The Complete Game Master's Guide to Running Extraordinary Sessions

FOCAL POINT

By Phil Vecchione, Walt Ciechanowski, and John Arcadian
Foreword By Jason Morningstar

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Art Director: John Arcadian

Graphic Designer: Darren Hardy
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Cover Artist: Juan Ochoa
Cover Designer: Darren Hardy

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In memory of Aaron Allston, who taught us how to create amazing worlds, and Robin Williams, who showed us how to bring them to life.

A special thanks to John Stavropoulos for his insight and feedback on the draft of Chapter 15: Safety on the Set. – Thank you for helping me understand the complexity of such an important topic, and to find the right words to convey it clearly. – *Phil Vecchione*

Dedications

For Paula - Who was not in my life for my previous book dedications, but who will be in my life for all of the rest. – *John Arcadian*

To my father-in-law, Col. Richard Poch, who always encouraged me to reach for the skies. – *Walt Ciechanowski*

A special thanks to Martin Ralya, who started this whole thing years ago when he took a leap of faith with us and asked us to write with him, first on Gnome Stew and later at Engine Publishing. – *Phil Vecchione*

Contents

Foreword

I'm dangling from a chain in a well that my gang just poisoned with benzene, pleading for my life. High above me, a very upset Gunlugger named Hector is smoking a cigarette, pondering whether to toss his smoke down and burn me alive. My name is Whimple, and I'm an NPC.

A minute ago Whimple didn't exist, but then a minute ago my wasteland gang had the upper hand. They were a nameless horde that had overrun Mopar's hardhold and soured her precious water forever. Now they had turned tail and run, leaving one of their own behind.

I picked his name from a list and decided he would be a lovable, treacherous loser—a craven wannabe road dog with a lot of inside knowledge and few scruples. In my head he would be played by James Ransone, Ziggy from *The Wire* in assless chaps and body armor.

The moment Hector throws him down the well he starts pleading. "Don't kill me!" Whimple shouts, "I know stuff, dude. I know the back way into Lord Gorbachev's valley! Totally secret, dude!"

Greg, playing the notably unhinged Hector, looks dubious. "Is this guy for real?" he asks. I give him a look that says *maybe you should use the tools at your disposal to find out.* Greg smiles and *Reads a Person*, which is a thing his character can do in *Apocalypse World*, the game we're playing. He rolls well and gets to ask a couple of questions, which I am obligated to answer truthfully.

"Is this clown telling the truth?" *Yes . . . ish.*
"What does he want me to do?" *See the value in keeping him alive.*
"What does he intend to do?" *Kill you, the very first chance he gets.*

And in that moment Whimple became part of our game. He went from nothing to a wonderful, plot-driving NPC in moments, and his trouble-making potential was unlimited.

This little vignette serves to demonstrate all three parts of this book in one grimy, post-apocalyptic nutshell. As GM I was building interesting stuff just as fast as my players could throw new situations and choices at me.

Entertainer, storyteller, and facilitator—*Focal Point* is absolutely stuffed with advice to help you up your game in all three areas. I particularly love the challenges that close each chapter, which ask you to directly apply what you've learned, at the table, in play. It's a really smart approach to honing practical skills.

You already entertain, tell stories, and facilitate, of course, and chances are you do it well. We all have room to improve, though, and approaching the weird art of GMing thoughtfully can pay big dividends. *Focal Point* is loaded with good ideas that can make your games easier, more memorable and more fun, but it's up to you to find the gems and apply them. I hope you do!

As for Whimple, well, he's still down in the benzene hole for now. But he's got big plans . . . really big plans . . .

Jason Morningstar • Durham, NC • June 2015

Introduction

The truest experience of any roleplaying game happens at the table.

Of all the activities that occur in and around roleplaying games (RPGs), the core of what we do happens at the table. It is when we are gathered around the table, as game master (GM) and players, that we actively engage in the creation of a story. It is when all of the prep and management comes to fruition and a unique experience is created.

It's during this time, sitting across from the players, that the GM has her most challenging role to play. It's at that time that the GM has to divide her attention and faculties across three disciplines and manage each one sufficiently to provide the best experience possible. Each discipline can be seen as a facet of the GM's role: entertainer, storyteller, and facilitator.

Focal Point: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Extraordinary Sessions addresses all three facets of GMing. Its focus is on how to perform this mental juggling act while sitting across from a group of players at the focal point of the gaming experience: actual play during sessions.

This book represents the end of a journey which began four years ago when I started *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep* (Engine Publishing, 2012). At the time, I thought *Never Unprepared* was going to be a standalone volume. One of the comments I received in the critiques of the book was that it didn't cover advice on campaigns, and so a year later I teamed up with Walt Ciechanowski and together we tackled that larger topic in *Odyssey: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management* (Engine Publishing, 2013).

While writing Odyssey both Walt and I realized that this journey was not done—there was one more big, related topic to cover. In fact, it's the largest topic: running a game at the table. Because this subject is both broad and deep, we brought in a third writer, John Arcadian—someone whose GMing style was different from both of ours—to help us tackle this topic as a team.

As a GM, John is an entertainer: He love props and he loves to draw his players into the game by creating a world that they can see as well as touch. Walt is a storyteller, a professional game designer who has written numerous adventures and run countless adventures for his gaming groups. I'm a facilitator, with years of both professional and personal experience creating productive and cohesive groups who work together to create deep stories.

Focal Point brings the "cycle" of GMing activity full circle, from prepping sessions to managing the campaign that includes them to running the game at the table, which in turn gives rise to new ideas for more sessions and takes the campaign in new directions.

Roleplaying games are meant to be played, and with Focal Point we set out to help GMs improve each of the three major facets of GMing—entertaining, storytelling, and facilitating—to explore more worlds and create more stories.

Phil Vecchione • Buffalo, NY • April 2015

How to Use this Book

Focal Point: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Extraordinary Sessions highlights the most common activities involved in running a game, categorizes them by role—entertainer, storyteller, and facilitator—and provides techniques and advice to improve in those areas. It's intended to be read away from the table, reflected upon, and acted on later, during sessions.

As in *Never Unprepared* and *Odyssey*, in *Focal Point* we'll break each role down into discrete activities and then deconstruct those activities to understand why they're important and to explore the various ways to accomplish them well. *Focal Point* is complemented by *Never Unprepared* or *Odyssey*, but you don't need those books in order to take full advantage of this one—it's designed to stand on its own as a resource for running extraordinary sessions.

Why a Book about Running Game Sessions?

GMing is a craft that benefits from constant improvement. Whether it's a new GM just trying to run a session without panicking or a grizzled veteran working to master a specific aspect of the craft, no one gets better at GMing by accident. And at the table, during play, is where all that hard work pays off—when you're actually running sessions.

Play is the focal point of roleplaying, and by extension it's also the focus of GMing. We believe this topic more than merits a book all to itself, so we wrote one. In so doing, we tried to capture the universal elements of GMing—the things which, no matter what style of game or particular system you run, are common to virtually every GM and virtually every game.

While it's impossible to document the multitude of activities a GM must manage while running a game, *Focal Point* sets out to define and describe the major activities that we all perform. The most common tasks that a GM performs break down into three major areas, or roles: **entertainer**, **storyteller**, and **facilitator**.

The Three Roles

Being a GM requires constant mental juggling. During the course of running a game, you must balance a multitude of game elements while monitoring the status of your players and making real-time adjustments to the game and/or story, all the while being entertaining and engaging. It's a job for the ambitious.

Understanding the three key roles involved in GMing is critical to getting the most out of *Focal Point*, so let's look at each of them in turn.

Entertainer

As the entertainer, the GM takes on the voices and mannerisms of multiple NPCs. She uses interesting maps and miniatures during combat. She creates props to hand out and playlists to help set the mood of the game. The entertainer gets everyone into the game, helping them immerse themselves in their roles.

The entertainer represents the parts of the GM that are projected outward to the players: the voices you use, the props you employ, and the soundtracks you play. A strong entertainer is captivating to watch and enhances the story and the game through their contributions.

Storyteller

In his role as storyteller, the GM doesn't literally tell his players a story—but he does tell stories during the game. Some GMs create the framework of an engaging story and then hook the group into the plot, making adjustments, often on the fly, as the players' actions create unexpected and exciting changes. Other GMs tell "small stories" in the moment, when they introduce a new NPC or location, but don't come to the table with a plotted adventure for each session. But all GMs are storytellers in one or more ways (just not in the sense that they dictate stories to their players).

This role encompasses the elements of GMing which are involved in facilitating the collective story that the group tells at the table: the creation of dramatic tension in a horror adventure, aggressive scene cutting to bring about a frantic pace, and the ability to quickly move a scene back into the path of the player characters (PC) if they passed it by. A strong storyteller creates tension, making hearts pound with anticipation, and helps to create drama that can move people to tears.

Facilitator

As facilitator, the GM creates a safe environment in which everyone in the group can let down their guard and relax their inhibitions. She helps to create harmony at the table, and she eliminates distractions. When there is conflict she helps to bring it to resolution. She softens the loudest voices and raises up the quietest ones. The facilitator helps to bring the group together to make it more than the sum of its parts.

The facilitator role involves everything that helps to keep the table focused on the game: managing the rules, resolving conflicts that arise, and helping the group to collaborate. A strong facilitator creates a strong table of players who work well together and help each other have a memorable experience.

Three Sections and a Metaphor

In keeping with the division of GMing into three roles, we've divided *Focal Point* into three sections, one for each role. We've used the metaphor of moviemaking as a framing device, both in the division into sections and throughout the book, because it offers some excellent parallels to game mastering.

Each of the three sections of *Focal Point* addresses a different element of GMing, and each is focused on one of the three major roles. Seen through the lens of moviemaking, the sections are:

- **Lights**—The set, the props, and the soundtrack. This is the arena of the entertainer.
- **Camera**—Framing scenes, the opening, the climax, and the cliffhanger. This is the realm of the storyteller.
- **Action**—Safety, collaboration, and managing all the moving parts. This is the domain of the facilitator.



Why Three Authors?

Each of *Focal Point*'s authors is an experienced GM who specializes in one of the major roles. We wanted a unique perspective for each section and role, and having three authors seemed like the simplest way to accomplish that. In addition to their respective specialties, each author brings years of GMing experience running both home and convention games, and a background in the RPG industry—writing and designing games and supplements—to the table.

As in *Odyssey*, each author is represented by a different icon. This makes it easy to see who wrote which bits. (If you don't much care who wrote what, the icons are deliberately unobtrusive and shouldn't get in your way.)


John Arcadian


Walt Ciechanowski


Phil Vecchione

Challenge Yourself

No GM is perfect. When you consider each of the three roles—entertainer, storyteller, and facilitator—you can probably tell which one you're strongest in, which one you're weakest in, and which one falls somewhere in the middle. If you want to improve as a GM, take an honest look at your strengths and weaknesses in these areas—and if you have trouble seeing them yourself, enlist your most forthright players and ask them to help.

Even an experienced GM likely hasn't mastered all three roles. The best GMs continually push themselves to be better. They look for ways to test their limits and to round out their skill set. They look for challenges in the types of stories they tell, the systems they run, or the ways they can "wow" their players at the table.

Once you have an idea of your strengths and weaknesses, though, there is an urge to jump in and decide to become better at everything right now. Don't dilute your focus by trying to improve many things a little bit at the same time. Instead, pick something that you wish you were better at doing at the table, and focus on how to improve specifically in that area.

Create a GMing wishlist composed of things you want to try and skills you want to improve. Look over that list and ask yourself, "If being better at one thing on this list would drastically improve my game, which one would it be?" Then focus on improving that area, using the information provided in this book and applying it your game. Add notes into your prep to remind you to do certain things, or make index card reminders to keep behind your screen or next to your laptop.

To help you transfer what you learn from *Focal Point* to the gaming table, we've included a challenge at the end of each numbered chapter. These challenges are system-neutral; you can use them with any game. They're designed to help you apply concepts from a particular chapter to your game.

If you already know how you want to challenge yourself, great! Pick a challenge that works for you. But just in case you're not sure where to start and want to leave it up to Fate, you can roll dice instead:

1. Choose your GMing experience level and roll to determine the number of challenges to tackle during your next few sessions:
    a. Novice: 1d4-1
    b. Experienced: 1d6
    c. Advanced: 1d8
2. Determine the chapter: Roll 1d20 (reroll a result of 20)
3. Determine the challenge: Roll 1d6 and compare the result to the list of challenges in that chapter
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 until you have a list of challenges equal in number to your first die roll

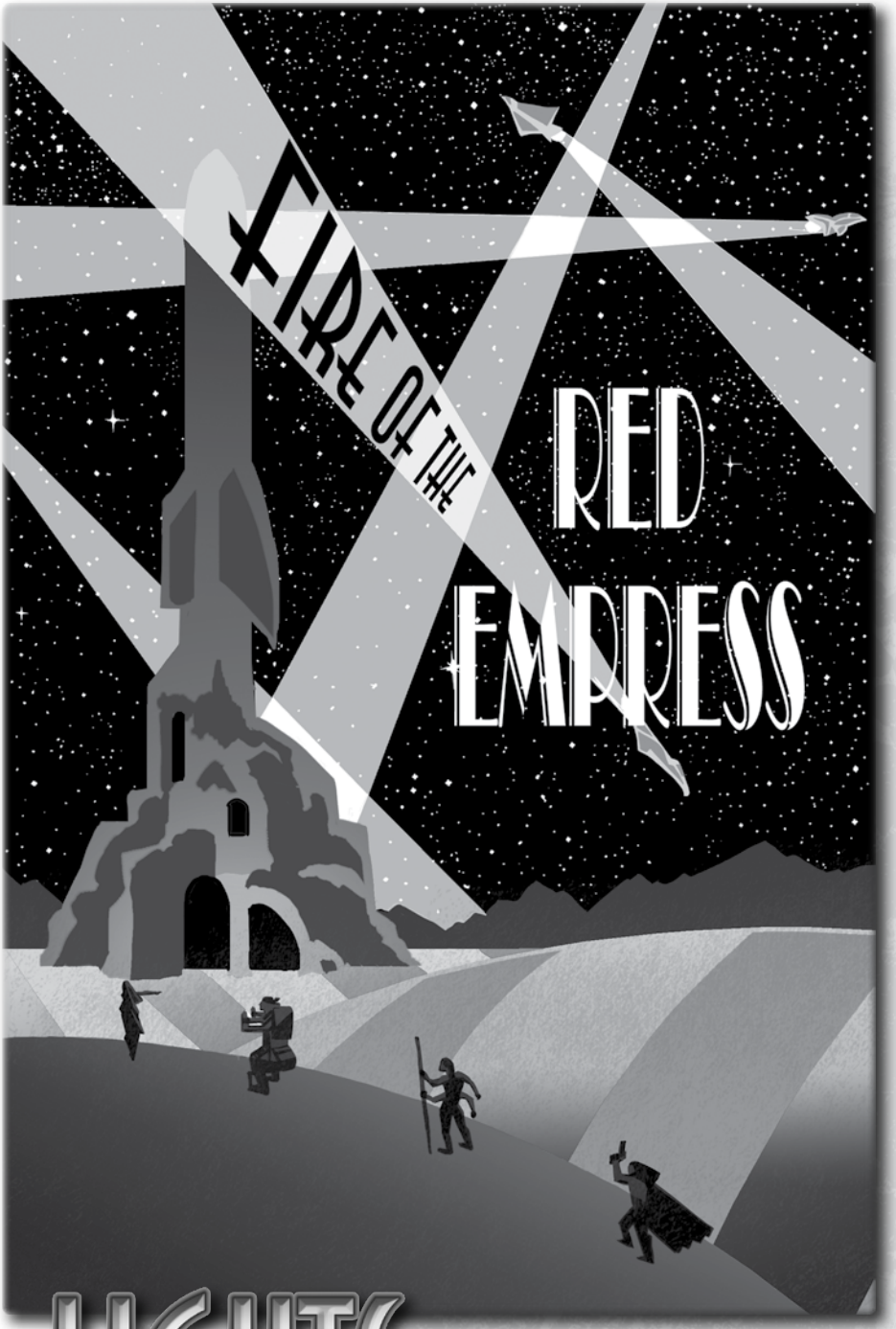
There's also an achievement in the Challenge section of each chapter. When you've completed all of that chapter's challenges, you unlock that achievement. Good luck!

We're Getting The Band Back Together

Readers of *Odyssey* will recognize the fictional gaming group featured in *Focal Point*: Gemma, the GM, and her players Renaldo, Patty, and Adam. We got a lot of positive feedback about these folks, so we brought them back to help illustrate the problems and solutions we discuss in *Focal Point*.

It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint

GMing is an incredibly satisfying activity. It's a complex craft requiring aptitude in a diverse set of skills. Along the way GMs develop a style and a toolbox of skills, and their games are shaped by those choices and by their strengths and weaknesses. But you should never be afraid to pick up a new tool or sharpen a well-worn tool just a bit more, and it's in that spirit that we wrote *Focal Point*. We hope you enjoy it.



Artist: Avery Liell-Kok

LIGHTS...

Chapter 1: The Studio

"It has all led to this," Gemma said. The treks through the Jungles of Andilore, the fight against the Heretic and his forces, the strange ruins that turned out to be the colony ship that seeded the planet, and now you stand before the controls with the white crystal in hand. Patti, what does Zembara do?"

"While I was never trusting of these humans who came into our jungle, I want to help James get to his father's planet and defeat the Red Empress and her fleet," Patti said in her best alien voice.

"Balmer reloads his gun and gets ready for trouble. I'm smirking, kind of hoping this will go badly," Renaldo said. Switching to his Balmer voice, he added, "We took out the Heretic too easily." He erased the damage marks from his character sheet as Balmer applied a healing crystal.

Gus, the owner of the game store where the group was playing, called to Gemma, Patti, Renaldo, and Adam from behind the counter. "Hey guys, closing time. I know this is a climactic moment, but we've got five minutes. Remember, Countermay tournaments are moving to Tuesdays, so for the next few months you'll have to find a new play space or come on a different night."

"Oh man! I forgot about that," Gemma said. "My apartment doesn't have enough space. Anyone else?" Renaldo's newborn made gaming at his place difficult (too many distractions), but they could play there if they had to. Patti's apartment was as small as Gemma's, and while Adam had plenty of space, it was always messy and that made it tough to game there, too.

Where You Play Matters

These first few chapters cover some topics that might seem tangential to gaming, but they're not really tangential at all. It's often the subtle things that have the biggest ongoing impact on the game. Before we get into using psychological cues, employing sets and props to create "wow" moments, and portraying your non-player characters (NPCs), we need to talk about the constants—the things you don't often think about because they're not directly part of the game. The first one is your gaming space, the place where you play.

It might seem like a small thing, but environment matters. It matters much more than cursory consideration would suggest. All you need to game is a table, right? And depending on the game, you don't even need that. In some ways that's true: You can make any space work for gaming, but if you have to fight against the space itself to keep people focused and to keep your players engaged, then that's effort and energy that you don't have accessible for all the other important elements of the game. If you can make the space where you game work for you and support your game mastering efforts, then all of that other important stuff will be easier.

You can look at a game space like a movie studio. A studio is generally a large room where you get a bunch of people together to pretend to be other people and, using some stage direction, rules on how to interact with each other, and an overarching concept, to create a story together. That sounds a lot like gaming, doesn't it?

Artist: David L. Johnson

The story—whether in the studio or at the gaming table—depends on all of the people involved, but it's also dependent on the space itself helping everyone get into character. If the movie is a pulp-action jungle adventure but the studio is tiny, then the vast, expansive feel of the jungle will be absent. On top of that, there's just no room to work. If the space is big enough for everything to fit but props from the previous scenes are scattered about, then it's not going to look or feel like a jungle.

In a roleplaying game, your players are taking on the role of both actor and audience. Their attention is already divided. So if the space is working against them keeping focus and staying in character, you have to do a lot more work to try to keep the game running smoothly. Fortunately, this is a solvable problem.

Scouting the Location

In movie-making terminology, scouting a location is the act of finding the perfect place to shoot a scene. For our purposes, it is determining what space is best for you to play your game. You won't always have the perfect space, but if you try to find a space that eliminates as many issues as possible you'll have a much better gaming experience.

There are a slew of questions you can ask yourself when scouting for the best location possible:

- **What is my dream space like?**—If you had phenomenal cosmic powers or all the money and tech of Tony Stark or Bruce Wayne at your disposal, what would your ultimate play space be like? Take a few minutes to dream about it. Think of the challenges you have in your games and what kinds of solutions the space could provide. Figure out your ultimate play space and then work backwards from there to more realistic options, noting the underlying ideas that are most important to you.
- **What elements benefit the game I'm going to run?**—Having the ultimate no-holds-barred play space is one thing, but how can your play area benefit the specific game you're about to run? Do you need a big table for miniatures and scenery? Would a few chairs in a circle help your players interact with each other and roleplay? Would the basement actually be a more atmospheric play space for a dungeon crawl than the living room? Focus your thoughts on the game you're running and determine what works best for that specific game.
- **Is the space a place where you can be comfortable acting?**—Is the space too public? Are the other people there making you feel embarrassed when you stand up to swing your imaginary broadsword? Being able to be unrestrained in a gaming space is incredibly important. Some people like performing for an audience, though; for them, a public space can be a benefit.
- **What is the best space we actually have access to?**—All other questions aside, what space do you actually have available to you? Gaming anywhere is better than gaming nowhere. If the space you have available to you is mediocre, maybe one of the players would be willing to host the game or a better space might be available at the local game store.
- **How can I make the space I have access to more viable for gaming?**—If you've found the best space available to you, what can you do to make it work better? Can you bring in a new table or change the wall decorations? What about the simple act of changing where people sit to emphasize character connections? Look at what you've got and see what you can do to make it better for your game.

Your Space Sets the Basic Atmosphere and Tone

Go and sit in one of your players' usual chairs and look at the "studio" from her viewpoint. What does it look like to her? What is in her field of vision when she is looking at you? Where would her eyes wander? Imagine how you look while narrating a scene and pick out anything that would pull your players out of the moment. Would that cat poster on the wall drain the gravitas you're trying to inject into the duke's speech? Is the blank beige wall just boring to look at? As you look around, you'll think of other questions to ask and things to consider.

These might seem like innocuous details, but they're all elements that are permanently there in your players' minds. Each player has a different view of the space and thus a different idea of it. While they're building a mental image of the game and the story in their minds, they're using the same gray matter that processes the visual input from their eyes. Our vision is our strongest sense, so everything in our field of view is going to affect the games we run. Want proof? Check out the sidebar before moving on to the next section.

Visual Cortex Exercise

Take a moment and try to envision a spaceship wrecked on a red desert planet, the survivors crawling out of the ruined hull. Really try to get a firm, strong image in your head. Get ready to pick out three vivid details of the scene to describe.

What was the first thing you did when you really got down to envisioning the scene and picking out the details? Did you close your eyes? You may not even have realized you did it—it just happened the moment you tried to really get some interesting details out of the scene. That was your visual cortex trying to stem the flood of competing information from your eyes. Without that information from your eyes mucking up the processor, you were able to imagine the scene more clearly. Try to envision the scene in the same detail with your eyes open and then with your eyes closed. Can you get as much detail when your eyes are open?

Now try this: Stare at one object in your field of vision, a chair or the pattern on the floor. Close your eyes and try to imagine a differently shaped chair or pattern. Did you have to work harder to get something different in your head? If you've got distracting things in your players' field of vision, it becomes harder for your narration to create mental images.

Making the Visual Cortex Work for You

You can do some things to control what information your players pick up from your gaming space. First off, remove anything that would be very distracting to the theme of your game or the mood you want to evoke. Even if you only move it for the few hours a week that you game, getting rid of the most distracting elements will help.

Second, add elements that help increase immersion. Change the artwork on the walls to something that fits your game. Put elements in the players' fields of vision that will help inspire or draw them into the themes of the game. For your macabre vampire game, grab a cheap plastic skull from a Halloween store and stick it on the bookshelf in a player's field of vision. Hokey? Yes, but as the player's eyes wander, he'll have a constant reminder that death is just over the shoulder of one of his companions. Contrast that with having a model starship from a popular TV show in the same spot: Your players' minds will constantly be picking up that image and trying to tie it to things they remember from the show.

Finally, even if it isn't specific to the game you are currently running, bookshelves full of gaming books are always a good background and they're likely already a part of many permanent gaming spaces. While they won't remind everyone of a single genre or theme, they will build connections to the act of gaming. If you want to really emphasize the themes of your game, rearrange your bookshelves to put books of a similar theme behind your spot at the table. As their eyes wander to other sci-fi themed books during down-time, players will start thinking about other games and solutions to problems that might not otherwise come to mind.

Never Leave Home Without Your . . . Sheets?

If all else fails, cover the walls with some plain, non-patterned bed sheets. Cheap sheets hung on the walls provide a nice blank canvas for the imagination. With the addition of a couple of removable hooks and a few bucks spent on sheets, you can completely change your play space. You can even pick colors that emphasize different moods—for example, light pastels for a happy environment or dark reds for a lush but dangerous feel. If you hang them on curtain rods instead of hooks, you can even use them to simulate stage curtains. Suddenly, the environment becomes a stage where living, breathing characters seem to come to life.

Sample Play Spaces

Subtle changes to your play space can have a surprisingly big impact on player immersion and interaction, but sometimes a bigger change is needed. Entirely rearranging your play space can help you emphasize different aspects of the game.

The Standard Gaming Table—A Good Option for Most Games

Your garden variety gaming table seats four or five people and leaves room in the middle for maps and miniatures. It can be hard to keep drinks, snacks, pencils, and books out of the "map area," though. This basic setup works well for many games because it gives everyone a place to sit and focuses their attention on whatever is in the center of the table.

The Circle of Conversation—Roleplaying- and NPC-Heavy Games

Grab a bunch of comfy chairs and set them up in a circle. This turns communication between players into the key element of your play space and focuses everyone's vision on a shared central area. This is a handy setup for games that are heavy on roleplaying and character relationships and light on dice-rolling. The central visual space also feels more in line with a 1:1 scale, helping players envision NPCs as life-sized entities that they interact with, rather than seeing them as miniatures on a table.

The Scene's the Thing—For Great Impact, Go to Hyper-Focus

Need to really emphasize the in-game physical terrain? Cover the entire table with a full scene or diorama, like what you might use for a tactical wargame. This will focus all attention on one element of your game and give it incredible impact. Better yet, remove the table entirely and make the scene the only thing the players can interact with. While this is an extreme change, it turns the play space into a thing of wonder that can't help but captivate players.

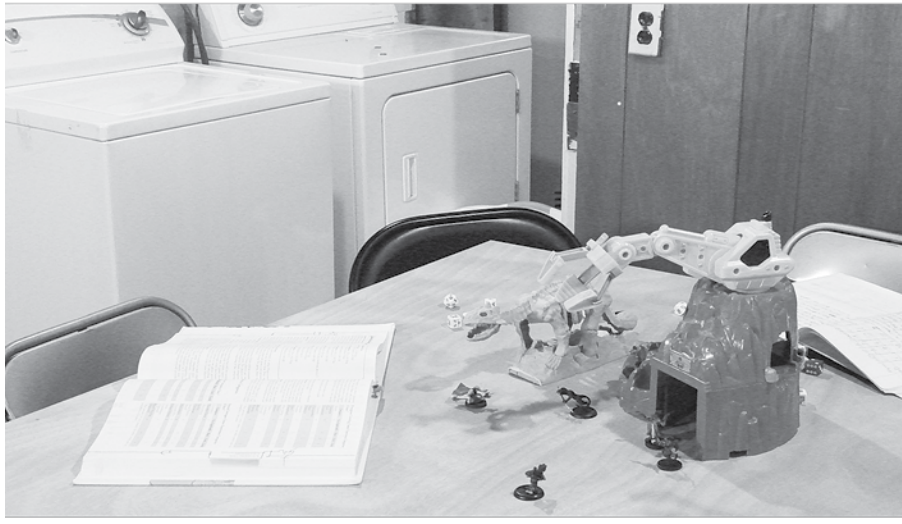
Get Up On Your Feet—Games that Benefit from Acting Out Characters

If you want to really keep everyone focused on what's going on at the table, replace the chairs that let you sit back and get comfortable with bar stools. While this can help people focus, it can also become annoying during long gaming sessions. If the session is going to involve players moving into the spotlight in turns, another option is to set your gaming area up like a pool table. Everyone who isn't involved in the scene moves away from the table to watch from the sidelines, while the players at the center of the action stay at the table and are the focus of everyone's attention.

An added benefit of using bar stools is that they make players higher relative to the table, giving them a different perspective on the game and making them feel like they have greater control over what's going on. This is great for simulating a massive battle that involves the PCs, or the plotting and intrigue of a cyberpunk planning session before the main mission.

On Location—Evoke a Specific Feeling by Going Somewhere Else

Need to get the players really involved in a scene? Go there. For one session, take your play space on the road. To evoke a sylvan feel, play in a wooded part of a local park. To evoke the feel of a clandestine meeting between spies, play in a fancy hotel restaurant. Gaming in public can feel odd, but so is painting your body blue to go to a football game. If you're not completely comfortable with the idea, play in public only when you don't think things will look too out of the ordinary to passersby. But so what if you have some dice and character sheets on the table at a fancy restaurant? If you go to St. Elmo's in Indianapolis during Gen Con, and if you're lucky, Billy the waiter might even jump in and tell you stories from his old gaming days.



Despite having the same essential table structure, the atmosphere of the gaming space changes the tone in these 4 locations.

From Garage to Kitchen to Basement

Once upon a time, during a hot and humid summer, I ran a game where all the PCs were vampires of one sort or another. Unfortunately, I ran it in the garage at 2:30 on Saturday afternoon. Everyone showed up and came into my nice suburban house, then tromped out to the garage where we had tables set up. It was the best space available to us at the time and once we strung up some sheets to cover the tools, the fluorescent overhead light cast pale, sunken shadows upon our faces that actually worked out well. Even though I got to do some fun things with that space—like opening the garage door to let in the deadly sunlight at a crucial, near-death moment for one character—it was still always a hot, dusty garage.

When we moved to a player's kitchen/dining room area, the game completely changed tone. It was more comfortable, but the player's family was always around and we never felt at ease acting out the characters and scenes to their full dramatic potential. After a few sessions, another player offered up his basement if we would help him clean it out. We took a full Saturday and stacked all the various boxes in a corner, threw some carpet on the cold stone floor, moved a thrift store table down the stairs, and built ourselves a gaming space that lasted us for a while. Something about it being a basement, and being underground, made the vampire game feel right, and the space worked equally well for the next fantasy-themed game we played.

Gaming in a shared space, like the dining room, never felt right for that campaign. There was always too much going on apart from the game. The moral of the story is that kitchens are always kitchens and garages are always garages—whatever your play space is will bleed into your game, and it's important to have a space that's yours if possible.

Challenge - Achievement: Studio Boss

1. Take your game on location for one session to increase immersion.
2. Remove the table for one night to help emphasize roleplaying and conversation.
3. Draw out your current gaming space on a gridded piece of paper, like a map.
4. Do challenge 3, then draw out your dream gaming space in the same way. Hold these maps side by side and see if there are improvements you can make to your current space.
5. Sit in a player's chair and look at your normal GMing position. Change one thing in each player's field of vision to improve their game experience.
6. Write a secret clue in big, bold marker on an index card and place it somewhere in a player's field of vision. Never mention it outright, but subtly reference that it is there and let the player pick up on it.

"The library? Seriously? We can game there?" Renaldo had Gemma on speakerphone while he changed his daughter's diaper, and he turned his nose up at the critical hit the baby had made on her roll to poop.

"Of course!" Gemma said, a smile on her face. "I just checked with the librarian and they have public meeting spaces available. We have to put down a deposit to guarantee the room for four hours every Tuesday, but we get it back when we're done with the room. I just told them to keep it as a donation and they gave us the room for the next three months. I was hoping I might talk my boss into letting us use a conference room at work, but this works out so much better!"

Renaldo was the second player she'd told, but it made her smile every time. The library meeting room was huge, and the conference room table was perfectly sized. It should be: Some architect had taken a lot of time to think about that space and how to make it conducive to groups of people getting together and having a meeting.

Gemma hung up with Renaldo and got ready to call the next player. The game was saved, and this space was even better than her local game store. It would just be them, so no more trying to talk over the loud card players at the other tables. Now, how to not look weird carrying in all of the props she was going to use in the next session? Ah, screw it, she thought, it's the library—some of the staff might want to play too!

Chapter 2: The Set

Patti and Adam both had a class on Tuesdays, and the library room was booked on Thursdays, so off to Adam's house it was. The dining room there was large, but it was always cluttered and the gaming table was always messy. As Gemma moved her wheelchair back so she could grab a new mini, the edge of the very small table caught the rubber of her wheel and piles of books, character sheets, half-opened mail, and the map with all of the scenery on it slid onto the floor.

Not amused, Gemma said, "So, when does your class end?" Patti and Renaldo began picking everything up, while Adam moved into the kitchen to get something to clean up the soda spill.

Rushing back into the dining room, Adam answered Gemma. "It's bad, I know. I'm sorry, but it's only for a month. I cleaned yesterday, but then Shelly started moving in and we had to move a bunch of stuff out of her room. I'll have something better for us next week."

After the table was back to its pre-collapse state, Gemma began to pull things out of her cart and arrange them for the next scene. She had to ask three times for people to move their books and sheets so she could set up. After about 15 minutes of wrangling, she had the next map drawn, but Patti was already on her phone checking her emails. Renaldo began studying the map, but then got distracted by a sourcebook and started thinking about things his character could buy. Adam had been moving a box of unpainted minis out of the way, but now he was looking through it to see if he could find a better representation of his character.

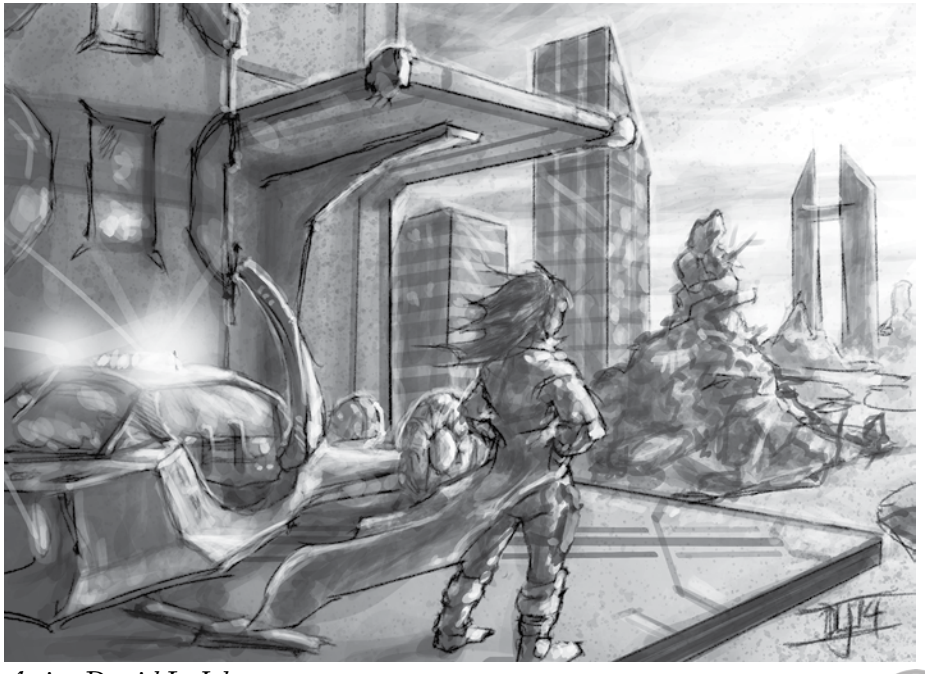
Restraining the urge to raise her voice, Gemma sighed and said, "I miss the library. It was clean."

Dressing the Set

Sticking with the movie studio analogy, if the studio is the play space as a whole, then the set is where your game actually takes place. It's where the magic happens. In most cases, that means the table on which you play and everything that gets put on that table. But let's expand that definition a bit and consider the set as the physical space in between you and your players—where the game "lives" in their imaginations.

Your players look across this set at each other, or at you, when they roleplay their characters. When there's something "on set," like miniatures or terrain, they stare at it. When you're describing an incredible landscape or a vicious monster about to snap them up in its jaws, and they close their eyes to picture it in their minds, they're still interacting with the set. When they look at their characters, your players see the set out of the corners of their eyes. The set is the *mise-en-scène*, a French film term which means "everything that is within the boundaries of the camera."

For our purposes, the eyes of all of your players, collectively, is the camera. Their fields of vision overlap to make the area in the center a kind of arena theater with an audience on all sides. The next time you're at the table with your group, imagine each of them projecting a five-foot conical beam from their eyes. Notice how many of those cones intersect or overlap that central area as you game. Notice what it's like when you do something really interesting or put an impressive miniature on the table. That right there is your set. The set is where you build your game and make it come alive.



Artist: David L. Johnson

Clear the Set

Now that we've looked at why the space between you and your players is important, let's start making it work for you. The first step is to clear out the clutter. To help your players stay engaged, you need the area where you play to be free from the kipple[1] that goes along with gaming.

Imagine that you're watching a movie scene set inside a spaceship, and the actors and crew have left all of their backpacks, lunch bags, and scripts laying around on the set. Can you suspend disbelief when you see fast food wrappers next to the control panel during a red alert? Or when backpacks and clipboards are cluttering up the gunnery station—the one with all the futuristic holographic displays? Probably not, and the same is true for your gaming space: Seeing all that kipple in your play space is just as distracting to your players.

You need *some* of this stuff around, certainly, but the defining trait of true kipple is that it accumulates as if by magic, under its own power—and you don't need *all* of it.

A simple box lid separates the gaming space from the clutter of the game table.

Clear the Kipple without Being a Dictator

How do you get that pristine set where the players can game and stay engaged, but without being hated by your players for constantly chiding them about kipple? By ruling with rewards and configuring your place space to deemphasize kipple.

[1] Kipple is a term coined by Phillip K. Dick in his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to describe piles of junk that just seem to spontaneously accumulate and grow of their own volition.

Rule with Rewards

Make it a rule in your games that players are responsible for their play space. Those that keep it clean get a small reward in the game—maybe an extra plot point or some extra experience. The reward should be something small, a minor benefit in the game you're currently playing. Gently remind them of the rule at the beginning of each session and give the reward at the end of each session.

Use Your Play Space to Deemphasize Kipple

A nice flat table is great, but if you can create a "backstage" area for all the props and ephemera of the game, then the actual set becomes a space solely for the game. A set of folding tables nearby, a cardboard box that everything goes in when not in use, or clipboards with built-in document holders for every player can all help keep gaming supplies neatly contained until they're needed.

Put On Your Assistant Director Hat

As the GM, you juggle a lot of things when you run a game, from NPCs to plots to notes to books to dice—and more. You can't be a great storyteller, or a great actor, or a great manager, when you're futzing around trying to find the right markers for the battle map.

Have you ever run a game where there wasn't enough room at the table, it took too long to run a combat, the sessions always seemed to run long, or your dice were never where you needed them to be? All of those issues have one thing in common: You can solve them by taking some time to organize yourself and your materials.

In filmmaking, the assistant director is the person who manages the progress of filming, logistics, the health of the crew, and all of the other myriad little things that go into making a movie work. As the GM, unlike the director of a film, you don't get an assistant director—so you have to become your own assistant director.

Every couple of sessions, put on your assistant director hat and look at your gaming space and materials with an eye to identifying problems and finding solutions for those problems. In your assistant director role, ask yourself these questions:

- **What are the limitations of the space?**—Can you hang things from the ceiling? Can you change the lighting? Is there enough room for everyone? Can you move the table to make more room? Will a bigger map fit on the table? Are people easily distracted because we're all too close together?
- **What do you really need at the table?**—Anything you don't need at the table might be kipple, and finding it a better home will help the game run more smoothly. Are the extra miniatures really necessary? Can you just make photocopies of the monsters you need instead of bringing the whole pile of books? Can you switch to PDFs for some (or all) books and access them from your tablet? If you go all-digital, do you have a good way to take notes? Would a mini-screen be better than this full-sized one?

- **How can you make the stuff we need easier to use?**—Once you know what you actually need at the table, be it maps or scenery or props, you can look for ways to streamline usage. Can you draw maps out beforehand on big sheets of paper? Can you afford a low-resolution projector for maps? If you use one, does the dimmer lighting make it hard for players to see their character sheets? Can you sort your miniatures by encounter or creature type to make deploying them faster?

Sitting down and thinking through these problems and solutions should be done separately from running the game. Running a game is very social, while managing your play space is a solitary task. Don't try to optimize your play space mid-session.

Compact . . .

If you're the kind of GM who likes to be prepared for every eventuality, that tendency might lead you to keep more stuff on hand during games than you really need. Putting on your assistant director hat can help you here as well.

How many pencils and pens do you really need? Which dice do you actually use? Are you bringing every miniature you own when a subset might do? More generally, what are you carrying around that you think you'll need, but which you rarely—if ever—actually use? That stuff is getting in the way of using the stuff you actually need.

Bring a small box to your next session. At the end of the session, stick everything you actually used during the game in that box. Compare what's in the box to everything that's outside the box, and consider whether you could skip bringing some or most of the stuff you didn't use to the next session.

. . . And Contain

Once you've eliminated kipple from your stash of GMing material, the next step is to put everything in a central, organized place. For my own on-the-go setup, I like to use a small carrying case originally intended for files. I pack it with folders, books, and smaller boxes. Specialized fishing tackle or tool boxes often work quite well if you need lots of compartments, but it's usually harder to put books in them than it is in a file box.

When I'm GMing at home, I let myself use a larger plastic rolling cart with many small drawers. Inside are metal tins of dice, small boxes of minis, a drawer for writing tools, whatever books I'm using for the next game, and a few folders of the character sheets and maps I need—all evaluated for utility while wearing my assistant director hat before each session. This evaluation process is like a pre-game meditation ritual. I organize everything beforehand so that it's easy for me to access during play without slowing down the action.

And that's the important part: You have to set your stuff up in the way that works for *you*. Experiment with your organizational system until you're happy with it, and remember to put on your assistant director hat between every couple of sessions.

Separate the Set from the Rest of the Play Space

When you separate your set from the space around it in some way, you turn it into a place where your players can engage with the game world in a discrete way. The distinction between set and not-set is a mental one, and you can make it clearer by creating a boundary between the set and the rest of your play space. In movie terms, you can think of this as stage design.

Stage Design 1: Create a Central Focus

Materials Needed:

- One themed element that acts as a centerpiece to draw your players focus

If you're running a game that uses maps and miniatures, the map is your focus by default. But if you're not running that sort of game, you can separate your set from the rest of your place space simply by placing an object or two in the center of the table—just like a centerpiece at a holiday dinner. But what sort of object should you use? It depends on your game, but in general you want something that:

- Emphasizes the tone and theme of your game
- Creates a visual impact and commands the space
- Draws the players back to the game every time they look at it
- Doesn't obstruct players' ability to look at one another

For a *Fiasco* game set in the advertising world during the 1960s, I picked up an old rotary phone at a flea market and put the phone, along with a few empty liquor bottles and some tumblers, in the center of the table. The phone became a prop that people would pick up and answer when acting out their characters' actions, and the player whose character was always drunk would swing around one of the bottles whenever he acted out his rampages. The prop centerpiece acted like a laser guidance system to drag wandering eyes and minds back to the central space and the themes of the game.

The centerpiece doesn't have to be something that the players can physically interact with, though. For example, you can use a statue of Cthulhu or a gargoyle for a horror-themed game, or a map of the area where the PCs are questing for a fantasy game. You can also swap out the centerpiece mid-game to instantly shift the tone and move everyone into a different mental space. If you're okay destroying that old phone, break it in half at a key moment to emphasize the absence of communication. Replace the creepy statue with a more upbeat sculpture to show that the PCs are winning the war against the dark forces opposing them. This is a simple technique to put into practice, but it works well to signal the shift in themes during the game.

Stage Design 2: Box Theater

Materials Needed:

- Option 1—A cardboard box and a cutting tool
- Option 2—The lid from a large plastic storage box
- Option 3—A blank canvas (the kind that's stretched over a wooden frame)
- Option 4—One "furring strip" of wood approximately 8′ long by 2″ tall by 2″ wide, cut into four pieces: two 1′ 5″ sections and two 2′ sections

You can also separate your set by literally walling it off from the rest of the table. This is particularly effective if you use battle maps and miniatures. The play space becomes the arena in which the game world exists, its borders clearly defined. Even if all you do is put all the minis in a trimmed-down cardboard box, the game world is now no longer part of the table; it becomes its own space.

Ideally, the walls of your box (whether cardboard or wood) should be 2" or 3" high and should cordon off a good-sized chunk of the table—enough that the walled area dominates the space. You can accomplish this quickly and easily by cutting the sides of a cardboard box down to a usable height, dropping the lid of one of those big plastic storage boxes in the middle of the table, or flipping over an art canvas.

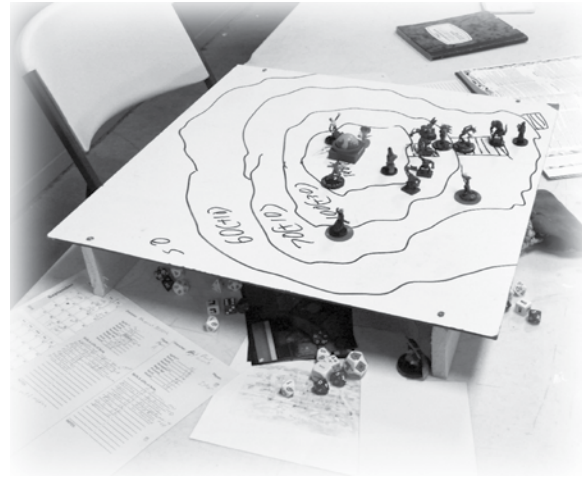
Feeling more crafty than that? Pick up an 8"x2"x2" piece of lumber and ask your local home improvement store to cut it down into four smaller pieces. Lay them out in a rectangle to neatly segment your play space. Want a permanent frame? Join the ends of the wood with nails or wood glue to create a sturdy separator that looks a lot better than a cardboard box.

Stage Design 3: Raise The Stage

Materials Needed:

- Whiteboard or dry-erase panels approximately 2′ x 2′
- Option 1—Aluminum pizza stands and one roll of duct tape
- Option 2—One "furring strip" of wood approximately 8′ long by 1″ tall by 4″ wide cut into two sections (a 2′ long section and a 1′ 4″ section), and 2-4 small screws

Let's set aside the movie set analogy for a moment and think about stages for live theater. All stages have one thing in common: They are higher than the area around them. That small distinction puts them in a physically different space, and it's a great psychological trick that we can make use of for gaming.



This is an incredibly easy build with some impressive results. Start by going to a home improvement store to find dry-erase (whiteboard) wall panels. These generally cost about $5 for a 2'x2' panel or $10 for a 2'x4' panel, depending on what the store stocks. One side is covered in a dry-erase paint that is perfect for gaming. The other side is usually dark brown, and you can add a grid for miniatures to that side with a silver permanent marker. This gives you a two-side mapping surface—now to raise it up off the table.

There are two simple ways to raise this set:

- **Metal pizza stands**—These are metal brackets about 6" or 7" inches high that restaurants use to hold pizzas. They're cheap and can be taped to the dry-erase panels for stability. Using two at the edges of a 2'x2' panel will raise your set while also creating a space underneath for books and kipple.
- **Wood**—Get an 8' furring strip cut into three pieces (two 2', one 1' 10") and screw them together in an "H" shape. Set your dry-erase panel on top of this frame to raise your set above the table. It won't be as high as the pizza stand option, but it does still offer a bit of storage space underneath the panel.

Working with Wood

In two of these stage designs, I mention doing a bit of woodworking. If you aren't the woodworking sort, don't panic! These are in no way complex builds and are easy to achieve even if you don't own any truly dangerous tools, but there are three things you should know before you get started:

- **Wood doesn't have to be expensive**—High-quality wood is expensive, but for our purposes a cheap piece of wood called a "furring strip" is perfect. They generally cost $2-$4 for an 8' length of wood (the width varies). Ask someone at the store where they are and then paw through the pile for one that suits your needs. Make sure you get one that isn't treated with chemicals—raw wood is your friend, and it can be stained if you want to go the extra mile.
- **Lumber sizes are not exact**—It's an oddity of the lumber industry, but a 4" wide piece of wood is usually 3.5" or 3.75" inches wide, but it is sold as 4" wide. And even if the stated measurements are accurate, cutting will change the length. A board that's 8' (96") long can't be cut it into four 2' sections because the saw blade is about 1/8" wide—you lose about 1/2" from the overall length of the board, if not more. If you aren't cutting it yourself, ask whoever is to cut it to length, but overall to *make sure the pieces are equal*. It's better to have two 1' 11" boards than two boards of different lengths.
- **Hardware stores can make cuts for you**—Many hardware stores have a saw sitting around in the back and will make simple cuts for you. Usually this is free, but sometimes they charge a small fee to avoid having to cut complex projects. They can only make simple cuts (like turning an 8' board into four pieces or cutting a 2'x4' panel into two 2'x2' panels) and sometimes you're better off marking off your cuts with a pencil and ruler before asking them to fire up the saw. Make sure to describe exactly what your end goal is to the person doing the cutting. (Also, a word of general advice: Be nice to the person who is trained in the use of industrial-grade powered cutting tools.)

Challenge - Achievement: Set Designer

1. Put a central, focusing element into the game space that fits the theme of your game, and encourage your players to interact with it if possible.
2. Put on your assistant director hat and compact all your GMing materials so they fit into a small storage container.
3. Find three props that fit the theme of your game and introduce them into the central area at different times during the night (whenever there are significant scene changes).
4. Build a raised set or create a "box theater" for your next game that uses miniatures.
5. Institute a kipple reduction plan as a rule for your game, and reward your players with an in-game benefit for following the rule.
6. Sit back and look at your table for a few minutes. Write down three things you could add to your setup that would improve it or remove distractions.

Gemma rolled into Adam's dining room and came to a sudden stop. She rubbed her eyes. Was this the same place? The table was immaculate and the junk around the room was stuffed into cardboard boxes. There was a smaller wooden table next to her spot at the table.

"Hey! Glad you're here early," Adam said. "I found this old table at a thrift store and it looks like it's perfect to fit your books and stuff off to the side. I'll move it after the game so stuff doesn't pile up on it. I also had a talk with my roommates, and now we have a rule that if the table isn't clear by 4:00 pm on the day of a game, whoever has stuff on it has to do dishes for a week."

"Adam, that's awesome!" Gemma paused. "But the table still isn't big enough for the map—everyone's books are going to cover it up like last time." Gemma knew her players well: If there was empty space, they'd fill it quickly enough.

"Oh, yeah. Hold on. My dad helped me make this." Adam pulled out a wooden frame. "It's a raised platform we made with some blocks of wood and an old piece of paneling. Now we can put the map up higher and people can keep papers under it."

Gemma threw her arms around Adam. Finally! She could run a game without having to deal with junk getting in the way.

Chapter 3: Special Effects Scenes

Gemma was in her apartment, banging her head against her desk, trying to come up with something that would make this game memorable. The change of locations had created a lot of distractions, but Adam's place was working out for now and they could go back to the library in another few weeks. However, Gemma was worried about how to make this game something they were going to talk about for years to come. She had been plotting out ideas, but everything she came up with just felt tired and familiar.

Her players knew how she thought and what sorts of twists and turns her plots usually took. They had also started figuring out how she had run her combats and were always picking off the magic user or support tech well before those NPCs got to use their powers to make the fight interesting. As she was trying to come up with something new, Gemma found herself playing with some of the models and PVC figures on her shelf. And that's when she knew what she needed to do.

That Wow Moment: Channeling Your Inner Eight-Year-Old

There are many things you can do with your games to keep your players immersed and focused on the world you are all creating together. You can craft the narrative to be unique and interesting, you can keep the spotlight on the players and encourage every one of their ideas, and you can engender a feeling of satisfaction by making successes easy but not extreme, but one of the most powerful things you can do is to create a "wow" moment by engaging them with something awesome and unexpected that completely changes the paradigm. In special effects-laden blockbusters, there is usually one moment fairly early on where the movie creates an epic feeling by hitting you with a gratuitous, shiny visual moment.

After the thunderous music and brief description to tie you into the story that starts *in media res*, the opening to *Star Wars: A New Hope* shows two ships engaged in a life-or-death chase that instantly makes you want to know more. For the quality of

effects in movies at the time, especially in the science fiction genre, this scene was mind-blowing. Laser blasts and a chase, and then the screen is filled with a giant ship that dwarfs your vision for far longer than it should, the sounds of the action still going on way up at the front of the ship doing the chasing. By the time you are introduced to the first two speaking characters, you have been shown that the scale of this movie is going to be epic.

That is a special effects moment, probably the quintessential one, and these sorts of moments engage the senses in incredible ways, setting you up to keep that sense of wonder and amazement throughout the rest of the movie—or, in our case, the game.

Creating a Special Effects Moment: The Basics

How do you make special effects moments in your games? There are three key elements that must be present, and if you have all three of them in a scene it will probably become a wow moment.

- Engage the senses
- Make it different from the usual fare
- Go big

Artist: David L. Johnson

Engage the Senses

Even though most of the experience of tabletop gaming comes from social interactions and spoken narratives, as a GM you have to engage the senses to really get into your players' heads. This could come from the incredible narrative so strong that it builds the image of the evil sorcerer's lair in the players' minds, but you can also engage the senses directly by using eerie music complete with crashing thunder and by showing the players an image of the lair. These elements will support the narrative you're building and focus three of the players' senses on the idea and mood you want to create.

Make It Different from the Usual Fare

In many action movies, the Big Bad Evil Guy (BBEG) is rarely taken out in the same manner as his minions. After pumping every minion in the building full of bullets, in a dramatic moment the final bad guy is pushed out of a window, because to just take him out like the throw away characters would feel mundane and anticlimactic. To make a big moment feel special, you have to shift the paradigm away from what your players expect.

Go Big

Grand gestures are the bread and butter of movie moments. It's rarely a private and rational act that wins back the lost love. There is never an easy code to disengage the bomb or activate the self-destruct mechanism in a tense action scene. Going big in terms of scale, action, or excitement helps disengage the scene from the usual fare and makes every action exaggerated and special in some way. Anything done against the backdrop of a big set piece or an extreme consequence feels special, even if the action or the mechanics of the game is on par with how things are usually done. For example:

- Scaling the branches of a tree that has been turned into a house is a chase scene in a unique place.
- Running across the tree-branch bridges and climbing through the vines and gigantic leaves of an entire city that is housed in a single tree is an extreme situation.
- Fighting on the rooftops of a city is thrilling because of the danger of a fall that could kill you.
- Fighting on the rooftops of a city floating in the clouds is epic because surviving the fall would require a miracle.

Analyze Your Scenes for Special Effects Worthiness

Like so many techniques that help you improve your GMing, you can determine if your scene is going to have that special effects quality by turning the rules above into questions. When you plan a scene that you want to be a wow moment, ask yourself these three questions about it:

- Does it engage the senses directly?
- Is it different from the usual fare?
- Does it "go big" in some way?

For example, say you have this scene in mind:

> *"The PCs will be chasing the BBEG out of his snowy lair. There will be a chasm that he gets across to buy some time and eventually get away."*

Ask the three questions, and you wind up with this much more interesting version:

> *"The BBEG will escape and run down the side of the snowy mountain, getting over a chasm that will delay the PCs. I'll put on some chase music and drape a white sheet over some cardboard boxes to create the actual chasm (Engage the Senses, Go Big). Since we usually do straight-up combats, the PCs don't usually do chase scenes, and if they fall down the chasm it will mean almost certain death. I'll let them know that beforehand and reinforce the idea by making one of the BBEG's minions fall off one of the small platforms of ice that can be used to cross the chasm (Different From the Usual Fare, Go Big).*

Even though the essence of the scene is the same as the original version, the one that incorporates the three guidelines—engage the senses, make it different, and go big—is the one most likely to be remembered. This version takes the basic concept and adds some shine and polish to make it a special effects moment.

When and Where to Use Special Effects Moments

Special effects moments create that wow factor, but they often take more time and effort to bring about. The good news is that they aren't the sort of thing you need to do all the time. Using a special effects moment is a matter of timing and understanding the flow of your game. One moment like this will set the tone for an entire night. Trying to force two or three special effects moments into a single game session may detract from the story or the characters. Special effects moments are best used sparingly and only when you want to create a great emphasis around a particular element or scene.

There are three places in a game session where you can easily place special effects moments to get the most bang for your buck:

- **Right at the beginning**—A special effects moment that wows at the start of a session will set the tone for the entire evening and will get your players excited and engaged from the outset.
- **As the finale**—Movies often have a climactic finale, and sometimes saving the best for last is a good choice. If you're planning a special effects moment for the end of the session, try to find a way to hint at and foreshadow it so that your players get excited about building to that moment.

- **Spread across the entire session**—If you have to run a short session or are running a one-shot that you won't likely revisit, turning the entirety of the session into one giant, extreme moment increases the impact of the moment exponentially. It won't just feel like a short gaming session or a one-shot, but a session that was hyper-focused on one incredible element. Your players will mark the entire session in their minds as something mind-blowing instead of it just being one awe-inspiring moment during a normal session.

Watching for Wow Moments

When I started gaming at conventions instead of just amongst my friends, I noticed my eyes constantly being drawn away from my game and into others' games. At first I didn't really think much about it, until I noticed that the games that drew my attention were doing something awesome that I wasn't doing at home. One game had a large golden chalice in the middle of the map and a small amount of orange crepe paper to simulate fire. When an NPC died, that NPC's miniature got thrown into the chalice. Another game had a large castle prop taking up the entire table and a giant army arrayed against the PCs. The PCs weren't fighting all of the miniatures that were on the table, but the epic scale made the grand battle the center of attention.

I also noticed that in some instances, I would catch players and GMs narrating what was occurring. I would hear people talking about blowing up giant robots or jumping out of airships and acting out their pleas for help from other characters. These were the moments that drew my attention away from the game I was currently engaged in, and I later realized that they were the moments that I remembered from those conventions.

The games I was in, or running, weren't bad, but they didn't have that wow factor when I stacked them up alongside whatever was going on at other tables. These moments were what set me on a path of looking at ways to improve my own games and focusing on how to keep my players' eyes and thoughts on what was going on in our shared space using wow moments.

Some Tools and Techniques for Creating Special Effects Moments

We'll go into more detail about the specifics of creating special effects moments later in the book, but here are some baseline ideas and concepts that you can use to create special effects moments in your games.

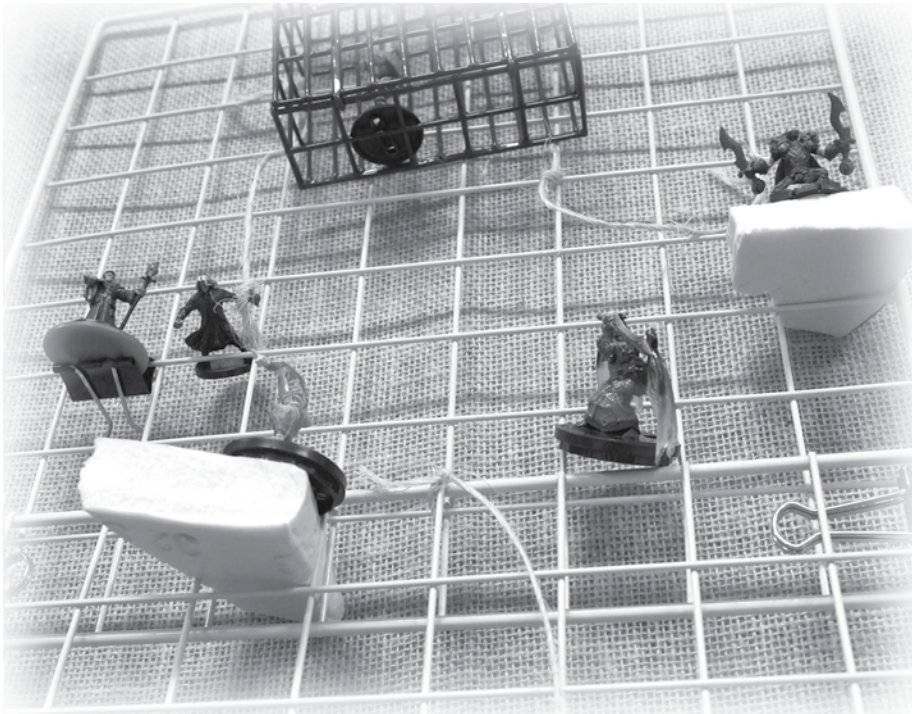
Flip the Paradigm

Paradigm shifting ties into the idea of making a special effects moment different from the usual fare: Find some element of your game and change how it happens. If you use maps and miniatures in all of your games, change the paradigm and go completely narrative in one scene. Remove the miniatures and the map from the table and

interact with your players in a more direct way, maybe even changing the play space to a conversation circle instead of a standard table setup. In this way, you will emphasize the narrative elements and remove the representations that the group usually uses to interact with the game world.

If you normally use miniatures and your moment is something that would be best served by representing the action scene with figures, change the scene from a horizontal one to a vertical one. Have the miniatures actually move up the map in some way. This will make the players think in new ways and have to interact with the same rules in a different manner. Their circumstances for failure may or may not change, but their perception will.

A paradigm flip doesn't need to change the physical space or its representation, but often a change in the physical setup helps emphasize the flip. You could flip the paradigm by setting a combat on a moving platform like an airship or a train, or you could place a narrative-driven scene in a setting vastly different from the norm. For example, if your game involves paranormal investigators in a late Victorian-themed world and your normal gameplay style is to scour through the dingy streets chasing vampires, you could have the PCs snatched by royal guards who clean and present them with new clothes as they are called into the halls of society to deal with a troubling issue for the queen. Their normal approach to questioning and searching out their undead adversaries will need modification if they are to do so within the confines of courtly life and the politics that go along with it.



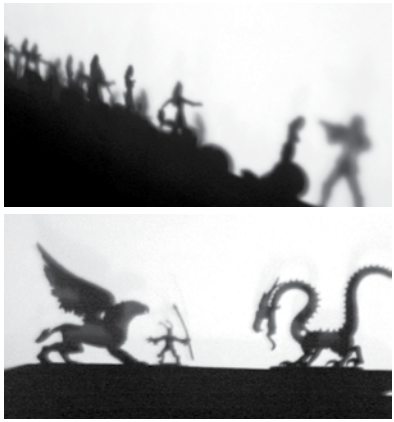
A vertical crawl up a cliff side to rescue a comrade held in a cage is achieved with old metal shelving, twine, and some blue foam to make ledges.

Make the "Boring" Bits Unidirectional

Whenever an NPC starts to fill the players in on some element of the backstory for the game, players' eyes glaze over. This is common in all games and no fault of the GM. Players focus on their characters, so it's easy for a player to tune out if a scene doesn't actively engage her character in some way. The alternative is that a player tries to engage with the moment and the narrative effect is ruined, leaving important details and information by the wayside. To keep these moments focused and impactful, make them unidirectional by creating them beforehand.

In a steampunk game, the bombs the PCs needed to disarm had speakers on them. I recorded sound files to play from those speakers. Each bomb had a new piece of information about why the bomber was setting the bombs. The players leaned in to listen to these—very basic—sound files that I recorded on my phone. No one interrupted, and they asked if they could listen to them again. Creating the files wasn't hard: I just pulled up the voice memo recorder app on my phone and acted out the part. When I played those sound clips later, I got a much better response than if I had tried to narrate the same information on the spot.

With a little more effort, this effect can be taken far enough that it becomes an incredible moment which engages multiple senses. If you have access to a video camera, a light bulb, and some cardboard, you can create a shadow puppet play on a wall and record it for later viewing. Then, as you begin to narrate the story in game, you end in the middle of a sentence that picks up in the video as you play it. The narration turns into the scene that could be occurring in one of the PCs' heads and you add an interesting visual element to the game.



Turning a backstory into a shadow play can make it interesting and more engaging and it isn't hard to do with the miniatures you are already using.

In a similar vein, you can create a short video of a narrative scene. If you're running a game set in a world that comes straight from a movie, playing just a snippet from the movie with a different voice track, or even editing bits and pieces together with free movie editing software, can create an impressive narrative moment. Playing in a world of your own creation? You can take screenshots from a video game and put them together in a montage, or use bits of art from the setting or pictures of the miniatures posed on terrain that you use in-game.

Don't be concerned if you can't put in all the fancy elements you'd like or make a pre-recorded narrative that sounds like a polished film trailer. Putting hours of work into a special effects moment is fine if you enjoy doing it, but the end goal is to engage your players and keep them focused, not win an award. Do the work that you feel you need to do to engage the players with the tools that you have, but don't stress out over making it perfect.

Move Bits of the Fictional World into the Real World

Although we play in fictional worlds created inside of our imaginations and through our storytelling, we can emphasize those creations by bringing bits of them into the real world. Is an NPC the crux of a certain scene? Dress up as that NPC or get one prop that represents that particular NPC to use as a costume. When you deliver dialogue from that character's mouth, players will use the costume elements to shape their idea of the character.

Giving your players something that exists in the game world and is relevant to their characters will also help them anchor themselves in the narrative. Does your game involve them all joining an organization or a military squadron? Give them pips to attach to their character sheets that represent their rank, or make the specialized squad badges out of cheap sculpting clay. That gives each character a physical connection to the squad. If a scene involves haggling over pay or delivering a ransom, throwing a bunch of metal replica coins on the table creates a link to the importance of the money in the scene.

If you want to emphasize a particular element of your game by bringing it into the physical world, you can create a prop of that element. Is the MacGuffin a sacred knife? A prop bought from a costume store or an old toy can become a physical representation of that item that your players need to get their hands on—and protect. You can print out a map on parchment paper as a simple physical prop, or, in a modern or futuristic game, hand your players a map displayed on a tablet. These don't have to be works of art: Merely having them in the real world helps to focus players' attention on those elements and keep a constant mental connection to the game world.

Challenge - Achievement: Special Effects Guru

1. Pick three scenes that you want to be especially impactful. Ask the three questions from the Analyze Your Scenes for Special Effects Worthiness section about those scenes and see if there's room for improvement.
2. Create or find a small prop that you can give to each player to tie them into the narrative and theme of the game world.
3. Create a scenario that flips the paradigm by changing your table setup or the gameplay parameters of a familiar type of scene (e.g., reimagining a horizontal chase as a vertical one).
4. Record a narrative beforehand and use that to convey backstory or other detailed information to your players.
5. Flip the paradigm by making the consequences of failing a particular scene extreme. Even if there's secretly a failsafe, ensure that your players have a sense that failure means the end.
6. Make the first scene a special effects moment by using an impressive prop or effect that sets the tone for the rest of the game.

"Okay. Make your jump roll, but don't forget what you're going to fall into if you fail," Gemma said, smirking impishly.

Patti looked at the 3-D map hanging on the wall. Gemma had said they were going to be doing something interesting this game, but she had no idea it was going to be like this. Hanging on the wall was a piece of cork board covered by a star-patterned sheet of cloth. All of their minis were sticky-tacked to pins, and there were wooden blocks tacked to pushpins to represent the debris floating around them in space.

Patti rolled her jump skill to push off of a piece of debris, guessing that her incredible acrobatic skills would probably make sure she succeeded, but looking at that map and knowing her character would drift into the infinite void of space if she failed made her uneasy. As she moved her miniature, Patti said, "I spend a plot point, just to make sure . . ."

Gemma smiled. She knew that when they had triggered the totem in the ruins, they were expecting it to turn into a spaceship. That was what happened last time. Instead, it teleported the entire room out to space near a drifting spaceship, and she got to use her wall map idea.

They all kept looking at the map with trepidation, trying to figure out how to push off of one piece of floating debris and time it so they could catch another one. Even though the rolls were the same as they would have been on the ground with a simple negative modifier, her players were looking at the game in a totally different way. Gemma knew that they would be talking about this session for a long time after it ended.

Chapter 4: The Props Master

Walking into Adam's house for the fifth session of their game, Patti and Renaldo stopped in the doorway. Covering the entirety of the table was a four-foot long spaceship. It was crude, made of painted foam, and enormous. The ship covered all of their play space and was raised up about a foot off of the table. Gemma's head popped out from behind the model, a giant grin on her face.

Patti said, "What the . . ."

Gemma said, "Oh, hey guys! Like it? It's the Red Empress' flag ship. You planned to assault it tonight with your new ship, so I brought it along."

"Seriously? Wow! How long did that take you to make?" Patti said, peering around at all the small painted bits and what looked like robots that were tacked onto the outside of it.

"Less time than you would think. It's not the prettiest ship there is, but it'll . . ."

"'Make the lessek run before the imperials know you breached their borders'" Patti and Renaldo said together, finishing a line from Gemma's favorite movie. Adam came in from the kitchen with a plate of nachos, went to set them on the table, and then reconsidered. He looked around and saw no space that could be used without impacting the giant flying battle fortress. Clearing some books off the shelf and piling them on a stack of papers that appeared to be tax documents from the previous decade, he put the nachos on the shelf and grabbed his stuff. "I can't wait to shoot some holes in this thing," he said with a grin, poking at the giant ship.

Gemma reached forward and pulled a section of it apart, revealing the interior and the gridded map there. Everyone's eyes widened just a little bit more.

Becoming a Props Master

So far we've looked primarily at the psychological impact of where you play and how to bring special effects into the mix. Let's shift gears and talk about something purely practical and hands-on: making stuff. This chapter is full of tips and plans to help you build scenery and sets, choose the right tools, and repurpose things you might not normally associate with gaming to create incredible terrain and set-ups that draw your players into the game and increase engagement.

Artist: David L. Johnson

The Miniature's the Thing

Because this chapter is focused on building terrain and sets, the advice in this section is most beneficial to games that make use of miniatures in some way. But your game doesn't need mechanics that require miniatures or a grid to make use of terrain and sets in order to get some of the benefits that come from using them. Having a physical representation of the game world, especially one that works in three dimensions, helps players visualize the game and work within a common, shared visual framework. Even in games that call for grid-based mapping, I prefer to use maps without a grid—it gives my players a mental anchor that connects them to the game. Encourage your players to interact with your sets and scenery however they like.

Don't Go Broke Making Stuff

Expensive premade pieces of terrain and miniatures made expressly for gaming are really cool, but you don't need to spend money on a deeply detailed replica of a castle or cave system to put alongside your miniatures to get the same benefit. You can spend big bucks on cool scenery—and I certainly have—but you don't need to spend a lot.

More than likely the scenery you're making or using is only going to appear in a single session, and the small-scale details are likely to get missed in the heat of the moment. To that end, I offer this all-purpose advice: When making a piece of scenery or a prop, take as much time as *you* feel comfortable with to get the quality *you* feel is necessary for your purpose.

Obligatory Disclaimer

Two last things before getting into the building advice. First, the techniques and tips described herein are pulled from multiple sources that are more detailed and exact when it comes to carrying out different builds. The goal of this chapter is to give you the basics and inspire you as to what can be done, but detailed instructions for crafting terrain and scenery would fill a book in their own right. The basics herein will get you started; for more details, I recommend seeking out some of the many books and articles on these topics.

Second, the tips and techniques that are broadly described herein often involve cutting, gluing, sculpting, and manipulating objects in ways that may fall outside their intended uses. ***Be safe.*** Wear appropriate safety gear. Work in well-ventilated areas. Never expose yourself to harm. Always make sure your vulnerable bits (pretty much all of you) are far away from any object that can damage you. Look up more detailed information about working with various materials and learn from the lessons and mistakes other people have made rather than making your own.

Whatever you find in this book that inspires you, and whatever techniques you try yourself, remember that actually doing it is at your own risk and you are solely responsible for any results or damage that come from your building attempts.

A Prop Master's Toolbox

You will work with many different materials when you set about building your own scenery, and it's good to have many different tools at your disposal. Rather than buying all the tools you might need at once, take a more need-oriented approach to equipping yourself. Take time to think out the piece of terrain you are going to create and then research ways to create it with a specific material or in a specific medium. See what others use and search out the names of tools and how to use them in order to determine what is going to work best for you. That all being said, here are some common tools that I have in my toolbox that are useful in many types of crafting.

Rotary Tool

A rotary tool is a very small motor that you can attach different blades, saws, grinding discs, and drills to in order to perform many types of crafting tasks. I suggest getting one with a cord rather than a battery, as the battery will always run out on you exactly when you most need it.

Fine Scissors/Heavy Duty Scissors/Tin Snips/Side Cutters

Scissors, you may be surprised to learn, come in a variety of styles and weights. Heavier scissors can cut heavier materials easily, while fine or "precision" scissors may be the only way to get that truly delicate corner. Tin snips cut tin well, but they also have the weight to cut many other materials without issue. Sometimes tin snips are the only thing that can get the job done. Side cutters are very good at making delicate cuts in tough materials.

Box Cutters/Fixed Blade Utility Knife

Keeping to the cutting theme, often the cuts you need to make are better done with a long, straight edge. A box cutter is a good start, but sometimes you need a smaller utility knife, such as an X-Acto® knife, to cut out the proper shapes.

Knife Sharpener/Whetstone

Knives and scissors dull with use. Getting a blade sharpener or a scissors sharpener will help you retain the edge on some cutting implements. The finer the edge, the harder it is to adequately sharpen. A manual sharpener made for kitchen knives will often rest on a table and has a coarse and fine sharpening "V" in it. Pulling a blade through it will sharpen both edges at the same time. Motorized ones are expensive, but decent manual ones can be purchased for around $10 to $15. A whetstone or a multi-function sharpener will have more options for sharpening, but require more training in its use if you want to avoid cutting yourself.

Needle-nose Pliers

Some of the scales we work at when making scenery requires a more delicate grip than our fingers can get. A good pair of needle-nose pliers is essential.

Metal Ruler/T-Square

A metal ruler provides a nice edge to draw a straight line with or guide a cutting instrument. A small T-square lets you do this with a right-angled edge or easily match up and cut a corner without slipping.

Self-Healing Cutting Mat

Self-healing cutting mats are made of a synthetic rubber material that will take many cuts before becoming damaged. They also hold materials in place through friction, making it easier to cut with precision.

Screwdrivers (Tiny and Regular)

Screwdrivers will be called for fairly infrequently, but you may find yourself needing very tiny screwdrivers if you're modifying a toy or other found item. The flat edges on a large screwdriver can also be used as a makeshift chisel for small plastic items, but tin snips or side cutters are often cleaner and safer.

Stick Glue/Wood Glue/Superglue/Hot Glue

If you make things, you will come to love and hate glue of all sorts. Stick glue, the kind used in elementary school, can actually hold well and is easy to apply. Wood glue and superglue can hold many sorts of objects together very cleanly, but application can be messy if not carefully controlled. Hot glue will be your best friend and your worst enemy: It will hold the best of many substances, but requires a glue gun and a few old rags to wipe up spills before it sets.

Gloves

Plastic or thin cotton gloves are great accessories to prevent your hands from getting covered in glue or paint.

Cheap Miniature Vise Grip or a Metal Armature "Helping Hands"

Crafting anything often requires that two pieces be held in just the right place or held together for a good amount of time. A miniature vise grip with a tilting head can make it easier to keep things in the right place. A "helping hands" device will also hold things in place, but in a more limited way and with less precision from its alligator clip "hands."

Paints and Brushes

Painting is a an entire sub-domain of crafting and every material you work with will be different. Acrylic paints are a generally safe bet for most materials and can often be purchased fairly cheaply in sets of multiple colors. Brushes come in many sizes and shapes, and each craft or medium will work better with different types and sizes or brushes.

Tape

Though not often used on the finished crafted object, tape will be essential to holding things together or creating tools. I like transparent tape for holding objects for permanent joining and electrical tape when I need a very tight grip.

Sandpaper in Many Different Grits

Sandpaper is a useful tool to rough up a surface you need to paint or glue together. Course grit sandpaper can also provide a more rustic, or worn down look if you want your terrain to look scratched or worn.

Finding Scenery in Everyday Items

Often, the best scenery and set pieces are the things you don't actually have to build. They are pre-made objects that can be repurposed as gaming scenery with little to no work. Items that can be repurposed are everywhere. The black cloth storage cube that you use for storing clothes can be emptied and flipped over to become a giant mysterious alien cube. The cheap toy train set you find at the thrift store is the perfect size for miniatures and creates a great steampunk set piece with a little bit of paint. The cheap bonsai tree plants that decorate your office are the perfect size to add some atmosphere to the fight in the enchanted forest when they are set on top of your map.

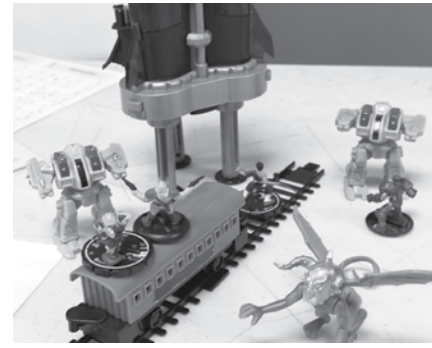
Almost anything, when placed next to miniatures, can be perceived in an entirely different way and make great gaming scenery. It only takes a little imagination to build an interesting gaming terrain out of found items, and scale works to your favor. Because miniatures are often at such a small scale, ordinary objects like a glass bowl are huge in comparison. Take one and fill it with some water and a toy shark, then cut the edges of a cardboard box to be flush with the top and open into the bowl. Draw a crude map on the box top and lay strips of cardboard across it a for a bridge. One glass mixing bowl and a dollar or two worth of cardboard or foam board and you have the perfect shark tank for a super-spy villain's lair.

Look at the world around you with a questioning eye that asks, "How can I use that in my game?" This will turn up gaming scenery everywhere.

There are two categories of found items that are especially good for repurposing and which will work as a source of gaming props: toys and decorative objects.

Toys

Toys of all sorts have great utility when turned into gaming scenery. Plastic robots are often the right scale to represent mechanized suits. An arm-mounted foam-dart launcher becomes a rocket ship. Construction trucks and toy cars become part of a cityscape. A plastic dinosaur becomes a life-sized dinosaur. A cheap helicopter toy becomes an excellent prop that the PCs can use to escape a burning building. "Go Big" by using an inexpensive toy gyrocopter that actually flies. Hide it out of the players' sight and keep the controller handy. When they call for evacuation from the combat zone in-game, fly it in and watch their eyes widen.



A toy train, slightly modified robot toys, and a wrist mounted dart launcher create a sci-fi battle, all acquired at a thrift store for under 5 bucks.

Play sets are another great investment because they include, or are themselves, terrain. The superhero's underground cave, the construction site with robotic claw arm, the jungle tree fort, the pirate ship, the pink princess castle—all of these items can instantly be turned into complete pieces of terrain for your games.

Decorative Items and Other Objects that Work Differently at Scale

An upside down candle holder and brass bookshelf set the scene for PCs battling in an ancient temple.

Items that are decorative in nature actually work incredibly well for gaming scenery. A brass platform candle holder picked up at the thrift store becomes an instant sacrificial altar when turned upside down. A large round mirror with a small amount of diluted blue paint becomes an excellent reflecting pool. A brass statue of an interesting figure that stands a few inches tall becomes a giant statue sitting in front of a temple. Many decorative objects can be repurposed if you imagine them in a different scale.

Similarly, things that seem ordinary when viewed at their regular size become strikingly different when viewed at the scale of your miniatures. Look around the room you're sitting in right now and you'll probably spot many objects that could work as interesting gaming scenery and terrain.

- With a little modification, those grey, shoebox-sized plastic storage containers with drawers can be viewed as futuristic mobile command centers.
- A black lamp on the flexible metal arm becomes a generator and the wires/scaffolding that lead to the underground base. Punch it up by using a red light bulb to represent an impending explosion.
- A laser pointer with the button taped down becomes a laser drill cutting into a gigantic energy crystal that looks very much like a d12 or the tracking dot on a giant cannon.
- As in the shark tank/glass bowl example above, cut a cardboard box so that it is flush with a Lazy Susan's height and create a terrain piece that rotates when the PCs step onto it, emphasizing the mechanical nature of the clock tower and highlighting the deadly fall should they fall from it.
- Simple bailing twine makes for great rope at a miniature scale, and it can be tied into a spider web that the PCs have to cross in order to get out of the dungeon. Cover the rest of the dungeon with decoration spider webs from a Halloween store to enhance the effect.

Modifying Premade Items

Often a found item works just fine as a prop as-is, but sometimes you need to modify it just a bit to make it work. Here are some general guidelines and tips on how to modify premade items. You can often find detailed instructions online for specific items by asking the right questions: Web searches like "how to cut brass" or "how to repaint a toy train" will bring up information from experts that can help you get it just right.

Painting and Gluing

When you find yourself needing to repaint a found item to make it work, you may want to consider sanding it first. Paint and glue often take better on a rougher surface, so get your sandpaper out and rough it up before applying paint/glue. Depending on the color, applying a white or grey primer first may be advisable. Whenever working with paint and glue, get plenty of ventilation.

Cutting and Reshaping

Your rotary tool is a great resource when it comes to most crafting, but it's usually the best tool for cutting toys or decorative items. If you have to remove something tiny, like a sticker or extra antenna nub from a plastic toy, a sanding cone is often your best bet.

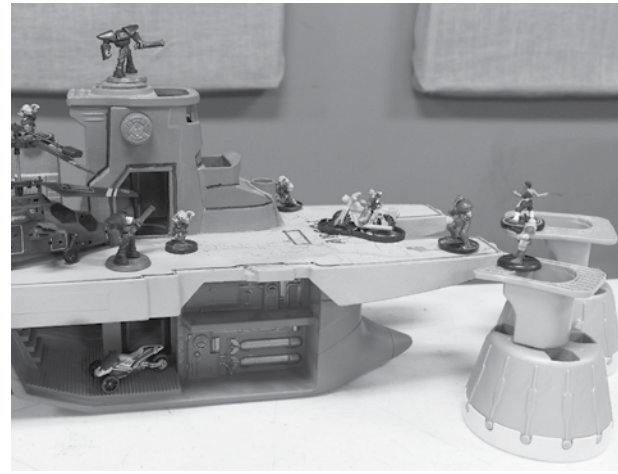
Cutting bits and pieces off is often best left to a side cutter, which has the power and strength to cleanly cut through most small objects but the precision to get close to the edge. Whenever working with a cutting tool, never force it if there is much resistance. Try a different approach or tool, or look up more information on how to work with that material and cut it.

Sculpting (Advanced Technique)

Sometimes you might want to add something onto a found object. Making the addition out of sculpting clay is a good way to cover up a hole or create a specific attachment for a toy. Custom action figure-making tutorials contain a wealth of information for working with all sorts of sculpting techniques, but here are the basics.

Form the sculpting clay into a rough version of what you need, and then use a toothpick or fine knife to cut away bits and sculpt it into the exact shape you're after. This is very delicate work, and it's easy to cut yourself when working at such a small scale, so be careful. After you've got the shape and the sculpting where you want it, you need to cure the clay. Sculpting clay often cures with time or heat, so baking it in an oven or dipping it repeatedly for 30-second intervals into a pot of boiled (but not currently boiling) water is sometimes required to get it to cure. The number of times it will need to be dipped depends on the thickness of the sculpted item. The boiling water technique is often necessary if the sculpting clay is attached to an object that should not be put into an oven, like a plastic toy. Check the instructions that came with the clay for appropriate ways to cure it (and tips on shaping it).

Hot glue is another interesting sculpting medium. Squeezing it out of the glue gun and layering it into shapes can create transparent effects or energy blasts. You can build a skeleton from a paperclip or other wire to sculpt around, though it will still be visible inside the glue. Use a toothpick or the end of a paperclip to sculpt the glue to create various effects like fire, an energy blast, choppy waves, or an ethereal, ghostly shape. You can tint the finished product using a diluted paint mixture.

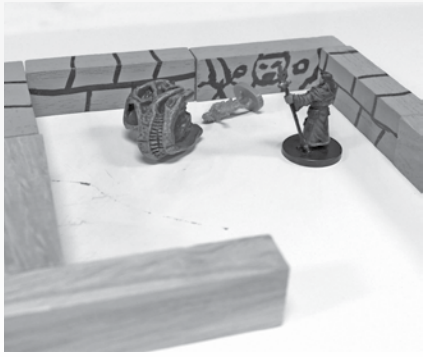


A repaint of a bright yellow kids' ship turns it into a great battle cruiser, while plastic bongos only need to be turned upside down to become a docking apparatus.

Simple Tricks for Modular Walls

I tend to improvise a lot as a GM, so building things that fit a specific purpose sometimes doesn't work for me. I like to build scenery that is modular and which can be used multiple ways, and walls are a great example because they come up so often. I've got one simple trick that I keep going back to for making walls: I scavenge the pieces from wooden building-block tower games.

Applying a coat of gray to the blocks and letting it dry gives it a base coat. I then use a permanent marker to draw a stone pattern onto the blocks and presto: instant dungeon walls that I can use to build any shape I need. Different paint colors and patterns create different types of wall, and if I want to make something specific I can always hand-paint a door or a unique pattern onto a few blocks that I can slot into the other more generic walls.



Papercraft

Papercraft models are some of the cheapest and easiest terrain and scenery pieces you can get, and most of the ones you can purchase look fantastic. There are also many sites that have free papercraft models of stuff like buildings, spaceships, monsters, and other things that work well as scenery. Making papercraft models usually involves three main steps: printing, cutting, and assembling. Most models you purchase from a company will have instructions for assembling that particular model, but here are some tips to help you out.

Paper Weight

Heavier paper is more stable and holds its shape better. You can purchase 110-pound cardstock that is a heavier weight than regular paper from any office store. It will be less flexible than paper and thus can be cut into intricate shapes much more easily. If you need something even heavier than cardstock, use cardboard comic book dividers. The non-glossy ones are cheaper and often work with home office printers. They don't typically come in 8.5x11" or A4 sizes, but they do provide a sturdier surface that can hold some weight.

Coloring

Papercraft models often come in color and black and white versions and look best when printed on a color printer. If that isn't an option for you, coloring the paper before you cut it out will give you a decent looking model with some visual texture.

Cutting

Cutting the paper for papercraft is easiest with a utility knife or box cutter, but standard scissors will work well in most cases. Be sure to watch out for any gluing tabs (small tabs meant to be glued to the inside of another piece of the model) so that you don't cut them off.

Scoring and Folding

Once you have cut your pieces out, assembling the papercraft often requires scoring the spots where you need to fold it. Scoring is the act of drawing a line across the paper so that you can create a clean fold. A scoring tool is great, but a thumbtack is often adequate to score the folds. Tape it firmly to a pencil or chopstick to give it a handle that's easier to hold. When it comes time to fold your papercraft, place your metal ruler along the scoring line for a neat fold.

Gluing

A glue stick is often a good method for hitting just the fold tabs or join points of a papercraft model. Simple white glue is generally more than enough to hold papercraft together, but one that bills itself as a "tacky" glue or "quick drying" is often worth it. If you're not using a glue stick to apply glue to small areas, squeeze the glue into a small bowl or onto a piece of scrap paper and apply it with a paintbrush. You can clean your glue brush with warm, soapy water or paint thinner, or just use cheap brushes for your glue and throw them out when you're done.

An Unexpected Papercrafting Resource: Cardboard

Papercraft is a great way to get good-looking terrain that works on a miniature scale, but when I want to create something impressive for a specific purpose I use cardboard. As a 10-year-old with a love of arts and crafts, I made a model of Castle Grayskull® out of old cardboard boxes. It wasn't pretty, but it was big and epic and it lasted for a good long while before the ThunderCats® set it on fire and I got grounded for a week. If you want to go big, use cardboard—and keep these things in mind.

A Box Cutter is Essential

Smaller utility knives don't have enough power or strength when cutting cardboard, unless you are doing fine detail work. A box cutter is the perfect tool for cutting cardboard.

Getting Cardboard

A major benefit of working with cardboard is that it's sturdy and cheap and you can find it almost everywhere. Old cereal boxes are much more flexible but less sturdy than moving boxes, which can be purchased fairly cheaply and provide nice big, square surfaces to work with. Boxes of a similar weight can be gotten free from almost any retail store just by asking nicely. You can also work with foam board in the same way that you can with cardboard. It's a bit more expensive, but can sometimes be sturdier and easier to paint and glue together. (More on this topic in the next section.)

Shaping

You can apply papercraft model ideas to cardboard, but often you'll be working with simpler shapes. Find pieces big enough and plan your projects out beforehand. Searching online for cardboard craft projects or looking at kids' craft books will lead you to some pretty impressive projects.

Glue and Tape

Like papercraft models, cardboard can be joined together with glue, but masking tape will often hold things together better. If you're using glue you can often improve a plan you find online by creating "gluing tabs" along the edges of pieces that are meant to be joined together. This will enable you to attach your pieces without visible exterior tabs.

Painting and Decorating

Painting a cardboard model of significant size often takes a fair amount of time. Fortunately, cardboard is a medium that takes spray paint well. This works well for a base color to remove the "cardboard look." After it dries, better paint and fine details can be applied with paintbrushes. With only a base level of paint and some minor details, a cardboard model can look somewhat cartoonish or childish, but this can still work for your game. Taking extra time with the painting step, however, can lead to impressive results for a model that was inexpensive to build.

Learning the Art of Foam Crafting from Wargamers

When I think of impressive terrain and set pieces on a miniature scale, my mind always goes to one place in particular: miniature wargames. Tabletop skirmish games rely on interesting terrain and scenery, and a lot of time and effort goes into self-crafted terrain. We can borrow many ideas and techniques from this field and apply them to creating scenery and set pieces for our games.

Wargamers often craft terrain out of polystyrene foam because it's easy to cut and shape. Working with polystyrene foam is an art unto itself, but even if you're not an expert it's cheap and can create many interesting structures. Let's go over some of the basics.

Getting Foam

Polystyrene foam is available from most big-box hardware stores and can be found in the insulation aisle. It is sold in varying thicknesses and width/height combinations. You can also find it in old coolers and packing material from shipping boxes, but these sources won't usually yield nice big sheets that are easy to cut. Hunt around to find the cheapest ones you can and avoid foam that bills itself as having been treated with special chemicals.

Cutting Foam

Polystyrene foam cuts well with a serrated knife, such as a cheap kitchen steak knife or a large bread knife—the kind you can acquire from any thrift store. Some people use hot wire cutters to carve out shapes, but I've found serrated knives often work best. If you want to use a power tool for the job, an electric kitchen knife can save your wrist from some pain if you're cutting large sections of foam. I've also been known to use my scroll saw to cut out large shapes when making big props, but I usually default back to the kitchen bread knife.

Getting smooth cuts in polystyrene can sometimes be difficult, but it's usually just a matter of pressure and a steady hand. Waxing the sides of your knife can help it move through the foam smoothly. If you want to smooth or "sand" the foam, get a piece of scrap foam and rub the smoothest edge you can find against the area you want to smooth. A slightly damp cloth can also work well to clean rough edges.

Shaping and Joining

Polystyrene foam can be stacked to create terrain that rises high and covers a large area. You can join foam pieces with wood glue and use toothpicks to hold it together while it dries. You can build square or angled buildings by cutting the foam and connecting pieces together to form walls and a ceiling. Foam pieces that have been stacked high can be carved as if they were a single piece to create a tall prop with a specific shape (e.g., a mountain).

A custom Foam Board bunker with wire ladder and blue foam turned into terrain make a cheap but impressive scene.

Using Foam Board

Many pieces of wargaming terrain incorporate foam board to create smooth structures or additions to more rocky pieces of terrain. Depending on what you are making, using a piece of foam board will provide a thinner piece of foam with a paper coating on each side. This paper can be peeled off of one side to provide a foam-like surface (wet it first for an easier time). Foam board crafts much like cardboard, but cutting it is best done with a box cutter or a rotary tool.

Effects

Once you've got a basic shape for your foam prop, you can use a thin wooden pencil or a utility knife to draw shapes in it. Applying pressure will cut out the shapes and leave them as a small indent into the wall. These should transfer past the painting phase, but you may want to exaggerate any shapes or patterns you want to be visible under paint. Applying a glue seal (more on this in a moment) and adding in gravel and sand can create a rocky terrain with texture.

Sealing and Priming

Painting foam can be a tricky thing. Since polystyrene is a plastic foam, it doesn't play nice with the solvents in spray paints and other paints. You always want to put down a primer coat when working with foam. You can use a spray paint to do this if it is marked as being foam or plastic safe. A better, and cheaper, option is to get some PVA glue (white glue like you used in school, but make sure it says "PVA") and water it down to make a sealant. With a brush and a 50/50 mixture of glue and water, you can seal the entirety of the foam prop and then apply a layer of priming paint by hand or with a spray can.

Painting

Once you've got the base sealing layer down, you can apply other paint layers to create a finished look. Dry brushing (getting a bit of paint on the brush and then wiping it off on a scrap piece of foam or paper until it is nearly dry, then dragging it across the prop to create highlights) is a great way to get texture and make very realistic looking props. Painting is what turns most wargame scenery from a foam shape into a work of art.

Prop Ideas in Foam

After reading that last section, you may be thinking that building foam props and terrain sounds like a lot of work compared to modifying found items or doing papercraft or cardboard terrain. In some ways it is, but foam sculpting is a crafting option that can yield incredible results.

Artist: David L. Johnson

Wargamers usually work with a large table and interesting pieces of terrain that can be used for cover in miniature battles. For a tabletop RPG, our goals are usually a bit different—and engagement is at the top of the list.

Here are a few ideas to spur your creativity.

Giant Tower

Cut multiple hollow circles or squares from the polystyrene foam and glue foam board floors to the bottom of each circle. Stack the circles and connect them with toothpicks to create a giant tower. For a modern game, use squares instead of circles to create a skyscraper.

Focal Object

Foam that is stacked and glued together can be carved into a sculpture of any sort, perfect to use as a central focus or to build a physical representation of an item that the PCs are chasing after in the game.

Uniquely Structured City

Without the need for flat surfaces to accommodate multiple models (e.g., squads of elven archers) in a wargame, you can use foam pieces of all shapes and sizes and connect them to each other to create three-dimensional spaces. An underwater compound could be created by building walls, rooms, and shapes that are connected by foam bridges and supported by foam "girders" on the undersides to raise them to different heights. Building the walls out of polystyrene and then using foam board for removable ceilings and floors can create interior rooms that PCs move between and explore.

Islands in the Sky/Sea

Foam islands of varying sizes and shapes can be created and then raised to different heights to create floating islands for an airship to navigate around. Using clear plastic cups as bases underneath to raise them higher, a crude illusion that the islands are floating can be achieved. Setting the islands directly on a blue cloth makes a cheap but impressive scene for a pirate game.

Stone Ruins

Is the final set piece for your campaign going to occur in open-air stone ruins? Using a single sheet of foam for the base and carving out small accent elements (like stairs or raised walls) can create impressive stone ruins. You could even carve out individual rocks from scrap pieces of foam and use them to build Stonehenge-like plinths.

Earth Elemental

Cutting out rough foam stones and sticking them together with toothpicks in a basic bipedal shape can create an impressively large earth elemental. The PCs can knock sections off the elemental and you can pull pieces of it apart and re-form it as the battle progresses.

Challenge—Achievement: The Props Master

1. Set a budget of $10 and go to a thrift store. Find as many items in their toy or house wares section that could be used as found-item props. See how much raising the budget to $15 increases your options.
2. Build yourself a set of reusable walls by painting wooden blocks or using toy building blocks that connect to one another.
3. Craft a basic piece of foam terrain to act as a set piece for a climactic scene or an interesting puzzle (complete with clues carved into the walls with a pencil).
4. Create an impressive set by using scale and a found object or a crafted prop—something huge that dwarfs your miniatures.
5. Find some free papercraft terrain and use it as a stage for the very first scene of the session to get that "wow" moment at the beginning of the game.
6. Using found objects or crafted objects, create an interesting set piece that changes the paradigm in some way—like a shark tank in a glass bowl with actual water or sky-islands that seem to float at different heights.

Artist: David L. Johnson

"You really want to push that final rod into the reactor?" Gemma said, grinning with her hand over the red crayon embedded in the foam ball in the center of the giant ship.

"Ummm . . . maybe we should rig some kind of timing system," Adam said in his James Dorlan voice. "Y'know, just in case."

In the booming voice of his character, Balmer, Renaldo said, "I think we should just do it and duck behind something, but . . ." After a few minutes of discussion and die rolls, the group decided to rig a timing mechanism that would give them enough leeway to get to their ship. They all decided that Gemma was too likely to do something big and dramatic.

Once they were safely tucked inside their ship and rocketing away, Gemma asked everyone to take their minis out of the ship model that sat on the table. She carefully put back the pieces of the ship and reached underneath to unlatch something. Grabbing a small string no one had noticed, her devil's grin at full power, she yanked and the ship model flew apart with a giant pop. The foam went flying everywhere and red streamers and glitter shot out of the model.

Everyone looked around for a second in awe, pieces of the ship laying all about. A few exclamations of excitement were uttered and Gemma picked up the mechanism that had been rubber-banded together in the center, holding everything in place until she pulled the lynch pin. With a sheepish grin, she said, "It actually took a little longer to make than I let on . . ."

Chapter 5: Green Screens and CGI

"But what kinds of things are on the walls? It's important!" Renaldo looked exasperated.

"No, it's not," said Gemma. "They're walls, standard walls made of two colors of brick. Two colors. Like every other wall in this maze. They're like all the other walls you've seen, just the pattern is different!"

"I check them again for secret passages and access points. I get up real close. That guy disappeared into thin air and there are no teleport signatures. He must have something in one of these walls. A secret passage or something," Renaldo said as he rolled his dice, failing again. "What are the walls like. If I could just envision them I could figure this out."

Raising her voice, Gemma said, "The walls are stone, with mortar between them—two colors of brick. Umm. I don't know. They're walls and there is something there, you're just not getting it!" Gemma threw her notes in the air. She couldn't think of how to describe it without giving it away. Renaldo just wasn't picking up on the clues and she couldn't think of a way to make it any clearer.

How do you describe what's special about walls? She got stuck on this train of thought and couldn't think of a way to turn Renaldo onto the right path without giving away the really interesting twist she had come up with.

"Ah-hah! I check all of them for loose bricks," Renaldo said.

Descriptions—Theater of the Mind

So far we've talked about ways to use your physical game space, props, and special effects moments to enhance your game. These are all great *secondary* aids to creating an immersive experience by engaging your players' senses. When you get down to it, however, most of the game is built on the interactions between you and your players and the words you all use during those interactions.

Most of the game, and the narrative surrounding it, occurs within the players' minds, and your most frequently used method of bringing scenes to life is verbal description. You don't need to be a master writer with a vibrant and detailed description for each and every element in a scene to make it come alive, but you do need to look at how you describe scenes so that they can be as vivid as possible.

Artist: David L. Johnson

Your Individual Style

You have your own personal, and completely unique, style of speaking and narration when you run a game. Like an auteur director, one whose films all reflect their personal style strongly, you should identify the elements of your GMing style and emphasize them to create impact. What you say, how you say it, and how you adjudicate your games will change with each game you run, but your style will always be your style and will contain elements that can only be found in your descriptions and narration.

Defining Your Style

Let's perform a quick exercise to help you define what is unique about your style so you can help emphasize your strengths. Take a piece of paper and make three columns: LIKE, UNIQUE, and DISLIKE.

- Start with the LIKE column and write down five things that you like about your GMing style
- Next, move on to the DISLIKE column and do the same thing.
- These should not be things that you consider necessarily bad or good in others' eyes, but things that you personally like and dislike about your style.

With these 10 items in place, the next step is to pick out some unique elements and identify how best to use them.

- Choose the element you like best from the LIKE column and write down how it is uniquely yours.
- Choose any element from the DISLIKE column and describe how it enhances your style.
- Choose the thing that you think your players like the most and write down why they enjoy it.
- Choose the thing that you think your players notice the most from your DISLIKE column and note how it can help you keep them engaged.
- Choose one thing from either column that you think makes the game fun for everyone.

You should now have a chart that shows elements of your style that you both like and dislike, and a center column that points out how those elements combine to create your unique GMing style. Important safety tip: The things you like and dislike about your style are not necessarily beneficial or detrimental to running a good game.

For example, I once gave an NPC the very stupid name "Pyul Cue," taken from the pool cue hanging on the wall. That name detracted a bit from the seriousness I had hoped to inject into the scene, but because I followed the lines of the players' interest in that character with the funny—but memorable—name, Pyul Cue became a key figure and led them on to the next part of the plot. Had I just given him a bland name, the players might have dismissed him quickly and I would have had to struggle to find a way to connect them to the next scenes in a personal way.

Though your GMing style, with all its highlights and flaws, is uniquely yours, there are always ways to improve as a GM. Once you've created your LIKE/UNIQUE/DISLIKE chart, there's one more thing you can do with it: Pick two things from the DISLIKE column and one from the LIKE column that you'd like to work on. Then write down a way to improve in those three areas.

For my chart, I would choose:

- **Rush the ends of games**—Set an alarm for an hour before quitting time and begin focusing on the "ending point" for the night.
- **Fumble for descriptive words**—Keep a list of descriptive words that I can reference when I'm fumbling.
- **Don't waste a lot of time with descriptions**—There are many times that my players might be better served by having good descriptions of an area. I'll write down more descriptions for important plot points and use them.

LIKE	UNIQUE	DISLIKE
Improvise a lot from player actions	***1. What you like best—how is it uniquely yours?*** I improvise by picking up on almost everything the players bring into play, making the world and story a jointly created thing.	Fumble for descriptive words when I'm improvising
Use interesting visual elements to support my descriptions	***2. One element from DISLIKE—what about it makes it unique to your style?*** The pauses in my speech when I'm trying to think give players time to interject things that I can riff off of to continue the story along.	Bad at coming up with names
Emphasize player success	***3. What do you think the players like the most?*** My emphasis on player success makes the PCs seem like heroes who kick ass at everything and that invigorates the players.	Pause in my speech very often
Don't waste a lot of time with descriptions	***4. One element you think the players notice the most from DISLIKE—how can it help you keep them engaged?*** When I come up with bad NPC names, the players remember those characters—no matter what.	Rush the ends of games when I get tired
Get players incredibly excited when they are tackling action scenes	***5. One element from either column that makes the game fun for everyone.*** When my descriptions default to the miniature or the external influence without being incredibly original, my players tie into the same thing I'm thinking of and can act with assurance that they know what they are facing.	Tend to make references to TV shows and movies or default to changing my ideas to fit the physical props or miniatures we have on the table

Build Your Body Language Vocabulary

We convey as strong a message through our body language as we do through our words, but rarely do most people think about how they move when they speak. Actors, politicians, poker players, and those who speak publicly often study and craft the "vocabulary" of their body language to make sure it isn't conveying a message that runs counter to their words. GMs should do the same. We often act out characters and try to convey their attitudes and the themes they represent, but we don't always pay enough attention to how our bodies communicate that message.

The grumpy travel officer who won't let you leave the planet until you pay the fee isn't defined solely by the tone of your voice—it's in how you raise your shoulders so you look down on your players and how you contort your face to display displeasure. These visual cues will speak more loudly than just describing the NPC as "grumpy."

Even when you're not acting out a character, your body language sends a message. Your players will pick up on the set of your shoulders or the way you smile and get wrapped into how you are describing things—for example, revealing that you're feeling rushed or aren't sure where to go next. Have you ever had that player who always seems to know that there's a trap up ahead? Never play poker with her.

She knows how to read the twinkle in your eye as you describe the "clear hallway that looks like the others and branches off to the left." Nothing about what you said hints at a trap, but you've got a "tell"—a characteristic behavior, such as a twitch in one eyelid when you're lying—that reveals to her that something isn't normal about that hallway.

That isn't bad in and of itself. You can use your tell to hint at the trap without directly telling the players or you can suppress it so that they have to use in-game cues to determine whether or not the party is in danger. But you can't make use of your tells if you don't know what they are.

Practice Vocabulary with Your Mirror Image

Whether you're good at using your body language or need some work to make it feel natural, practice helps. Take some time before your next game and sit in front of a mirror. Stare at yourself for about two minutes before doing anything else. Look at each part of your body separately and try to disassociate them from the whole image you have of yourself.

Once you've done this, start putting on your best "mood faces." Imagine an NPC and try to make your face and your body convey that NPC's feelings and mood. How does he hold his head? How does he turn his body to convey the theme you want your players to pick up? What makes him feel like a distinct individual when you act him out?

You're going to look a little odd to yourself, but get used to it. When you do it in the actual game, your actions will be more subtle because you're switching to that NPC without all the prep work, but you'll convey the NPC's mood better and the players will be more likely to pick up on what you're trying to get across.

Our pictures of ourselves are composites, made up of many pieces of information, but are rarely formed by consciously watching ourselves as we use body language. You might smile and build an image of yourself, smiling, based on how people react, but chances are you rarely watch yourself smile; you likely aren't used to how that actually looks. This is why, when doing these exercises, you need to look at each part of your body as discrete from the rest of you.

Do the same exercises while describing various scenarios. Look at yourself and talk about the hallway with the traps or the alarms that are blaring as the PCs get chased by the security guards. If you don't feel you conveyed what you wanted to convey, try it again and see what you can change about how you hold your body to express the message more clearly. If you feel odd doing this, remember that you're the only one looking and that you have as much time as you need to practice.

Artist: David L. Johnson

Find the Right Words *Before* You Game

Words, terms, designations, phrases, explanations, names—there are many ways to describe a scene, but the nature of gaming doesn't often give you time to find just the right way to say what you want. In other words, it's hard to come up with the right words on the spur of the moment.

Writing things down beforehand, by contrast, lets you put the general idea down during your first pass and then improve upon it during the editing phase. You have the time to think deliberately about whether each word sends the right message and to change it if it doesn't work as well as you'd like. You don't have that same luxury at the table. You can write down flavor text and read it aloud, but that often kills the conversational tone that arises from making up descriptions up on the fly.

But there's a good middle ground between those two extremes, as well as a simple technique you can use to make sure you evoke the right moods and themes: writing lists. You may or may not know exactly what you're going to describe when the players get to a certain scene, but you can give yourself an arsenal of terms to use as needed. You merely have to write a list of the words that bring up the images you want to get across during that scene.

Lists of Descriptive Terms

With a thesaurus handy, you can start writing down words and phrases that describe the mood and feeling you want to convey, taking the time to edit and improve upon your basic ideas. As an example, here's a list for a castle that you think your players will wind up exploring in a modern-day supernatural campaign:

- Dusty
- Decrepit
- Quiet
- Eerily still
- Empty
- Barren
- Desolate
- Chipped stones in the crumbling walls
- Shafts of light and shadow that illuminate the dust motes of a previous age
- The lonely howling of the wind through the abandoned passageways
- The disarray of the rotted books spilling off of the crumbling bookshelves and onto the cold, gray stone floor
- The children's songs sung by voices no longer attached to living bodies, echoing and garbled, as if they're coming from far away and being filtered through a pool of fetid water
- The lantern light visible through the windows moves in fits and starts at a height just a few feet off the ground, as if carried by some invisible force too small to easily move it and struggling with the effort

As you can see from the list, some terms are simple adjectives that are easy to grab and attach to any element of the scene. Others are complete phrases intended to evoke a feeling or to more fully describe some element of the setting.

Creating this list of descriptive words and phrases beforehand allows you to spend as much time editing it as you like (or as you have available for prep). You might start with simple words and phrases, but as you look up synonyms in your thesaurus, page through books that inspire you, or watch a movie that makes you feel the way you want your players to feel, you'll start to come up with more powerful and evocative phrases. When you're referencing your list during play, your descriptions will likely be more vivid and evocative than what you could have come up with on the fly.

Lists of Objects

Lists are also a great way to determine what elements would exist in a scene—set dressing and props, to return to our movie theme. One of the areas that I often ignore as a GM is describing those specific elements. I might state that a fight is taking place in a restaurant kitchen and leave it at that, but if the players know about all the cooking implements and other objects in that kitchen then they'll be more likely to come up with creative ways to use them. So before I write up that scene, I make a list of the various objects that might be present:

- Knives
- Industrial ovens
- Clean metal tables
- Hanging racks of pots and pans
- Metal pantry shelves full of dry goods
- A walk-in freezer
- Sinks
- Large white plates
- Racks of spices
- Sprinkler system
- Dishwasher
- Boiling water
- Spray hose
- Green tile walls
- Griddles
- Large frying surface
- Heat lamps
- Cutting boards
- Surprised chefs
- White hats and frocks

Resources for Adjectives

It helps to use a few different resources when you're picking out descriptive terms and elements for a scene. I use images of scenes, or an image that feels like the scene, to jog my memory about what might be present there. I also use a writer's aid called an adjective list. Much like using a thesaurus to find synonyms, adjective lists are often grouped by mood or subject. A collocation dictionary, which lists words that appear frequently with other words in books, can also be helpful. Lastly, I like to use *descriptivewords.org*, which lists adjectives alphabetically and by category.

NPCs: Describing a Cast of Thousands

Typically, NPCs—including monsters, quest-givers, political enemies, and any other sentient creature in the game world—are the element of the game with which the PCs will interact most often. So how do you effectively manage and maintain interesting NPCs?

The 3/2 Rule for Memorable NPCs

There are lots of techniques for making your NPCs vibrant and unique, but personally I like to use the 3/2 Rule. It's simple: Take any basic NPC concept and describe it with three unique elements, and your players will remember two of them.

The three elements create a framework around which the players can build a mental image of the NPC, but why will only two of those elements stand out? It has to do with the number of elements our brain needs to differentiate between similar things.

When there's only one difference, we feel that one object is an imperfect copy of the other. When there are two differences between similar objects, our brains note that there are major variations between the objects. When we have three differentiators available, the brain selects the two elements that interest the person the most and fixes those in her mind.

Need a wise old man for an encounter? You might describe him as follows:

- Huge bushy mustache that looks like a broom
- Wearing old armor from a war 30 years ago
- Has an arm that was replaced by a steam-driven hand

Your players will remember the old man and describe him as "the guy in the old armor with the mechanical arm," "the bushy-mustache guy with the old armor," or "the guy with the big mustache and the steampunk hand."

Describing an NPC in terms of three unique elements will trigger just the right amount of variation from whatever mental template a player has for the NPC's archetype, or basic concept. For example:

Captain of the Guard

- A deep scar cut into the temple above his left eye
- Long, flowing blond hair
- A red brooch in the shape of a skull with a serpentine dragon wrapped around it

Businessperson

- Head shaved completely bald
- A clean blue suit with large shoulders
- A tattoo on her right arm that stretches down to the fingers

Artist: David L. Johnson

Evil Sorcerer

- Black hair that is cropped short and spiky
- A large knotted wooden staff, the top of which is constantly on fire
- An icon of a giant, swirling, mass of chaotic energy on the front of his black robes

Casting Sheets

Keeping track of all of your NPCs and their descriptions while also making sure your players remember them can be a daunting challenge.

You can make it easier on yourself by creating a casting sheet. In movie terms, a casting sheet is a list of all of the descriptions of the characters and actors needed for a particular production. Repurposing this idea for gaming, you can create a list of NPCs and their descriptions so that you have an easy-to-reference list of NPCs at hand whenever you need it.

Creating a casting sheet is easy: It's basically a table with columns for name, description, and any other columns you need for your specific game, plus room for an image. As long as you address name and description, you can make the other columns optional. Casting sheets can also be broken down onto a stack of index cards with GM-specific information on the back and general information on the front. When an NPC is present in a scene, put her index card in front of you so that your players have a constant visual reminder of that NPC.

Here are some good things to include on a casting sheet (or casting cards):

- **Name**—You can leave this column blank temporarily if you don't want the players to know a character's name before they've interacted with him. Conversely, if the PCs know a lot of NPCs by reputation it's good to display their names even if they've never appeared in a scene.
- **Description**—Provide a 3/2 bulleted list here. You want just enough information so that the players will remember who the NPC is by her description.
- **Image**—Putting in a picture of every NPC makes remembering them even easier. Photos of actors are a good option, as are pictures from stock photo sites and the portfolio sections of modeling and casting agency websites.
- **GM-specific information**—You can also keep all of your NPCs organized with a column of GM-specific information so that you remember connections or secrets that the players shouldn't know. When you share your casting sheet with the players, leave this section out.

Challenge—Achievement: Green Screen Guru

1. Write up five NPCs using the 3/2 Rule.
2. Create a descriptive list of words that evoke two different moods or themes in your game.
3. Sit in front of a mirror and practice gestures and body language.
4. Define five unique elements of another GM's style to see how he does things differently than you.
5. Create a descriptive list that's full of complex phrases which evoke strong connections to a mood that you want for one particular scene.
6. Create a casting sheet which includes all the NPCs in your game and hand out the edited version to the players.

Picking up the thread from where they'd left off last session, Gemma said, "You all turn the corner, chasing the small . . . multi-limbed . . . creature with the red hat and see an empty corridor, the same as the others you've come across in this maze of city streets."

Renaldo rolled his eyes and everyone else sunk down a little in their chairs. They didn't want to get into this again. Gemma just smiled. This time she was prepared. Pulling out her list of words, she said, "Everyone make a Notice roll."

When they had all revealed their results, she continued. "The red and brown stones form a pattern that you can't quite make out. There's definitely something in the ochre-colored stones that looks slightly different. Stepping back and looking at it at the correct angle, you notice that the . . . motif . . . makes a sort of shape that's familiar to you. It's kind of like that Vitruvian man, you know, this thing," she said as she pulled up a picture on her tablet, "but the pattern has a . . . digitigrade . . . turn, kind of like a dogleg to the left."

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute! How did I not get it?!" Renaldo said. "I grab a spike from the ground—here's a Plot Point so there is an iron spike on the ground for me to grab—and I jam it into the oddly colored bricks!"

Gemma smiled. "The creature re-forms, his . . . quintessence . . . pooling until he transforms from a two-dimensional form to a three-dimensional one. I'm sorry I didn't explain that better last time."

Chapter 6: The Soundtrack

"I check one more time for traps. We don't want to be killed before we get to the empress, right?" Adam said.

Gemma sighed again. This was the final session, and they were already two hours in and not yet past the first part. She was going to have to cut some things. Everyone was focusing too much on the fact that she had thrown a trap at them. She wanted to get to the fighting and the big speech, but they were all cautious and knew the system could be deadly.

"The seer materializes from within Zembara's nanocloud. She speaks in her . . . ephemeral voice: 'I will scout the way ahead for you, now that you have freed me.' Her nebulous form goes flying down the hallway and—" Gemma made a die roll. ". . . There's nothing. She comes back and gives you the all clear, telling you that time is running short."

"Ah-ah! That's just what you want us to think," said Renaldo. "The seer got corrupted before. This is probably a last-minute trick!"

Gemma shook her head and looked around for the ibuprofen.

Subtlety, Mood, and Engagement

This chapter is called "The Soundtrack," but it's about all of the many things that contribute to the mood of your game—the subtle auditory and visual cues that make your players feel like they're there and keep them engaged. But why is that stuff important? Doesn't the game itself and the way you describe things set the tone and mood for the session? Yes, they do—but by adding another layer to the experience you can increase engagement even more.

Artist: David L. Johnson

To demonstrate this, let's compare two horror movies: a typical slasher flick and a slow-paced film about a haunting. In the slasher flick, there are moments of tension followed by explosions of gore when the killer jumps out and chops, bites, or chainsaws someone into little pieces. That's great for jump scares, but once you calm down those scenes don't leave much of an impression on you afterwards.

In the haunting movie, however, the tension comes from watching someone go through a scenario that you could be going through yourself. The protagonist walks into the attic and thinks he sees something out of the corner of his eye—just before the light goes out. Then, for what seems like an eternity, he moves through the dark room, hoping that what he saw wasn't real. Whether or not he gets out without being attacked, he'll never trust his home—formerly a safe place—in the same way. And when it's done well, the slower, more suspenseful scene will stick with you.

After seeing that movie, you might find yourself reading a book alone in the house. You glance up at a closed door and, just for a second, wonder if something might be behind it. How do you know something *isn't* behind it? What if it opens ever so slightly—probably on its own (you hope), but maybe not . . . What if something has *always* been back there because whenever you come into this room, it hides behind the door? Is something watching you right now? Close your eyes and imagine that you're being watched, and then try to shake that feeling. It's not easy to shake!

Much of that effectiveness comes from the subtlety of the latter approach. When you want to immerse someone in an experience, subtlety works better than directness. That's why filmmakers spend so much getting the soundtrack, lighting, and sound effects just right. It tunes the audience's experience in ways that more obvious elements of the film cannot.

Creating Mood

So how do you create mood effectively? How do you help your players focus and pick up on the subtle cues you're laying down? There are a few techniques you can use to get players onto your wavelength.

Subtly Turn the Focus Onto the Players

Your players interact with the game world through their characters, so that tends to be where they focus their attention. Whenever you're trying to convey something important or make sure the players pick up on something, find a way to put the character or player at the center of what you want them to remember. For example:

> *"Jorgen is wounded and bleeding heavily. You figure you're about halfway through this level. How many cure spells do you have left? Okay. The scratching at the door intensifies and you hear a THWUMP as the door is slammed into by something that sounds A LOT larger than the things you faced before."*

Bringing up Jorgen's bruised and bloody state makes his player more likely to be thinking about the danger he might be in. It's much more effective than merely emphasizing the sounds at the door and the fact that another attack is imminent. That's the message you want to convey—something is coming to get you, moving might be a good idea—but pointing out the impact to the character first primes the pump for the message to be received and acted upon.

Getting Pavlovian

We're a lot more susceptible to suggestion than we would like to admit, and there are many ways to get people to associate simple concepts with more complex moods. Do you draw with dry erase markers on a map? Start using those to color-code your players' expectations. Draw enemies in red, draw trustworthy things in blue. Draw beneficial items in green on note cards and hand those out. Never let on that you're doing this; instead, just say that you've got a system so you can remember various things in your notes.

Get your players used to this over a few sessions and then hold up a marker of the appropriate color as a clue. Is the duke, who seems trustworthy, actually out to get them? Hold up the red marker and then use it to write a note from the duke to the PCs. It's a good bet that at least some of them have picked up on red meaning danger in the context of battles, and that they'll pick up on that cue.

If you're skeptical about this technique, watch *The Godfather*. Whenever an orange was onscreen, it usually signified that death or violence was about to happen, generally to whoever interacted with the orange. The folks who made the film took great pains to work this subtle message into different scenes and to associate the orange with death for a reason: It wove a narrative thread through the piece and gave them another tool to reinforce the feelings they wanted to convey to the audience.

Whatever Lola Wants

In a game I ran long ago in a galaxy far away, the dulcet tones of Sarah Vaughan crooning out "Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets" were attached to a particular PC's arch-nemesis, Lealia Bellemar. Whenever her machinations were underway, I would play that song, slowly ramping up the volume as the scene progressed. After some time, the player would twitch every time the song came on. Even though that game was years ago, he tells that even today, from time to time, he hears "Whatever Lola Wants" on the radio or in a movie and it sets him on edge.

Subtlety, repeated cues, and the slow integration of that song into the game created a long-lasting effect that really cued my player into Lealia's plotting and made it stick with him. It hasn't changed his life, but his brain gets that little tickle whenever he hears that song. That is the power of subtlety.

It also makes for a good laugh when that player's wife calls and tells me that she sometimes plays "Whatever Lola Wants" in their house just to see her husband get twitchy.

Start with the End Goal and Work Backwards

One approach to creating a particular mood for a scene is to think about how it's likely to end and keep that in mind as you employ the techniques in this chapter. With the likely (though not certain) ending in mind, write down a phrase, concept, or single word that sums up the feeling you want to evoke in your players by the end of the scene. Use that card as your litmus test for your actions: Ask yourself if what you're doing brings you closer to that goal or drives you further from it.

If you want to take things a step further, brainstorm other ways to evoke a theme or mood and add them to the note card. Jot down anything that could help you in the moment, when you're juggling so many balls that it's easy to lose sight of your goal—references, evocative terms, and the like.

Using Music

Music is powerful and subtle, which is why so much effort is taken to get movie soundtracks just right. Using music to build mood in a tabletop RPG can be hard to pull off just for this reason: It takes a lot of effort to get just right. A typical game session might run 3-6 hours, and managing a soundtrack of music snippets, each 3-10 minutes long, throughout the entire session consumes a lot of your energy. By contrast, if you don't count the title scene and credits, a movie soundtrack typically runs for about a quarter of the movie's running time. This is because, generally speaking, music is used in two ways in movies:

- As background, where it's subtle and doesn't interfere with what is going on in the scene
- As a punctuation to a scene, boldly stating that a certain mood is in effect

If you model your music usage on these two elements, you can cut down on the effort required and create a musical accompaniment that really enhances your game.

A Background Soundtrack That Doesn't Detract

Using a soundtrack without distracting your players can be a fine line to walk. Movie soundtracks take great pains to make the ups and downs of the music match up with the actions and poses of the actors exactly, ensuring that a happy beat doesn't occur when a person should be reading sadness from the screen. At the gaming table, you don't have that luxury, but you can make sure the soundtrack doesn't get in your way while still being effective. Here's how.

- **Create a set soundtrack and moderate the mood**—You don't want to keep futzing with what song to pull up next, so find as many songs as you can that evoke the moods you want and create separate playlists for each mood. You can then pull up a playlist and let it go without having to worry about finding just the right song or switching to something that's out of sync with the mood you want. Filling your playlists with enough songs and turning off the repeat option will make sure you don't get stuck on the same background song for every combat.
- **Ditch anything with vocals**—One of the first things you want to do is make sure you get rid of anything with intelligible vocals. If you can understand the words in a background track, then you can get caught up in them. The exception to this rule is when you want to bring about the mood that the song portrays exactly, but then it's less of a background piece and more of a punctuation piece.

- **Keep the volume controlled**—A soundtrack shouldn't get in your way, but sometimes the volume crescendos and you find yourself having to talk over it or drop the volume manually. Whatever program you use to play your music, see if it has a volume leveling option or just make sure the knob is turned down. It's better to not hear the music than to have to talk over it. Where the sound comes from can also be a factor. If it's all coming from the same area where you are trying to speak, it's competing for attention. Pick up a cheap set of speakers and see if you can affix them under the table so they're out of the way and the sound comes from a more central location. If you have the time and inclination, set up a more impressive system and put the speakers behind the players. Because they can't see where the sound is coming from, it draws them into the game world.
- **Use music only when needed**—Even musicals have talking bits in between the songs, so don't worry about filling every second with sound. Use music when it supports a particular mood, but leave it out when you aren't aiming to get your players feeling a certain way. It will make it more impactful when you do use it.

Personal Theme Songs as Punctuation

To get music to evoke a particular mood, think about giving everyone a theme song. Ask every player what song they think about when they think of their characters and stick those songs in a playlist. When you want to showcase a certain character or put everyone's mind on that person, cue up that character's song and let it go at a volume that doesn't overpower your voice. The players will appreciate knowing that it's their character's time to shine and will usually rise to the occasion, using the audio cue to take charge of the scene.

You can also assign songs to important NPCs to play up their influence. Even if it doesn't come about subtly, having a set soundtrack with songs representing players and NPCs instantly shifts the tones and signals that a certain mood is at work in the game.

Finding the Right Music

Finding just the right music can be a challenge, but it's worth it. Soundtracks to movies and video games are a great source for songs that work well for gaming. Soundtracks to movies are among the cheapest things you can purchase at used CD stores, and they're often found at thrift stores. There are many online sites that collect remixes of old video games scores, either in 8-bit beeps and bonks or orchestral remixes of songs that were originally 8-bit.

If you are really craving the music from a particular video game, see if it's available for purchase with the game. Often independent games and older games have their soundtracks packaged with them when you purchase them as a digital version. If you just need a particular song, video sites like YouTube make songs from video games available online, often from official sources.

Sound Effects

While background music can help your players get into the right mood, sound effects can make them feel like they're actually in the game world. Something as simple as water dripping while they're exploring a cave or the sound of a large truck engine revving as they sneak into a military base can really draw players in.

Artist: David L. Johnson

Sound effects take a little more time and effort to work in, as they often require a more manual approach. Don't be afraid to edit together sound effects into a loop. One free program that can help you create loops pretty easily is Audacity. It can be downloaded online and is a fairly powerful audio editor. Of course there are other programs available for purchase that focus on creating loops or working with sound effects, if you're willing to make the investment.

One other issue with using sound effects is finding the ones you want. There are many different sound effect CDs marketed at Halloween, and you can buy professional sound effect albums, but they're often expensive for gaming soundtrack purposes. I recommend a resource called the Free Sound Archive (*freesound.org*), a collection of sound effects uploaded by users. There are lots of sound effects available and the variety and quality are often surprisingly good. Downloading a few and combining them in a loop can create some very effective background sounds to intersperse with your music.

Artist: David L. Johnson

Using Lighting to Create Mood

Another subtle factor that you can control in your games is the lighting. While lighting isn't as easy to change as music, tweaking it can create an effect that enhances or completely changes the mood of your game. Making the light redder while describing how the blood of its victims coats the walls of the vampire's lair can be a surprisingly powerful way to immerse your players in the scene.

The Bulb's the Thing

One easy way to change your lighting effects is by using different types of light bulbs. Get a cheap lamp with multiple sockets on flexible arms and put different bulbs into each socket. Now you can change lighting effects in a moment by switching individual bulbs off and on as needed. You can also achieve interesting effects by using a single socket lamp with a dimmer switch and gradually increasing the illumination from an accent light bulb of a different color, as in the example of the vampire's lair.

Lower wattage light bulbs create a softer light than typical bulbs. Mix in colored light bulbs with the lower wattage light bulbs and you can create the greenish tinge of the leaves in the elven forest or a somber blue undertone as the PCs fail to save a child from danger.

You should also look at bulb temperatures. If you use a halogen light that registers as close to 6500k (degrees Kelvin) as possible, your light will have a very blue feel to it, like daylight, unlike typical bulbs, which have a color temperature of around 2700k and a yellowish tinge. You can also order a package of cheap lighting gels or lighting diffusion filters online. Form a metal frame out of a coat hanger that places the gels about 6" away from the bulb (no fires, please!) and you can create multiple lighting effects with a single bulb.

Placement and Timing

Setting the mood through lighting is as much about the light's location as it is about its color and temperature. A single light placed at your feet and pointing into your face while the other lights are turned down makes an incredibly eerie look for a mystical NPC who is conveying a message to the PCs. Strong lighting that glares down from above creates a feeling of unease and can emphasize the danger of a scene where the PCs are on trial or being questioned. A single low-intensity light in the center of the table, surrounded by darkness, emphasizes the closed-in feeling of being trapped in a cave while being hunted by a monster, while light streaming in from giant windows removes some of the separation between the natural world and the space where you game.

Just like music, lighting effects can be subtle background cues or punctuation for the mood of a scene. Planning for only one scene with a special effect is a good goal and helps you create impact that will carry through to other scenes with no extra effort. For example, you could create lightning in one scene with a bright light that can be manually (and quickly) flicked on and off in time with a thunderclap sound effect. If you do this just as you're beginning to describe the PCs' travel through a bleak, rainy landscape, that will stick with your players for the rest of the scene.

When in doubt, making the very first scene of your game the one where you try to create mood through lighting and sound effects is good practice. The players are more ready for direct narrative at the beginning of the game and the mood cues you place here will linger for the rest of the session.

Challenge—Achievement: Mood Master

1. Use one special bulb to create an interesting lighting effect that immerses your players in the game.
2. Choose three moods you want to emphasize throughout your game and create three playlists with 10 background songs each (non-vocal, non-distracting) that fit that mood.
3. Find a personal theme song for each PC and major NPC and use these as cues for their turns in the spotlight.
4. Make the very first scene of your game a blockbuster with special effects and mood cues that will set the tone for the rest of the game.
5. Connect a color with a mood in your games and use that color to subconsciously draw your players back to that mood during later scenes.
6. Spread visual reminders that fit themes of your game throughout your gaming space to increase engagement.

As Gemma's hand hovered over the bottle of ibuprofen, she noticed a video game in her bag and got a great idea. She grabbed her tablet and went to her music files. She found the fifth track from the soundtrack and hit play. Thunderous, ominous, fast-paced music erupted from the speakers, accompanied by an alarm klaxon as Gemma turned down the room lights and flicked on a lamp with a red bulb at her feet.

"You guys hear some rumbling down the hall. It sounds like one of the blast bay doors closing," Gemma said.

Listening to the music and seeing the red light, Patti looked concerned. "I know this game—that's the music that comes on when you're in the race level. Our security bypass probably wore off. Go, go, go!"

The group's entire attitude changed. Everyone seemed on edge, and they started moving their minis more quickly down the corridor on the map. Gemma smiled.

Artist: Avery Liell-Kok

Chapter 7: It Starts With a Script

Gemma smiled as she turned off the lights. The gaming room was now lit only by the two large candles burning on the center of the table. Adam, Patti, and Renaldo took their seats around the table as music from a nautically-themed movie soundtrack played on Gemma's tablet. Gemma told them to each take three "gold coins" from the pile of plastic coins amassed between the candles. As the music trailed off, Patti was the first to speak.

"So where were we again? I remember being captured, but we escaped. I think we made it to the coast of the island with a few weapons, but I don't remember if we rolled for heat exhaustion. We should probably start thinking about food, too."

"Of course," Renaldo said. He sighed as he fidgeted with his eye patch and bandana. Sometimes Patti's attention to detail irked him—he just wanted to roleplay.

"We killed the other pirates and we have the treasure chest," Adam said. "We were heading to their ship. If there's anyone aboard, we have to kill them."

"Or parlay," Renaldo said. "They don't have any more officers and we have the Templar's lost treasure! I'm sure we could cut a deal."

"I don't know," Patti said. "In spite of being waylaid by the rival pirate band, I thought getting the treasure was too easy. There must be something else afoot."

Gemma chuckled to herself as she opened her adventure notes. The group was going to be so surprised!

"Okay," she said in her usual time-to-get-down-to-business GMing voice. "You've been following the trail of the rival pirate band and you discover, to your great surprise, that the tracks don't come from the coastline, but from up the hill—near the high outcropping just above the tree line.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Patti said.

Adam said, "We put down the chest and sneak up."

"Okay," Gemma said. "You move into the shrubs and crawl up the rest of the way. The top of the hill is flat, and sitting at its center is a small, enclosed ship with a giant balloon attached to the deck. Steam rises from a smokestack towards the rear."

"You've got to be kidding me," Renaldo said. He pulled off his bandana and eye patch in a single frustrated motion.

"I thought this was a Caribbean pirate campaign," Patti said, frowning. "I don't think any of us thought to take the Pilot Airship skill. Let's hope we don't come across a computer!"

"You put your crappy steampunk all over my pirate game," Adam said. He yawned as he spun one of the coins.

Gemma started to panic. She needed an adventure for tonight and she had thought a skyship fantasy adventure she'd recently picked up would be just the ticket. Looking around the table, she now realized that the players, while accepting a bit of magic and the supernatural, really had no interest in steampunk antics. It was going to be a long night.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Why Is Having a Good Shooting Script Important?

A script provides the blueprint you'll use to guide your players through the game session. "Guide" doesn't have to mean "railroad," and "script" is just the term that fits the movie metaphor we're using throughout *Focal Point*. For our purposes, even if you walk into a session with no adventure notes whatsoever, there's a script—or something like one—involved in some way.

Scripts come in all shapes and sizes, from highly detailed pre-packaged adventures to broad outlines (like the ones in Engine Publishing's *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters*) to hastily scribbled notes to simply winging it. All of these are valid "scripts" and whether they work for a particular GM is a matter of taste. Whether a script is a good "shooting script" is another matter. A good shooting script should have the following elements.

- It works within the boundaries of your campaign.
- It interests the PCs.
- It holds together and lacks obvious plot holes or exploitable plot elements.
- It suits the PCs and has appropriate challenges.

These elements should be present whether the adventure is the size of a phone book, a few scrawled notes on a cocktail napkin, or even just "all in your head." Let's get something straight from the beginning: A shooting script is what you, the GM, walk into the session armed with in order to manage a session. It need not be written material, or if it is then the written material is only a portion of the script. What's in your head is just as important, if not more, than anything written down.

Does the Script Reflect the Campaign?

Gemma's first mistake was choosing an adventure that didn't really fit the tone of her campaign. Up to this point she'd been running a historical Caribbean campaign that had a touch of the supernatural, but nothing that took the players out of feeling like they were playing in the West Indies circa 1690. The anachronistic airship obviously violated that premise.

What's important to note here is that whether the adventure fits your campaign has nothing to do with the quality of the adventure. To Gemma's credit, the published airship fantasy adventure that she bought could be really well-written and entertaining in a fantasy or steampunk setting. Unfortunately, it just wasn't a good fit with what she'd already established over the course of the campaign thus far.

Director's Notes—Giving a Script the Personal Touch

It can be quite tempting, especially with a well-constructed published adventure, to run it as-is without any modification. After all, the author wrote all of the pieces to fit together and you don't want to risk screwing it up because you wanted to substitute your recurring adversary for the one included in the adventure, right? If the plot hooks seem to fit well enough to bring the PCs on board then its mission accomplished, isn't it?

Well, no. While it's certainly possible to run a fun session with an unmodified adventure, personal touches make it that much more interesting for the players and keep their interest high. It also feels more personal to them when the adventure feels like it could only happen this way for their particular group and not just any random bunch of characters. Having the victim in trouble be related to one of the PCs or introducing an adversary with unfinished business with the group is much more fun than "Victim X is being terrorized by Generic Bad Guy."

One word of caution—the worry regarding "screwing up" is a valid one. When you give an adventure the personal touch, make sure that it all still holds together. It's fine if the victim came to the PCs because he's related to them, but having an old adversary behind the scheme "because this time it's personal!" often isn't enough of a motivation and can break the verisimilitude. Also, make sure that patterns of behavior are consistent from one adventure to the next. If an NPC is shown to lack curiosity in adventure one, then having her suddenly acting like a sleuth because you wanted to write her into adventure three is going to be jarring. While you should always add a personal touch, don't try to bang square pegs into round holes.

Does the Script Interest the Players?

Regardless of whether the adventure is appropriate for the campaign, it has to grab the players' interests. While the appropriateness of an adventure is a prime consideration, getting buy-in from the players is going to mitigate problems down the line. Players that aren't gripped by the premise may get passive-aggressive, become frequent absentees, spend more time out of character than in character, or otherwise disrupt the flow of the campaign. If your players aren't happy, you're unlikely to be happy yourself while running the campaign.

Note that I'm using the term "player," not "player character." While a player usually judges a plot hook with the mindset of his PC, the adventure really needs to capture his interest; in some cases this is one and the same, in others it's not. A player will tend to rationalize joining an adventure even if it's a poor fit for his PC, but it rarely works well the other way around.

An easy way to gauge player interest is to look at the style and tone of the adventure. Some players love a good dungeon crawl; other players absolutely loathe them. Some players relish in the opportunity to spend a session heavily involved in court intrigue, while other players just want to know what dice they can roll to get it over with. An adventure may include political, religious, or social themes that would upset one or more of your players. If you want player buy-in, these things need to be considered and addressed.

Plot hooks are usually the first sign of whether an adventure is a good fit for the players. If they're a roving band of mercenaries with hearts of steel, they probably aren't going to take a job with little pay, even if the cause is just. On the other hand, if they tend to be heroic then they probably aren't going to perform a mission for a shady executive.

Plot hooks are also a good way to personalize the campaign. Maybe they normally wouldn't help an impoverished village, but one of the PCs has family there. Maybe they normally wouldn't take the job from that executive, but she can open a door for them in their quest against the Big Bad.

Finally, the types of challenges present can also signal player interest. Perhaps while your group loves cleaning out monstrous strongholds, they aren't fans of traps and a stronghold with an overabundance of them won't hold their interest. If your players don't enjoy buying gear and trying to survive the journey to their destination, then they aren't going to enjoy a session solely devoted to getting from Point A to Point B.

Example: Club Blood

In this example, the adventure is about a vampire "nesting" in a night club that is popular with local college students. The PCs are college students who investigate the supernatural. This example shows how to identify three key features: hooks, useful contacts, and NPC substitutions.

In addition to hooks (which we've covered above), useful contacts are NPCs that the PCs know who would be useful to the adventure. Some of these contacts may need to be leaned on if a particular player can't make it to the session and her character isn't being played by someone else.

The "NPC substitutions" section is really only necessary if you're adapting an adventure prepared by someone else. In this case you are identifying the adventure NPCs that you can replace with characters from your own campaign as well as any modifications you need to make them fit.

For the purposes of **Figure A1** there are three PCs. Misty is an athlete and can sense the presence of the supernatural. Deshawn is a computer hacker and electrokinetic. Susan is an occult specialist and magician.

Figure A1

Club Blood

NPC Substitutions

- The afflicted NPC can be swapped out for Ruth.
- Misty's friend Sadie can be the friendly bartender NPC.

Hooks

- It's a college hangout! What more is needed? Susan isn't the clubbing type, but for fun let's say a formerly introverted friend of hers convinces her to come. Misty and Deshawn would obviously be intrigued by Susan's clique getting more social and confident.
- If Susan can't make the game then I could either NPC her (she can take Ruth's place) or I can have an introverted classmate of Misty or Deshawn (Tyler would work great!) suddenly undergo a personality change.

Useful Contacts

- Thus far the group has yet to encounter vampires and the vampire in this adventure isn't the traditional horror movie type. We need a vampire expert – perhaps Vincent Claive, a former priest that now spends most of his time drowning his sorrows in local bars when not hunting vampires.
- Also, Three Circles Books probably has a wealth of information in their occult section.
- Finally, Sadie can provide extra muscle if Misty is unavailable.

Does the Script Hold Together?

Once you've decided that your adventure is appropriate and the players are likely to enjoy it, you'll want to review it carefully and identify any plot holes. Plot holes can be damaging in many ways: They could short-circuit an adventure, they could lead to an evening of arguments, they could leave the PCs chasing red herrings, or they could simply stink of railroading. No matter what script you use, you're going to want to make sure that everything flows logically from one part of the adventure to the next.

When scanning for plot holes, remember that genre conventions are not "plot holes," even if they aren't realistic. Of course a supervillain is going to put a hero's boyfriend in an elaborate death trap that gives the hero time to save him, and of course the key clue that enables the PC master detective to solve the case borders on the supernatural. (He recognizes that the boots have mud from two different sites on them? Really?) So long as the PCs identify these things as genre conventions then they are not, by definition, plot holes.

Here are some typical plot holes to watch out for:

- **Lack of clear villainous motivation**—Most villains do not perform evil acts simply because they're *EEEEVILLL*, but instead have rational motivations for their actions (or at least motivations that seem rational to them). Some may even believe that they are on the side of good, with their evil actions being unfortunately necessary. If you're reading the adventure and wondering why the villain is going through all the bother, then she probably lacks a proper motivation.
- **The late entrance**—As a rule of thumb, if you want your PCs to solve a mystery then they need the clues up front. Introducing the real villain three-quarters of the way into the adventure is not only dirty pool, but it makes the players feel like they wasted the preceding sessions.
- **Irrational actions**—If you review the adventure and find yourself wondering why an NPC acted a certain way, chances are it's an irrational action that the author used purely to move a plot element forward. There are times when an NPC could act irrationally, of course, but these should be prompted by a stimulus such as fear or overconfidence. Remember that genre conventions aren't irrational—the evil overlord usually *does* blab his entire plan before leaving the PCs in a deathtrap that they can overcome.
- **Relying on curiosity**—I once read an adventure where the PCs were passengers on a ferry when an abandoned ship appeared in the foggy bay next to them. The adventure simply assumed that the PCs, being PCs, would investigate on their own. A little tweak would have given them a proper—and much more interesting—motivation.
- **Relying on coincidence**—While coincidence can be used to great effect in some genres (of course a PC in a soap opera campaign has an evil twin!), its overuse can damage credibility, especially in an investigative campaign. In such cases, it needs to be reasonably foreshadowed or the PCs are going to get stuck.
- **Too many red herrings**—While not a plot hole per se, one too many red herrings can really derail an adventure and sap player enthusiasm. While red herrings can make things interesting, they should be quickly resolved.
- **The outrageously obscure clue**—Sometimes advancing the plot hinges on an obscure clue that the PCs just can't find or decipher. Even worse, sometimes you might think a clue is obvious without realizing how obscure it actually is, and your players will become justifiably frustrated if you dig in your heels because they can't figure out an "obvious" clue.

- **Plot advancement hinging on a dice roll**—If getting the PCs from Point A to Point B involves succeeding on a dice roll, you can bet that the characters involved will fail it. GM fiat (often known as fudging) tends to rear its ugly head in these circumstances, making the players feel as if their actions, even in failure, don't matter.
- **Overreliance on a particular character or circumstance**—If you've tied key elements of an adventure to a particular PC or circumstance, you run the risk of that character or circumstance disappearing too soon. If you don't have a back door built in, your adventure could quickly fall apart.

Once you've identified the plot holes, you have two choices (technically three, but I wouldn't recommend just ignoring them!). First, you can fix them. Some plot holes only require a few tweaks in order to fix; others may require a bit more work. Second, you can deem a plot hole "terminal," which means that it basically sinks the whole adventure. Fortunately, terminal plot holes are rare; almost any plot hole can be smoothed over with a little thought. Typically, terminal plot holes are simply ones that require too much time to fix, and you just might not have enough time. In such cases you can simply hold off on running the adventure until you've had time to address the plot hole.

Scene Identification

For pacing purposes, it's a good idea to get a sense of what scenes are necessary to occur within the adventure and which scenes can be trimmed if time is an issue. Pacing tends to be more important in games that meet less than regularly or when you want to finish within a certain period of time. It's also helpful to know what scenes you can add in if you find yourself with extra time.

Typically, there are five types of scenes or encounters in any given adventure:

- Core
- Supplementary
- Cutting room floor (CRF)
- Additional
- Replacement

Core scenes are those that must happen in order for the adventure to move forward. Facing the Big Bad is the classic example; so too is the old man in the tavern who gives the PCs the treasure map.

A **supplemental scene** is one that adds value to the adventure (you would definitely like to run it), but can be left out for pacing purposes. A space pirate ambush on the way to the colony world and a look into the complicated personal life of the PCs' superior officer are good examples of supplemental scenes.

Conversely, a **CRF scene** is one that you feel needs to be excised from the adventure. These aren't necessarily bad scenes or encounters; they just don't fit with the dynamics of the group or their situation. A classic example is a brief encounter designed to coax the PCs to investigate a murder; this is unnecessary if the PCs are police investigators and are simply assigned the case.

An **additional scene** is one that isn't included in the adventure, but which can be added in if you need to stretch time or give the PCs a boost (e.g., extra experience, a helpful clue, a magical artifact, additional character-building). These scenes might be built into the adventure (you've identified it as "additional," even if the adventure doesn't treat it as such) or they might be scenes you may add from another source. The classic additional scene is the "random encounter table" in all of its many permutations.

Finally, a **replacement scene** is one that replaces another scene. This is usually because the new scene fits the campaign dynamic better than the original. While this may be a core scene, other types of scenes may also be replaced. For example, if your fantasy world only has humans, then a hobgoblin ambush doesn't make sense. The replacement scene would cast them as human bandits or change the nature of the encounter entirely—perhaps the PCs come across a victim of a robbery fending off hungry wolves from inside an overturned wagon.

Director's Notes—Don't be Afraid to Cut

Whether because the adventure was pre-packaged or we spent a lot of time crafting it, we GMs often have a natural tendency to try to use all of our material. In the case of the former, we tend to look at the product as a whole, rather than its component parts, when determining whether it's a good fit for the gaming group. In the case of the latter, we designed the adventure with the group in mind so we tend to think all of the scenes should be included as presented.

That said, it's worthwhile to step away from the all-or-nothing approach and evaluate each segment of an adventure on its own. Every group has its own chemistry and some segments of an adventure are better fits than others. If your group generally likes hand-waving the journeys from place to place, then you may want to cut the travel encounters, or at least limit them to the ones critical for the adventure. Another group may not be into speaking "in-character." In this case you'll want to boil down the big party scene aboard the star base to a couple of social skill rolls.

A word of caution: Some games rely on scenes to give adventurers the experience they need to handle later challenges or the clues they'll need to progress to the next plot point. If you eliminate these segments, make sure you give the group the opportunity to acquire those things some other way. Hopefully, you'll do it in a way that suits their chemistry and they'll never even notice that you made the change.

Example: Journey to the Goblin Cave

While I'm offering an example here, most of the time you don't need a separate document to distinguish the various scenes—a quick letter (e.g. "C" for "core," "A" for "additional," etc.) or note appended to each scene in the adventure document is enough (or, for a CRF, simply eliminating the scene) will do fine. You'll only really need extra paper for new additional or replacement scenes that you develop.

For purposes of illustration, however, we'll create a document that lists each scene and offers notes on why the scenes were categorized the way they are. This is a simple fantasy adventure where the PCs are a party of adventurers hired by local villagers to clean out a goblin cave. The session here is about the journey to the cave.

Figure A2

Journey to the Goblin Cave

Scene 1 - The Villagers ask for Assistance **R** The PCs are already journeying with a caravan. Why not have goblins attack the caravan and get away with some important loot?

Scene 2 - The Treacherous Swamp **CRF** Given that the first scene is a roadside attack of opportunity rather than a sudden raid on a village the goblins have left alone, a new secret path through the swamp doesn't really make sense and kills the sense of urgency.

Scene 3 - Dire Wolf Ambush **S** The PCs should already be hot on the trail tracking - this is a good "soften them up" encounter, but easily excised.

Scene 4 - A Villager in Peril **S** While we don't have villagers now, there's nothing to say the goblins haven't been raiding a local village, and the escaped Marlena seems like a fun NPC to play!

Scene 5 - Cave Entrance Guardians **C** Fine as written.

Additional Scene - Now that the PCs are in more immediate pursuit, it's likely that the goblins may leave a patrol behind to deal with them (or they could be tracking down the escaped Marlena!)

Are the Challenges in the Script Appropriate?

One of the biggest problems when deciding whether to use an adventure is whether the challenges presented are appropriate for the PCs and the game. In many cases, "appropriate" also means "winnable," although this isn't true for every play style (old-school fantasy games, for example, often include the potential for total party kills—it's up to the players to avoid them). Believe it or not, this issue is more prominent when GMs use published adventures rather than designing their own.

Why? Because GMs can easily fall into the trap of believing that a published adventure has already been vetted and should have appropriate challenges as long as the PC group falls within its guidelines.

Unfortunately, individual groups often don't match the guidelines for what publishers consider an appropriate PC group for their games. They make assumptions about what the majority of groups playing in their system will look like, and this can vary considerably from your own group. By contrast, when you design your own adventures you usually have your particular group to model it on, unless you've designed the adventure independently or the group's make-up changed between adventures.

Here are some things to look out for when assessing challenges:

- **Will the players find the challenge interesting?**—Having appropriate and interesting challenges is all well and good, but if the players don't enjoy a particular challenge then it just becomes a tedious obstacle. Make sure your challenges are a good mix of what your group enjoys and minimize the types of challenges they don't enjoy.
- **Does the challenge advance or hinder the adventure flow?**—If your players don't enjoy combat scenes very much, then forcing them to wait two sessions to advance an investigation because there are large tactical battle scenes planned probably isn't a good idea. On the other hand, if your group enjoys tactical combats and has maximized their characters to take them on, then they probably won't appreciate a bunch of investigative or social challenges with little combat (or, worse, hand-waved combat) in between.
- **Does the group have the skill set?**—When preparing an adventure, highlight the challenges and ensure that the PCs have what they need (or will have by the time they get there) to defeat it. If a fantasy challenge requires a particular spell, then you'd better make sure the PC magician has it. If the martial challenges are brutal, then the adventure may not be suitable for scholarly investigators of the occult. If the climax involves the PCs jumping into starfighters to take on the villain's capital ship, then they'd all better have some level of piloting skill.
- **Do the challenges exhaust the PCs too quickly?**—One of the critical mistakes that novice GMs tend to make is to match the opposition to the PCs. This is problematic because you're giving the PCs only a 50/50 chance of winning, absent GM fiat, and they'll probably exhaust most of their resources in the process. Also, a challenge that is "evenly matched" for the PCs won't be if they're at half-strength when they get to it.

Remember that assessing challenges is an art, not a science, and it's okay for the occasional challenge to diverge from expectations (whatever those expectations are for your game, play style, and genre of choice). What is important is that the players are enjoying the adventure and that, when they fail, they still feel like they could have won if things turned out just a bit differently. What you don't want is a bored group that feels like the challenges are tedious or that their actions are futile.

Documentary Reel—Splicing the Film

I once had the privilege of playing in a group that had three regularly rotating GMs (as well as a few players who would occasionally take the chair). One of these GMs, Bob, meticulously crafted a large dungeon, talking it up for months as the two GMs before him ran through their campaigns. He was bursting with pride and his enthusiasm was infectious.

When the time came for him to take the chair, he took us all on a wild ride through an old-school, retro-style fantasy dungeon that was a lot of fun. I could tell that he'd put a lot of thought and work into his design and each location was bursting with descriptive details. We'd made our way through about a quarter of the dungeon when everything went wrong.

We encountered an evil wizard who, finding himself outclassed, used an intricate teleportation device to escape and gather allies to come back for a rematch. We examined the device in the meantime and learned that it could open a dimensional window into any location in the dungeon. It worked simply by touching the device and thinking about where one wanted to go or, more frustratingly for Bob, about anyone with which the user was familiar.

While the dungeon was designed as an old-school romp, we did have a mission: A noble was imprisoned deep in the dungeon and we were hired to free him. As it turned out, the noble was known to one of the PCs. We simply had that PC use the device to open a window to where the prisoner was held and scooped him right out of his cell! With said noble free, we high-tailed it out of the dungeon and back to civilization to receive our reward, which now far exceeded the risks we took. An adventure that was supposed to take months of real time to finish was wrapped up within a few sessions.

Bob made several mistakes, but the big two were poor planning and not thinking on his feet. Merely limiting the teleportation device to "places we knew within the dungeon" would have prevented us from short-cutting the adventure—"splicing the film," if you will. Once he realized that we were going to use the teleportation device ourselves, he could have done some "editing on the fly" to remove the "find person" detail.

While there's no way to anticipate every film splice, and indeed because players should be encouraged to be creative splicing film is often the inevitable result, poor planning can often result in adventures ending long before their time.

Roll the Film!

It's very important to look over a script before you start filming. It needs to naturally integrate with the rest of your campaign, have encounters that flow smoothly, and coax emotional investment from the players. Any of the elements we've gone over in this chapter can wreck a session if it isn't considered and, if necessary, fixed before play.

One word of caution before we move on: Don't be afraid to take chances and try something new. Just because your group loves combat doesn't mean they wouldn't enjoy a mystery adventure once in a while. Similarly, if the PCs lack a necessary skill then you may not need to toss an interesting adventure if a minor NPC or gadget could make those occasional rolls (as long as they aren't major aspects of the adventure). The goal of this chapter is to help you determine how well an adventure fits your group and game, not to put you in a straitjacket.

Now that you've got your appropriate script in hand it's time to prepare yourself for actually running the adventure. We'll cover this in the next chapter.

Challenge—Achievement: A Well-Prepped Script

1. Play one short session with a published adventure that you haven't read before starting play. Ask for feedback. What personal touches were missed?
2. Create/use a mystery adventure that has no combat encounters whatsoever.
3. Increase the challenge level of three encounters so that the PCs can't succeed by just throwing themselves at them.
4. Create a mystery that is simple and straightforward and see how many red herrings the players generate on their own.
5. Rewrite a plot hook so that it is atypical of the group's usual hooks.
6. Ask each player to tell you something that they'd like to see in the next adventure. Design an adventure incorporating everything they asked for.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Gemma chuckled to herself as she opened her adventure notes. The group was going to be so surprised!

"Okay," she said in her usual time-to-get-down-to-business GMing voice. "You've been following the trail of the rival pirate band and you discover, to your great surprise, that the tracks don't come from the coastline, but from up the hill—near the high outcropping just above the tree line.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Patti said.

Adam said, "We put down the chest and sneak up."

Gemma grinned. "The hill crests and you see a small campfire with three agitated pirates around it. They're playing cards and one of them just accused the other of cheating. You also notice that they seem to be guarding a hole in the ground."

"Let's hit them while they're distracted!" Adam said. He always enjoyed a good combat, especially when the odds were even.

"Quietly," Patti said. "We don't know what's in the hole."

"That is a good plan," Renaldo said. "But Francois, of course, leaps up with a cutlass in each hand and twirls them menacingly, offering the pirates a chance to surrender before things get ugly."

Gemma giggled while Adam and Patti sighed. It wasn't prudent, but Francois was Francois and their characters, Paulos and Red Kate, leapt up from the grass to join him. Red Kate brandished a cutlass of her own while Paulos relied on capoeira. It was a quick combat, with Paolos kicking flintlocks out of pirates' hands while Francois and Red Kate dispatched their foes handily.

When it was over, Gemma said, "You look into the hole and notice that it leads down into a large open cavern—a hidden cove! There's a pulley system to lift large objects up and down, with a ladder nearby. Anchored in the cove is a frigate. It's flying a black flag with an embroidered red skull."

"The Bloody Skull," Patti. "It's our rival's ship!"

"Now that's funny!" Renaldo said, laughing. "They wanted to take the treasure aboard their ship, and now we are granting their wish—post mortem, of course!"

Gemma nodded. "You can also see that the majority of the crew are Maroons, and the way they are being treated by the pirates in charge show there isn't a great deal of love lost between them."

"My kinsmen!" Adam said, smiling. "If we take out the leaders it shouldn't be much of a problem getting the crew to work for us, especially since we have the means of paying them in that treasure chest!"

"Then what are we waiting for?" Renaldo said, miming pulling out a sword. "Let's get ourselves a ship!"

Gemma grinned as the group started planning how to approach the vessel. She quietly reflected on that steampunk adventure she had almost used. While a skyship sounded cool at the time, she had to admit that the secret cove fit the campaign much better and the group was really getting into it. Besides, she'd found a few encounters in that airship adventure that she's easily modified for tonight, including this assault on the ship; the players would never know the difference.

It was going to be a fun session!

Chapter 8: Preparing the Shoot

After swaying the crew to their side, the intrepid pirates sail their stolen ship out of the hidden cove on a gust of wind provided by a magical rune embedded in the cove's wall. Patti, having researched real-world piracy and the ships of the Golden Age of Piracy on her own time, quickly took the lead in ensuring that the ship was sailing smoothly. Renaldo was having fun engaging the crew in friendly banter while Adam climbed up to the crow's nest.

*Gemma quickly glanced at her notes and addressed the group. "Okay. Thanks to the Sea God rune in the cove you're underway and your sails catch the wind as you emerge into the sea. Renaldo—excuse me—*Francois *leads the crew in a rousing pirate song as Paolos . . . Give me a Hard Perception roll, Adam."*

Adam made the roll, adding the appropriate modifier for the increased difficulty. "I succeeded!" he said. "And by a healthy margin."

"Good," Gemma nodded. "Paolos uses his spyglass and notices another ship coming around the island flying a black flag."

"Frank and Kate, we've got company!" Adam said.

"Wonderful," Patti said, sighing. "Yet more rivals."

"Obviously," Renaldo said. He smiled. "Why risk the dangers when you can wait for someone else to do it and just take it from them?"

"Were we the only pirates stupid enough to brave the dangers?" Adam said. He turned to Gemma. "How big is the ship?"

"Pretty big," Gemma said, although she was caught a bit off guard by the question. She paused to flip through the rulebook. "It has 12 more cannons than you."

"In other words," Renaldo said, "we're toast if we fight it."

"It may not come to that," Patti said. "We're probably lighter and faster. We could try to outrun it. What are the chase rules, Gemma? Can we prepare the ship for battle while extending our lead? Where is the wind blowing? How many crewmen do we have to commit to both?"

For a moment, Gemma looked like a deer caught in the headlights. She'd assumed that the players would fight the enemy ship and hadn't read the chase rules very closely. Now, in the heat of the session, she had to stop the game and figure out that subsystem while her players wondered why Gemma was unprepared for a sea chase in a pirate game.

Why is Preparing the Shoot Important?

We've just spent a chapter going over the suitability of your "script"—the adventure—so with that all resolved we can launch straight into playing, right?

Not so fast.

An adventure is usually more than just a barebones outline or sketchy thoughts. Generally, you (or someone else) have put in quite a bit of work fleshing out scenes, creating challenges, ensuring that key elements flow together, and determining what rules are needed where. For meatier adventure notes, this is a lot to keep track of! That said, there are quick and easy ways to manage your preparation so that you can communicate the script more easily to your "actors," the PCs.

This chapter is designed to help you get organized so that you can manage your session smoothly and efficiently without having to stop to pore through rule books or reread portions of the adventure.

Understand Your Goal

A good director organizes her shoots so she knows which scenes she needs to shoot each day. Similarly, you should get into the habit of understanding what you're trying to accomplish in each session. You already know where you're starting based on the previous session and you should have a general idea, based on your group's dynamic and the length of the session, of where the session will end. You need to be prepared for what's in between.

Note that this section isn't titled "Set Your Goal" or even "Acknowledge Your Goal," but "*Understand* Your Goal." The goal is to be prepared, inasmuch as possible, to run a fun session; understanding comes from keeping the following points in mind.

- **An adventure is rarely a straight line**—Unless you've created a rigid, linear scenario (Room A leads to Room B leads to Room C), chances are your group will have choices to make at various points. These choices can affect the shooting goal.
- **You don't have control**—It's all well and good to sketch out every scene, but your players aren't married to your script and will often go off in directions you didn't anticipate. You need to plan for this and adjust your goal accordingly on the fly.
- **Time is relative**—Game time and real time rarely match; so too with anticipated game time and actual game time. You never know what the players are going to cling to or let go; you also have little control when the rules contract or extend a scene. You may think that a scene involving a couple of brigands trying to hold up the PCs will only take a few minutes, only to find that parlay and several "interesting" combat rolls have eaten up an hour of session time.
- **Rules reflection and arguments take up time**—This can be folded into the above bullet point, but it's worth parsing on its own. Nothing can bog down a session or eat up more time than having a rules argument or flipping through rulebooks to find the correct implementation. In addition to taking time directly from the session, rules arguments can also indirectly influence the pacing of the rest of the session. A player unhappy with a rule may drag the pace down, or the correct implementation of a previously forgotten rule may bypass a key scene, bringing the group closer to the session goal ahead of time.
- **If you aren't prepared, it can be a short session**—Being prepared is more than just having enough material to get the players to the goal you have prepared. You also have to have enough material to move the goalposts when the original goal looks like it may be achieved early or the players deviate from your anticipated path. If you don't, then you may end up wrapping your session much earlier than intended.

Now these points are all well and good, but how *specifically* can you prepare for a session? Preparation involves three areas: rules, scenario, and players. With those areas in mind, we're going to look at three methods of preparing for your shoot: **cheat sheets**, **flowcharts**, and **insurance**.

If you like to wing it or run games with minimal prep, those topics might sound intimidating or time-intensive, but they really aren't either of those things. Heck, you might even find that spending a few minutes doing these for each session may actually help you make things up on the fly.

Director's Notes—Convention Games

When I run convention games I consider it a point of pride when I introduce new players to a game by showing them the rulebook and then proceeding to ignore said rulebook for the rest of the session. Why? At a convention I only have a fixed amount of time to conclude an adventure and I don't want to waste time flipping through pages of a rulebook to clarify things. I also feel that it's more important to give the players the overall experience with the game than to get bogged down in rules minutiae.

To that end, when prepping for a convention game I tend to use customized character sheets that highlight all the important statistics and, where possible, include rules mechanics alongside traits, abilities, and the like. I also make a custom cheat sheet featuring the relevant rules and try to limit them to a page or two. During the session I refer only to the character sheets or the cheat sheets; I improvise everything else.

I've adapted this to great effect in home games. I generally use "convention rules" for the first session while slowly introducing subsystems as they become important. I tend to make cheat sheets for home games, and I try to limit implementation to one subsystem per session. For example, the first session of a space campaign may take place entirely inside a space station (basic rules), the second session may require ship-to-ship combat outside the station (starship rules), and the third may start with plotting a course to another system (using the space navigation subsystem).

By boiling rules down to their essence and offering them up to the players in manageable chunks, I've found that players pick up the various subsystems far more easily than if I assumed they'd each read a thick rulebook on their own—especially if they don't own the rulebook!

Highlighting the Rules—Designing a Cheat Sheet

Obviously, understanding the rules is a huge boon when running adventures. That said it is surprising how many GMs don't know most of the rules for the game they're running (or not so surprising, given that the average rulebook is hundreds of pages long). While the "missed" rules are usually circumstantial or uncommon applications, I've been in games where even core rules are misunderstood (see the **House Rule Assumptions** sidebar).

An effective way to ensure that your session runs smoothly is to read through your notes, identify what portions of the rules will be used, and create a rules cheat sheet that acts as a handy reference tool for those specific rules. The cheat sheet can be as sparse or detailed as you like—it could be a bulleted list of appropriate rules and page number references, or you might prefer to summarize rules in greater detail. (In the latter case, you're doing what many publishers do on their GMing screens.)

Three points of note when making a rules cheat sheet. First, don't bother writing down rules you know off the top of your head—most games have a core mechanic that's easy to remember and you don't need to give it prominence on a rules cheat sheet. If, however, you have players that don't understand the base mechanic (which is pretty likely if you're running a store event, convention game, or simply have a new player in your group) then you may find it helpful to put the core mechanics on the sheet.

Second, don't feel that you have to regurgitate everything from the rulebook. While I recommend putting everything down and simplifying rules for public events, your home game is more informal and generally unfettered by time constraints. It's usually easier to flip to the appropriate page and find a rule rather than waste prep time distilling everything into cheat sheet format. That said, technology does simplify that process: If you have the rules in a digital format, you can bookmark, hyperlink, and sometimes cut and paste to your heart's content. Some games even have sites hosting hyperlinked rules.

Third, personalize your rules cheat sheet based on your session. If you're running a superspy campaign and anticipate an exciting car chase this session, then you should have the vehicle rules highlighted. If you had the car chase last session and don't anticipate one this session, remove the car chase rules from the cheat sheet—it reduces clutter and opens up space for other circumstantial rules that may be useful in this session.

Artist: Matt Morrow

House Rule Assumptions

While you shouldn't usually need to put common mechanics on a rules cheat sheet, be sure to refresh your memory on how they work from time to time anyway. It always amazes me when I discover that my gaming group as a whole interprets a rule a certain way that is clearly wrong and has been doing so for quite some time. It can come as quite a shock when they learn that they've been doing it wrong.

When this happens, be prepared for some resistance. Often these unofficial "house rule assumptions" get started because there's a clear advantage for the PCs, and they may have relied on this advantage when designing or upgrading their characters. In these cases it's entirely up to you whether to enforce the original rule, but if you do then you should give your players some leeway in adjusting their PCs accordingly.

Storyboarding—Designing a Flowchart

In film, storyboards are essentially "comic books" that illustrate how scenes should play out. They enable directors and others involved in the film's production to understand what's supposed to happen during a shoot. You can't apply this concept to gaming in its entirety because of the unpredictability of player actions—and other things—that can, and usually do, send sessions off in unexpected directions.

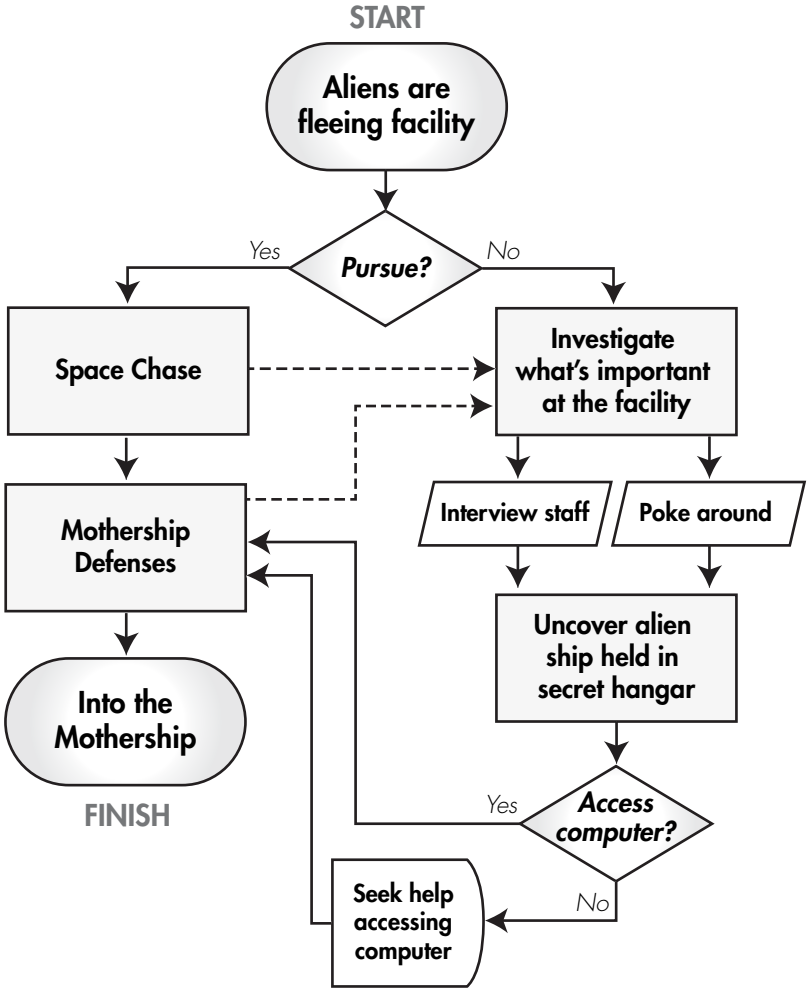
What you *can* take from storyboarding is the element of mapping out likely paths for the PCs. This gives you an idea of what you need to prepare (and which rules to highlight on your cheat sheet). To create a flowchart, simply map the decision points that you expect your players to make during the session and then draw lines to the next scene based on each decision.

A session flowchart is very similar to a dungeon map: On a dungeon map, each door and corridor on the map represents a decision point; on a flowchart, the scenes are the decision points. If the PCs entered Room 5 and there is a door to their left and another in front of them, chances are that their next moves will be to explore what's behind each door and then make a decision as to which one to go through. You can make similar guesses about what they'll do next on a flowchart.

Figure B1 provides an example flowchart for a supers campaign. In the last session, the PCs discovered an alien attack on a government research facility and they forced the aliens to flee. For today's session, the GM knows the starting point (the aliens' flight) and the likely endpoint, getting inside the alien mother ship.

While brainstorming the flowchart, the GM anticipates that the PCs will pursue the aliens, but it's also possible that the PCs will let the aliens go for now and try to figure out what attracted them to the facility. She's listed both options on the flowchart.

Figure B1



Following the flowchart gets the PCs to the mothership one way or another. They may do this by directly pursuing the aliens or by discovering an alien ship inside the facility that is transmitting a beacon. If the PCs break off their pursuit, then they may still get the information they need by going back to the facility. Simply following the flowchart gets the PCs to the session goal.

Let's take a deeper look at two things about Figure B1. First, the flowchart can also highlight the rules needed for the session. There's obviously going to be some combat, but if the PCs directly pursue the aliens then chase rules may be involved. Investigating the facility requires skill checks and social interaction, as well as possibly tapping a computer-specialist contact. You'll want to note page numbers on the rules cheat sheet (or even just jot them down on the flowchart).

Second, while this flowchart seems fairly exhaustive there's always an opportunity for players to go "off the trail." In this case, they may break off pursuit and decide not to investigate the facility. The GM could then either have a government scientist from the facility approach them or have the aliens (after determining that the PCs are a clear threat) send another strike force to destroy them, leading the PCs back into space.

Keep an Eye out for Character Upgrades!

When designing cheat sheets or flowcharts make sure you take into account any PC upgrades that happen between adventures. I once designed an elaborate mystery that I thought would take up an entire session. I failed to take into account that a PC had upgraded her psychic powers, and she figured out who the murderer was in seconds. Oops.

In any event, a flowchart can help you avoid losing your place and keep the session generally on-target, making allowances for player innovation. Obviously, your planned endpoint (FINISH on the flowchart) may not be where the session actually finishes, but you can pick it up next session, using the actual endpoint as the new START.

Another benefit of creating a flowchart is that it makes you think critically about every decision the players make, and may even flag a question or decision point that you hadn't thought about. It also may prevent "leaps of logic," where you expect the players to go from Point A to Point B without giving them enough of a reason to do so, because you can see what the players have to work with in terms of decision-making.

Accidents Happen—Taking Out Insurance

During production of a film, unanticipated events can throw a spanner in the works of a shoot. An actor may get sick, a prop or scenery may be damaged, or weather conditions may delay shooting. Similarly, your game session may be plagued by unforeseen events. Anything from forgetting your adventure notes or character sheets to a player cancelling at the last minute to a power outage can potentially derail a session before it starts.

"Taking out insurance" is merely taking the steps you need to take before a session to ensure that the session runs smoothly regardless of unanticipated events. Here are a few tips on taking out insurance:

- **Never plan on every PC being present at the session**—Even if everyone pledges to be there, real life can often sideline a player at the last minute. If your session relies on a particular PC being present, then your session could be over before you start.
- **Have a plan in place for absent PCs**—This could be as simple as making each session self-contained in order to make absences logical, but this is easier done in some games than others. Whether you chose to "ignore" absent PCs, run them like NPCs, or have another player play them, make sure you have a plan.

- **Set a quorum**—A quorum is the minimum number of players to play a session. Ensure that everyone at the table knows what this quorum is and that if it isn't met the session is cancelled. If you like, set an alternate venue if the hosting player can't host for whatever reason.
- **Keep a backup of your notes handy**—A gaming session was once saved because I was able to access my Dropbox account at my friend's house. It's also a good idea to keep a hardcopy in case your connection is bad or your laptop/tablet battery dies (and yes, I've opened up my bag at a session only to discover that I'd left the power cord at home).
- **Similarly, keep backups of character sheets**—Not only are they useful if someone doesn't show, but having backups also enables you to reference the sheets while designing challenges in your adventures.

To help illustrate taking out insurance we've provided an example of an insurance sheet, **Figure B2**.

Figure B2

Insurance Sheet: Summer is Fleeting Campaign

Tamsin Ravenholme (only play if three players are available)

- **Role:** Healer and Necromancer
- **Absentee Notes:** Fades into background – played when necessary by Jason
- **Considerations:** In the third adventure Tamsin is supposed to receive a request from a ghost. This would be weird if I'm talking to myself, so the ghost possesses and talks through her instead if Dharma can't play that session.

Sir Mikhail Idanovich

- **Role:** Warrior
- **Absentee Notes:** No worries. We play at Jason's house so if he's not available then there is no session!

Kuina the Brave

- **Role:** Swashbuckling rogue
- **Absentee Notes:** Disappears, likely due to a "quick score" elsewhere
- **Considerations:** When the PCs need thieving skills and Cyndi isn't at the session then they'll have to hire help

Torin Goldhammer

- **Role:** Runecaster
- **Absentee Notes:** Played by the GM.
- **Considerations:** Ken plays Torin to use magic sparingly and when mundane means are exhausted.

An insurance sheet should be developed prior to the campaign and updated as necessary as the story progresses. There should be an entry for each character on the insurance sheet, noting the character's role, absentee notes, and considerations. There should also be a general understanding as to a quorum—how many players need to show in order to play?

The character's role is what she brings to the table and what you need to replace if she doesn't show. In practice, this might be unnecessary—you'll likely remember the roles of each player.

"Absentee notes" is what happens if the player doesn't show for a session. This is generally where you note if someone else is playing the character, if she becomes an NPC, or if she's moved off-camera for the session.

"Considerations" is a catch-all for anything you need to remember if a character doesn't show. This is a good place to note those parts of an adventure where the PC is expected to shine, how the regular player generally plays his PC, and how to replace the character if he is moved off-camera.

Roll the Film!

It should go without saying that preparation is the key to a great session. Even if you tend to wing it, you'll still want to ensure that all of your tools are available and have plans for cancellations or other issues. In fact, you may want to try a cheat sheet or flowchart to see if it enhances your usually improvised approach.

Now that we've checked the script and prepared the shoot, it's time to roll the film! The next chapter covers launching the actual session.

Challenge—Achievement: A Well-Prepared Shoot

1. Randomly pick three adventures (your own or published scenarios). Write the adventure goal for each of them in a single, clear sentence.
2. Create a flowchart of scenes connected by the clues/information needed to make choices.
3. Ask each player to create a fully-designed back-up character that is tied to the current adventure.
4. Have each player submit an "upgrade wishlist" for their next character achievements.
5. Create and implement a house rule for the next session.
6. Run a game without opening a rulebook. Use a one page cheat sheet instead, if you like.

Documentary Reel—The Forgotten Clue

It's no secret that I love running investigative adventures. I love giving my players a mystery and watching them unravel it, get to the heart of the mystery, and resolve it. I enjoy peppering my adventures with clues for the players to find and interpret, flagging red herrings while honing in on the true culprit. I also pride myself in ensuring that the critical clues get into the players' hands by having different means of delivery. That said, one area I've sometimes fallen short in is judging red herrings.

I'm using the term "red herring" here as a false lead—it looks like an avenue that will help the PCs solve a mystery but is actually a dead end. Some red herrings are easier to spot than others and some are simply resolved through process of elimination. Where I tend to fall short is determining how long I should let my players spend on a red herring and when to throw them a lifeline.

During a modern occult investigative campaign my players spent the better part of the previous session chasing down a red herring and only resolved it at the beginning of the current session. The group then decided to pursue yet another red herring. I wasn't sure why my players didn't associate what they'd learned from the previous red herring with another clue that should have pointed them in the right direction. Still, it seemed like my players were having fun interacting with NPCs while chasing down this new red herring, so I just went with it. Before I knew it, the session was over.

While cleaning up, I was surprised when one of my players told me how frustrated he was that they'd burned two sessions on false leads and were no closer to solving the mystery. I asked him why he'd ignored the Big Clue, especially in light of the previous red herring, and he responded with a blank stare. It turned out that in the course of the last two sessions he'd completely forgotten about the Big Clue, and a quick show of hands informed me that everyone else had forgotten it as well. Had we not had that conversation the group would likely have burned yet another session the same way.

While I still don't think having players spend time hunting down false leads is a bad thing, having them do it out of frustration over something the player, not the character, forgot *is* a bad thing. From that point forward I resolved to recap what important things the PCs learned up to date at the start of the session while also encouraging my players to write things down as they discovered them.

Gemma was surprised that the group cut right to the chase, but she was prepared. She'd anticipated this possibility when designing her flowchart and she had notes on her cheat sheet covering the chase rules. Without skipping a beat, she opened the rule book and flipped to the appropriate pages.

"Okay, the chase is on! Make a navigation roll to judge the winds and the pirate ship's speed."

"I made it," Adam said. "Can we outrun it?"

"It's definitely gaining ground," Gemma said. "You just aren't sure you can get out of cannon range before they can fire."

"Darn," Patti said. "We're going to have to prepare for a volley."

"It may help if we give them reason to think we're surrendering," said Renaldo, "and once they get in range, we can hit them with everything we've got before making a run for it!"

"Sounds like a plan," Patti said, nodding. "Let's see how many guns we can line up aft."

Gemma smiled. It looked like she was going to get her combat after all. If she'd assumed the PCs' ship was faster, rather than working through the chase rules, she'd never have gotten to that scene.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Chapter 9: And... Action!

Gemma cursed under her breath as she took the elevator up to her apartment. She hadn't intended to spend all afternoon shopping and she certainly hadn't counted on the bus being late. As it was, she was 15 minutes late for the game. Adam and Patti were waiting by her door; Renaldo was late, as usual.

Gemma greeted her friends and let them in. She quickly gathered her gaming stuff, not wanting to waste any more time. Adam and Patti continued their conversation from the hall; Adam was enjoying the foibles of Patti's latest crazy date. Gemma had only just turned on her laptop as Renaldo burst through the door.

"You won't believe what happened to me on the way here!" he said as he sat down.

Gemma cut him off. "Save it. Let's get started."

She began describing the scene—the PCs were deep in negotiations with the strange inhabitants of a remote island. Unfortunately, no one was listening. Patti, complaining about the restaurant staff from the previous night, didn't hear Gemma cut Renaldo off, so she asked him what had made him late. Frustrated, Renaldo launched into a tirade about traffic etiquette and someone who had cut him off and stolen his parking space.

Trying to take command of the room, Gemma raised her voice and said, "You are negotiating with the tribe."

Adam cocked an eyebrow. "Wait a minute, negotiating with the tribe? Weren't we fleeing from another ship when we left off?"

"No," Patti said. "You had to leave a bit early. We're past that point. We set anchor near an island."

"That's right," Renaldo said, nodding. "What were we negotiating again?"

"Forget that," Adam said. "What are we doing for dinner? I'm starving!"

Gemma sighed as the players debated the merits of Chinese or Italian. It was going to be a long session.

Why Is Starting a Session Well So Important?

The beginning of a session is much like the first block of a television series (or, for those of you who stream your TV shows, the first few minutes). This is the part of the show that is designed to hook the viewer and foreshadow the plot elements to come. Similarly, a good start to a roleplaying session hooks the players' interest and telegraphs the session goal and some of the challenges they may face. A good start to a roleplaying session should do all of the following things:

- Alleviate outside distractions before they interfere with the game.
- Draw the players into the session.
- Remind the players of what has gone before.
- Quickly, efficiently, and, most importantly, entertainingly thrust the players into the action

All of these elements need to work in tandem, as missing any one of them can hinder the flow of the session. Similarly, the excitement generated with a strong opening can carry the players well into the session, helping them gloss over the slow bits and encouraging them to move forward when they get stuck.

Social Hour

Gemma's main problem in the opening fiction was the lack of a social hour. She assumed that Adam and Patti already had their discussion in the hallway and she wasn't about to sacrifice more time for Renaldo, who'd arrived late. As a result she had to fight a losing battle between starting the session and the more immediately interesting conversations that had nothing to do with the game.

Generally, giving everyone a chance to socialize or vent between the time they arrive and the start of the session helps minimize such disruptions during a session. This is especially true of older gamers who don't have a lot of free time—the session is their social hour, no different than a poker night or catching a movie with friends. They want to talk about their week and hear similar stories from their friends.

In spite of the name, "social hour" doesn't have to last an hour. You can also combine it with a meal if your group is in the habit of eating during a game; in fact, in these cases your social hour may even be mid- or post-session rather than at the beginning.

Director's Notes—The Problem of Camaraderie

At this point in my GMing career I've run many convention games. While these can be (and often are) intimidating, convention games never suffer from an unfocused start. When several strangers gather around the table for the event, they're ready to game and look to the GM to get things moving. If there's a muddled start, it is usually due to lack of preparation on the GM's part.

Gaming with strangers in a convention context stands in marked contrast to a home game, where everyone knows each other. Not only is "social hour" more prominent, but other factors, such as lateness and disruptive behavior, are more common. It can be difficult to "lower the boom," especially when your friends point out that it's just a game (and they're right!).

That said, following the advice in this chapter helps to bring a bit of that convention formality to your familiar table. While this advice won't eliminate distractions, it will help to minimize them.

Acting Like Adults

Over the years I've seen lots of attempts to "curb player disruptions." The most common of these is "If you said it then your character said it," but other variations include the "instant wandering monster," "hand of god," or loss of XP if someone makes an out-of-character joke or otherwise disrupts the session. All of these have one thing in common—they're utter nonsense.

Trying to enforce "proper behavior" is nonsense because it's childish behavior. Rather than have a rational discussion about possible issues, the GM is using the game in a passive-aggressive way to get what he wants. This rarely goes well because childish behavior begets childish behavior. I've seen good PCs get "suicided" and I've watched fun sessions suddenly devolve into shouting matches after a player was hit with one of these tactics.

The best advice I can give you is that if a player does something distracting, just explain why you think the distraction is an issue and politely ask her to stop. Most of the time people don't even realize that they're distracting everyone else, as they delivered their joke or shared a story while the affected players' characters were "off-camera." In any event, the dispute can be handled calmly and intelligently, rather than becoming exercises in petty vengeance.

Setting the Stage

Anyone who's seen a movie set is familiar with the clapperboard, a board with an attached strip that is "clapped" to inform everyone that the camera is rolling. Equally important is the information displayed on the clapperboard, which tells the actors and crew what scene is being shot. On a finished film, the same is accomplished for the audience by use of an eye-popping pre-credits sequence or catchy opening credits.

Similarly, a good way to begin a session is to set the stage, instantly informing the players that it's time to begin. A good stage-setting also helps the players "get their heads in the game" and start thinking like their characters. Here are a few suggestions to help set the stage:

- **Have the social hour in a spot other than the gaming area**—If the players have to physically move from one spot to the next, then they've already received a powerful signal that it's time to start the session.
- **Change the atmosphere**—Dimming the lights, lighting candles, turning off a radio or television, or even the act of putting up a GMing screen are all signals that the game is about to begin.
- **Select a song to represent the campaign and play it as a signal to get started**—If you're feeling really ambitious, create an opening montage that can be played on a laptop or tablet.
- **Ask a player to provide a recap of last session**—Once other players start hearing familiar events from the previous session they tend to listen, if only to "correct" the other player's recollections!
- **Write a short "cut scene" that players can read to set the mood**—This is mild metagaming (as the PCs likely won't have this knowledge) but it's a fun way to subtly encourage the players to get involved in the adventure. See **Figure C1** for an example of a cut scene that sets the stage, gives a little metagaming insight into important NPCs, and points the players towards a possible plot.

All of these suggestions have one thing in common: They offer a concrete signal that the game is about to begin. This signal minimizes the problem of trying to talk over players, as it grabs their attention in the way that adding yet another voice to the din cannot. Once you have their attention, though, you need to get them focused—do they remember where they are? With that in mind, let's move on to recapping.

The Importance of Recapping

Recapping is a valuable tool that helps ensure a smooth start to the session. A lot of real life happens between sessions and it's easy to forget what happened in past adventures. This can be especially essential if the players are mid-adventure and need to recall clues and other facts in order to successfully complete the scenario. Without a good recap, players may stumble through investigations or botch key social interactions because they simply forgot what happened before.

Figure C1

Tournament of Dread – Cut Scene

Lady Rachel sullenly looked out of her window at the field being prepared for the day's events. Merchants were setting up tents that would hold their wares while the castle cooks were already preparing food in the makeshift open air kitchen. Villeins were clearing the tournament area that would be used for archery, jousting, and other combat arts while craftsmen built the seating area. A few knights were already practicing with their horses. She could even see some of the local wizards preparing rituals and illusions that were sure to delight the faire-goers. Her father had pulled out all the stops for this faire, and he should be proud.

Unfortunately, she couldn't share his pride.

She grunted softly as Teresa pulled the laces tight. The maid was doing her best to get Rachel ready, but her mistress wasn't being very accommodating. Teresa tried to lighten the mood.

"I can't wait to see the jousts," she said as she stood back to admire how the gown favored Rachel's form. She frowned as she noticed a crease and adjusted it. "I see Sir Willem from Seibolt Barony is out there."

Rachel frowned. She knew Teresa was trying to be helpful, but it wasn't working. Rachel's father made it clear that he'd offer his daughter's hand to the winner of the tournament, but Rachel wanted no part of Sir Willem or the vicious woman she'd gain as a mother-in-law. She tried to change the subject.

"I don't see Sir Acton practicing?"

Teresa smiled behind her mistress' back. She knew how much Rachel fancied the young local knight, although the Baron would rather she marry outside the barony.

"I hear he's come down with a cold or something, but he still plans to joust."

Lady Rachel frowned. Sir Acton stood a good chance of beating Sir Willem, but if he's not healthy then that was in doubt.

"That's strange," Rachel noted. "Last night he was in top form. When did he get ill?"

Teresa shook her head. "He seemed fine at the knights' feast last evening. He must have caught it in the evening.

Lady Rachel's eyes narrowed as she watched Sir Willem charge at a quintain. She knew he could never hope to beat Sir Acton, and he knew it too. Did he or his mother have something to do with Sir Acton's sudden malady?

It's worth noting at this point that you shouldn't jump to the conclusion that if the players can't remember what happened during the last session then they're obviously not interested in your campaign. I'm thinking of one player in particular (though I've known others) who regularly forgets adventures he's played in yet really enjoys playing, and he has nothing but good things to say about our games. He just deals with a lot of pressure in his work and family life and doesn't have the bandwidth to remember adventure details.

Figure C2

Recapping Checklist for *The Guns of Purgatory*

Long-Term Goal: To eliminate a notorious gang led by the ruthless Devil Dannon.

Short-Term Goal: To escort and protect a stagecoach carrying critical medical supplies.

High Points: You prevented robbers from stopping the stage as it went through Dry Gulch; you captured one and got him to talk. He told you that Dannon's Gang was holed up nearby.

Complications: It's possible for you to get the jump on Dannon's Gang now, but doing so might put the stagecoach at risk. It's likely that Dannon's Gang would move on by the time you get the stagecoach to Happy Valley. Also, Robbie Tanner took a bullet last session and he's going to need medical assistance.

Unresolved Questions: You'd changed routes at the last minute yet the robbers still found you.

Example: Recapping Checklist

Our example recap is from an Old West themed campaign, *The Guns of Purgatory*. The PCs are hired guns deputized by an overworked marshal who's trying to end the schemes of notorious criminal Devil Dannon and his gang. The PCs variously alternate between protecting people and rooting out the gang.

While **Figure C2** is probably written a bit more formally than you might write it, it illustrates the kind of information that a good recap should include. The biggest thing to note is that no attempt is made to give a blow-by-blow account of the previous session, which is one of the most common mistakes in recapping. Offering a 15-minute monologue is sure to lead to the players not hearing the relevant points.

The example starts with "Long-Term" and "Short-Term" goals. While these could be relabeled "campaign" and "adventure," or even "adventure" and "session," the structure of your adventures could vary substantially and these goals could mean different things based on how you parse them. Generally, the long-term goal addresses what the PCs ultimately hope to accomplish while the short-term goal is their current stepping stone in that direction.

Virtual Recapping

One way to ensure effective recapping is to post it on a wiki, in a shared cloud, or in some other virtual space. This not only enables the players to read the recap when convenient but, if there's technology at the gaming table, enables them to refresh their memories during the session.

If you go this route, don't be afraid to hand it to another player to maintain (or players, if it's a shared file). This helps even busy players stay engaged with your campaign.

High points are just that, the big elements that the PCs faced. In this example, it's likely that the PCs had several scenes involving the stagecoach along the way, but it's the attempted robbery and subsequent information gleaned that will propel them to make decisions in this session.

Complications are factors that may influence any decisions the PCs may make. In this case, taking an early crack at Devil Dannon may leave the stagecoach, which carries vital supplies, exposed, and one of the PCs isn't healthy. That said, eliminating Devil Dannon now accomplishes the long-term goal before the villain can cause more trouble!

Unresolved questions are those things that should be burning in the back of the players' minds. Understand that these are questions you should have heard the players ask, rather than "extra information" that you are planting now. If at least one of your players doesn't say, "Oh yeah, that's right!" when you mention these, then they probably weren't questions in the first place.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Start with a Bang

Once you've started the session, it's always a good idea to lead with something to get the players' juices flowing. Nothing saps enthusiasm more than simply asking "What are you doing?" as most players aren't in the right frame of mind just yet. You're much better off igniting their imaginations with a stronger open.

An effective opening scene does two things. First, it gets the players into the game world quickly and has them making decisions in character, even if it's just to roll dice. Secondly, it either reflects the tone of the overall campaign or it foreshadows some element of the upcoming plot.

Here are a few ways to introduce a strong opening:

- If the characters are a mercenary band, throw a combat scene at them. You can frame it as the climax of an unseen adventure or simply a particularly challenging random encounter on the way to their next mission.
- Have the PCs aid or run afoul of an NPC that seems incidental now, but who then pops up later as important to the session. This works well if the NPC crosses swords with them, only to turn up down the road as the trusted henchman of a powerful NPC who the characters need to work with.
- Put the characters in danger. Maybe they're on board a star-liner that suddenly has an emergency or an avalanche threatens them as they cross a mountain pass.
- Drop the mystery on them. The PCs are at a grand ball when a butler opens a closet and a body falls out, or they're out for dinner when they hear the sound of muffled gunshots from the kitchen.
- Have the characters arrested for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. If your genre supports it, maybe the true culprit shares a face or enough similar characteristics to one of the PCs.

In any case, it's important that these openings aren't particularly challenging or lethal. Remember, you're trying to get their creative juices flowing; empowering them with successes in areas that they are supposed to be good at will do that, having them dramatically fail or die will not. Finally, be careful with opening scenes where you need the PCs to fail in order to establish a plot point; players generally don't like scenes that smell like railroads.

Roll the Film!

All of the advice in this chapter really boils down to this: You want to quickly engage your players so that the session runs smoothly and is entertaining. Allowing social time minimizes distractions during the session. A clear signal to the start of the session helps get the players ready. A strong opening takes those ready players and gets them into character and prepared to deal with whatever you throw at them.

Of course, sometimes you aren't ready for what they throw at you! Fortunately, this is the topic of the next chapter, **Keep Filming!**

Challenge—Achievement: An Exciting Start

1. Start your session in a different way than usual.
2. Use a cut scene to start the session.
3. Begin a session with an action scene, even if the previous session ended with no hint of one.
4. Ask a player to "tweet" a recap (no more than three entries, or sentences).
5. Work an NPC into your opening who won't be used again for at least another session.
6. Put your social hour in the middle of the session rather than at the beginning.

Documentary Reel—The Long Recap

Several years ago I was running a campaign that had three big problems. First, we were playing on a weeknight after everyone got out of work and we were lucky to get three hours of actual session time; most of the first hour was usually eaten up (pun intended) by dinner and conversation. Second, I had six players, which made it difficult to give everyone adequate spotlight time. Third, I always wrote a short recap for the players to read, but I rarely made more than one copy, preventing the players from all reading it at the same time. Given that some players read more quickly than others, this tactic ate up a sizeable chunk of session time. (I suspect this would be less of a problem today with the ubiquity of smart phones and tablets.)

Needless to say, time was an issue.

This wasn't helped by the fact that one player insisted on recapping at the start of the session. He didn't want a quick recap; he essentially asked for a blow-by-blow account of the previous session and kept asking questions until he'd gotten it. While the rest of the group complained, I soon discovered that they didn't remember much from the previous session either—they just didn't want to waste session time recapping. It was obvious that, with such a large group and a short session window, no one was particularly invested in the game.

What I learned is that if you need a long recap, then something is seriously wrong with the flow of your campaign. While the group size:session time ratio was the culprit in this case, I've also noted it in multi-session mystery investigations and dungeon crawls—after a while, players forget why they are there and revert to autopilot mode. I learned to tighten up my sessions with a strong goal for each that enabled the players to start fresh each session with little recap necessary.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Gemma was upset about being late, but she knew it wasn't her fault. She promised herself she'd keep a better eye on the clock next time. For now, she had to deal with the fact that she was losing time. She looked through her notes and adjusted accordingly. The big reveal about the island could wait for next week.

When Renaldo arrived, Gemma let him regale Adam and Patti about his parking lot incident. While the three were chatting, Gemma used the time to get set up and address the dinner situation.

After several minutes, when it seemed like the players were winding down, Gemma dimmed the lights, lit a candle, and played the song she always used to open their sessions. The other three went silent as they pulled out their character sheets and dice bags, ready to play.

Gemma smiled. Last week they'd made the initial attempt to negotiate with the tribe, but per usual they'd done a particularly bad job of it. There was no rational reason for the tribe to trust them. What was needed was something that would bring them together anyway. During the time between sessions, Gemma had thought about it and come up with what she thought would be a great way to start.

"Okay," she said, "last time you'd just landed and were speaking with the advance party of a local tribe. As I'm sure you remember, Francois tried to use sign language but ended up insulting their leader about his 'prowess.'"

Adam chuckled as Renaldo flushed red at the memory. "Please don't remind me," he said—too late, of course.

"Maybe Red Kate should give it a try," Patti said.

Gemma had other plans. "Give me Perception rolls. Those of you that made it note that no one seems very interested in you. They seem distracted by some rustling in the trees. You look just in time to see a giant crab emerge from the large leafy bushes! A second crab bursts forth from the trees on the other side and, judging by the blood-curdling scream from the jungle, there's likely a third lurking about as well!"

"Time to show these locals what we've got!" Adam said. "Paolos draws two pistols from his bandolier."

"Red Kate's sticking with her cutlass," Patti said. "I'm not sure what bullets are going to do against those shells."

"That's why I carry two!" Renaldo said, grinning. "So are we dividing up or taking them on one at a time?"

Gemma grinned. There was nothing like the promise of a good combat to get their pirate juices flowing!

Chapter 10: Keep Filming!

After making allies with the local tribe, the PCs learned that the tribe had a "protector"—a giant octopus that the tribe's shaman could command—when a tentacle reached out of the water and crushed one of the giant crabs that had almost cut Paolos in half. Fortunately, a combination of a magical potion that Red Kate kept for just such an occasion and the magical salve smeared onto Paolos' wounds by the shaman put the pirate back into a half-healthy state.

As the other two were tending to their friend, a local lookout rushed into the village and excitedly shouted that another ship was on the horizon—the pirate ship that had been dogging the PCs since they'd left the Island of the Templar's Treasure.

Gemma smiled. Everything was in place. Now that the characters had the villagers' trust, they could easily convince them that the new pirates were a threat. All they had to do was let the shaman send the giant octopus after the pirates and the PCs could escape in their own smaller ship. Gemma could now close this chapter and move on to the next threat for the characters to face!

"What should we do?" Adam said. "It's obvious that the pirates know we're here."

"What about the octopus?" Renaldo said. As Gemma had suspected, he wasn't ready to go toe to toe with the pirates after what Paolos had just been through. Unfortunately, Patti didn't see it that way.

"I don't know, guys, using the octopus seems like a cheat. This is our adventure, after all, and we should be able to handle our own problems. I think we should take the ship out and face them once and for all!"

Adam didn't look too sure. "We almost got sunk last time, and we were just trying to slip away. I think they're too strong."

Patti dug in her heels. "They only look *strong. Gemma would never throw anything at us that we couldn't handle with a little thought. Besides, the tribe has been very helpful and hospitable. If their guardian can't handle the pirates, then we'd be responsible for its loss. That's not a good repayment of the debt we owe."*

"You're right," Renaldo said. "If we die, at least our deaths will be honorable, and if one of us manages to survive then we'll know where to find the treasure."

"Indeed," Adam said, nodding, "and, if it comes to that, we can ram the pirate ship and light the last of our gunpowder. That way the other pirates don't get the treasure either."

"Sounds like a plan," Patti said as she looked to Gemma.

Inwardly, Gemma was panicking. What had seemed like the obvious and expected solution was now off the table and, should the PCs face the pirate ship, this campaign would come to an abrupt end.

Why Is It Important to Keep Filming?

There's a key difference between a game and a story: The outcome of a game is uncertain. When writing a story the author has complete control over the direction of her plot and characters; while she may change her mind in regards to a plot twist or whether a character lives or dies, ultimately she remains in control. The very nature of a game, on the other hand, leaves the outcome in doubt, unless the sides are so unfairly matched that the outcome is a foregone conclusion. In such a case the participants often feel the game is not worth playing.

Similarly, it can be easy to jump to the conclusion that a gaming session is going badly because you didn't expect the players to go in a particular direction or for the dice to roll as poorly as they did. But if your session is so tightly plotted that the randomness of combat or a player thinking outside the box can derail the game, then you've likely missed the point of roleplaying games.

Whenever you play a game that has an element of randomness, unanticipated events are bound to happen. Some of them may even "threaten" the course of your adventure or campaign. In such cases, it's important to remember that these are the kinds of things that make your campaign unique. Heck, I've run the same adventure six times at a convention and each ran very differently based on player decisions and random rolls. Once you've learned to embrace the randomness, dealing with unanticipated events becomes much easier!

In this chapter, we're first going to delve into five common problems that tend to derail a session: the missed clue, bad dice rolls, roleplaying issues, team tension, and the chaotic player. After that we'll look at ways to "right" the session, including railroads, gentle persuasion, and letting the dice fall where they may.

Director's Notes—Don't be Afraid to Pause

In *Odyssey: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management* (the previous book in this informal trilogy), I mentioned that I once ran a campaign that had a great mystery at its heart. It was billed as a medieval fantasy set in 9th century Britain but, unbeknownst to the players, they were actually operating in the *World of Darkness* setting. I quietly dropped clues as they explored the world, preparing to pounce on them with an aha! moment when they finally confronted the local bishop, to whom they'd been unknowingly blood-bound.

During the game I'd inadvertently thrown a challenge at them that was too powerful for them to handle. Predictably, they fell and I was presented with an almost total party kill. Trying to think fast, I introduced the replacement PCs while info-dumping the nature of the world on the remaining PCs in the hopes of keeping interest. It was a panic move, and it showed. I simply wasn't thinking clearly as I saw the remnants of my campaign swirling around the toilet bowl.

What I didn't share in the *Odyssey* anecdote was that just before I called my friends to end the campaign, I'd come up with a great way forward. Unfortunately, that great way would only have worked if I hadn't info-dumped all of the secrets. Had I taken a few minutes to gather my thoughts or even ended the session early, I probably could have had that burst of inspiration and kept an enjoyable campaign viable.

When the unanticipated happens, don't be afraid to step away from the table for a bit. It really is okay to say "I didn't expect that. I'll need some time to adjust my notes." So long as the players don't feel that you're trying to railroad them back onto a preordained path, they'll likely appreciate that you want to reflect on what they've done. One final word of caution, though, some players may take this as a threat and offer to change their decision just to keep the game going. Don't let them!

The Missed Roll/Clue

One of the most common "accidents" occurs when a vital plot element is missed and the adventure comes to a grinding halt or, more often, heads off into a sea of red herrings. Sometimes this is due to a bad dice roll; other times it's because the players either missed interacting with the vital plot element or completely misinterpreted its meaning.

For failed dice rolls, the best advice is to not call for die rolls if the players are about to get a vital clue; they should get it without rolling. (I'd rather not relive a *Call of Cthulhu*® moment when my player missed a Spot Hidden roll and didn't notice large holes in the backyard, each of which held a dead sheep.) If you still wish to add an element of chance to the encounter, then make the die roll about interpreting the vital plot element rather than discovering it. In this way, the dice aid the player in her reasoning, rather than determining her PC's ability to uncover it.

Alternately, you can build back doors. A back door is a second (or third!) way for the players to get a vital clue if they happen to avoid learning it the first way. For example, there may be two witnesses to a crime scene; one may not give good information but the second one might. Another example is trying to bait an assassin to mention where he's striking next. If he doesn't offer the information, then it may be possible to get that information from hacking into his records or burglarizing his apartment.

Another way to look at a back door is not as a back door at all, but as "the long way around." In other words, the players eventually get the clues they need to reach the end of the adventure, but using their skills and abilities at various junctures may make the trip faster.

Sharp-eyed readers may notice that the alternative, building back doors, can work just as well for dice rolls simply by calling for a different roll or having another PC make the roll. While this is technically true, having an immediate reroll to invalidate the missed roll just seems like a pointless exercise. The players will wonder why you just didn't hand them the clue (and, in retrospect, you probably should have!).

Note that this is not the same as giving the player a second opportunity to make the roll if she revisits the scene or comes across new information that makes a second dice roll plausible.

Example: The Clue Map

A clue map is a good way to keep track of the various clues in a crime scene; **Figure D1** provides an example. Obviously you'll only append a clue map to particularly investigative scenes. A clue map works for social interaction as well as clue-gathering. When making a clue map you'll want to identify the following types of clues:

- **Core clue**—A clue that the PCs need to have, regardless of how well they roll or investigate. These clues contain the bare minimum needed to move forward with an investigation, and should be given to the PCs rather than relying on a dice roll.

- **Superior clue**—"Something extra" that is appended to a core clue. Often this is additional information gleaned from studying a core clue. Superior clues bring a core clue into sharper focus and cut down on misinterpretations or red herrings.
- **Additional clue**—A clue that isn't tied to the core clue, but is tangentially related; it's discovered when the PCs ask the right questions or use the proper skills. Unlike a superior clue, which falls back on a core clue if undiscovered, additional clues can go unnoticed if the PCs fail to spot them.
- **Red herring**—A false clue that may nonetheless be successfully "discovered" in the course of an investigation. A red herring can be of any type (core, superior, additional) but it nonetheless hampers the investigation by sending the PCs off on a false lead.

Figure D1

Clue Map – The Crime Scene

An eccentric Victorian country squire was discovered in his library with his throat slit and a window shattered. The motive seems to be simple robbery, as valuable personal effects are missing. The gardener spotted him from the window in the morning. No tracks were found, but it had heavily rained overnight.

Core Clues: The squire was in his favorite chair by the fire when he was killed. The squire is retired from the East India Company and often believed that the 'Thuggee' were still out to get him, even here in England. The window is shattered and the glass shards are primarily inside the room.

Superior Clues: The squire did not die from the slit throat—he'd been fatally poisoned, but there's no sign of a drink. The squire feared the Thuggee and always kept a pistol within reach. It does not appear that the squire tried to grab his pistol at any point. The shattered glass is inside, as it should be, but the way that the glass was shattered indicates that the window was likely hammered by someone hanging out of the adjacent window.

Additional Clues: There are no stains on the carpet—an intruder surely would have tracked some mud inside. The floor just under the adjacent window is wet—someone opened it and some raindrops got inside. Several valuable small items are strewn throughout the room—the burglar-assassin didn't do a very good job of spotting and taking some easily transportable valuables!

Red Herrings: A neighbor's dog was barking at around 11pm the previous night and several other neighbors and passersby saw the dog chasing someone away from the estate—this was actually due to an admirer of the neighbor's daughter coming to see her in secret. The dog chased him off.

An Ignoble, Dicey Fate

Nothing stops a session in its tracks like a PC that "died like a punk" because the dice didn't go her way. While this can be a dramatic moment, it's usually taken in a bad light. The affected player is sidelined until she creates a new character, and the rest of the players just lost a valuable member of the party to a quirk of fate, hardly the stuff of epic legends!

If your campaign style is to rigidly enforce the rules to evoke a brutal, uncaring world, then such a death is par for the course. (There are other styles where this applies, too—"play to find out what happens" is one such approach.) The player was simply unlucky and that's the way it goes. In such situations the players usually understand this and the loss of the character is lamentable, but part of the setting. Anything else would be fudging.

In such cases, I humbly suggest that you stick with the rules. If there wasn't a risk involved then why was the encounter there? If you save the character then you've just set a precedent that only certain conflicts or situations count. This is likely a case where it's better to roll with the punch and maintain the integrity of your game world.

Still, if the idea of a random PC death bothers you, then another possibility is to use some sort of fortune currency, such as fate points, drama points, or similarly named "get out of jail free" cards (thereby enabling hard fudging *by the players*). Many RPGs with a cinematic flavor tend to have fortune currency baked into the rules. You can easily house rule the same into your game.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Finally, you can offer a substitution. This is a mechanic that is decided upon by the group before play. For example, you may rule that any character that dies is actually only seriously wounded and must spend a certain number of sessions recuperating; the affected player brings in a replacement character during this period. Once the original character is healthy again, the player has the choice of either bringing him back or remaining with replacement.

The Roleplay Gone Bad

This is another case that happens often in my groups. The players need something from an NPC and all they have to do is ask politely. Naturally, the most socially-inept PC takes the lead and completely botches the scene. There's no back-up plan because I never expected the scene to play so poorly.

Fortunately, there are a number of ways to salvage a poor roleplay encounter if you don't want to simply "roll with the punches" (more on this a bit later). Here are a few:

- **Call for a social skill roll**—Sometimes the dice can save a scene; a success means that the PC accomplished the goal she was after with the NPC—what played at the table either didn't happen or was interpreted in the best possible way (note that this can work in reverse as a "soft fudge," allowing roleplay to erase a bad dice roll).
- **Have a sympathizer intercede**—Another PC or even an NPC may step in, acknowledging that things got off on the wrong foot and offering to set it right. This may involve flattery or accepting additional conditions in order to obtain the goal.
- **Offer another route**—Perhaps the host of a party at her mansion wasn't convinced to hand the PCs invitations, but one of the PCs' contacts knows the caterer. The PCs can now sneak in as servants and don't need to get in as guests.
- **It's magic!**—In a magical world, the NPC could be convinced that the PC was under a curse or other malady when the bad roleplay took place (this may even work in other genres—a fever or head cold often grants some latitude).

A word of caution: Employing some of these tactics may transform your campaign. If you enjoy heavily roleplayed social scenes, for example, don't be surprised if such scenes are reduced to dice rolling once you've employed the "saved by the dice" approach, for instance. Similarly, if an NPC sympathizer always picks up the slack, then you've taught your players that sloppy play still gets things done.

I'm Just Playing My Character!

There are times when a player decides to intentionally "go off-script." This is usually for reasons other than what's being played at the table, although if the GM bats an eye then "I'm just playing my character!" is often the defense. This is the person that intentionally insults the patron, tosses the object of the quest into a pool of lava, or

draws the PCs into a brawl when they were trying to be stealthy simply because they believe it's fun.

In some cases this is passive-aggressive behavior, invoked because something in the game upset the player (see the **Yes, I was Being a Jackass** sidebar for more about this). Maybe the dice haven't been going his way or his plan to storm the castle was rejected. Now he's no longer invested in the adventure and is lashing out.

In other cases, the player simply enjoys the chaos. She's whacked the hornet's nest because it's fun to watch everyone scatter. On some level she may enjoy the unexpected challenges that crop up over the course of an adventure and is playing a bit of "backdoor GM" to make it happen.

In either case, my best advice is to stop the game and have a discussion with the "chaotic player." I've found that gentle persuasion and rolling with the punches (see below for both) merely leads to more chaos. Similarly, fudging around the player's actions only makes him push harder. This is just one of those times when having a calm conversation can reap big dividends, even if it means stepping away from the game for a while.

Yes, I was Being a Jackass

A few years ago I was playing a Jedi in a *Star Wars*® campaign. We were meeting a couple of Hutts who wanted to hire us for a mission. I'd managed to tick them off by using mind tricks on their guards as we entered and I got challenged by one of the Hutts. In the opening round, the Hutt won, hit me with a critical, and I went down like a punk. When I came to, I decided that I wasn't going to accept any mission from the Hutts.

What followed was an exercise in stonewalling. As I stormed off to sulk, the other players did their best to get me back on board. I wasn't having any of it. I felt wounded (in spite of being the instigator in the first place—in my sulking I'd conveniently forgotten that) and the GM sat helplessly while he waited for the adventure to continue. If we hadn't accepted the mission, the session was over as the GM didn't have a back-up plan. We ended up blowing the entire session on futile attempts to convince me otherwise.

There were many ways that the GM could have handled my situation. The first and obvious one would have been to call me out on being a jerk and settle the issue away from the table. With a chance to cool off I might have been more agreeable. If not, then the GM should have given me the option to bring in a new character or simply remove myself from the campaign, as I was just being disruptive.

Alternately, the GM could have quietly salvaged his adventure. While I still think he needed to cool me down or remove me, he could also have subtly changed details of the adventure and I'd never have noticed. Rather than Hutts, he could have had Rodians, Black Sun gangsters, or any number of go-betweens hire the group for an unrelated mission that just happened to follow the adventure notes of the original.

It wasn't my finest moment as a player (and I did apologize for it), but it helped me understand how to handle similarly intractable players when I'm in the GM's chair!

Artist: Matt Morrow

Railroads

"Railroading" is a loaded term. Everyone has a horror story about a time when the players didn't want to take a particular course of action and the GM forced it down their throats anyway, only for the feared outcome to be realized. Railroads take agency away from the players and, by extension, sap their enthusiasm for playing the game.

A railroad is not the same as a linear plot, although both have similarities. Both limit the players' actions, but a linear plot does so logically. A typical example of a linear plot is a "gauntlet," which is a series of rooms in a dungeon that can only be entered in sequence. Another, somewhat softer, example is a murder investigation where the crime scene only turns up a single clue. While the players are certainly free to investigate other avenues, they understand that only by following the clue are they likely to get closer to solving the mystery.

Gentle Persuasion

So now the unanticipated has happened and you need to adjust the notes for your campaign. Do you try to get the players back on track or do you just follow their lead? There is no right or wrong answer here—it really depends on the nature of your campaign and how crucial it is that the original plot be followed.

Usually when the players agree that the original goal is desirable, they'll want to find a way to get back on track. Sometimes they may not even realize how important the original goal is and that, if they knew, they'd certainly want to accomplish it. In such cases you may wish to employ gentle persuasion to get them back on track.

"Gentle persuasion" is exactly what it sounds like: You use subtle methods to coax the PCs back in the right direction. The difference between gentle persuasion and railroading is that the former contains the possibility of failure—if the players just aren't interested, you abandon attempts to persuade them. The players only feel that they're on a railroad when you force them into a certain direction no matter how much they resist.

Here are a few examples of gentle persuasion:

- The PC police investigators stumble into a drug den unprepared and end up in the hospital. The captain assigns new PCs to pick up the investigation, perhaps even by interviewing the old PCs.
- The PCs can't transport the shipment to the waiting star system because their transport is too damaged from a chance encounter with space pirates. Another freighter happens by and offers to finish it for them for a cut of the profits. The freighter captain even hires the PCs on as crew for the mission.
- The PCs abandon rescuing a prince because the evil overlord's fortress seems impenetrable. The prince's sister seeks them out and begs them to reconsider, offering a larger reward.

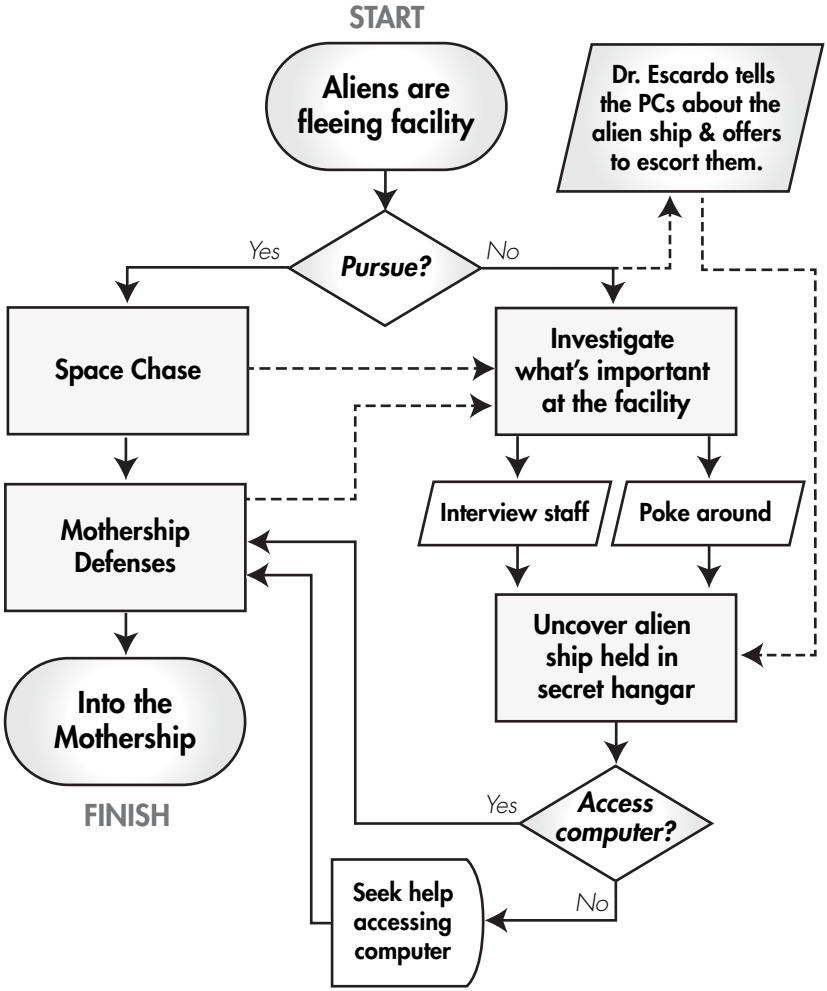
Each of these examples offers a different reason for the need for gentle persuasion. In the first, the players understand that the police are going to try and take down the drug cartel no matter who does the investigation. It's not railroading to continue the adventure; it just makes sense that the next set of investigators would be PCs. Here you're likely to encounter minimal resistance.

In the second case, the players still want to finish the mission but events have thwarted them. Both players and GM likely didn't think a small group of space pirates was going to be a big threat, but a few unlucky dice rolls and critical successes scuttled their freighter. Fortunately the shipment is intact and the players are probably all too eager to see the shipment through. In some cases, though, the players may decide to cut their losses and hand the shipment over to the new captain without seeing it through. As such, this is probably moderate gentle persuasion.

In the third case, the players have made a choice on their own—the fortress defenses are just too strong for them. While the GM is using gentle persuasion to get them back on track, it's entirely possible that the players will reject it. If so, then the GM has to be ready to accept that the PCs may abandon the mission (they already have, after all). This is a case of difficult gentle persuasion.

Going back to Figure B2, the insurance sheet from Chapter 8, the example of the superhero team fighting the aliens could result, as noted, in the PCs deciding not to pursue the fleeing aliens nor returning to the government facility to see what they were after. Based on the circumstances, this could be any of the three types of gentle persuasion. In this particular case (see **Figure D2**, below) the GM has chosen to use Dr. Escardo, an engineer working at the facility, to gently persuade the PCs to return to the adventure.

Figure D2



If gentle persuasion works, then you've gotten some semblance of your original session plan back on track. If it doesn't, then you're left with one course of action: rolling with the punches.

Rolling with the Punches

"Rolling with the punches" is exactly what it says on the tin. Sometimes you just need to go with what the players give you. For whatever reason, the adventure has gotten away from you and the players have no interest in coming back to it. So now what do you do?

Firstly, don't panic.

Secondly, remember that it's okay to fail. If the Big Bad wins, then it just adds to the drama the next time the PCs have to face her. If a treasured character dies, then give him an appropriate funeral and time for the group to mourn before moving on. If the PCs failed to save the village, then it gets overrun. Players expect the occasional failure.

What they also expect, however, are consequences. No matter how many friendly NPCs are in the village, the players would rather it get overrun because they missed the opportunity to save it rather than you stepping in to do so in order to save a treasured set piece. Players want their actions to matter, regardless of whether they succeed or fail.

Finally, remember that it's not solely your responsibility to fill a session. If the adventure goes off-script and you're unprepared to roll with the punches at the moment, end the session—don't worry if it's two hours early. The players will likely understand if you tell them that you need time to prepare now that they've done something unexpected. Some players may even help fill the remaining time by pursuing a player-generated subplot or returning to a loose end. You may not even need to kill a whole session; a quick break may be enough.

Rewrites

Generally speaking, a roleplaying session should be like filming a live stage performance: You can't stop filming, rewind the film, and start over. If a mistake is made, you just roll with it and move on. There are times, however, when you may wish to consider rewriting a scene. Here are a few examples:

- You misinterpreted or forgot to implement a rule which made things play poorly.
- A player misinterpreted or forgot something that her character would have known (e.g. the player wasn't paying attention when you said there was a sniper on the roof, but her character surely would have noticed), and acted unwisely.
- A dice roll was miscalculated or an effect incorrectly applied.
- A player admits to you that something outside the game distracted her and she wasn't at her best playing a scene and the result has tarnished the adventure.
- The PCs unwisely wandered into a total party kill (TPK) or most of them are so grievously injured that they can't continue.

In most cases, it's best to mitigate the fallout rather than replay the scene. If, for example, a PC died because a combat rule was misapplied, then rather than replay the combat just let the PC survive (he was only knocked unconscious). If a player completely botched a negotiation then just give her another chance to negotiate later. By doing this, you don't waste a lot of time invalidating finished scenes and you minimize the risk of some players actually preferring the results of the original scenes rather than the rewritten ones.

If you do feel the need to rewrite a scene, remember that the closer you are to the rewritten scene, the easier it is. It is much easier, for example, to replay the previous combat round than it is to roll things back 10 rounds or two scenes ago. Overusing rewrites can lead to confusion as well as run the risk of fostering sloppy play—after all, you'll let them rewrite it if they mess up, right?

Documentary Reel—*Who* Did I Call?

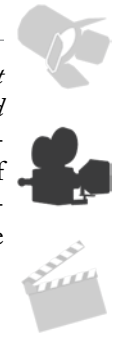
Sometimes mistakes that lead to unanticipated consequences can still be fun to roll with. I was running a superhero campaign that was set in a fairly realistic universe (superheroes had just come onto the scene, and only a small minority had actual superpowers) and the player characters got to know one NPC, a field reporter, extremely well. This reporter happened to know the characters in both their super and secret identities, but she didn't know that they were connected. All of that changed because of an ill-fated phone call.

In a previous scene, the reporter had asked one of the superheroes how she could contact him. The hero responded by giving her his cell phone number. Later, when the city was in crisis because of a supervillain's plan, the reporter decided to get the inside scoop by calling her super-friend. While the team was together, I mentioned to my player that his phone rang. Without thinking, he answered in his secret identity.

Hilarity ensued, as the reporter could easily identify the voices of the exasperated characters without the distraction of their masks. The affected player tried to cover his mistake, but he just kept making it worse. At some point during this rather amusing and game-changing development (the most famous reporter in the city just learned their identities and one of the heroes was a powerful and well-respected CEO and the other a Nobel prize winner), I realized that I'd made a mistake. The player had made a point of carrying two phones and I never mentioned which one had rung. Sure, it was possible that he'd have made the mistake anyway, but I didn't give him the chance to make it.

As it turned out, my player enjoyed the situation well enough that he decided to roll with it. In addition to dealing with the latest menace to the city the characters now had to convince the reporter to keep quiet about their identities, which she was happy to do—so long as a few perks came with it! While the campaign plan was irrevocably altered by this development, it made for a far richer campaign.

Roll the Film!



All of this advice essentially boils down to this: *Accept that this is a game and not everything will go your way. Accept it if the players pull the session elsewhere, and adapt.* This advice is very practical and simple but surprisingly difficult to follow at times, especially if you put a lot of hours into developing the interior of a ruined castle or derelict spaceship only to have the PCs decide to skip it. Remember that no plans need go to waste; you can always incorporate your castle or spaceship into the game later.

Of course, if your players have drifted and you're stuck for ideas, then it may be time to call for a break. We cover breaks in the next chapter.

Challenge—Achievement: Running a Smooth Session

1. Review your last session. Change the outcome of your first scene (or the first that had real consequences). How would it have affected the rest of the scenes?
2. Create a menu of gentle persuasion techniques.
3. Run one social scene without any dice rolls and one purely with dice rolls. Which worked better for your group?
4. Roll with the punches at least once in your next session, even when your gut tells you to do otherwise.
5. Design a clue map.
6. Design a clue map that has no red herrings.

Gemma wasn't prepared for the players to take on the rival pirates head-on, but she understood their desire for a reckoning. She warned them that she wasn't going to pull any punches but Renaldo waved her off, telling her that he was tired of running. The other two agreed.

Gemma then asked the group for a 10-minute break while she gathered her thoughts. As the players checked their emails and texts while refilling their cups, Gemma assessed the situation. A full-on attack was likely to end in the PCs' deaths, but chances were good that the Templar's treasure could sink beneath the waves—particularly if the tribe sent their champion, the giant octopus, into the battle anyway. Gemma could then have the players create a new party tasked with finding the treasure.

She called the group back together.

"Okay, you've decided to take on the pirates. What do you do?"

"We should move as many cannons as we can fore, aft, and port," Adam said. "We just have to keep the pirates off our starboard side."

"I just hope we get close enough to board!" Renaldo said. "I want as many of them as possible to taste my steel before I go down."

Patti smiled grimly. "It was great fighting alongside you, gents! Red Kate prepares six pistols."

Gemma suddenly had an idea. It was a long shot, but what the heck. "Everybody make a Perception roll."

Adam and Renaldo announced that they made it. Red Kate was apparently too busy filling pistols with gunpowder.

"You guys notice disturbances in the water off to your starboard side as you're moving cannon. There's a giant octopus in the water, and it seems to be keeping pace with you!"

"I told the shaman we'd take care of this!" Patti said. "No matter, we can probably use the help!"

Gemma rolled. "The pirate in the crow's nest sees it too. Through your spyglass you can see him animatedly calling the captain's attention to it. Let me make a morale roll . . . wow. They're rattled. Rather than concentrating on you, they're turning away."

"Awesome!" Adam said. "Let's swing broadside and let them have it with their aft facing us!"

Gemma couldn't believe her luck. Sometimes the dice were on her side, and with a single roll she'd salvaged the adventure without taking agency away from the players.

Chapter 11: Lunch Break

Having left the enemy pirate ship sinking—after running aground on a coral reef and fighting off a giant octopus—the PCs once again set sail towards port. Thankfully, their own ship didn't take a lot of damage and the crew were busy making repairs.

Gemma couldn't wait to spring her next encounter on the players, the one that would be the highlight of the evening. A group of weresharks had capsized a vessel, with only one passenger surviving. The weresharks tried to pursue her but the sunlight had thus far protected her, which would change tonight. With the woman aboard the PCs' ship, the weresharks would be attacking this evening.

Renaldo was getting punchy, as he always did later in the session, and decided that he was going to throw an impromptu party on board, cracking open cases of wine and dancing amongst the crew. He tried to include Red Kate in his antics, but Patti was having none of it as she patiently checked her email on her phone.

"Adam, you're still in the crow's nest, correct?" Gemma said.

"Yes." Adam yawned as he checked his watch. It was getting late and his stomach was growling.

"Good, give me a roll." Gemma waited until Adam succeeded and then responded. "You spot a rowboat floating in your direction. A young woman, fashionably dressed but with her clothes in tatters, lays unconscious within."

"Hey, guys!" Adam said, barely acting in character, "looks like we have another pirate!"

"We do?" Renaldo said. "Paolos pulls out his pistol as he spins on the deck. He glances over the rail, takes aim, and plugs her."

"What? Really?" Gemma looked surprised. The woman was defenseless and the action was certainly out of character for Renaldo.

"Definitely," Renaldo said. "We've been pursued by pirates, almost eaten by giant crabs, almost killed by an octopus, battled pirates again—what else are you going to throw at us tonight? It's pretty obvious that the woman in the boat is a trap. You haven't given us a chance to breathe all session!"

Gemma couldn't argue with him. This was going to short-circuit the plot, but she steeled herself for the fact that the players would simply be blasting things from here on out until the end of the session.

Why are Lunch Breaks Important?

Gemma's problem this time around is that the players are getting punchy as the session wears them down. I'd wager that, given most school and work schedules, many RPG sessions take place in the evening. It's only natural to get tired as the game progresses and this leads to sloppy play and sloppy GMing. Sometimes a quick bite to eat or a stretch is all you need to make it through the rest of the session as a fully engaged participant.

Breaks also shake things up a bit, enabling everyone to refocus, and ensure that the rest of the session flows smoothly. We'll cover that in this chapter, but first we need to talk about the length and frequency of breaks in general.

How Long and How Often Should We Break?

Depending on the length of your gaming sessions, you might not need a full-on lunch break (or dinner break, if you play in the evening). If your sessions typically last five hours or less then you'll probably want to include one 10-15 minute break. For sessions of three hours or less, a break probably isn't necessary. By default, break mid-session—but if you think a different break point makes more sense (see the **Commercial Breaks** sidebar), plan accordingly.

Director's Notes—Commercial Breaks

If you watch a TV show with commercial breaks but *without* commercials (streaming it, for example), it's quite obvious where the commercials are supposed to fit. A sudden bit of narration recapping what just occurred or a climactic scene suddenly fading to black and starting anew indicate where commercials were inserted when the show aired.

You might also notice that TV shows are usually divided into acts that are designed to fit comfortably between commercial breaks. Television writers structure these acts to build tension, set cliff hangers, introduce plot twists, and deliver the climax.

You can use this technique in your sessions as well. If you know that you're going to have one break then you can build your session into two "acts" that take advantage of this schedule. Throwing in a plot twist, cliff hanger moment, or big reveal is a great way to keep your players excited during the break and ensure that they'll be ready to jump right back in when the session restarts.

For games that run six hours or more, I recommend at least one longer break (20-30 minutes) for dinner and/or a short break (10-15 minutes) every two or three hours. Whether you wish to include the dinner break largely depends on the time of day you're running the game; if you're starting in the evening after dinner, your players probably won't want to eat another full meal in the middle of the night!

While breaks are generally informal affairs in home games, you may still want to "undersell" the break by declaring it to be 5-10 minutes less than what you actually want. In my experience players tend to stretch break time and by leaving yourself a little leeway you can maximize the amount of time you have left to finish the session.

Figure E1 is an example of a scene sheet (which you'll recognize as being Figure A2, from Chapter 7, with a few additions) that includes breaks. The GM figures that the first two scenes are primarily combat-related and will likely consume the first half of the session. She notes a break just after that, during which she can evaluate whether to add the additional scene based on how on-the-mark she was with her timing.

Figure E1

Journey to the Goblin Cave

Scene 1 – Attack on the Caravan!
Scene 2 – Following the Trail
Scene 3 – Dire Wolf Ambush

BREAKTIME!!!

Scene 4 – A Villager in Peril
(Scene A – Advance Patrol Ambush)
Scene 5 – Cave Entrance Guardians

Artist: Matt Morrow

Breaking "Thought Fatigue"

One of the problems with not having a break is that it can lead to tunnel vision or "thought fatigue," which is when the players get tired and simply don't consider alternatives beyond their initial impulses. They may race through a dungeon without considering traps or secret doors, they may decide to attack anyone who gets in their way, or they may continually beat a red herring into the ground because they "know" that it's the solution to the mystery.

Thought fatigue is compounded when the players are feeling frustrated. Whether the dice seem to be against them, their attempts to follow a clue turn up nothing but red herrings, or the Big Bad just seems undefeatable, the players start to feel as though nothing they can do will overcome their problem. In this case, a quick break may be all they need to recharge their creative energies. (Another option is to offer clues to overcome the problem, but frustrated players tend to see this as a "cheat"—and it does little to end the fatigue).

Evaluating Your Shooting Schedule

Breaks are a good time to evaluate your session goal. If your break is in the middle of the session, is your group about where you expected to be by now? If not, then you may need to amend your session goal and ensure that the new "goal" offers a suitable ending spot to keep your players wanting more.

It's worth noting that real time and game time are different: The mid-point of your adventure notes is probably not the midpoint of your session. In some RPGs combat can soak up a lot of time and in others a social encounter could last three times as long as a typical firefight; it all depends on the system and the dynamics of your group.

If you're running at a slower pace and you still wish to attain the original session goal then you can "trim the fat" by cutting out or narrating through certain encounters or scenes. If your group needs to get to the castle by nightfall then you can skip the orc ambush. If they need to get out of the corporate offices right that minute then the computer security system isn't as difficult to crack. To save time, you can identify such "optional scenes" before the session, so you can readily identify what to trim.

Conversely, if you're running at a faster pace and you don't want to extend past the original session goal then you have two choices. The first, obviously, is to end early. This doesn't have to be a hard end; the players could continue roleplaying or pursue a subplot in absence of the adventure proper moving forward. The second is to extend your material with optional encounters. A quick ambush is always a fun way to accomplish this. You may wish to keep a list of optional scenes on hand to introduce if necessary.

Fixing Your Script

As with battle plans, there is no adventure plot that can survive the game table. Players frequently approach adventure elements differently than you would and the dynamics of the game system may also push an adventure into unexpected territory. Here are a few situations in which you may feel you need to fix adventure issues:

- If the players have gone far afield of what you've prepared for them, then you'll either need to find a way to steer them back towards the session goal or identify a new session goal.
- You made a ruling on the spot, but after consulting the rulebook you now wish to change it.
- Your players have come up with more interesting avenues to pursue.
- You need to bring in a new PC.

A break is a great time to evaluate and implement any necessary changes before moving forward. In the first example, you may want to think of ways to gently persuade them to get back on course and implement them as soon as the players return from the break. Alternately, if you're rolling with the punches this is a good time to jot down two or three potential scenes (just quick notes at this point) based on where the PCs are going.

Documentary Reel—Convention Breaks

Convention games tend to be tightly run affairs—you only have a set block of time in which to complete a scenario, and oftentimes some of that time gets eaten up explaining character sheets and the basic rules. In the mad rush to accomplish everything, it's difficult to set aside time for breaks. Without such breaks, however, you run the risk of wasting more time, because players tend to walk away from tables at random.

One way to combat this is to schedule a break mid-event (or two, if it's six hours or more). Not only does this give everyone time to stretch their legs, go to the restroom, or get refreshments, but it also standardizes the time when the players leave the table, minimizing the chance that they'd leave the table during actual play. You'll never get 100% cooperation, of course, but having a break certainly cuts down on absent players during crucial scenes.

While I prided myself on building one in during my first convention event I ran, I still made the rookie mistake of not mentioning it when we got started. Without knowledge of an upcoming break, I had players leaping up from seats throughout the first half of that session (I didn't want to call them out as it was happening). Whether running at a con or in your home game, make sure the players know when you plan to break!

Example: The Enemy of My Enemy

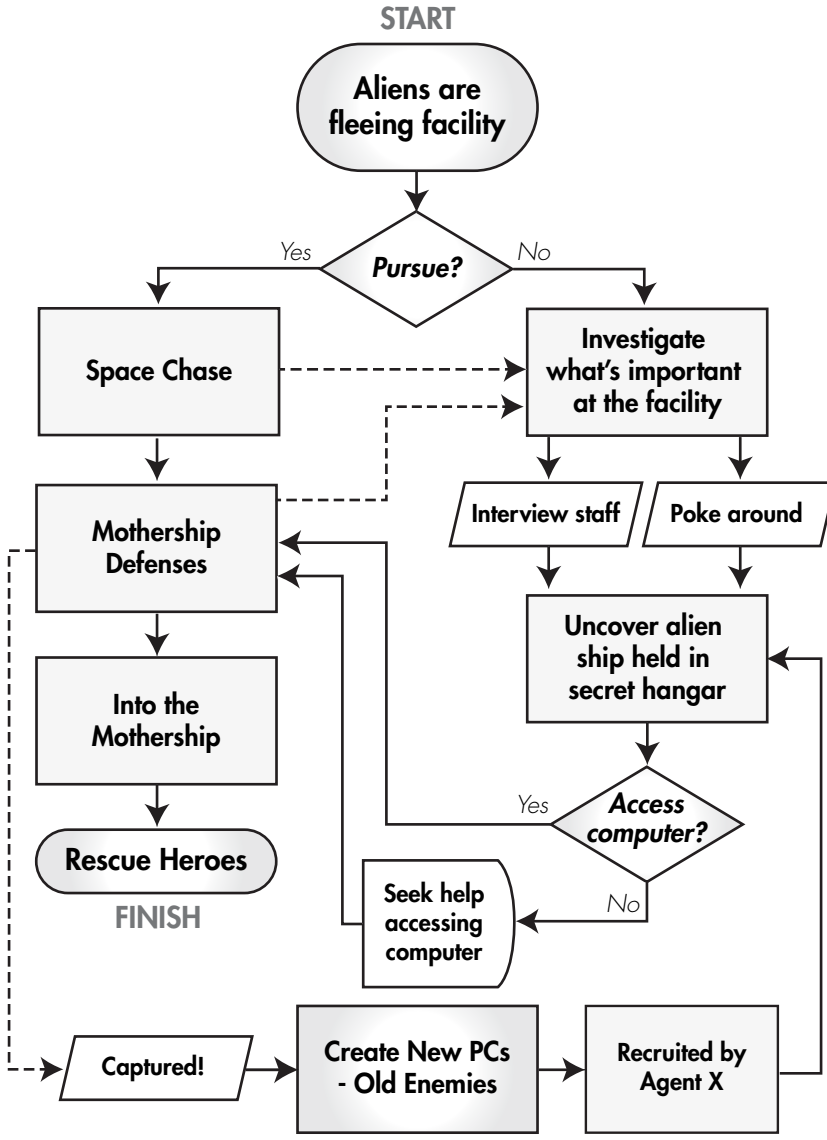
Returning to our superhero example, the GM has run into a problem. The PCs pursued the aliens into space but were completely unprepared for the mothership defenses; they were neutralized and captured in short order. Panicking, the GM called for a break.

While gathering her thoughts and nibbling on pizza, the GM came up with a great idea. The government needs someone to stop the aliens, especially now that the PCs are captured. They turn to the only people they can—former adversaries of the PCs. The government offers a clean slate (their crimes are forgiven) if they partake in the mission.

As her thoughts cascade, the GM decides not to use the villains that the PCs have previously encountered. Instead, she offers each player the opportunity to create an adversary from their hero's past and leaves the details up to them. In this way, the former adversaries provide some insight into the backgrounds of the heroes themselves.

When the break is over she pitches this to the players. Agent X is a government agent that has had run-ins with the PCs before; he's the perfect recruiter. Each player is excited to develop an adversary from the PCs' pasts. In one case it's an ex-partner, in another it's the catalyst that created the hero, and in the third it's a crazed killer

Figure E2



who has been locked up for almost a decade. The players spend the rest of the session designing their villains and are excited about the next session. As a final bonus, the GM offers them the opportunity to switch villains, so awesome roleplaying can be had when the villains meet the heroes.

The GM quickly amends her flowchart to note the changes. This new band will be taken to the government hangar and will use the alien ship to find the mothership.

Roll the Film!

This is one of the shorter chapters in this book, but in some ways it's among the most important chapters. Not only do breaks help keep your players focused and give you a breather every now and then, but they can also be real "session savers" when unexpected developments threaten to negatively impact a session. Being able to step out of the moment and take some time for reflection can really make a difference. I can't tell you how many of my adventures were saved because I was able to think for a moment rather than let something spiral out of control!

One caveat is to make sure that your breaks don't dominate the session. While short breaks are good, long breaks can make it difficult to get back into the game. This isn't as much of a problem if your primary reason for getting together is to socialize, but it makes it more difficult to keep the players engaged in what's happening at the table.

Now that we've made it through our lunch break, it's time to sprint towards the end of the session. This is covered in the next chapter, **The Final Shoot**.

Challenge—Achievement: Good Evaluation During Lunch Breaks

1. Add a break to your next session.
2. Adjust the schedule to meet your original session goal.
3. Add a soft scene to your session.
4. Eat beforehand; use your lunch break purely to prep the back end of the session.
5. Ask for feedback during your lunch break.
6. Let a mistake you made early in the session remain.

Gemma probably shouldn't have had that third slice of pepperoni and sausage pizza, but it felt good to take a break. Her players had noted all of the combat in the first part of the session, but she casually reassured them during the break that things would probably slow down for a bit. Renaldo was thankful for that; he hadn't had much of an opportunity to, as he put it, "roleplay."

After 20 minutes of munching pizza, downing sodas, and picking at cheese fries, Gemma called the group back to the session by playing the theme song again. As it faded out, she kicked things off with a short recap.

"Okay, you've gotten away from the octopus island and you're no longer threatened by the rival pirate ship. You're busy making minor repairs when one of the crew spots a small boat drifting in the water.

"I'm in the crow's nest," Adam said. "What do I see?"

Gemma had him make a Perception roll. Once he succeeded, she continued.

"You spot a rowboat floating in your direction. A young woman, fashionably dressed but with her clothes in tatters, lays unconscious within."

"Finally," Renaldo said, smiling, "someone to talk to rather than shoot at!"

"Assuming that she's still alive," Patti said. "In any case, there must be a ship nearby. Perhaps it has booty in it as well."

"I hop down from the crow's nest to get the crew ready for plunder, presuming that Renaldo can work his magic once we revive her."

"If a ship exists, Paolo's charm will coax that information out of her in no time," Renaldo said. Both Adam and Patti rolled their eyes.

Gemma smiled. There was a ship all right, and booty ready for the taking. There was also a band of weresharks laying in wait for them . . .

Chapter 12: The Final Shoot

Gemma panicked as she checked the clock. Adam was moving away after this session and Gemma really wanted to finish tonight. Unfortunately, the players had spent so much time grilling the castaway and ensuring that she wasn't a plant that they were only now heading to the lagoon where her ship was wrecked.

And Gemma had less than 30 minutes for them to explore, find the booty, face weresharks, and make it back to Port Royal with the Templar's treasure. So she did the only thing she could.

"Do you explore the shipwreck?"

"Obviously!" Patti said. "We'll drop a rowboat and head over to it."

"Umm, okay," Gemma said. She quickly narrated them through the various rolls to search the ship, including the submerged hold. Several Search, Swim, and Strength checks later they'd pulled a couple of chests up onto the top deck, where Renaldo used his Lockpicking skill to open them. They were rich!

"This seems a bit too easy," Adam said. "I look around for an ambush."

It was *too easy. Gemma had planned for the weresharks to attack while they were exploring the wreck, but she was out of time. She had pulled them from the adventure.*

"Nope, don't bother making a roll. You all get the treasure aboard your ship and sail back to Port Royal. Mission accomplished! I hope you enjoyed your last adventure with us, Adam!"

"I . . . I did," Adam said. He tried to sound convincing, but it didn't work.

Gemma read it in the others' faces. It was a disappointing end. After the thrill of the first half, the second half of the session was gobbled up by a social scene that ran way too long and the rewards, even after being paid by fighting pirate bands and giant crabs, just didn't feel earned. Adam's last campaign with the group ended not with a bang, but a fizzle.

Why is Finishing Strong Important?

Most sessions begin with players sitting around the table eager and ready to play. It's an unfortunate reality that, at least sometimes, much of this enthusiasm is sapped by the time the end of the session rolls around. There are many reasons for this, including fatigue, monotony, indecision, red herrings, being stumped—any of these things can cause a player to lose interest as the session rolls on.

This chapter focuses on keeping the momentum from the first part of the session going (or igniting it, if the first part fizzled) and ending strong. The trick is to make the players feel like they've accomplished something and make them want to return for more.

Toward that end we're going to look at listening to your players, maintaining focus, making (or not making) rules adjustments, and finishing at a good stopping point. Like using a shooting schedule on a film set, working through these elements will ensure that your session ends strong.

Listen to Your Players

I've found that it's important to listen to your players as much as, if not more than, they listen to you. Roleplaying is a collaborative process and input from your players is just as important as your adventure design. By listening to your players and responding to their concerns, you can really tighten up a session and make it sing.

For example, if your players have been grousing about something throughout the first part of a session, then you may wish to adjust it for the remainder of the session. It could be as simple as a player constantly failing skill rolls; offering more opportunities to successfully use his skills could make up for that. If the players are complaining that there isn't enough combat, then maybe it's time to have ninjas drop from the ceiling "just because." Conversely, if they're feeling beaten down by too many combat encounters, then you may want to dial them back for the remainder of the session.

Director's Notes—Twenty Minutes of Fun Can Make All the Difference

Ryan Dancey, game designer and principal architect of the Open Game License, once noted that game sessions sometimes consist of "20 minutes of fun packed in 4 hours." While I'd certainly beg to differ with that assumption, I do find it anecdotally true that the "fun bits" that players remember are often just a small percentage of what happened at the table, no doubt primarily because "that fight with the four-headed dragon was epic!" takes 10 seconds to say but could have taken an hour or two of real-time to play through.

With that in mind, a good finish can certainly wipe away any bitter tastes from the early part of a session. Maybe the investigation went just a little too long, but ending the night with an exciting car chase, with everyone taking pot shots at each other while racing through traffic, can help compensate for that. Perhaps a PC got bested by a rival early in the session, but she got to do something heroic later when the village was threatened. Perhaps a player was frustrated because you didn't implement the social challenge rules properly; a properly run court intrigue scene at the end can wipe that out.

In effect, the back end of a session is all about second chances. As noted in the previous chapter a quick break is often enough for you to recharge and refocus. Stray from the script a little and make sure that your back end has an exciting finish! As long as everyone at the table is having fun, you'll have time between sessions to adjust your plots accordingly.

If you hear the same concern more than once from a player, write it down in your session notes. This will give you a good checklist to glance at while running the rest of the session. As an example, we're going to return to *Journey to the Goblin Cave* and look at the notes scrawled by the GM. The notes above "BREAKTIME" are her observations; the notes below are her implementations.

Figure F1

Journey to the Goblin Cave

Scene 1 – Attack on the Caravan!

- Fiona noted that no one had tracking - I allowed Wilderness Lore Instead

Scene 2 – Following the Trail

- Trent is getting tired of fights - his healer isn't suited for them

Scene 3 – Dire Wolf Ambush

- Marta is complaining about the linear plot

BREAKTIME!!!

Scene 4 – A Villager in Peril

- This should ameliorate Marta's concerns - different methods of entry offered

(Scene A – Advance Patrol Ambush)

- Trent is perceptive - maybe he could notice the patrol so the group can prepare/avoid them?

Scene 5 – Cave Entrance Guardians

Keeping Focused



When you're in the latter part of a session, it's important to build to a climax. It may not be the end of the adventure or even a pivotal moment, but it should be a goal that provides the players with a sense of accomplishment and/or excitement for the next session. Building and keeping momentum is critical in this phase.

Here are a few ways to keep the momentum going:

- **Don't get side-tracked**—If a minor encounter threatens to explode, consider nipping it in the bud and moving along, *unless* the unexpected explosion is providing a lot of entertainment and can bring the session to a satisfactory conclusion.
- **Don't let intra-party squabbling build too much during this part of the adventure**—While such scenes can be fun, they can also lead to frustration, bad blood, and the premature exit of PCs.
- **Don't let small encounters take up too much time**—If you want to build to a climax but you realize that the kobold attack is going to eat up too much time, have them flee once a couple of them are killed, or "downgrade" their health scores behind the scenes.
- **Don't let a player side-quest his way into eating up time**—Keeping the group together is often better than allowing one player to hog the spotlight for an hour. If the PC really must go off on his own, ask the player what he hopes to accomplish, come up with an appropriate skill roll and difficulty, let him make the roll, and come back to the party. Oftentimes the player will retract the request once he realizes that it isn't going to be played out.
- **Cut the extra scenes**—You've probably done this already, but sometimes you'll still need to trim on the fly.

All of these tips boil down to one simple rule: Do whatever you can to sprint towards the goal and don't let minutiae bog you down.

Rules Adjustments

We're all human (well, unless you're running your game in Gondor or Mos Eisley) and as such we all make mistakes. No matter how much you prepare or how well you know the rules, you're going to trip up at some point. You forget when a modifier applies, you misread a power description, or you call for the wrong type of skill check. When that happens, the outcome of a particular situation may be different because of your mistake.

When that happens, don't panic. Part of being a GM is making rulings, and provided that the scene played fairly (if not accurately as far as the system is concerned) then you probably don't need to fix things beyond implementing the rule properly the next time around. There are, however, a few cases when you may wish to do something a bit more substantial:

- The PCs have been doing something that the rules as written wouldn't allow them to do.
- The rule makes something more difficult for the PCs
- The rules would harm the pace of the adventure
- The PCs are suffering from the effects of the improper rule.

In most cases, keeping your initial ruling intact is probably enough to fix the issue until it can properly be addressed for the next session. If things went drastically off course because of the ruling, then you may wish to consider a reshoot (see the **Reshooting?** sidebar).

Figure F2 is an example of a GM considering rules changes for the second part of her session. In this case, it's the first half of the same scenario used for Figure F1. In fact, you may notice in the latter that a rules adjustment has already popped up—the GM didn't notice that no PC had the Tracking skill and it was pretty crucial to continuing the adventure. In this case, the GM realizes that she needs to keep using the substitute skill until at least the end of the session, and likely until the end of the adventure.

Figure F2

Journey to the Goblin Cave

- No one had the Tracking skill – keep allowing them to use Wilderness Lore for now; stress importance of skill next time I hand out XP
- Forgot to add modifiers for "ganging" up during Dire Wolf ambush – see pXXX next combat
- Difficult to keep track of everyone's modifiers – need to have everyone state them before making a roll.
- Used Surprise incorrectly – pYYY

There are three other rules notes in Figure F2. The first and third, forgetting circumstantial rules or misapplying a rule, are common and easily fixed. Generally it's best to move on and properly use them next time rather than do a reshoot.

The second is most often a problem in math-heavy games: Sometimes there are so many modifiers to keep track of that players simply forget or misapply them. It can also be difficult to determine whether a particular roll was actually successful or not when the affected player is juggling four or five modifiers in his head.

Reshooting?

One of the reasons to stress "rulings, not rules" is to avoid the need for reshooting, or rewinding the game so that a key scene can be replayed. (This is sometimes also called *retconning*, which is short for "retroactive continuity.") Roleplaying sessions often have elements of exploration, and once you've pulled the curtain back on certain scenes it's impossible for the players to conveniently forget them when rewinding and moving through them a second time. Thus, reshooting is generally an inferior option in the GM's tool belt.

Whenever a misunderstanding causes a scene to go in a different direction than if the rules had been properly applied, ask yourself if you adjudicated it fairly regardless. If so, then you generally don't need to rewind the scene. If necessary, rationalize why the scene played out the way it did (the wizard was distracted from casting a useful spell, the starfighter's guns jammed, etc).

In other cases, it's sufficient to adjust the consequences of the affected scene rather than rewrite it. If it caused a PC death then he miraculously recovers. Perhaps one character only dreamt that the scene occurred or idly mused about how an encounter with an NPC would go; now you can "reshoot" the scene without actually reshooting it!

Finish, Don't Cut

A final point to remember about keeping the momentum going is to finish, rather than cut, your session. While it's great to get the most out of your sessions, you don't necessarily need to end at 11:00 p.m. because you'd decided that the session ran from 7:00 p.m. - 11:00 p.m. If the session goal can be accomplished by 10:20 p.m., then it's better to end early than stretch things out by starting the next phase and using up some of the excitement that's best saved for the beginning of the next session.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Similarly, if it looks like your session goal is moving out of reach then you may have to reassess your goal. Can you finish within a few minutes after your normal quitting time? If so, then you may be better off asking for the group's indulgence rather than cutting the session short. If not, then you may wish to establish a new goalpost (using an earlier exciting encounter) and finish a few minutes early rather than push on to the time limit.

Roll the Film!

In sum, once you've crested the midpoint of the session you should ride the momentum towards the goal, whatever you determine that to be. Don't get hung up on the small stuff, like rules implementations or less-than-perfect scenes. Don't allow yourself to get side-tracked or unfocused. Do help your players move forward and don't be afraid to let them dictate where that end point is—after all, you want them to be excited to come back next session, and nothing does that better than giving them control of their own destiny.

Congratulations! You've shepherded the rules through your session from start to finish! Now it's time to evaluate your session, which we'll talk about in the next chapter.

Documentary Reel—The Weak Reshoot

I was once running a modern-day occult investigative campaign where most of the PCs had magical abilities. Only one did not, and his player made it a point of pride that he was the "Zeppo" (with apologies to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) of the group. One of the things he did believe he excelled at, though, was being the shoulder to cry on and offering advice.

His moment to shine came during the front end of one session when a troubled NPC gave him a call. As was typical for this group dynamic we tended to roleplay rather than roll during social scenes unless we felt the situation really called for it, and there was nothing here that the NPC was looking for beyond advice or reassurance. For whatever reason, the player's head wasn't in the game and his roleplaying was flat and uninspired. The NPC thanked him and hung up.

While I didn't think of it as more than an inconsequential scene and quickly moved on, my player was absolutely devastated. He felt that the scene basically defined his role and purpose for being in the group and he came up lacking. When we took a break he took me aside and begged me to rerun the scene. I found his request odd in that my group as a whole disliked rewrites, but he was so passionate about it that I agreed to put it to the group.

When we returned from the break, I asked the other players if it was okay, as the rewrite might have influenced a subsequent scene. The other players allowed it and we played through it once more. Unfortunately, the replayed scene was only moderately better than the first and, while the player got the result he wanted this time, it really didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

In hindsight, I probably should have simply called for a social roll and then played the NPC from that point forward as if she'd gotten good advice and reassurance from the PC (e.g., "Thank you for the advice, it really helped. Because of it I decided to . . ."). It would have done the same job without wasting session time to make a relatively minor change.

Challenge—Achievement: Ending Strong

1. Cut out all soft scenes, even if it means ending really early.
2. Rewrite a scene and compare outcomes. Was it worth running again?
3. Make a list of any player gripes you hear during the beginning of the session. Implement a solution for each one on the back end.
4. Have a player handle rules questions.
5. Force the group to stay together for an entire session by converting all side quests into single-roll challenges.
6. Keep track of how long in real time a player eats up doing things outside the group.

"Gone—gone now—sank—terrible—creatures!"

With the party being so cautious that they'd eaten up more time than planned, Gemma improvised. She described the castaway falling in and out of consciousness, offering only vague hints and warnings. She knew that the party didn't have time to go to the ship, so she decided to bring the fight to them, instead of waiting for them to encounter the weresharks.

"She's delirious," Renaldo said.

"No matter," Patti said. "We need to get back to Port Royal."

"I agree," Adam said. "Perhaps the woman has a family willing to grant us a reward for rescuing her."

Patti said, "Rescuing her from what, I wonder?"

Gemma simply smiled and told them that a storm was coming. Patti ordered the crew to drop anchor to wait it out. Of course, dropping that anchor provided a convenient way for the weresharks to scale the hull and get inside the boat. She tried not to chuckle as the group unwittingly played right into her hands. The three pirates were about to get the fight of their lives . . .

Chapter 13: That's a Wrap!

"Wow, that was epic!" Patti said as Gemma turned off her laptop and gathered her notes.

"That's easy for you to say," Renaldo said, laughing. "You are the last one standing!"

"Hey, with Paolos' dying breath he lit the powder kegs in the hull that blasted the remainder of the weresharks!" Adam said. "I'm the one that went down like a punk!"

Patti giggled. "You did gut two of them before the third one bit your head off."

"I'm really going to miss you, Adam," Gemma said. It wasn't truly the end, of course. Adam was still going to play remotely, but the group said goodbyes anyway.

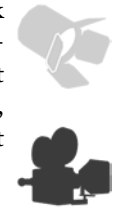
"Well, I guess that's it then," Adam said as he grabbed his coat. "At least until next week, when I'm playing via webcam!"

Gemma chuckled as everyone left. In spite of Adam leaving she still had a new campaign to plan. Unfortunately, she'd forgotten to get feedback on exactly what that campaign should be. She hadn't bothered to ask if they wanted to stick with the pirate theme and, if so, what they enjoyed and what they thought could use polishing. She sighed as she prepared to send out an email to solicit her players' feedback. It just wouldn't be the same . . .

Why is Getting Feedback Important?

The common denominator for any gamer is whether she is having fun. Players and GMs derive enjoyment from participating in a game session; while a fun session is a worthy reward in and of itself, it's valuable to know what made that session so enjoyable or, conversely, what factors inhibited that enjoyment.

In this sense both positive and negative feedback is important. Positive feedback tells you what's working and what you should be doing more of in following sessions. It may also tell you what plot elements and questions the players are most interested in following up on as the adventure or campaign progresses. Finally, positive feedback is good for a GM's ego: We like hearing good things about what we do!



Negative feedback generally addresses one of two things: the absence of something a player likes or the presence of something he doesn't like. The first simply denotes that there was something missing from a session that the player would have liked to see. For example, "The whole session was combat—we didn't get to do any roleplaying!" It could also be something that was downplayed; for example, you may have rushed through a combat scene before the players were ready to leave it. This kind of feedback is important, but doesn't signal major problems with the game—and it's easy for you to address in future sessions.

The second type tends to be about more serious problems—things the players don't want to see again in the game. Gaping plot holes, railroading, issues with someone else at the table, heavy-handed GMing, and uncomfortable roleplaying scenes are all examples of this type of negative feedback.

Director's Notes—Do You Really Want Criticism?

This is an interesting chapter to write because there's a dirty little secret underlying feedback: Not all GMs want criticism. We definitely want feedback, but we tend to prefer it in the form of accolades, or at least affirmation. We don't want a laundry list of negative feedback. Still, good feedback needs to include negative comments if it's going to help us improve our GMing.

That said, being a GM can sometimes feel like a thankless job. We tend to put more hours into thinking about the game and planning for the sessions, and we often invest the most money in products. It's difficult to hear criticism from someone that really only thinks about the game from the time she arrives to the time she leaves. Unfortunately, that's *exactly* who we need to hear from, because all of our time and energy has been invested in creating a fun environment for everyone at the table—including her. If we aren't doing that, then we're kidding ourselves.

One way to combat this is to avoid open questions ("What did you think of that session?") in favor of asking each player to identify one thing he enjoyed and one thing he felt could use improvement. This will ensure that you receive some affirmation, which can be a great motivator, as well as some valuable insights into how to hone your skills.

When to Get Feedback

Feedback is traditionally gathered at the end of a session, and even in our increasingly technological present that's still generally the best time. The players' memories are fresh and you haven't put in any time preparing for the next session. If you want the rawest, most honest opinions, this is the time to solicit them.

Artist: Matt Morrow

On the flipside, the end of a session can be a time of exhausted euphoria, especially if your session ends late into the evening. The players are ready to pack their things and go, and your requests for feedback may fall on deaf ears. The players generally presume that you're looking for accolades. "It was fun" is a stock answer, and it can be as damning with faint praise as saying that your last date "had a great personality." You may wish to employ directed feedback (see below) to get more useful answers.

Alternately, you may wish to gather feedback at other times. Email, texting, telephone calls, and meeting outside the game are all good ways to get feedback and often make the best use of directed feedback. Conversely, these methods mean that you may not get the feedback that you're looking for in time for the planning of the next session.

Lunch breaks mid-session can be great times to get feedback because you have a chance to make changes to the rest of the session to help things go more smoothly. Fair warning: You need to be strong for this, as getting strong negative feedback mid-session can demoralize you for the rest of the night.

I'd caution against getting feedback during the social hour before the game. Not only does the same potential for getting demoralized exist as with lunch break feedback, but you might also inadvertently be setting false expectations in your players' minds that you'll employ the feedback immediately. For example, if you've planned a session of political intrigue then getting the feedback "There wasn't enough combat last time" just before the game might cause problems.

Indirect Feedback

While the advice in this chapter is aimed at direct feedback, the kind you request, indirect feedback can be just as important. You gather indirect feedback instinctively, by judging the reactions of your players as you run the game. A bored stare or a leafing through a rulebook can speak volumes. Ditto for engaged excitement about what's unfolding at the table. You can learn a lot just by being observant.

What's important to remember is that indirect feedback is just as vulnerable to bellyaching as direct feedback. Don't judge your current scene by a player's frustrated stare if the dice had just gone against her for the third time in a row. Similarly, some players get anxious to "hurry things up" when experience points are on the horizon and they just want to acquire a new ability for their characters. Indirect feedback is a useful tool, but only if you know how to gauge it correctly.

Directed Feedback

Instead of asking a big open-ended question—"So what did you think of tonight's game?"—try asking direct questions that highlight the areas where you really want feedback. Not only will you get better feedback, but it provides some insulation from hurt feelings.

Here are a few examples of directed questions:

- How difficult was tonight's mystery? Did the clues make sense?
- What did you think of the villain's motivation?
- How well do you think you operated as a group?
- Are there any rules that got in your way or that we need to pay more attention to next time?
- What did you think of tonight's plot twist?
- Are there any lingering plot threads that you want to pull?

I usually combine directed questions with a general question at the end, just to let players tell me anything else that may be of value to me. This even helps with negative feedback, as the responses to my directed questions often soften me up to hear the rest of the bad news.

Another benefit of directed feedback is that it can take some of the sting out of a bad session. By asking probing questions, you're telling your players that you recognize that there were issues and you're going to fix them.

Parsing Bellyaching

One thing to remember about feedback is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If something personally upset a player then it's going to shape how she viewed the entire session. That doesn't mean her points aren't valid, but they should be viewed through the appropriate lens.

For example, one player may be particularly agitated and frustrated due to his character's lack of effectiveness in combat (or worse, his character's death). While his opinion is definitely colored by that experience, it doesn't invalidate his feedback that the combats are too challenging. What it does require you to do is dig a little deeper for additional details.

Did you misjudge the challenge level? Did the players use an appropriate tactical approach? Were there potential avenues to try or weaknesses to exploit that the group just failed to capitalize on? Or does the player just loathe combat scenes? Finding out will help you decide how to react to that feedback.

Documentary Reel—You're Playing a *What*?

Many moons ago I was invited to play in a medieval fantasy campaign. I'd asked the GM what the group needed and he replied with a spellcaster. I agreed and immediately set to drawing up a necromancer. I'd poured on the horror tropes and made him really stand out as somebody who would send shivers down someone's spine just for being near him. In addition, I concentrated on mind control, necromantic, and ritual magic. I couldn't wait to play!

When we started the session, the GM had me introduce myself. I could see the panic in his eyes as I began describing my character and his capabilities. He'd envisioned that I'd play a more "wizardly" type with offensive and defensive spells, not a half-crazed ritualist. I had more in common with the group's adversaries than I did with the PCs, and some of them thought I was a plant. Needless to say, my character didn't last long.

The GM's biggest problem in this case is that he didn't keep tabs on what I was doing. (I could also have helped by running my concept by him first.) It was no different than a fantasy character switching careers mid-campaign or bringing in a new type of character that short-circuits the main plots. Had he kept in touch with me I likely would have arrived at the game with a flashier wizard in tow.

Feedback and Character Advancement

Another great opportunity for feedback is character advancement. In games where the players spend experience (or some other mechanical currency) to enhance their characters, they typically make those "purchases" as soon as they get the experience. I can't tell you how many sessions I've run that fell apart because I overlooked a new psychic ability or spell in the hands of a character or, worse, a new direction in a character concept. There will be players that prefer to think about their choices a bit longer, but you can always set an appropriate grace period. If the player doesn't get back to you by then, her character simply can't spend the points until after the following session.

Character advancement is also a good opportunity to link the player to the ongoing campaign. A question like "How has this adventure impacted your advancement choices this time around" will let you find out if the adventure made a difference in the character's life. If the answer is "Yes," then that's a powerful statement. If the answer is "Not much," then you've gotten some good indirect negative feedback. (Fair warning: Some players are very mechanically minded when it comes to building their PCs and no adventure, no matter how much they enjoyed it, is going to affect the advancement choices they make.)

Roll the Film!

Obviously, the importance of feedback is to gather notes and tips that you can use for your next session. In this case, negative feedback can often be more valuable than positive feedback, as you don't want to go down a path that wasn't enjoyable for everyone the last time around.

More important than gathering feedback, however, is implementing it. If your players have provided feedback at all, positive or negative, it's because they want to make the most of the game. Take it all in stride and use it to craft a better session the next time around. Your players certainly want their opinions to matter; if you address their points, then you're showing them that their opinions matter.

Lastly, keep in mind that you won't be able to satisfy every opinion. Sometimes a player's wants or needs are simply out of step with the rest of the group and/or campaign. That's perfectly okay; all games are compromises, and some fit some players better than others. In such cases, it's best to be up front with the player as to why you understand her point, but you can't implement a change in her favor because it would negatively impact the table. This can be tough, but it's much worse to pretend to listen and then sweep it under the rug.

Congratulations! You've made it from script to wrap-up. Hopefully you've learned some things that will help you improve your GMing and your campaigns. Now get shooting!

Challenge—Achievement: Getting Useful Feedback

1. At the end of the session, ask your players for only negative feedback.
2. At the end of the session, have your players ask you directed questions.
3. Ask each player for feedback individually. Does it change from when you ask together?
4. Send a list of directed questions to the players after the session.
5. Design a series of encounters; have each one address the negative feedback from a different player.
6. Ask for feedback in the middle of a session and again at the end. How did the feedback differ overall?

Gemma said, "So Red Kate and the castaway row into Port Royal with the treasure and the credits roll."

"Nice," Patti said, smiling.

"Okay, guys," Gemma said, "before we say goodbye to Adam, do you want to continue with the pirate campaign or should we try something else?

"I think with Adam leaving it's a good time to wrap this and start something fresh," Renaldo said.

Patti nodded. "I agree. Adam wanted to try space opera, and he's playing via remote now. It kinda fits the theme."

"Definitely," Adam said.

"Okay, then. Space opera it is," Gemma said, smiling. "Now, can each of you give me one thing that you really liked and one thing that you thought needed improvement in this last session?"

"Sure," Adam said. "I'll go first . . ."

Artist: Matt Morrow

Artist: Avery Liell-Kok

Chapter 14: Quiet on the Set

The three agents sat at the briefing table while their handler, Agent G, gave them the mission briefing.

"Agents, this mission is critical for national security. You are to locate and arrest this man: Sebastian Sorrow, a known arms dealer here in the U.S. on business. He is staying at the—"

"Oh man that's funny. Look at this," said Agent Stone as he passed his phone over to Agent Remo, who laughed in agreement. They stopped when they saw Agent G glaring at them.

"Oh, sorry," Stone said, slowly lowering his phone.

Agent G continued, "Sorrow is staying at the Remington Hotel on Steele Street, in the penthouse suite. He is expected to be there for the—" Another smart phone vibrated loudly on the table.

Agent Sylk picked up the phone and rolled her eyes, and then began typing out a message. "Sorry, it's my Mom, she wants me to bring home some milk."

"Come on, guys!" Gemma said, slamming her hands on the table. "You guys aren't paying attention. Are you sure you want to be doing this tonight?"

Patty slowly put her phone in the bag at her feet. Renaldo slid his phone back into the pocket of his jeans. The smile on Adam's face faded away.

The three apologized and sat up straight in their chairs. The three agents returned their attention to their handler, and Gemma took a deep breath and started again.

"Sorrow will be at the Remington through the weekend."

Why Distractions Matter

A good night of gaming requires that everyone be present not just physically (or virtually, if that's how you play), but mentally. Playing an RPG, even with a battle mat and miniatures to keep things straight, still requires a significant amount of mental processing to imagine the scene, think in-character, and comprehend and use the rules.

When a player becomes distracted and his mind wanders, he can overlook a key clue, misunderstand a situation, or forget what's going on in the game. This often leads to the GM having to stop and repeat information, which can break the dramatic tension or slow the overall progress of the session.

There are numerous reasons why a player may get distracted, and many of them can be controlled or at least mitigated. In your role as facilitator of the game, you should be aware of distracted players and bring them back into the fold. In some cases a nudge is all that's required, but sometimes you might need to take more drastic measures and create some table rules to help everyone stay focused.

Players aren't the only ones to blame, either—GMs get distracted, too! A buzzing smart phone behind your GMing screen or an instant message on your laptop can make you lose your focus in the middle of a session. When the focus shifts to the players, such as while the PCs are making plans, it's even easier for you to get distracted.

Whenever anyone at the table, player or GM, isn't up to speed on what's going on in the game, it can lead to a variety of problems. Let's talk about three of the bigger ones.

What's Going On?

The most important reason that you need to keep the focus on the table during play is to keep everyone on the same page story-wise. A player's ability to contribute to the overall story is going to heavily rely on her staying in sync with the other players and GM. When the player's mind drifts she runs the risk of falling out of sync with the rest of the group.

This often manifests itself when a player hesitates when his turn comes around, trying to recall what just happened in the game. Sometimes the player might subconsciously have picked up on what was going on and, after a few moments, will jump right back in. But if not, he'll make a move that seems ridiculous or bizarre because he's acting on old or incorrect information. He might attack an NPC who just surrendered, or may start talking to the prince after missing that the prince just left the room. This forces a pause while you and the other players update him and then wait for him to take appropriate action.

Then there are times when a player is totally lost and has to ask someone to recap what just happened. This also halts the game, as you have to rewind and either replay the previous exchange or summarize the current scene for the player. When this occurs, you run the risk of losing the attention of the other, more attentive players, who don't need to hear the recap, further perpetuating the problem.

Grogar, Can You Put Down the Phone?

For groups who play in a deeply immersive style, distractions—especially things that cannot be accounted for the in game world, such as smart phones—cause players to break immersion and converse player-to-player. Good players and GMs can try to nudge someone into paying attention without breaking immersion, but even then it doesn't always work.

Getting into character takes a few minutes of mental effort and having to break character and then get back into character will slow down the game. This has a ripple effect, too: The other players have to get back into character as well, and everyone has to get in sync again.

Worse still, oftentimes when one player breaks character it triggers a chain reaction and everyone breaks character, bringing the scene to a halt. This can then lead to a break in the game, which isn't always desirable (especially if you're on a tight schedule). After the break, additional energy and time are required to bring everyone back to the table, start playing, and get back into character.

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

Yeah, Yeah . . . I Am Playing

Everyone who shows up to game is there for just that: to game. They've made a commitment to one another to show up at a set time and to play the game to the best of their abilities. They've accepted the shared responsibility of helping to provide an entertaining evening for everyone present. When a member of the group becomes distracted or unfocused by letting something outside the game encroach on the game, it's disrespectful to everyone else at the table.

Much to our detriment, we've become conditioned to accept a certain amount of distractedness from others, as we see people on their smart phones at meetings, in restaurants, or even driving. Many of us aren't just seeing it, either: We're guilty of checking our phone while talking to someone else, and the like. We've become accustomed to, and forgiving of, a low-level disrespect from others. This acclimation has made it that much harder for people to remain focused during play.

Why Our Attention Strays

Distracted players are nothing new, but while this problem has existing as long as the roleplaying hobby it's become more prevalent and pervasive with the arrival of laptops, tablets, and smart phones. Where your main concern in the past might have been a player losing attention while flipping through a supplement or a copy of *Dragon Magazine*®, now players are assailed by text messages, friend requests, status updates, and torrents of email.

Just what kinds of things cause us to lose focus with the game? Let's look at some of the most common reasons a player›s or GM's attention can falter.

It's Not Them . . . It's You

Let's get the hardest one out of the way first: Sometimes players lose focus on the game because the GM is doing a sub-par job that evening. It could be that your delivery of the material is flat and uninspired, or it could be that the adventure you're running has failed to connect to the players on an emotional level. Regardless, in this case the blame falls on your shoulders.

It can be difficult to monitor your own performance as a GM, but you do need to read the table and see if the players are still engaged. Engaged players are paying attention and are focused on the action that's currently unfolding, whatever that might be. Unengaged players are reading books, messing with their dice, checking their phones, or otherwise not focused on in-game events.

Sometimes you know when you're having a bad night, perhaps because of something that happened at work or because you're under the weather. If you sense your players' attention is fading then you need to take action to bring them back. Often to get them back you need to up your own game. Consider either using **Loud Voices** (see **Getting Attention Back**, below), to change up your delivery and pace, or just **Calling It** if you cannot seem to find a way to inject new energy into your delivery.

Fatigue

There are times when physical factors like hunger, lack of sleep, mental stress, or the onset of an illness can cause a person's focus to waver. A person who is feeling fatigue is not going to have the same mental acuity as someone who is relaxed and well rested. In times like these, **Taking a Break** or **Calling It** are the best ways to regain focus.

Story Pace and Flow

Often players start to disengage when the story bogs down, and this can usually be traced back to you, the GM, or what you prepped for the session. It's possible that you've created a problem that's too difficult to solve or stymied an investigation by allowing players to fail a check for a key clue. Or you may have presented a situation that requires extensive player planning, which always slows down the pace of the game.

When a story is well-paced and interesting it commands our attention, even to the point of shutting out everything around us. We've all had those moments in a game where we stop seeing the players and just see their characters. When a story goes too slow or it fails to engage us emotionally we become hyper-aware of everything else around us and distractions come out of the woodwork.

If you realize that the story is plodding along, then you need to make some corrections to speed it back up to recapture your players' attention. Consider **Ninjas Bust Through the Door** to add an element of unexpected action, or **Fast Forward Button** to speed up the conclusion of the current scene and get into the next (and hopefully more interesting) scene.

Moving the Spotlight Around

It's unrealistic to think that every scene can put the spotlight on every character. More often than not what winds up happening is that the spotlight gets stuck on a single PC because of the way the scene developed—which is great for you and that player, but leaves everyone else out.

While players will stay focused on the game when they're not in the spotlight, they usually won't do so indefinitely. If you lose focus and get caught up in a scene, or if an individual scene is followed by *more* individual scenes, eventually virtually every player's attention will drift. After all, they're not called "watchers"—they're called *players*, and they're here to play.

When you are running scenes where the spotlight is on one player, or just a portion of the group, you need to aggressively move the spotlight around from player to player. This will often require you to juggle several mini-scenes at the same time. Run one scene until you can find a logical gap and then quickly cut to the next player, and the next, until you have come around back to the first player. Do this until you have resolved all the mini-scenes and you can return the group into a single scene.

Splitting the party is the most common cause of this sort of divided spotlight. Often a plan will require the players to split up and perform two different tasks at the same time. By aggressively switching between the two subgroups, even if you're in the middle of one or more separate combats, you will help every player stay focused by setting the expectation that their turn will be coming up shortly.

Gadgets

It's impossible to talk about focus and attention without talking about portable electronics at the gaming table. Some items, such as phones, may not be necessary to the game and can be silenced or put away. Others, such as tablets and laptops, may be tools for the game as they can contain character sheets, digital copies of books, or other reference material. These devices all have connectivity and the ability to multitask, so while there's a great game use there are also a myriad of non-game uses, from status updates to email to browsing online.

Much of the GM advice I've seen regarding this topic calls for banning devices at the table, or for setting restrictions like using "airplane" mode to prevent email and other notifications from distracting players. In my experience, though, gadgets are only a distraction for a small percentage of players—generally the ones who can't get away from their gadgets no matter what the situation. Everyone's group is different, though—your group might run most smoothly with a few ground rules.

For most players, checking their device(s) is a symptom of boredom, fatigue, or other problems noted in this section. If you see someone checking their phone who doesn't usually take it out during the game, and it's not an emergency, consider what might be causing his attention to drift and take appropriate action.

References at the Table

Another distraction which can crop up is the presence of game supplements and other reference material at the table. Like digital gadgets, it's rare for supplements to be a primary source of distraction. Usually a distracted player will be drawn to flipping through books because that's less rude than pulling out her smart phone.

It's best to simply avoid leaving a library of supplements on the table during the game, unless they're needed for actual in-play reference. If they're not needed in play, gather them up and put them to the side—where they're always available to flip through during breaks.

Where You Game

The place where you game is another source of potential distractions. If you're at a convention or in another public setting, distractions abound: other people talking around you, people walking by, and ambient noise, among others. Even in more private settings, kids, spouses, and pets can distract the group from the game at hand.

When you pick a location to game, try to scout it out and get a feel for how busy the area around your gaming space will be. Ideally, find a room or alcove that provides more privacy. When that isn't possible, then look for the least noisy area in the space available and position yourself there.

In some situations, especially in convention games, there may not be a way to control where you play or how much ambient noise surrounds your table. When this happens, you need to use **Loud Voices** and make sure you're heard.

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

Getting Attention Back

It's almost inevitable that, at least once during the average session, someone at the table will lose focus on the game. When that happens, you have a number of tools at your disposal for bringing back their attention. Here are some of the best options:

- **The Nudge**—A small vocal prompt (my favorite being "Pssst") that reminds the player to return his attention to the table. The Nudge works best when the rest of the table is paying attention and you have one straggler.
- **Silence is Golden**—Stop talking. As the GM, when you stop talking it takes just a few moments for the rest of the table to notice. Once everyone has stopped talking, ask if they're ready to start again. (If they're not, it's probably a good time to **Take a Break**.) This technique is best applied when the majority of the table has lost focus and is a good way to bring them all back at once.

- **Loud Voices**—Speak up. Raise the volume of your voice, or have an NPC make a sudden outburst. There's a reason why there's cannon fire in the 1812 Overture—be the cannon. This technique works best when the lack of focus was caused by your delivery. It will get attention without breaking immersion.
- **Ninjas Bust Through the Door**—With credit to Fred Hicks and Rob Donoghue of Evil Hat Productions, from whom I learned this technique, have someone kick in a door and start shooting. Nothing gets the players' attention like an immediate threat. This technique is best applied when you realize you have been having a story pace or flow issue.
- **Fast Forward Button**—Sometimes a scene just isn't working, or is taking too long. In either case it may be time to get the scene over with and move to the next scene. You can trigger this by switching to a more narrative mode, summarizing the remaining part of the scene, and asking if anyone else wants to do anything before moving on. Then move into the next scene.
- **Take a Break**—Take five. Stretch your legs. Get a coffee. After a long stretch of gaming, it helps to take a break and move around. Use the break to socialize, talk about what just happened in the game, share a funny video, or otherwise relax. This is a good solution for when fatigue has set in.
- **Call It**—Sometimes a break won't cut it: You just need to stop playing and pick things up next session. If it's early in the night, consider using the extra time for some socialization or some casual gaming.

Ways to Hold Attention

While you can never hope to retain 100% attention, here are some good techniques for proactively holding your players' attention:

1. **Location, location, location**—If it's under your control, you should find a gaming location that has the fewest possible distractions.
2. **Social contract**—Depending on your group, a few rules about devices at the table, use of reference material, and what level of side talk will be tolerated can go a long way to mitigate issues.
3. **The list**—When someone suddenly remembers something they wanted to tell the group, write it down. Create one master list, or have every player keep her own. Then when you have a break, or at the end of the game, you can share the stuff on your list. This alleviates the need to blurt things out, because you know you won't forget what you wanted to say.
4. **A symbol**—Choose an interesting object and set the rule that when that object is placed on the table, the game starts and the socialization stops. (For more on this technique, visit Gnome Stew: www.gnomestew.com/gming-advice/keeping-the-focus.)

5. **Warm-up period**—Start your game with some friendly banter and socializing as you're setting up. Give everyone a chance to talk about what's going on in their lives before you jump into the game.
6. **Pre-game activity**—Take part in a shared activity before you game: have dinner at a restaurant, play a board game, or do something else that everyone enjoys. Like a warm-up period, this provides a venue to socialize and chat before heading to the gaming table.

Challenge—Achievement: All Eyes on Me

1. Play one entire session with no phones at the table.
2. Split the party and use aggressive cutting to keep everyone focused.
3. Use **Ninjas Bust Through the Door** during a session.
4. Speed up a scene that you see is dragging by summing it up and moving to the next scene.
5. Run a scene composed of individual sub-scenes and move the spotlight around to help everyone stay focused.
6. Have a discussion out of game and establish some rules for managing the biggest distractions at your table.

Personal Story: The Field of Battle

Recently I was running a convention game at a local venue—a college. Space was somewhat limited and the gaming tables were located in the main hall, adjacent to the boffer weapon fighting arena. When I sat down to run the game, the boffer warriors were fighting one-on-one. It was a minor distraction, but one that was easily overcome by raising my voice and making frequent eye contact with my players.

But as the session reached its climax, so did the boffer fighting: They divided into two teams and had a battle royal. In the middle of the large combat I was GMing, two armies of college students with foam weapons and homemade armor were warring with loud abandon. I stood up at the table and raised my voice to stay above the noise of the battle raging next to me.

I managed to keep the table focused on me until the boffer fighters began to crash into the line of chairs that separated their field of battle from the RPG tables. I took it in stride and began to describe the battle the characters were facing, pulling descriptions from the actual battle that now surrounded us—the clash of weapons, the sound of feet scuffling.

I managed to hold my players' attention through the climax and, after the boffer fighters went on break, delivered the conclusion of the session to great satisfaction. I also left the convention organizers a note about trying to find an alternate location for the RPG events next year. . .

There was a knock at the door. "Come on in," Gemma said. Patty came in as Gemma was rolling into the living room to meet her.

Gemma said, "Are you ready for tonight?"

"Sure am," Patti said. "I even set a different ringtone for work, so if it's an office emergency I'll know to answer it, and otherwise they can wait until we're done. Here you go." Patty handed Gemma her phone.

"Thanks, and thanks for being cool about no phones at the table." Gemma rolled into the kitchen and placed Patty's phone on the dresser, next to the other three phones. She then turned her chair and rolled back into the living room where Patty, Renaldo, and Adam were getting out their character sheets and dice.

Gemma said, "You guys ready to see what Sorrow has to say?"

Chapter 15: Safety on the Set

Sebastian Sorrow sat in the chair, hands cuffed behind his back. His fine silk suit was soiled and ripped due to his attempted escape from the agents at the hotel. A bandage was wrapped around his leg; Agent Sylk had shot Sorrow to slow him down. A dark red spot was slowly appearing on the bandage.

Sorrow smirked and said, "I want my lawyer."

"There are no lawyers where you are, Sorrow." Agent Remo leaned in from behind and spoke close to his ear. "Now tell us where the dirty bomb was delivered, and you might get out of this with only prison time."

Gemma looked at Renaldo as he rolled the dice. A four.

"Screw off, " Sorrow said." I'm not revealing any of my sources. The next time you see that bomb it will be raining plutonium over 20 city blocks."

Renaldo glanced over at Patti; she looked frustrated. Precious time was ticking away and they needed Sorrow to talk. Patti shook her head, shrugged, and said, "Any other ideas, guys?"

Adam smiled. "I got this."

Agent Stone walked over to Sorrow's chair. He knelt down and looked Sorrow in the eye. "Last chance, scumbag. Where's the bomb?"

Gemma looked at Adam, but Adam held up his hand to ask for a moment.

Agent Stone then reached out and grabbed Sorrow's wounded leg and began to squeeze.

"Stone puts his fingers into the wound and—" was all Adam could get out before Renaldo cut him off.

"Whoa . . . You're going to torture him? Are you serious?" Renaldo jumped to his feet. "I did not *sign up for that kind of game." The other three looked at him in surprise.*

That's when Gemma knew there would be a bigger discussion that evening.

Roleplaying games are a social activity, and one that is enhanced by interacting with different people. As people, we're the sum of our experiences, both good and bad. We've been raised in one or more cultures, with a set of morals (be it prescribed by an institution or based on personal reflection), and those things can be in alignment or conflict within ourselves. This makes us very complex social creatures.

Given all that, it's inevitable that every one of us will at some point do or say something that seems perfectly normal *to us*, but which will create ill feelings in someone else because of their unique matrix of experiences, culture, and morals.

When these conflicts arise they often come with a flush of emotions, which can drown out the more intellectual aspects of our brain and cause us to react rather than discuss, or to go silent. This tends to result in the conflict not being handled in the best way possible, which—coming back to gaming—creates emotional responses in others at the table. Left unchecked, this leads to sides being drawn and, as arguments and tempers flare, what started out as a pleasant evening of gaming becomes a volley of personal attacks.

This chapter is about avoiding that.

How? By ensuring that everyone at the table has an enjoyable experience, that we minimize emotional conflicts as much as possible, and that when they do arise we resolve them quickly. The goal is for everyone, player and GM alike, to feel *safe*.

You'll see "we" used a lot in this chapter because we're all in this together—we share the responsibility for and benefits of feeling safe at the gaming table.

Defining "Safe"

In terms of roleplaying and gaming groups, the definition of the word "safe" includes the following elements:

- Respect for each other
- Respect for the game
- Everyone has a voice at the table
- No bullying
- We are candid
- We compromise

Let's take a closer look at each of those elements of our definition.

Respect for Each Other

We may not share the same experiences, come from the same culture, or have the same morals, but we need to respect those things in the others. From gender to sexuality to economic status to religious beliefs, respect means supporting those aspects of every person and, when we can't support them directly, acknowledging them silently. We don't critique or mock someone for those aspects of who they are, either outright or through passive aggression such as snide comments or jokes.

Respect for the Game

We understand that the game is a collaborative, shared experience created by everyone playing for the enjoyment of everyone involved. We understand that our actions in the game can create emotional responses in others who are sharing in the game. We acknowledge that the campaign framework, created during the start of a campaign, and the social contract the group has previously established (whether formally or informally), establish a tone and expected behavior for the game, and we will adhere to that tone so as not to impede or impact play for others.

Everyone Has a Voice at the Table

We ensure all players have the opportunity to speak their minds and be heard by everyone at the table during play. It is the responsibility of everyone at the table, out of respect for each other, to make sure everyone is given a chance to share their thoughts and ideas and that those are not dismissed out of hand after they speak. Furthermore, we must go further to help those who are shy or do not normally speak up by showing them that their voices matter and their thoughts are of equal value.

No Bullying

We do not tolerate any one player or group of players who, through force within or outside of the game, exert pressure on others to get their way when the group is making decisions. No one at the table should ever be made to feel the helplessness, fear, and frustration that come from being bullied.

We are Candid

We agree that when someone has been made to feel unsafe they have every right to express that to the group without being judged for it. The best way to express those feelings is to do so with plain, simple speech, and as rationally as possible. Some people are comfortable doing this face-to-face, while others might prefer the emotional insulation—and ability to choose their words more carefully—that come from using email.

We Compromise

We agree that when we have reached a conflict of ideas we can work together to find a way to resolve the conflict and move forward. We look to create a win-win situation where all parties are satisfied, rather than one side getting their way at the expense of the other.

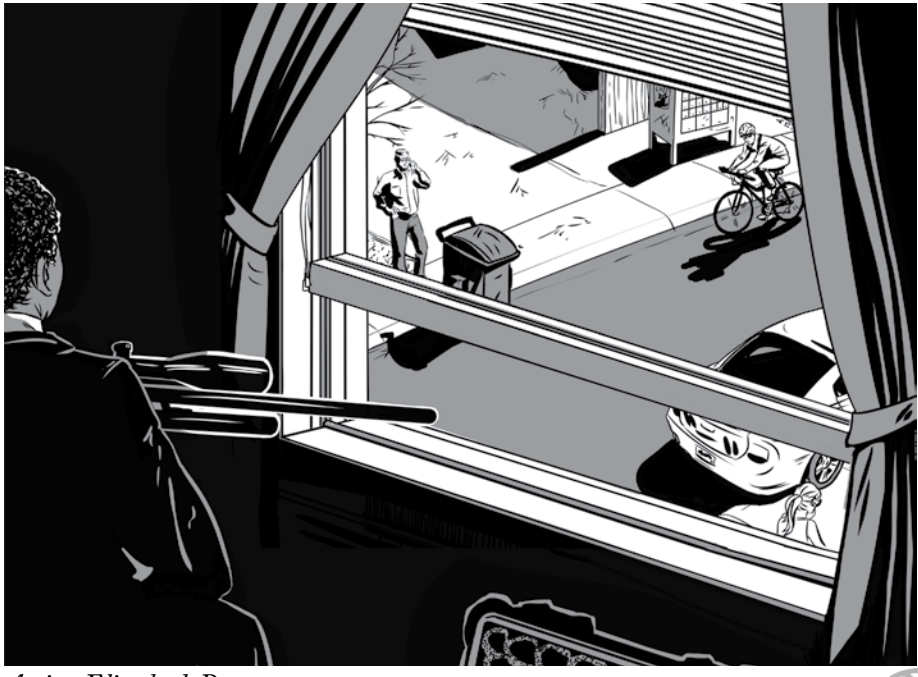
What Makes People Feel Unsafe at the Gaming Table?

In only the rarest case will someone in a gaming group deliberately set out to make someone else feel unsafe, or to emotionally harm them. Don't game with these people again, full stop.

Much more common are instances where someone unintentionally makes another player feel unsafe. Here are some of the most common ways that can come about at the gaming table.

Cultural Differences

The culture in which we're raised as children imprints on us during those formative years, imparting customs, norms, and taboos. These are often sources of friction. For example, one person might have been raised in a household where corporal punishment was the norm, while someone else was raised to believe corporal punishment was repugnant. If the first person's character slaps a kid in the game, that action is likely to make the second person feel uncomfortable.



Artist: Elizabeth Porter

Differences in Morals

Our morals are a combination of societal influences and personal psychology. These result in a rigid or loose code that we follow through life, and when our code conflicts with others' codes it tends to produce an emotional response. The characters we play in games also have morals, sometimes similar to and other times quite different from our own. If one character tortures another during play, as in this chapter's opening fiction, that could easily bother others at the table.

Unearthing Past Experiences

Everyone has endured hardships and tragedies, and even if we've moved past them they're not always fully resolved (and sometimes cannot ever be resolved). The scars of those experiences live in our psyches, often deeply buried—sometimes at an unconscious level. When an action in the game reminds us of one of those negative experiences, it can flood us with emotions connected to the original experience. The action, or "trigger," might seem totally innocuous to the triggering person, but can be devastating to the person reliving past traumas.

Simple Misunderstandings

Sometimes missing a bit of information, failing to pick up on someone's tone of voice, or misinterpreting a social cue can lead us to misunderstand another player's actions in-game. Without that subtext, we see only the more overt "portion" of the action, and that portion can seem hurtful.

Personality Issues

Personalities come in all shapes, sizes, labels, letter codes, and quadrants. Some personality types are a natural fit for the collaborative experience of roleplaying—for example, those who are naturally outgoing, good at collaboration, or empathetic. Other personality types—such as aggressive, boisterous, and callous—aren't as ideally suited to gaming, or are more likely to offend someone or make another player feel less safe. These folks may mean well, but tend to be the ones the rest of the group has to reign in from time to time.

Being Offended

The feeling of being offended is subjective and unique to the offended party. What offends one person may not offend another. Because taking offense is by nature subjective, just about anything can be offensive to someone, somewhere. A person with an aggressive personality might be offended by someone else's perceived passivity. Likewise the more passive person might be offended by the other person's more aggressive behavior.

It's important to understand that being offended is a valid emotional response. Even if the person who gave offense doesn't believe she did anything wrong, she must respect the feelings of the person she offended. This tends to require tuning one's actions and behavior to the people around you, and that's not a sign of weakness. It's a vital life skill that allows people to work, play, and otherwise interact with people who aren't exactly like them.

Creating Safety

The majority of the time, safety is compromised by accident. This means that we can mitigate the chances of someone being made to feel unsafe with a bit of forethought and planning. This planning often involves establishing boundaries so that everyone knows the comfort zones of each player as well as the acceptable tone and actions within the group. Once those zones have been discussed there are also ways to help to maintain them during play.

Understanding Comfort Zones

It is important for each player to define, or at least understand, his or her comfort zones. These zones encompass our reactions to different topics and situations that we encounter. Everyone has three basic comfort zones:

- **Comfortable**—These are things that we can see, discuss, and experience without feeling unsafe. We're fine with these being played out at the table.
- **Uncomfortable**—These are things that we can see, discuss, and experience, but only in limited amounts or when not described in detail. Taken too far, these things will make us feel unsafe.
- **Forbidden**—These are topics which make us feel unsafe no matter how they arise or how lightly they're present in the game.

These three categories will be different for each person at the table. One player might be uncomfortable with a plot that involves the children in harm's way, while another may consider that topic forbidden. It's important to discover and understand what topics are forbidden and uncomfortable for you and your players, and doing so is much easier than trying to list every topic with which people are comfortable.

Social Contract

The best way to establish comfort zones is to incorporate them into your group's social contract. Social contracts are a big topic and are outside the scope of this chapter, but in a nutshell a social contract is a written or unwritten understanding among the people in your group about conduct during gaming sessions. (Search for "social contract" on *gnomestew.com*, as well as other gaming sites, for much more information on this topic.)

As part of your social contract, create a list of the topics that are uncomfortable and forbidden for each person in your group. It's entirely possible that the same topic will fall into a different comfort zone for different people. If this happens, assign those topics to the most sensitive zone—for example, if a topic is comfortable for one player and uncomfortable for another, it gets flagged as uncomfortable for the group.

The resulting list will establish a set of boundaries for your group at the gaming table. For you, the GM, it also acts as a list of which topics are acceptable to include in adventures (comfortable), which ones you need to pay extra care and attention to when they come up (uncomfortable), and which ones to avoid entirely (forbidden).

For the players, the list informs them of what in-game actions are permissible, which ones they need to be cautious about, and what sorts of actions should never come up during a game.

Campaign Framework

In the previous volume in this "accidental trilogy," *Odyssey: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management*, we talked at length about campaign frameworks. A campaign framework is a document that the group creates (facilitated by the GM) which defines what will be included in and excluded from the campaign. For example, a campaign framework might specify "no steampunk" or "lots of aliens." Adding a section to this document for triggers and comfort zones is a great option.

In-Game Warnings

Another way to maintain a feeling of safety at your gaming table is to have a "warning system" on hand—a simple way that anyone in the group can indicate that the current scene or topic is making them uncomfortable. There are lots of options you can use, ranging from those that pause the game entirely to those that more subtly indicate to the group that the tone of a scene needs to change.

The X-Card (*goo.gl/EBuAhP*), created by John Stavropoulos, is a silent tool used to indicate when a player is uncomfortable without stopping the game. In its simplest form, it's just an index card with an "X" drawn on it. Picking up or touching the X-Card signals to the group that you're uncomfortable with the current scene, and that topic is immediately edited out of play—no questions asked. No one has to explain why they're using the X-Card, and anyone can use it at any time.

Another method is to use "safewords," a technique which arose from the Nordic LARP scene (*nordiclarp.org/wiki/Safewords*). "Brake" is a safeword that signals to another player not to increase the intensity of a scene any further. "Cut" can be used to signal one of two things: that content has gone too far and play needs to stop, or that someone is in actual danger (by any definition, physical or otherwise) and the game must be halted.

New Players

The introduction of a new player, whether permanently or for a guest spot, can throw off your group's safety dynamics—not because the new player intends to do so, of course, but because he brings his own set of mores, comfort levels, etc. The new player also isn't aware of the group's social contract or established comfort zones.

If a new player is joining the group permanently, it's important to revisit your social contract and incorporate her comfort zones into your group's master list and update that list accordingly. This may move some topics to more sensitive zones (e.g., something previously listed as uncomfortable might be forbidden after the update).

If you have a guest player, or you're at a convention and no one knows each other, you should set expectations up front by talking about the tone of the game (serious, silly, etc.), the level of cooperation vs. competition among the PCs, your GMing style, and any forbidden topics. You should also employ the X-Card, safewords, or some other warning system to enable players to sidestep uncomfortable topics. By doing these things you'll help everyone feel safe—and mitigate the chances of a scene or topic changing that.

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When Safety Is At Risk

It's inevitable that at some point you'll step out onto the thin ice of an uncomfortable topic at the gaming table. This isn't a bad thing: Often, being outside of your comfort zone is a good way to expand your enjoyment of the game and your understanding of yourself. But when you find yourself on thin ice, you need to exercise caution or you'll plunge into the icy waters and make one or more of your friends feel unsafe.

Slow and Easy

When you venture into an uncomfortable area, whether knowingly (it's on your group's list under "uncomfortable") or by accident (someone taps the X-Card, flagging the topic as uncomfortable on the spot), slow down the game and think through each beat within the current scene. Uncomfortable scenes should usually be described more vaguely than normal, and should be relatively brief. Avoid graphic descriptions and abstract the action to reduce the intensity of the scene.

You may wish to change the narrative style of the game from first to third person to make the scene less personal. You can also break character briefly and provide a bit of GM commentary to take everyone out of the moment.

An uncomfortable scene should have a distinct purpose, and should never be included just for the sake of pushing boundaries or making anyone squirm. Once the purpose of the scene has been met, quickly close off the scene by using a summary question—something like, "You get the information you need, is there anything else you'd like to do before we move on?"

Check In

During an uncomfortable scene, take a moment to make eye contact with each other player and make sure that they seem okay with the scene. If you'd rather be more overt, you can pause and ask everyone if they'd like to continue the scene—making it clear that it's okay for them to say no. After assessing the group either visually or verbally, look for signs of increasing unease in your players and adjust the pace of the scene accordingly.

Take a Break

When the scene concludes, call for a break. Give everyone time to take a deep breath and unwind. This will reduce any tension caused by the scene and allow everyone to talk about how the scene made them feel while it's still fresh. That will give you useful information about how to run uncomfortable scenes in the future.

Away from the Table

For some uncomfortable scenes, you may be better off playing them not at the table, but via email or instant messaging. Those venues make things less intimate and allow everyone to choose their words more carefully. Make sure everyone knows that this is an option, and if possible talk about it when you're establishing your social contract and list of comfort zones.

When the Ice Breaks

There will likely be times when things go wrong and one or more players no longer feel safe.

This might be because a forbidden topic has arisen during play, a topic no one mentioned proves to be unpleasant, someone forgets about a comfort zone, or a player finds that something she used to be comfortable with is now unpleasant. When this happens, it's important to address it at once.

Stop!

The best thing to do is to stop the scene. If your group uses safewords, someone will cut the scene and play will cease. This will give everyone who no longer feels safe a chance to get comfortable again.

The worst thing you can do is push through the scene to try to get back to more comfortable territory. This will only emotionally injure the players who no longer feel safe. Instead, just stop the scene right then and there.

Identify What Happened

In some cases the underlying cause for the break in play will be obvious, but not always. For example, maybe the scene included more than one uncomfortable topic and it was the combination of the two that made someone feel unsafe. If the player or players who don't feel safe are comfortable talking about it, they should identify the topic or issue so that everyone is aware of it. (This won't always be the case, and that's okay.)

Determine What Broke and Why

If the players who feel uncomfortable want to talk about it, that's the most direct way to figure out what happened. But if not, don't make them more uncomfortable by trying to get them to talk about it or making them feel like they have to justify their feelings to the group. They felt uncomfortable—that's all anyone needs to know.

But if they do want to discuss it, take the time to figure out the underlying cause (personal experience, morals, culture, etc.) and identify related topics that should also be flagged as forbidden or uncomfortable. After the game, update your comfort zone list and social contract accordingly.

Next Steps

If a break is needed, take one and let everyone do what they need to do before starting up the game again. Everyone recovers their feeling of safety in different ways: by relaxing, getting some space, seeking comfort, changing the topic, having a discussion, etc. After everyone feels safe again, you, the GM, have several options:

- **Summarize the scene**—Recap the scene, avoiding any deeper discussion about the forbidden topic, and then move right into the next scene.
- **Rewind and start again**—Back up the story to the point just before the forbidden topic and resume play. Now that all players know to avoid the topic, play can continue forward along a different path.
- **Move forward carefully**—If the players who lost their feeling of safety are comfortable enough, resume play but follow the tips in the When Safety Is At Risk section (above).
- **Stop the game**—Sometimes time and distance from the game will be necessary, and resuming the game that night isn't the best thing to do. Playing the game is never more important than the people who play in the game, so end the session and pick things up next time.

Removing a Player

It's possible that the best option for making the group as a whole feel safe will be removing a player from the game. Unless the player in question is malicious, this should only come after trying to preserve safety in other ways. (We'll talk more about removing a player in the next chapter.)

Always Be Safe

Roleplaying games gives us a medium to explore the complexity of human (and non-human) interactions. We can don personas vastly different or remarkably similar to our own. The experiences that occur at the table, while devoid of any real-world consequences, are in their own way genuine experiences. From time to time these experiences can be more than we're comfortable with, and when that happens people can be emotionally hurt.

By understanding what makes us uncomfortable and what we can't stand under any circumstances, and sharing those feelings with the group, we can work together to make the game a safe place to explore the gamut of human experience. When we do go too far, by taking care not to push too hard, or by knowing when to stop, we can make sure everyone at the table feels safe and enjoys the game.

Personal Story: Gabe and Lucy

In a *d20 Modern*™ game I ran years ago, one of the players, Myke, played Gabe, a cat burglar. Gabe had an estranged girlfriend, Lucy (an NPC). The campaign started with the two of them broken up, but mid-campaign they began to see each other again and their relationship developed from there and became complex.

As the relationship became more complex, it also became more intimate, and Myke and I discovered that we were uncomfortable playing out that level of intimacy at the table. Neither of us wanted to stop exploring the relationship and the drama it created in the game, so we looked for a way to continue doing so that was more comfortable for us.

We decided to move the deeper conversations and relationship-building scenes to the group's email list. We both found it was far easier to communicate in-character via email, and it allowed us to create a rich and realistic relationship between these two characters—something that wouldn't have happened at the table, and would have been absent from the campaign if we hadn't altered our interactions to make ourselves feel more comfortable.

Challenge—Achievement: Safety First

1. Lead the group in a discussion of safety. Everyone should identify at least one topic that's forbidden.
2. Lead a group safety discussion and have everyone identify a topic that makes them uncomfortable.
3. Implement a method (existing or created by the group) for signaling to the table that someone is uncomfortable with a scene.
4. Explore a topic your group flags as uncomfortable and include it in the game without anyone stopping the game.
5. Create a method for conveying your forbidden and uncomfortable topics to new players who join your game.
6. Before your next session, review your list of uncomfortable and forbidden topics and see if any have changed or if any new ones need to be added.

The discussion had gone well. Renaldo was able to explain that he wasn't comfortable with torture in the game because of some past personal issues. He was surprisingly candid sharing with the group. The other three had no idea that Renaldo had come from such a troubled childhood, but completely understood his aversion for portraying any kind of torture in a game.

The campaign framework and social contract were updated to include torture as a forbidden topic, and Gemma said that she would think of ways to avoid scenes like this in the future. Renaldo, who had been quite tense after stopping the game, now looked more relaxed. After a break, he was ready to jump back into the game.

Gemma thought it was best to just skip over the interrogation scene. She told the players that they were able to convince Sorrow to give up the location of the terrorist cell, and play continued.

Chapter 16: Playing Company

Agent Sylk unlocked the door and the team entered the nondescript suburban house—the safe house of the terror cell that Sorrow had rolled over on two nights ago—with their guns drawn, expecting a confrontation. The living room was sparsely furnished but made up for it with a makeshift explosives laboratory in the center of the room. The three agents surveyed the room.

"Let's sweep the rest of the house," said Sylk, her voice a low whisper, as she gave the team a hand signal.

"You do that," said Agent Stone. "I'm going to check out the explosives lab." He moved to the table full of household chemicals and hardware pieces.

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Remo nodded. "There's a laptop over here that's likely full of juicy intelligence. We can figure out where the bomb is going to be planted if I can just hack into it." He sat down in front of the laptop and started typing.

"What?! Are you two serious?" Sylk's whisper was louder and hoarser than before. "We can do all that after we check this place for hostiles."We're going to get—"

Suddenly, the door to the kitchen burst open. Gunmen poured in and began firing at the agents. Sylk was hit, and she dropped to the floor.

Raising her voice, Patti said, "Seriously! What's wrong with you two? I thought we were a team?!" She marked down Sylk's condition—bleeding out—on her character sheet.

Gemma put down her dice and surveyed the group. Patti was clearly upset, and Adam and Renaldo both look annoyed. She had better head this problem off at the pass.

"Let's take five, everyone," Gemma said. Now she could take a few minutes before the game started back up to talk to the group about teamwork.

A Productive Group Is a Many-Splendored Thing

Broadly speaking, gaming groups can be productive or unproductive. A productive group is collaborative, communicative, and works towards shared goals. An unproductive group is like an ongoing tug of war with as many ropes as there are people at the table, with similarly disastrous results.

A Productive Group

What defines a productive group? In my experience, productive groups possess many—if not all—of these characteristics:

- **They share a common goal**—Even if they have some secondary goals or objectives, the players and/or their characters all share a common goal that keeps them aligned and gives them something to work toward.
- **They respect each PC's role**—Within the PC party, each team member has a role and the group trusts that character to take care of the things that fall under their role.

- **They're candid but not insulting**—The members of the group can speak to each other honestly, but do so in a way that isn't demeaning or condescending. This allows them to express opposing ideas without sparking a conflict.
- **They listen to everyone**—The group makes sure that every participant is given a chance to speak and is heard. No one dominates the conversation and no one sulks on the sidelines.
- **They collaborate, and no one person dominates**—When the group comes up with ideas, they share their thoughts and find ways to incorporate the best ideas into a cohesive plan. A plan is never the product of a single person.

Not every group has all of these characteristics in equal measure, but the closer a group is to this ideal the more productive they are the gaming table.

An Unproductive Group

It will come as no surprise that the unproductive group fails in all the above areas. Here's a glimpse of what that looks like:

- **Divided or conflicting goals**—This is a group where individual goals are placed above any shared ones. These individual goals may directly conflict with one another, and that conflict will end up in the middle of the game.
- **Lack of respect**—Some members think of themselves as above the others. They think of themselves as better roleplayers, or more experienced with the system, perhaps because of their tenure as gamers. They look down on the other players' decisions.
- **Niche-crashing**—One or more of the characters has been designed to be awesome at multiple things, and thus marginalize those characters that were designed with a specific role in mind.
- **Abrasive and condescending**—These groups speak to each other in ways that result in feelings being hurt. Players verbally attack each other when they disagree.
- **Dismissive**—Some players are dismissed, and their ideas are ignored by one or more of the others.
- **My way or the highway**—Some players have to have things their way. They don't want to hear other ideas and will make threats if they don't get to do things the way they desire.

While it's rare for a group to have all of these problems, it is possible. It's more likely that one person (or perhaps a small number of people) in the group will display some of these traits. Unfortunately, it only requires a couple of folks with these issues to disrupt the productivity of the whole group.

Being a Collaborative Group

For a gaming group, productivity is a shared mindset (or collective personality type, if you well). Unless it's put to use in the game, it's just potential energy. Collaboration is the act of a productive group doing something together to advance the game. ("Advance" can mean different things depending on the game and group; what's important is that everyone agrees on its meaning.)

Collaboration is based on two principles: teamwork and communication. In order to be collaborative the group must want to work together towards some common goal, and must possess the ability to share ideas; agree upon things; and—more importantly—disagree, ultimately leading them to a decision that is agreed upon by the group.

It Starts with Teamwork

Players need to understand that they're in the game to make the game an enjoyable experience for everyone. Players need to understand that they have a responsibility to the group, and that the decisions they make in the game are in order to make the game more enjoyable and exciting for everyone.

Depending on the style of the game and/or campaign, the PC party may also exhibit teamwork. Parties like a group of dungeon explorers, a league of superheroes, or a military unit likely work together as a team, and that team structure is built into the game. Other games or campaign styles may not foster teamwork among the PCs. Ultimately, it matters less that the PCs work as a team than that the players work as a team.

As the GM, you need to share that sense of teamwork. The gaming group is its own team, but it has one goal and that is to create a form of entertainment. You can help to make the game enjoyable for all by working with the players, not against them.

Then Comes the Talky Stuff

Communication is the currency of collaboration. It is the medium that is required to present ideas, share them, and combine them into new ideas.

A productive group not only has to have a good attitude about sharing ideas, but its members also have to actively communicate with one another. The atmosphere within the group must be open enough that every member can contribute ideas without feeling like they'll be shut down or mocked by the group. The group has to police itself to make sure that all members are given a chance to share their ideas; the more outgoing may have to advocate for the more introverted. The group also has to be able to share honestly. Sometimes people come up with ideas that just won't work, and the group needs to be able to say that and move on to other ideas.

In groups where everyone gets along, players may tend to take actions without checking in with the group. Even in these groups, it's important to check in and share ideas before taking significant actions.

Reaching a Collaborative State

When a group has the right attitude, a sense of teamwork, and good communication, it can reach that collaborative state where the sum of their ideas is greater than any individual idea. This collaborative state has three hallmarks.

Ideas are Built

A collaborative effort is one where an idea is built from a collection of smaller ideas. It's not collaboration when one person proposes an idea and the group agrees with him. Rather, in collaboration, someone poses an imperfect idea and others add their ideas to address the imperfections by using their expertise, experiences, and knowledge. The group then combines those ideas into a final idea that's stronger than the original idea.

There are No Stars

A collaborative group strives to be as inclusive as possible. When they build an idea or come up with a solution, they do so to utilize the skills of everyone in the group, not to rally behind one person, so that everyone has a chance to contribute and to share in its success and rewards. For example, in a fantasy game where the party's wizard and thief can both get past a locked door (the wizard by using a spell, the thief with lock picks), the group would decide to have the thief pick the lock and reserve the wizard's spell for later in the session, enabling both characters to shine.

Being Collaborative at the Table

Apart from being a good life skill, the ability to collaborate also has a direct impact on the game. There are many times during a session where the PCs will need to collaborate, and in order for that to happen the players have to be able to collaborate. Here are three common examples:

- **Combat**—In any life-and-death struggle, a group whose members have each other's backs will fair far better than a "group" of hot shots each going it alone. Players skilled at collaboration look out for each other, understand everyone's strengths and weaknesses, and know how to combine their strengths to defeat the toughest foes. Groups that can't pull together wind up getting picked off one at time when they get in over their heads. The greatest challenge to collaboration in combat is when characters try to showboat and take on the biggest threats solo, rather than combining their abilities with the rest of the party.
- **Heists and ambushes**—Scenes where the group needs to come up with and then execute a plan are natural opportunities for collaboration. In these types of scenes the players need to combine their ideas to overcome a challenge that is greater than any one of them can accomplish on their own. The tricky part is including as many members of the party as possible so that no one feels left out.

- **Puzzles and mysteries**—When the group is faced with a mystery or puzzle to figure out, success is contingent upon collaboration. In order to solve a mystery, the group must analyze clues, fill in gaps with hypotheses, and draw conclusions. Players who can work together in these situations have a far greater chance of solving the mystery by being able to attack it from many angles. The greatest challenge to collaboration in puzzle-solving is ensuring that everyone can share ideas without being judged or mocked (which, naturally, makes people less likely to share their hypotheses).

All of That Sounds Like the Players' Problem

Is it solely the players' responsibility to form a productive group, and to collaborate in the ways we've examined above? Not at all. While it's true that the players have to engage in collaboration, as the GM—and facilitator for the gaming group—you can help guide the group to make healthy, collaborative choices and steer it away from destructive, discordant choices.

As the GM, you're part of the gaming group but also separate from the players. You have the unique position of being an outsider, but one with a vested interest in the group's behavior. You have the opportunity to help forge a productive group of players by laying a good foundation, creating opportunities, and guiding the players.

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

Laying the Foundation

The origin of a productive group begins before the first session and falls partly under the umbrella of campaign management, which is discussed in length in *Odyssey: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management*. In case you don't have *Odyssey*, here's a quick summary that will lead us into talking about the formation of a productive group in the context of *Focal Point*.

The first opportunity you get to create a productive group is when the group is formed. Ideally, you want to select people who emulate the positive behaviors discussed above. Watch out for people who display one or more of the negative behaviors we've talked about—remember, it only takes a single person to disrupt a group. It may not always be possible to be that selective, particularly because we often game with people who are already part of our other social circles and excluding someone can lead to other problems. Do the best you can.

The next opportunity for forming a productive group comes during character creation. As recommended in *Odyssey*, create characters as a group and discuss the wants and needs of the players as well the PCs. Look for places where those might come into conflict and work to make changes to avoid potential issues. During this time the group should define the role(s) or niche(s) that each character will fill, and should respect those niches such that each PC has the ability to excel in an enjoyable way.

It's also during this time that you should set some ground rules or expectations for the game. As a group, discuss how comfortable people are with intra-party conflict, have a discussion about safety, and come to an understanding about how productive the group is expected to be during play.

Create Opportunities

Once the game is underway, your next avenue to guide a group towards collaboration is the creation of scenes and plots that require a productive group. Any scene where advance planning is required makes for a wonderful opportunity for the players to exercise their ability to collaborate. When you create one of these situations, you need to design it to reward productivity and deal a punishment—not too severe—to an unproductive group, as negative reinforcement.

Sometimes a group will need assistance becoming productive, and you can employ an NPC to help mentor the group. The key element here is *mentor*. You don't want the NPC to force them to collaborate, nor do you want the NPC to do all of the PCs' work. Rather, you want the NPC to nudge the group into better collaboration through friendly advice or leading questions—basically, to get your players thinking along collaborative lines.

Guiding the Players

There will also be times when you need to act as the facilitator for the players—for example, when they work on a problem or come up with a plan. As with a mentor NPC, you're not there to solve the in-game issue they are working on, but rather

make sure that the group of players is playing fairly. You need to provide some amount of refereeing for the group, heading off any negative behaviors and suggesting positive alternatives.

Here are some things to look out for that might prompt this kind of intervention:

- **The big picture**—Remind the players about the goal that the PCs are working towards, and about the nature of the bigger picture.
- **Respect**—If one player disrespects another, politely call out that behavior and make it clear that it's not appreciated. That includes dismissing other players' ideas and being abrasive to those who speak up.
- **Niche protection**—If Player A is trying to encroach on Player B's PC's niche or role, jump into the conversation by asking Player B a leading question, such as, "As the thief, what's your take on that trap?"
- **Take the temperature**—To make sure that no one gets drowned out, before the players commit to an action go around the table and ask every player for their opinion. This can help an introverted player, or someone who has been ignored up until that point, express her opinion.
- **Call for a break**—If a discussion becomes too negative or too heated, call for a break and give everyone a chance to get away from the table. This will let stress levels drop and, if needed, give you an opportunity to talk to players individually.

Sometimes It Can't Be Saved

Sadly, there are going to be times when the specific makeup of a group just isn't productive—or worse, is toxic in some way. Opportunities have been given, discussions have been held with the people causing the issues, but nothing has changed. When this happens, the group has no choice but to eject the members who are negatively impacting the group's productivity, and move on. Because friendships and gaming often intertwine, this decision can have other social ramifications, but it must be made if anyone in the group is going to enjoy the game.

Here are three suggestions for how to handle this as smoothly as possible:

- **The direct approach**—If you're the type of person who can eject someone from the group directly while avoiding a major confrontation, this is always the best option.
- **End the game and start a new group**—Another option is to end the campaign, wrap things up, and announce that you want a break. After a short while, start up a new game and only invite the people who work well together.
- **Leave the group**—If the majority of the group is okay with a play environment you find unproductive or toxic, then you may be best off leaving the group and finding a new one that better suits your preferences.

Personal Story: Losing My Cool

For the most part, I'm a pretty mild guy. I don't raise my voice often, and I am tolerant of a wide swath of personal behavior within my games. In a *Corporation* game I ran a few years ago, one player, who was playing the hacker, wasn't happy with the selection of the division leader because they didn't think that player would be good for the job. The hacker player chose not to speak up, instead internalizing their feelings and allowing the issue to fester. I became aware that there was an issue after character creation but took a "let's see what happens" attitude, hoping it would work itself out.

One night the team was on a mission, breaking into an apartment and looking for clues. For agents in *Corporation* this is a pretty easy task, as a good hacker can make the tasks of bypassing security, cameras, and locks pretty straightforward. But things weren't going smoothly, and the game was plodding along. As I looked at the players, I realized that the hacker wasn't offering suggestions or doing anything proactive, but instead was waiting for the division leader to give him orders. This behavior was a passive-aggressive expression of the hacker player's dissatisfaction with the player chosen as division leader.

I tried to break up the situation by suggesting to the hacker's player that they might want to weigh in, and tried to make sure that they understood the game mechanics that were relevant to the scene. They remained stoic, dragging the operation out as the other players looked on and waited for the hacker to do something.

I was growing increasingly upset at this lack of collaboration, and the effect it was having on the scene and the players' enjoyment. After a few more plodding minutes, I could take no more, and at that moment I lost my cool. I threw my dice into my dice tray with a loud clatter and barked an expletive at the hacker's player. I then called for a break and walked away from the table to regain my calm. Eventually we came back to the table and talked about what had happened, but the session was over for the night—and the campaign ended shortly after that.

Doing It Together

Much like a skilled acting troupe, a collaborative gaming group is an amazing thing to behold. The players attack problems head-on, develop ingenious solutions by combining ideas, and overcome even the most daunting challenges. In both the gaming group and the acting troupe, collaboration is a skill that starts with feeling like a team and actively communicating with one another.

As the GM, you can foster collaboration among the players and cultivate productivity through the structure of the game, as well as through NPC mentors. With some time and care, a group can reach a collaborative state that allows them to face greater challenges and adventures.

Challenge—Achievement: Stormin' Norman

1. Create a combat scene where the PCs will have to combine their abilities to overcome their foes or accomplish a specific objective.
2. Create a scenario that requires the players to come up with a plan (such as a heist). Have the PCs roleplay the planning.

3. Create a mystery or puzzle that requires every member of the group to contribute in order to find the solution.
4. Help foster PC collaboration through the use of a mentor NPC.
5. Foster collaboration among players by guiding them through a collaborative effort—for example, assembling the clues at the climax of a mystery.
6. Design a scene for one or more characters which requires the player(s) involve to exercise a positive productive trait that isn't one of their strengths (listening to everyone in the group, for example).

The three agents stood in the kitchen in front of the basement door. Sylk had a pressure bandage on her shoulder. Lucky for her, the bullet had hit the top part of her vest and only done superficial damage. Stone and Remo had acted fast, taking the lone gunman down quickly and tending to Sylk's wound. It was enough to snap them in line and get their objectives clear.

The gunman was not alone, and they knew that the others were in the basement.

"Okay, I'll toss the flash-bang," said Sylk.

"Then me," said Stone, "in and sweep right." The others nodded.

"Me next, in and sweep left," said Remo as he checked his ammo.

Sylk said, "I will follow and clean up anyone left standing."

Sylk pulled the pin on the grenade as Remo opened the door, and then tossed it down the stairs before Remo shut the door again. The grenade tumbled down the stairs and terminated in a loud bang and a flash of light that could be seen through the cracks around the door.

Sylk opened the door and Stone and Remo went down the stairs, the sounds of their silenced pistols clacking as targets went down. Sylk pulled her twin pistols and headed down the stairs after them.

Chapter 17: Improvising Lines

The raid had been fruitful, and the three agents were driving back to the lab to start analyzing the evidence. Sylk and Stone were startled when Remo, sitting in the back of the SUV, suddenly clapped his hands.

"I know what to do! Skip the lab and head downtown," Remo said, "I have a contact, umm . . . Dr. Daiyo Teng, she's a leading mathematician and she can help us crack the encryption on the laptop so that we can find the location of the target."

Gemma tried to hide her surprise. Who was Dr. Teng? She had never heard Renaldo mention her before. She hadn't prepped a scene with this mysterious NPC. She had set up a different path of clues for the agents—the encrypted laptop was supposed to be a dead end.

"Renaldo," Gemma said, "how does Remo know Dr. Teng?"

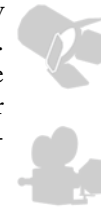
"She's one of my contacts. I picked her at character creation."

Gemma had forgotten that Remo had taken the Contacts trait. Her mind began to race. She would need to make up a scene fast, and figure out how to adjust her plot so that this clue would lead them to the target. She took a long sip of water and let her mind go to work.

Making It Up as You Go Along

To paraphrase German Field General Helmuth von Moltke, "No prep for a session ever survives contact with the players." Or if you prefer: Players will always screw up all the good prep and planning you have done. A bit tongue in cheek, but somewhat true! You can do the best possible prep, but once you start running the game anything can happen. At some point, the players will go somewhere that your prep didn't cover, and you'll need to be able to improvise.

In **Chapter 10: Keep Filming**, Walt talked about the need to adjust the story on the fly as the players do unexpected things—improv in action, if you will. This chapter looks at improv from the angle of cultivating a group that's able to engage in and is receptive to improvisation. As the GM, you can help your group with their improv skills and create scenes that provide practice for everyone.



What About that *Unframed* Book?

Another Engine Publishing book, *Unframed: The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters*, offers up essays from 23 game designers and GMs, including the three authors of this book, that discuss various aspects of improv. We'll address some improv basics in this chapter (for a deeper look, check out *Unframed*), but we'll also cover new ground.

Being Improv-Ready

All games are improvised. Once you start playing, no matter the style of game, the interplay of actions between player and GM is all improvised. But not all groups are improv-ready, meaning that they are not all skilled or comfortable enough to insert an unplanned scene or make up a game element (be it an NPC, an organization, or a magic item) on the spot.

"Improv-ready GM" doesn't mean "GM who only improvises." An improv-ready GM can still do plenty of prep and run a linear, planned-out plot, while introducing small amounts of improv in the form of on-the-fly NPCs or the occasional side scene. So, too, can an improv-ready GM rely much more on improv and prep very little (or not at all) before a session. Both GMing styles employ the same improv skills, but they apply them in different amounts.

But the fact is that if the *group*, as a whole, isn't improv-ready, then improv will yield little fruit. Improv is a two-way street, and so both the GM and the players have to be improv-ready. Only when the whole group has reached this state does improv shine.

What then are the signs of an improv-ready group? How can you tell if you and your group have the right skills and mindset? To figure that out, let's start by looking at the skills required to be proficient at improvisation.

Wide Range of Knowledge or Experiences

Improvisation is about taking what you know, dissolving it into its components, tropes, and so forth, and then being able to use it in a different setting or situation. The more varied your knowledge, the more raw material you have for improvisation. Importantly, this knowledge doesn't have to have anything to do with gaming for you to be able to apply it in a gaming context. Your knowledge of craft beers may come into play when you improvise a scene featuring a group of dwarven brewers.

Sense of Story

Improv involves creating a scene within a story. Having an understanding of how scenes and stories are constructed and how they unfold will give you a sense for what is the most appropriate for the next beat. This knowledge can be learned formally though literature, but it can also be absorbed by reading books and watching movies and TV shows.

Pattern Matching

Improv is also about "reading" a developing scene, recognizing what is the logical next step, and connecting it to something you know. The more you hone this skill, the better your choices will be when you develop an idea on the fly to contribute to a scene.

Mental Reflexes

Finally, improv is about action and reaction. The ability to think quickly when called upon helps a scene develop smoothly and avoids "dead air." In many ways, the improvisation of a scene is like taking a test: You have a general knowledge of what the test is about but you don't know what you will be asked until you read the questions. You need to think quickly and synthesize an answer.

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

In addition to these skills, there are also three traits a group needs to possess in order to be able to improvise well.

Trust

Improv requires a tremendous amount of trust between everyone in the group. Using the "Yes . . . and" technique (see below), for example, requires you to accept what someone else comes up with, without knowing what they are going to offer up in advance. That can be scary, and can make you want to keep "No" in your back pocket. For improv to work, everyone has to trust that the group is out to create a fun story. From a players' perspective, the group needs to trust that the GM isn't going to put them in an impossible situation. Players also have to trust each other in the same way (i.e., knowing no one will build a scene to doom anyone else's character).

Safety

Along with trust, safety (discussed in **Chapter 15: Safety on the Set**) is required. Because improvisation is spontaneous, there can be accidents when someone broaches an unsafe topic. The risk of this happening is compounded when the entire table is contributing to the improvised narrative. Review what is safe for your group, and make sure you have a way to note when safety is being threatened (e.g., the X-Card).

Collaboration

Improvisation is not about members of the group wrestling for spotlight or narrative control. It is about the group creating an interesting and engaging story together. Your group needs to be collaborative and able to work together to develop the story—which is why we talked about collaboration in the previous chapter. The group, as a whole, should be doing a good job of incorporating each other's ideas, as well as sharing the spotlight by pulling other players into a developing scene.

If any of that sounds daunting, don't be discouraged. These are things that can be learned and honed, either through practice, through repeated use in improvised scenes, or both.

Improv 101

While *Unframed* provides an in-depth look at improvisation, this next section is a cheat sheet of the most basic improv concepts. If you've studied improv, you can skip to the next section. For those less familiar, consider this a gentle introduction.

Like other aspects of GMing, improv encompasses a number of techniques and activities. Here are three basic improv skills that yield the most success with both novice and experienced practitioners.

Yes . . . And

If there is one core skill in improv, it just might be this one.

"Yes . . . and" (sometimes rendered as "yes, and") is about the inclusion of others' ideas. When someone puts out an idea, the worst thing you can do is to say "no." No negates the statement and shuts down the person and the scene. Rather than say no, you are encouraged to say, "Yes . . . and." "Yes" acknowledges the other person's statement and contribution, while "and" gives you the opportunity to build upon that statement.

Let's take a look at how that might play out at the table. Here are Gemma and Renaldo setting up the scene with Dr. Teng:

Gemma: *"Okay, Remo has not seen Dr. Teng in months and she is quite angry with you."*

Renaldo: *"She's angry with me, and she is about to call campus security when I show up at her office."*

Gemma is looking to create a challenge for Renaldo: How does Agent Remo get Dr. Teng to cooperate? Renaldo accepts Gemma's contribution (Teng is angry) and then builds upon it, raising the stakes by introducing the fact that she's so angry she's about to call the campus cops.

There are other variations of this technique, as well:

- **Yes . . . But**—To create obstacles
- **Yes . . . So**—To create consequences
- **Yes . . . Or**—For alternatives

All of these, and more, are physically represented by a tool that's too neat not to share: Daniel Solis' Writer's Dice, which enable you to roll up combinations of "yes," "but," "or," and related terms. Lots of inspiration can also be found in the Writer's Dice Guide: *https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/7247980/Writer%27s%20Dice/WritersDice-Guide.pdf*.) As you become comfortable with "Yes . . . and," you can try to work these other variations into your improvisation.

Listening

The next technique is listening. While this sounds like a basic skill, it does take some training or practice to really listen to what the people around the table are saying and to digest what is being said.

With improv, the person speaking is often giving clues to what they would like to have happen next or what they would like to have happen in the scene. If you're too focused on just tossing out something you thought of during the next pause, you'll miss the chance to pick up that message and in turn provide what that person is looking for.

When this works well, the people in the scene seem to read each other's minds and the scene develops organically. When you fail to listen, the scene may make strange twists and turns as people are introducing ideas but failing to play off of each other, or there may be an awkward silence as the scene stumbles. Actively listen to everyone around the table.

Reincorporation

The skill of reincorporation goes hand in hand with listening. Reincorporation is simply taking something that was introduced earlier in the scene, or in an earlier scene, and bringing it back into play. This technique is best demonstrated in a good stand-up comedy routine, where the comedian makes an early joke and then, at the end of her set, her final joke ties back to the early joke, enhancing the comedy by creating a connection between them.

This can be done in gaming, too, and it's done through listening to what others have introduced in play, as well as remembering the elements you have introduced. If a player introduced his character's friend Aldo, a city guard, and then in a later scene the group is chased by the city guard and caught, have Aldo be among the pursuers. This will enhance the scene, as the character already has a relationship with this NPC.

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

Building Some Improv Muscles

Improv can be practiced, and improv skills can be developed over time. Groups that are neither skilled nor comfortable with using improv techniques in their games can use improv exercises and tools to accomplish this.

Improv Exercises

There are a wide variety of improv exercises that you and your players can try out, either as a group or in pairs. Developed by improv troupes, these are often quite entertaining. A quick web search will reveal dozens of options; you might start here: *improvencyclopedia.org/games*.

If your group is not into doing pure improv exercises but you still want to work on these activities in your game, there are some simple things you can do at your table to practice. Here are three suggestions:

- **The pointed question**—Ask a player a pointed question about their relationship to an NPC? ("Why does the mayor's champion always look at you with anger in her eyes?")
- **What's going on?**—For the session's opening scene, ask a player what's going on right at that moment and then play off her answer. ("What's making all the ruckus at the tavern as you're trying to enjoy your evening ale?")
- **What happens next?**—Describe a scene that a player's character is witnessing and then stop and ask the player what happens next. ("The guards look to be offloading a locked trunk from the carriage. What happens next?")

If you're using these techniques for practice, it's best to employ them during the opening scenes of the session, when you're not deep into a plot or in the middle of combat. These techniques are also great for those sessions when you're transitioning between major plots.

Tools for Improvisation

Not everyone is good at coming up with things on the fly. Fortunately there are lots of tools out there that can help. One specific type of tool that I like is the sort that provides a foundation for improvisation, and these come in a variety of forms: lists, cards, dice, smart phone apps, and others. They typically address elements like names, personality traits, actions, and locations.

These tools can be of assistance to group members who are struggling with a particular area improv-wise. If someone isn't very good with names, a name generator app on their phone can help them come up with an original name while creating an NPC on the fly. Someone else may enjoy the use of cards that provide personality traits, which can help him develop an interesting personality for an NPC.

When picking out a tool, consider both the need the tool fills as well as the method used to get results. A smart phone app is great if you're playing somewhere with limited space, while a deck of cards might be better suited to a larger table. Dice are portable, but have a limited number of sides (and, therefore, outcomes) and won't offer the depth of a deck of cards. Finally, consider your own preferences for various media. Do you like to roll dice, or flip cards, or do you have an awesome phone or tablet you love to use? Use what you're comfortable with.

Incorporating Improvisation into Your Games

Your group's improvisational skills will improve with practice. As the GM, you have the opportunity to introduce improvisational scenes into the game gradually, allowing your group to become more skilled at and comfortable with improv. For a group that isn't familiar with these techniques, the best way to start is simply by incorporating one or more of the improv exercises mentioned above into your sessions.

As you and your group become more skilled you can incorporate different improvisational scenes into your game. An easy way to start is by reducing the prep for your games: Prep the scenes for the main storyline but have the group improvise the peripheral scenes, including any spotlight scenes which feature character development.

Over time, as your skills become stronger, you will find that your prep will be greatly reduced as you will need fewer and fewer notes to run a session and can rely instead on your group's ability to improvise the bulk of your game. Some GMs might find that they need only prep some NPC stats and an index card or two of notes; others may not need notes at all.

The goal isn't necessarily to shed all of your prep (although that could be your personal goal). But even if you run a prep-heavy game, improvisation will help create spontaneous moments that draw upon the contributions of the entire group, allowing the story to develop in ways you may not have imagined. Improvisation can also be the duct tape of roleplaying, patching up missing parts of your prep and holding your scenes together.

All gamers improvise—it's in the nature of the hobby. But not everyone is equally comfortable or adept at improvisation, whether due to personality or lack of improv experience. The good news is that practice and improv tools, coupled with a safe and supportive gaming environment, can make just about everyone comfortable with and better at improvisation.

Personal Story: My Ever-Shrinking Prep

Having written *Never Unprepared*, a book entirely devoted to game prep, I have the reputation of being a "high-prep" GM—one who preps tomes of material before my games. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As my ability to improvise with my group has increased, my prep has been dramatically reduced. Over the past few years I have become more proficient at improvisation, as has my group, and I have found a number of tools which help to fill in the gaps. The end result is that I now prep the main scene(s) for my session, the necessary stat blocks, and a sketched-out map or two.

What I have eliminated is any serious prep that comes before or after the main scenes, relying on my table's ability to improvise to handle those situations. Because of that level of comfort, I am able (as I discuss in *Never Unprepared*) to reduce my prep to only the things I need to feel comfortable. The end result is that my actual notes have gone from a dozen pages down to just a page or two.

Will I ever reach zero prep? I don't think so. While I enjoy improvising the opening and closing scenes in a session, I like to plan out key scenes so that I can still deliver a specific experience. There will always be a bit of prep in my games.

Challenge—Achievement: Winging It

1. Use "Yes . . . and" or one of its variants when one of your players makes a suggestion or statement during a session.
2. Use the skills of listening and reincorporation to take something a character says early in the session and bring it back into the game later on.
3. Find an improv exercise online and use it to warm up your group before a game.
4. Incorporate an in-game improv exercise into one of your sessions.
5. Find and use an improv tool at an upcoming session.
6. Don't prep some of the peripheral scenes for an upcoming session, and rely instead on improv to play out those scenes.

Smiling, Gemma said, "Renaldo, why isn't Doctor Teng happy to see you?"

"Um . . . there was this previous mission I was on . . ." Renaldo trailed off, thinking, but found that no ideas were coming to him.

Adam chimed in. "Yes, and you stole something from her. What was it?" Gemma smiled again.

"Her research!" Patti said, with a large smile on her face.

"You stole her research," Gemma said, nodding, "and now she's starting over at the local university. The three of you arrive at her office, and as she turns around and sees Agent Remo her face flushes bright red. She begins to shout something in Cantonese. Make a Negotiations check at -6."

"Ugh," Renaldo said, picking up his dice. This roll was important—it could be the key to cracking this case. As everyone looked on, he let the dice tumble out of his hand and onto the table.

Chapter 18: Permits and Regulations

The agents fanned out in the park. There were scores of innocent people there, all unaware that a terrorist carrying a dirty bomb was among them. The agents looked around, but there were all manner of people in the park, and too many of them had bags and backpacks.

"This is hopeless," said Agent Sylk, whispering into her sub-vocal microphone. "We need a way to find the carrier faster or this is going to be a catastrophe."

Scanning another group of people in the park, Agent Stone replied on the team's secure channel. "We need a way to get this jerk to stand out. Quickly."

"I've got it!" Agent Remo said. "We know the carrier has a burner phone, and that they're supposed to get a text with the final location for the bomb. We have the phone number. Perhaps I can hack the phone and cause it to start playing music on full volume, drawing them out."

Out of character, Renaldo said to Gemma, "Can I do that?"

"Um . . . I don't know. That sounds like a use of the Computers skill, but these rules were written years ago, and I don't think smart phones existed back then. Let me look at the rules." Gemma picked up the core book and started reading.

Adam got up from the table to get a drink. Patti excused herself from the table. Renaldo sat patiently waiting for a verdict. Gemma could feel the tension of the scene draining away as she searched through the rulebook for the definition

of the Computers skill. The book was not well organized and of course there wasn't an index . . . She couldn't find the skills section.

Renaldo came over to help, and the two of them flipped through the book. Patti caught Adam in the kitchen and they started talking about a TV show they'd both watched the night before.

Gemma was getting a bit anxious. They were just moments from the climax of this campaign, and everything was being held up by trying to figure out if Agent Remo could hack the phone.

Following all the Rules and Regulations

Among the many variations of the title "game master" used in the hobby, one can trace its roots back to wargaming: referee. One element of being a referee, in the gaming sense, is interpreting the rules of the game. And of course the "G" in "RPG" stands for *game*. An RPG is a game with a set of rules that, generally, we're expected to use during play. Your mastery of the rules has a direct impact on the flow of the session, as well as on your ability to improvise scenes when things don't turn out as planned.

When a GM has not mastered the rules of the game, it can create problems at the table. The least of these is that a game can slow down or halt while he has to look up a rule (which might be found in any of several rulebooks). The worst is failing to use a rule correctly in a way that affects the outcome of a scene or session, perhaps resulting in a PC's death.

Knowing the written rules is only half the battle, though. Situations always arise through play that aren't covered in the rules, and in most games and groups the GM is required to act as the arbitrator of the rules and expected to make a ruling to move the game forward. If the GM doesn't fully understand the rules then it's possible for her to make a faulty ruling, which can also have an impact on the session—or even the campaign.

Mastery of the rules is an essential activity for GMs. It develops not in a single sitting, but over the course of many sessions.

Hitting the Books

The first and most fundamental step to mastering the rules is to learn the game by studying the rulebook. While this can be an enjoyable task (and one that I enjoy quite a bit), it is work. You are *studying* the rules of the game.

The type of learner you are will determine the best way for you to learn the rules. For example, a good visual learner may only need a simple reading of the text. There are lots of ways to learn rules, and combining different approaches can be valuable. Here are some of the methods I've used over the years:

- **Learn from an experienced GM/player**—Having someone teach you the game is a good option, but your mastery will only be as good as their understanding of the rules.
- **Actual play**—Seek out podcasts or videos of people playing the game online and watch how they run the game.
- **Play it at a convention**—When I'm learning a game, playing a session of it at a convention helps me learn it better.
- **Make your own GMing screen**—I find that having to go through the book to create the inserts or panels for my GMing screen helps me better understand the mechanics of the game.
- **Read the forums**—When I need insight on a game, I like to post questions to the game's dedicated forum (if it has one; if not, general RPG forums are an option).
- **Find the FAQ/errata**—Often if a game has been out for any length of time, questions about the rules will arise and be brought to the attentions of the designers. Designers will often create a FAQ or errata page, and these can be valuable tools.
- **Social media**—Between Google+ Communities and game designers on Twitter, you may be able to get your questions answered online.

No matter which approach or approaches you use, the end goal remains the same: Know the rules. But what rules do you need to know? In a "typical" traditional RPG, you have to understand the core mechanic of the game and how to make skill checks, and you have to understand the basic combat system. From there, the characters in the game and the structure of your campaign will determine what other rules will play a prominent role in your game (e.g., hacking rules when there's a hacker PC, rules for exposure to cold in a Viking campaign).

Learning is also a continuous process. Once you have read the rules and have a number of sessions under your belt, go back and reread the rules—you may be surprised by what you have missed or misinterpreted. If you're running a long-term campaign, plan on revisiting the rules several times.

Applying Rules at the Table

Once you have a good understanding of the rules, you're prepared to run your game. During the course of the game you will interact with the rules in many ways. There will be common rules that you will use all the time (skill checks, combat, etc), and there will be some rules that may be important for a specific session, like rules for swimming and drowning during an ocean voyage. Finally, there will be rules that you didn't think you would need, but which arise due to player actions.

One of my favorite analogies for GMing is that being a GM is like being a radio DJ. In radio, there's nothing worse than dead air. In GMing, nothing hurts the flow of your game, drains off any tension you're building during a session, or loses your players' attention faster than pausing a session to look something up in the rules. The less that happens, the better.

Looking Up Existing Rules

If you do encounter a situation where you don't know a rule, but you know the rule exists, then take the few moments to search it out in the rulebook. Your mastery of the rules is not only the ability to recall the more common rules, but also the knowledge of where to find rules that you haven't committed to memory. Use that knowledge to home in on that rule and quickly give it a read. (If you use a digital rulebook, use the search function to zero in on the rule.)

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

When There Is No Rule

No matter how many rules your game of choice includes, situations will arise when no rule exists to determine how to adjudicate them. When this happens, you make a ruling a keep the game moving forward.

A ruling, as I learned it from my days of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons®*, is a temporary interpretation of the game rules to resolve a situation not covered by an existing rule. There are two key parts to this definition. The first is that there is no exist-

ing rule—you're coming up with something that has fallen outside the scope of the rules. The second is that the ruling is temporary; it's not a new rule you're adding to the game, but rather a "patch" applied to keep the session going.

A rule, on the other hand, is a permanent mechanic for handling a specific situation. It is applied to that situation every time it comes up in the future. (We'll talk more about house rules shortly.)

To work well, rulings require knowledge of the rules as well as a sense of impartiality. To create a ruling, follow these steps:

1. **Understand what's at stake**—Take a moment to talk to the players involved about what they're trying to accomplish. Knowing their desired result will help you determine what mechanics to use.
2. **Is there an existing rule that covers a similar situation?**—If so, you can then modify that rule and apply it to your situation.
3. **If not, create the ruling from scratch**—If there is no similar existing rule, you'll need to come up with something from scratch. Use the core mechanics of the game, or other already extant elements (e.g., character attributes), as your baseline. The goal is to invent something that feels like the rest of the game, not something novel.

Example 1

A player wants her character to try to make money by gambling for an evening, but the rules for the Gambling skill only address how to play out a single hand.

- **What's at stake?**—The PC wants to make more money than the amount addressed by the Gambling skill.
- **Existing rule?**—Our hypothetical system includes a Performance skill, and its description addresses making money for an evening's work.
- **Solution**—Allow the player to make a Gambling check and use the payout rules from the Performance skill to determine how much money is made.

Example 2

A player wants his character to make money by gambling, but there's no gambling skill in the game.

- **What's at stake?**—The PC's action isn't covered in the rules.
- **Existing rule?**—No, there's no skill for gambling. The ruling will need to be created from scratch.
- **Solution**—The GM determines that the character's Moxie (an attribute in this system) is applicable, and decides that the character can make 25 gold for each success he gets on a Moxie check (building on an existing rule).

The key to making a ruling is coming up with it as quickly as possible, implementing it, and then moving on with the game. Rulings are not perfect—they're temporary, kit-bashed solutions. They're intended to get the game moving again.

Rulings get sticky when the outcome could potentially affect the life or livelihood of one of the PCs. A ruling can evoke strong emotions in a player if she believes that her character's life depends on a quickly-made ruling. If a ruling might have this kind of impact, it's best to ask the player if she's comfortable with the ruling before proceeding. If not, then call a break and use that time to research the rules, check a FAQ online, or otherwise do a bit more homework.

After the Game

Sometimes a ruling is just that: a temporary solution created for a single situation, and not likely to come up again in future sessions. These rulings can be, and are, forgotten after the session. But other rulings are made to address a situation that will come up again in future sessions—for example, in a supers game, a hero might use his power in a new way that requires a ruling. He's likely to want to use the power that way again.

In the latter case, it is time to convert the ruling into a rule—specifically, into a house rule. Because you're not under pressure to keep the game moving (as when making a ruling), you can take more time and do more work on a house rule. In the end, your house rule will be a new rule added to the game, with the expectation that it will be used again in the future.

When creating a house rule, consider the following:

- **Do some research**—Thanks to the Internet, its often easy to get feedback on a situation or a rule you want to make. Things like Google+ Communities or game-related forums allow you access to a large number of GMs and players for the game you're running, many of whom will freely offer advice or their own solutions to your issue. The game's designers may even be involved in the community, and can help clarify rules or discuss house rules.
- **Consider game balance**—Because this house rule is going to stick around, consider how it works in the context of the overall rules, your players, and your campaign. Will the use of this rule create some advantage for the affected PC that makes her too powerful within the context of the game?
- **It doesn't have to be the same as the ruling**—The ruling was just a patch to keep the game going. If after doing some research or working on it on your own, you want to come up with something different than the ruling, that's fine. This is the more thought-out solution.
- **If possible, test it out**—Outside of your normal sessions, give the rule a test drive either on your own or with some players. Tested rules are always more sound than untested ones.

- **Communicate and document**—Once you've created a new house rule, you need to document the rule for future reference. Often when I start a campaign, I create a document of house rules that then gets posted or distributed to the group. In addition, share the new rule with your players so that they're aware of its existence.
- **Be willing to change or kill it**—If after you've run a few more sessions with the house rule you find it's not working, don't be afraid to go back to the drawing board and change (or eliminate) the rule based on that experience.

The Rules Not Found in Any Rulebook

In addition to all the rules within the rulebooks for the game you're running, there are a number of house rules that you may have, or may want to consider developing, that cover topics outside of what's normally addressed in a rulebook. These often revolve around how things work at the table. While they're not critical, nor would their absence impede a game, it can be helpful to have rules regarding these areas:

- **GM dice rolling**—As the GM, are you going to be rolling in the open or behind a screen?
- **Who rolls for hidden checks**—At some tables the GM will ask the player to make a roll; at others, the GM makes rolls for the players in secret.

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

- **GM fudging**—Is the GM allowed to fudge any of the rolls or rules during the game (see below for more detail)?
- **Dice falling off the table**—Does a die that falls off the table get rerolled, or does it count?
- **Cocked dice**—If a die ends its roll leaning on another die, is it rerolled?



These may sound like silly things to address with rules, but when a PC's life is on the line, or a whole battle comes down to one climactic roll, you'll be happy that you have an established table convention for these topics. Not having these rules can lead to tense discussions in the heat of the moment. Creating a house rule for any of these things is no different than creating other house rules; you can follow the same steps discussed above.

Fudging

I shudder to even get into this topic so late in the chapter, but it's one that bears some discussion. Fudging is when the GM bends or ignores the rules in order to accomplish a specific goal. It's also the equivalent of politics and religion in roleplaying circles, so I will tread lightly. To make my own position clear: I have fudged in games in the past, but don't currently fudge. This section will pass no judgment on the practice, but I want to discuss it because it rounds out any discussion on rules in a game.

Breaking Down Fudging

There are several types of fudging that a GM can employ, either individually or in combination:

- **Dice fudging**—Changing or "misreporting" the result of a die roll (e.g., a to-hit roll)
- **Outcome fudging**—Substituting a desired outcome for the actual outcome of a die roll (e.g., succeeding instead of failing at a task)
- **Selectively ignoring rules**—Not uniformly enforcing rules or modifiers in order to make a situation worse/better than it otherwise would be (e.g., letting a monster ignore a penalty for darkness)
- **Hand-waving**—Determining the outcome of a task by GM fiat (e.g., not rolling when a roll would normally be appropriate)

Why Do GMs Fudge?

GMs often fudge to maintain some kind of control over the game. This generally has to do with the GM's expectations for how the session will progress, and it's compounded by games which lack rules that give the GM or the players a way to mitigate unfortunate in-game circumstances. Ultimately, the GM chooses to fudge because an expectation is not met and there is no way to meet that expectation by following the rules.

A GM might fudge for a variety of reasons, including to:

- Avoid disasters (like a TPK)
- Give a player a break (managing frustration)
- Protect a major NPC (plot armor)
- Move the story along (pacing)

Choosing to Fudge

It's best to discuss fudging with your group before the game. If your players are under the assumption that all rolls are above-board, and they discover that from time to time you have fudged rolls or outcomes, they will feel cheated out of their successes. Agreeing on the presence, and the level (including none), of fudging in your game will prevent many potential problems down the road.

If you do fudge, be subtle:

- **Roll behind a screen**—Fudging the occasional outcome is a lot easier if the players don't see your die rolls.
- **The first rule of Fudge Club**—When you fudge a roll, don't tell your players afterwards; it will retroactively lessen their experience.
- **Fudge in favor of the PCs**—As GM you wield all the power you need in opposition to the players, so if you do choose to fudge something then do so in the PCs' favor.

Are You Playing the Right Game?

If you feel the need to constantly fudge rolls and/or outcomes in the game you're running, it's possible you're not playing the best game for your GMing style and group. Some schools of thought say that fudging is a sign that there's a gap between what you want the game to do and how it plays. In essence, fudging closes that gap. Following that school of thought, if you do find yourself fudging often, then take a critical look at the game you're running and ask yourself if you like the experience it creates at the table.

The beauty of the gaming industry at this point in time is that there are thousands of games out there, all of them with different approaches and each creating a different play experience. With some research, and some experimentation, you're likely to find a game that better fits your style.

The GM Rules (And You Can Take That Any Way You Like)

As GMs, we're often called on to be experts in the rules of the game, as well as to use our judgment to make rulings when needed. Our ability to master the rules of the game determines how efficient we will be in this role. With a deep understanding of the rules, we can move scenes along smoothly, as well as be able to use the rules to facilitate a player's action when they've ventured outside the rules as written.

Rules not only cover what's in the game's rulebooks, but also the rules surrounding how we play the game at the table, including whether we choose to always follow the rules or selectively ignore them from time to time. Through a combination of learning, documentation, and communication we can make sure that everyone at the table is playing by the same rules.

Personal Story: What the Hell Is Weapon Speed?

I was only 10 years old when I learned how to play *Dungeons & Dragons®*. As was commonplace in the early 1980s, I learned the game from a friend—in this case, the boy who GMed my game. Unbeknownst to me, he was running a mash-up of *Basic* and *Advanced* D&D, which was not uncommon in those days. He would tell me what to roll and when, but often failed to tell me the rules behind the rolls. Eventually we parted ways, and I took on the mantle of GM—after all, I knew how to play, right?

One year, I got the core books for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons®* for Christmas. Excited, I started to flip through them . . . and suddenly I realized there were whole areas of the game that I didn't know about, things that I was never taught—one of which was weapon speed. I tried to read the AD&D books, but I was 10 and those books were written in High Gygaxian, and weren't easily consumable for elementary school children. So I reverted to the D&D I was taught, and went on to run my *Basic/Advanced* mash-up, and I never did learn what weapon speed was all about.

Over the years, I learned the importance of reading the rules of a game as both a GM and player. While complex rule sets do not come easy to me, I do make the effort to read and learn how to play the game as written.

Challenge—Achievement: Master of the Game

1. Create a scene that utilizes a lesser-used rule so that you can practice your mastery of that rule.
2. Reread an important section of rules before your next session, and see what things you're doing correctly and what things you need to change.
3. Create a cheat sheet either for you or your players regarding a rules-heavy part of the game (e.g., combat).
4. Listen to an actual play podcast for the system you're running to hear how others are playing the game.
5. Engage a user community about a rule of the game that seems unclear, and get clarity from the community.
6. Work with your group to set table rules about dice falling off the table, cocked dice, and the like.

"Okay. I don't see anything in the rules about hacking phones, but these rules weren't written with smart phones in mind. No worries, here's how we are going to do it . . ." Gemma went on to lay out a modification of the extended skill mechanics using the Computers skill. She wasn't sure that was the best way to handle it, but everyone understood the extended skill mechanic and she wanted to keep the game moving.

"Okay, the first check is to connect to the phone, the second one to gain control, and the third to get the music to play. Make sense?" She looked over at Renaldo, who was already scooping up his dice off the table.

"Sure does," Renaldo said. "With a +40 in Computers, this phone is about to be mine." As Patti and Adam looked on, Renaldo rolled his dice.

Agent Remo stood in the park furiously typing on his phone while muttering under his breath. Agents Stone and Sylk slowed their pace and listened intently. Suddenly, Sylk heard a burst of loud polka music coming from the vicinity of a hooded man with a red backpack. The man looked down at his phone in surprise. Sylk pulled her pistol and approached the target.

Chapter 19: Film Crew

The man with the backpack was only the tip of the iceberg, but the team was able to find out from him (through a much better interrogation scene) that the ringleader of the terrorist cell was operating from a warehouse out by the airport. The agents moved in to put an end to this cell once and for all.

There were many things that Gemma liked about this game system, but running large combats was not one of them. Her side of the table was cluttered with an initiative tracker, a row of minis she had yet to put on the battle mat, cards, and a stack of tokens.

"Okay," Gemma said, leaning over the map. "The warehouse is right here. To its left . . ." As she began to describe the scene, the players listened carefully to the description while looking at the map that lay on the table.

The three agents crouched outside the warehouse. It was raining lightly, and their armor was beaded with water droplets. They did a final check of their weapons and reviewed the plan one last time. They were ready to end this threat against the city and bring down the terrorists who were behind this insidious plot. They waited . . . and waited. The three agents kept looking around.

"Hang on," Gemma said. "I'm just getting the initiative organized, and then I need to pass out some cards, and I just want to prep some minis." The players could hear the frustration in her voice as she hastily organized all the components on her side of the table. She fumbled the deck of cards and they cascaded into her chips, which toppled her stack of minis, causing her to drop the initiative tracker.

The three agents simultaneously took a deep breath. They would be waiting in the rain for a bit longer.

You Have a Lot on Your Plate

Let's face facts. When it comes to the number of things you have to do as a GM, the list is pretty long. That list gets longer if you're playing in a system that uses additional materials and play aids to spice up the game. Now you're not only entertaining, guiding a story, and managing the table, you're also juggling cards, chips, battle mats, props, etc. Any time managing those things becomes too much, it can negatively impact your ability to run a smooth-flowing game.

Now look over at those players, each with a single character sheet and a little pile of dice. Perhaps they have a few cards, but not a full deck, and a few chips, but not a stack. What are they doing lounging around while you're running helter-skelter trying to keep all these plates spinning?

It's time to put those players to work and make your game run more efficiently.

Many Hands Make Light Combat (or Work)

Many tasks need to be handled during the course of play, but not necessarily by you. Your most important tasks are to keep the game flowing and the group working together to create an engaging story. Anything outside of that can be delegated to the players to assist with during the course of the session.

Delegation has two key benefits. The first is that it frees you up to focus on the most important things going on in the game. The second is that it gives the players things to do during scenes, especially combat scenes (when things tend to be the most complicated), which helps them stay engaged.

What to Hand Out?

Not every traditional GMing task is appropriate for delegation. In most games, the best activities to delegate are the ones that don't reveal anything about the plot or the status of major NPCs. Good tasks to delegate include, but aren't limited to, the following:

- Cleaning off the battle mat
- Shuffling decks of cards
- Moving miniatures around the map
- Writing out tags on index cards
- Keeping track of initiative
- Helping track conditions during combat

Paying the Crew

Depending on your group, it can be a good idea to give an in-game reward to players who help take tasks off your plate—it's a nice way to say thank you. In most cases, just a few extra experience points, a Benny (in *Savage Worlds*), or the like is more than sufficient. Players will appreciate the in-game reward, and, if given in moderation, it won't disrupt any of the various "economies" of the game.

My first experience with this was in a *Savage Worlds* game run by Sean Patrick Fannon. Sean would find the player who had the fewest Bennies and have them shuffle one of the initiative decks (he used two, one active and one ready to be used next), and give that player a Benny for helping out. This freed Sean up to keep running the game, and the extra Benny for the player who was running low helped to keep them engaged in the game. A win-win.

Delegating Larger GMing Responsibilities

In addition to administrative tasks, it's also possible to delegate bigger things to your players—like elements of the GM's traditional narrative authority. By picking the right tasks, just as with the administrative stuff, you can reduce your workload while engaging your players even more deeply in the game.

Again, the best tasks for delegation are the ones that do not reveal any of the plot or the machinations of major NPCs to the players. There are still plenty of things that fall outside of those parameters, such as:

- Defining NPCs not integral to the main plot
- Describing minor locations
- Describing local customs

In many respects these tasks are improv exercises—like the ones in Chapter 17. When the players encounter a minor NPC, rather than making her up yourself, hand the NPC off to one of the players: "Tell me about this bartender. What makes her stand out?" There are two major benefits to doing this:

- The resulting NPC will likely be outside of your comfort zone, and this will help avoid some of the stock descriptions you (probably) fall back on when describing a minor NPC.
- The player will be more invested in this NPC because he created her. He will be even more invested if you use reincorporation to bring back this NPC at a later date.

As with other types of in-game improvisation, there is a strong need for trust between you and your players involved, particularly in the area of what makes sense in the game world. In a fantasy world without sophisticated technology, it wouldn't make sense if the player described the bartender as having a clockwork arm. Similarly, the player needs to trust that you won't veto his description of the bartender.

Handing off narrative control isn't always easy, nor are all players willing to take on these responsibilities. Discuss this with your players and find out their feelings on the topic, rather than springing this on them cold in the middle of a session. (If some of your players are also GMs, you're likely to find them receptive to this idea.)

When you are ready to try out some of these techniques, incorporate them into early scenes, before the main plot is in full gear. If a player freezes or the narration goes flat, don't let the player flounder—come in and gently take control of the scene and move it forward. As we said in Chapter 17, improvisation is a skill and it improves with practice—don't worry if things don't go perfectly.

Scene Framing

Scene framing is the act of describing the "set," NPCs, and other elements in a scene as the scene begins. It often ends with the question "What do you do?" In many RPGs, scene framing is part of the GM's purview, but it doesn't have to be. If you're not playing a game that already spreads this responsibility around, you can easily shift the framing of some scenes to your players.

If your players are new to this idea, start by providing a list of the elements the scene requires (e.g., where it takes place, who else is there, and what's going on) and letting them take it from there. (Players experienced at scene framing likely won't need this sort of introduction.) For example:

GM: *"You're confronting the Hyena at the hotel where he's hiding out. He's in a suite, and he's not alone. Set the scene for us—how does the confrontation begin?"*

Player: *"He's having breakfast in bed with his lover when I kick in the door. Both men look up at me in surprise as I stride into the room, grab a nearby chair and put it next to the bed. I sit down and say, "Surprised to see me, Hyena?"*

Oftentimes, having a player frame a scene may result in a scene where that player's PC comes across as cool and competent—and that's great. The PCs are the protagonists, and this is just one more opportunity for them to shine.

Close-Ups

Interpreting and narrating the outcome of a die roll—"going in for a close-up," to use a filmmaking analogy—is a fantastic moment to hand narrative control over to a player. For example, "So that's a critical hit. What does it look like?" or "Wow, you totally tanked that Find Traps check. How do you wind up setting off the trap?" If your group is used to you narrating outcomes, this can take a bit of getting used to, but once they're used to it this technique can really deepen everyone's engagement with the game.

Spotlights

Spotlight scenes, those that focus on a particular PC and her growth, are great places to hand narrative control to players. Because these scenes are usually independent of the main plot, giving a player control over scene framing and how the scene plays out is unlikely to affect the overall structure of the session. If necessary, you can prompt the player with a bit of direction and then let him take over (e.g., "You're having lunch at a restaurant when you see a mugging take place outside . . ."). You can also ask other players to take on the roles of NPCs in the scene.

Rules Lawyer Becomes Rules Expert

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I'm not the best at learning and memorizing "crunchy" game rules. They just don't stick well with me. I am blessed because I always game with someone who is a rules savant, who has a wonderful grasp of the core mechanics as well as a large number of ancillary rules. In the past I would struggle to study the rules over and over to gain mastery over them so that I could make sure that the players were not trying to skirt any rules, and that we were playing properly. I would also shut down the player who knew the rules well, labeling them as a "rules lawyer," when they noted things that I was doing wrong.

There's a limit to how well you can know the rules, though, and to how much time you can devote to rules mastery alongside all of your other GMing duties. So instead of taking offense at a "rules lawyer," put them to work for you. Make them the czar of the rules, the oracle that everyone in the group can turn to when they need to know something about how the game system works. Establish that if someone breaks a rule (likely unintentionally), the rules expert will politely mention it so that the rule can be followed correctly.

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

Co-GMing

The ultimate delegation of GMing duties is to actually share the role of GM with another person, which is usually referred to as "co-GMing." This is a pretty rare practice, but there are those that have found this arrangement to greatly enhance the games they're running. Since this chapter is dedicated to delegating GMing responsibilities, we'll finish it out by exploring this GMing style.

Two GMs, One Screen

In a nutshell, co-GMing is when two people split the GM role. In my 30-plus years of gaming, I have only ever heard of this being done with two GMs, but I'm sure that somewhere out there is a group that's done it with three or more GMs. We'll focus on the idea of two people filling the GM's role, but many of these principles can be extended to cover additional co-GMs.

There are a few different ways that the two GMs can delegate their duties. Here are some of the ways I've seen it done.

Narrative vs. Combat

In this configuration, one GM handles all the story and non-combat scene narration, including NPC dialog, while the other GM manages all aspects of combat scenes. This split typically arises in games with complex combat systems, where a single combat can take hours to play out. The "narrative GM" can keep the story moving, while the "combat GM" adjudicates the players' actions and plays the monsters/NPCs in the battle.

Game vs. NPCs

One GM handles everything except running NPCs (including overall narration and combat scenes), and the other GM handles only the NPCs. This arrangement works well in games where there are numerous NPCs for the PCs to interact with. Often the NPC GM has an acting background, and is someone who enjoys portraying a wide range of characters.

Split Brains

Two GMs work in concert, but they each run separate groups. Each GM is responsible for running the game for their group, but the sessions are designed in such a way that both groups are playing in the same story and the actions of one group affect the other. There may be cases where the two groups come together, or when players "swap" groups. This configuration works when you have a large number of players and a complex story. It requires a free flow of information between the GMs, so that each can relay the other group's actions to their group.

Spotlight and Behind the Scenes

One GM runs the sessions, and the other GM—in part or in whole—manages the entire campaign and preps the sessions. During play, the "behind the scenes GM" may just hang back and watch the session while passing notes to the "spotlight GM" to provide feedback and advice on how the story should proceed. Alternately, she may take on another, separate GMing role at the table—likely one of the co-GMing roles outlined in this section. This setup works well when one GM is less comfortable behind the screen but is full of adventure and campaign ideas.

Even Split

Finally, there are pairs of GMs who just split the role in some sort of organic way, not really following any one of the above models (or employing some kind of hybrid of more than one co-GMing arrangement). This configuration tends to be unique to the two specific GMs involved.

Implementing the Co-GM

If you're going to co-GM with someone else in the group, it's best to set that up at the beginning of the campaign—or, to test the waters, as part of a specific story arc or even for a one-shot. Co-GMing is something that should be discussed with the whole group before the first session.

Before you start the game, the two GMs need to determine what co-GMing configuration they're going to use and define their respective responsibilities. This is critical to making co-GMing work: You don't want the GMs to stumble over responsibilities at the table, creating confusion and delaying the game.

The Advantages of the Co-GM

There are a number of reasons you might want to consider a co-GM, whether for a session or for a campaign, including:

- **Double the creativity**—Two minds generate more (and more varied) ideas, enriching your sessions and campaigns.
- **Compensate weak areas**—The GMs can fill in for each other's weaknesses, making the overall GMing stronger than if either GM were on his own.
- **Manage larger groups**—With two GMs, you can run larger groups and allow them to play in separate scenes
- **Manage more complex campaigns**—For those really complex campaign concepts, having another GM to help manage the story can help to ensure success.

The Downside to the Co-GM

Of course, there are a few downsides (or at least potential downsides) as well, including:

- **Increased communication**—With two people working on the campaign, there is the need for a dedicated channel of communication between the two GMs.
- **Compromise**—With more than one idea and opinion about most things, there will be times when you don't agree on an idea and you will need to compromise to reach an agreement.
- **Prep will take longer**—The need for communication and the potential of having to compromise on ideas will lengthen game prep.
- **Depleting the player pool**—If you don't have a large group of players, then taking one away to be a co-GM reduces the number of available players.

Helping Out

The job of GM is multifaceted, and sometimes you can use a hand managing all the things that are going on at the table. Luckily, there's a group of people around that very table who can help. By sharing GMing responsibilities with your players, you are freed up to handle the more critical aspects of the role. Beyond simple tasks, you can also turn over greater authority to players in the areas of scene and NPC creation, among others. And if it works for your group, you can extend this all the way to full-on co-GMing.

Delegation is best done in small increments. Give up a thing here and there, and soon you will have players framing scenes and creating NPCs, giving you more mental bandwidth to keep your table focused and creating better and better games.

Challenge—Achievement: Manager

1. Distribute some of your minor tasks to your players, such as initiative tracking.
2. Ask a player to create an NPC, location, or other background element during the course of the game.
3. Ask a player to frame a scene during the game.
4. Ask a player to describe a critical success (or failure) during the game.
5. Ask a player to run a spotlight scene.
6. Co-GM a single session.

Personal Story: My First Encounter with Big Irish

Years ago, I attended Con on the Cob, a regional convention in Northern Ohio known for having a large *Savage Worlds* contingent. I was told we needed to play in a game of *Shaintar* run by its creator, Sean Patrick Fannon ("Big Irish"). I had not signed up for the event, but was told by my friends not to worry, Sean would fit us in. When I walked into the room there were 15 other people there! Sean quickly introduced himself and gave me a pile of pre-gens from which to choose my character. The main table in the room was a group of eight veteran players, all of whom were *Savage World* experts. They were involved in a long and complex combat.

Sean then took all the new players and put them at another table on the side of the room. He selected one of the experts, broke them off from the main table, and had them run the combat at our table. Sean laid out the general story, provided the expert with the NPC stats, and then let them manage our combat as he bounced between tables overseeing both combats. All the while he had players shuffling decks of cards, moving miniatures on the giant tables, and handling other parts of the game.

Eventually both tables came together in one 15-person climatic battle. During the battle the expert players helped to advise the newer players on their turns, answering questions and explaining rules. It was a lot to manage, and it worked because of how Sean delegated the work to the Savages involved.

Artist: Elizabeth Porter

Adam moved the initiative tracker down a notch. "Your turn, Sylk".

Agent Sylk sprinted from the pile of boxes she'd been using as cover and chased after the Hyena. Agents Stone and Remo moved to cover her as the other terrorists moved to intercept Sylk.

"Move the terrorist up three more squares and two to the left," Gemma said to Renaldo, who was in charge of moving minis. "That gives them all an open shot." Once the minis were in place, Gemma said, "Now to open fire. Patti, roll to evade."

Patti rolled for Agent Sylk. "100!" Adam and Renaldo cheered, and even Gemma smiled.

Gemma said, "Okay, Patti, describe for us how Sylk avoids the hail of bullets from all three shooters."

"Well, Sylk starts running . . ."

Agent Sylk runs in a low crouch as a hail of bullets sails over her head. She then cuts sharply to the left as the next burst misses her, and finally she slides on the concrete floor, tripping the Hyena and knocking him to the floor as the last burst tears into the crates above their heads. She puts her gun against the back of the Hyena's head and tells him not to move.

Agents Stone and Remo pop up from cover and open fire, taking down the remaining terrorists. Once again, disaster has been averted. All in a night's work for Agents Sylk, Stone, and Remo.

Conclusion

In GMing, there's nothing more important than running a good game. You can have the fastest, shortest, or most elaborate prep, but it won't matter unless you can run a good game. You can have the most intricate campaign idea, with plot twists and intertwined story arcs, but that doesn't matter if you can't run a good game.

The Game Session Is Where It All Happens

Running a good game is no easy feat. It's not a single skill that you can practice over and over until you master it. Rather, it's a group of disciplines, each with their own skills that must be mastered. For most of us it takes years to master enough of those skills just to be considered a good GM.

Being a GM Is Hard Work

There's no single path to being a great GM. Rather, you have to discover what you need along the way. That discovery comes in the wake of playing games and managing campaigns—the good ones *and* the bad ones, from those high points when the table breaks out in cheers at the completion of a challenging story arc, to the crushing, silent frustration of a session gone all wrong.

Wisdom Is Never Gained Easily

Overt time, as you run games, you create a toolbox of skills that allow you to GM with confidence. You may pick up a knack for crafting moving soundtracks. You might develop a great sense of timing to end your games on a cliffhanger. Or you may discover how to get a group of players to cooperate and move the story forward.

Our Tools Come from the Games We Run

As your GM career continues, your needs change in the same way that your games change. Skills you once relied on are no longer as useful, and you find yourself looking for new skills to add to your collection. As GMs, we're constantly striving to run a better game than the last one.

The Best GMs Always Work to Be Better

The goal of *Focal Point* was to take a tour through the three disciplines of GMing, and break them down to show the essential skills and activities. Like *Never Unprepared* and *Odyssey* before it, our goal was to give names to those skills and activities so that you could find the things you wanted and needed, and focus on their development.

We hope that as you read this book you found ways to sharpen some of your existing skills or some new tricks to add to the table, and discovered some skills you didn't have that you want to add to your repertoire.

Reading Is Not Enough

Now, take what you learned and use it at the table. Use these skills to create memorable games for you and your players at every session, and inspire others to become great GMs.

Game well.

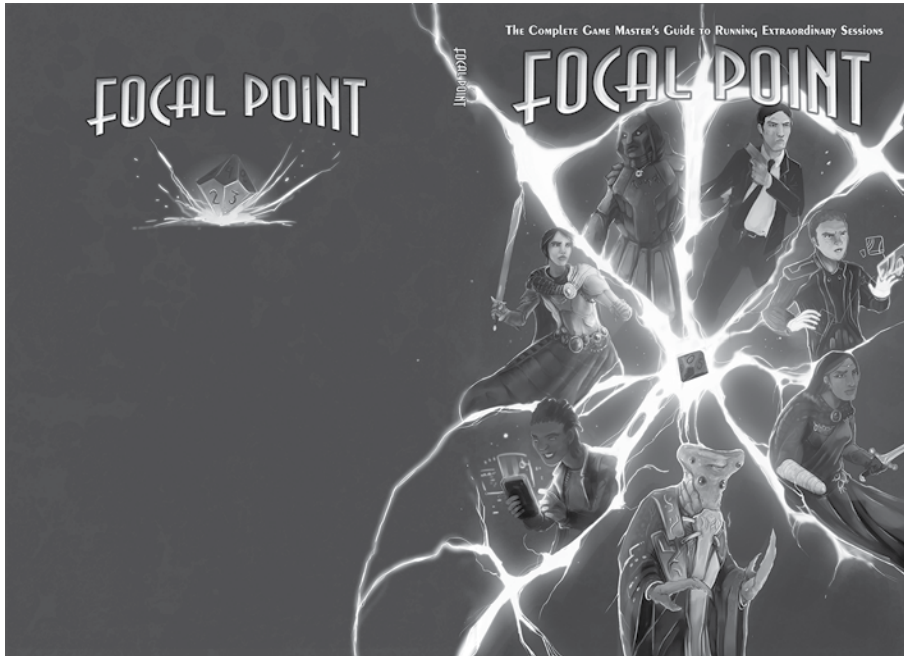
Phil, Walt, and John

About the Artwork: A Fortuitous Hat Trick

Focal Point is the third book in a semi-unplanned trilogy of GMing advice books, the first two being *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep* and *Odyssey: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management* (both from Engine Publishing), and I have been fortunate enough to be the art director for the entire series. Phil Vecchione was the driving force behind this trilogy, bringing Walt Ciechanowski and myself on as authors for each subsequent book. In my role as art director, I want to point out something you may not have realized: the conjunction of the red d10. (I'd also like to say thanks to The Guardtower in Columbus, Ohio, for use of props and permission to photograph there.)

As you gaze at the cover of *Focal Point*, you sit in the seat of a player, looking at a die that has been cast onto the table. It represents all the electricity and mayhem of a game in the midst of being run with every character, PC or NPC, in motion or about to act. This is the living and dynamic world of the session, jointly crafted by the players and the GM and tied together by the game itself.

Count back a second in the timeline of the red die and flip to the back cover of this book, and you'll see the die from the GM's perspective, just rolled and beginning to explode. Here it represents that moment between planning and execution, just after the GM has put something into play.

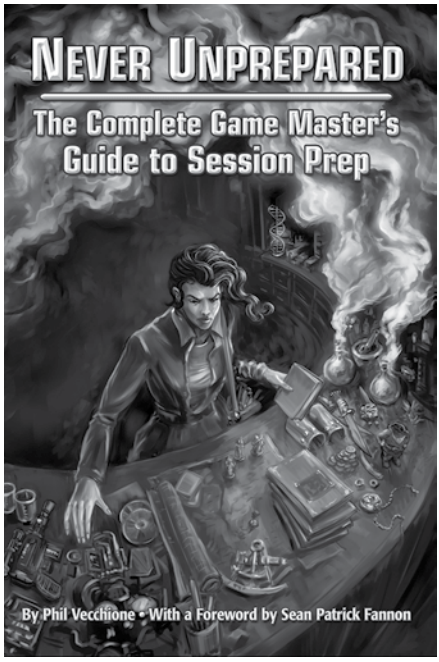


Move back along the timeline a bit further and you'll see the cover of *Odyssey*. Gemma, the GM, sits there with the red die in hand, her beautifully crafted and organized campaign plans in her head and ready to put before the players.

Stretch even farther back in time to the cover of *Never Unprepared*, and you'll find yourself in a scene directly out of Gemma's imagination. A character of Gemma's, Alia Tholk—a reality explorer—is prepping for an adventure. Standing at a table of game elements real and imagined, Alia is gathering her tools from the chaos and preparing to create unique worlds—and on that table is a red die that ties everything together. Lined up on your bookshelf, the covers form a complete narrative that represents every GM's personal journey when running a game.

It starts with the order-from-chaos world of prep, progresses to our beautifully crafted and intricate campaign ideas that are destined to be shredded to pieces, and finally ends with the mixture of planning and improvisation that is the chaotic electricity of each session. Like any great gaming experience, the covers were a mixture of planning, blind luck, and adapting to the situation on the fly that led to this wonderful synergy and narrative.

Thank you for sharing this journey of GMing with us. Next time you pick up your lucky red die to roll for an NPC, think of these covers, everything it took to get to this one moment of the die roll, the moment when your players' imaginations and yours will meet and spark something wonderful—because it is those shared moments, full of electricity and mayhem, that keep us GMing.



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Contributor Bios

John Arcadian is a freelance author, blogger, and art director in the tabletop gaming industry with many awards under his belt. John writes gaming advice at the multiple ENnie award winning site *GnomeStew.com* as well as books and gaming content for companies like Engine Publishing, Cubicle 7, Silvervine Games, Savage Insider, Open Game Table and many others. When not gaming or writing about gaming, John builds websites and creates videos, paints miniatures, builds custom sonic screwdrivers, hikes in the woods, and generally causes havoc in his kilt. You can find a complete list of publications and his personal blog at *JohnArcadian.com*.

Walt Ciechanowski wasn't deterred by *Mazes and Monsters* and has been a game master for over 30 years. Forced to "play outside" during his early years, Walt has developed a Wing It style that relies heavily on roleplay. A LARP survivor, he's been working in the RPG industry since 2003 and is currently a line developer for Cubicle 7 Entertainment. Walt lives in Springfield, Pennsylvania with his wife Helena and three children, Leianna, Stephen, and Zoeanna.

Robert M. Everson, aka "Spenser," is an Epic Level Proofreader and Editor for the bloggers at Gnome Stew. He's been gaming for over 30 years, has a voracious appetite for reading, and is currently finalizing one of his own game designs that he hopes to have published in the not-too-distant future. This marks the fifth book in his longtime collaboration with Engine Publishing.

Darren Hardy is a web and print designer enjoying life in Midland, MI. He enjoys hiking, kayaking, cooking, gaming, and helping others with their projects. He's looking forward to upcoming adventures and quality time with family and friends.

David L. Johnson is an ENnie-nominated illustrator and designer from Missoula, Montana. He's illustrated for Pelgrane Press on the *Trail of Cthulhu*, *Fear Itself*, and *Night's Black Agents* games, as well as slung pencils and inks for a variety of old school games like *Scarlet Heroes* and *Strange Stars*. Additionally, David has worked as a concept artist for the Jan Woletz Group, as the sole artist and cartographer for *Slumbering Ursine Dunes*, and published his own gonzo retroclone module, *Grandpappy Cromdar's Whizbang Zoo!* When not making art, David can be found soaking in remote mountain hot springs.

Avery Liell-Kok is a painter and artist. A longtime RPG player and character doodler with a fine art and art history background, she got bored of illustrating all of her fellow gamers' games for free and began seeking gainful employment. She lives in Indiana with her fiancé.

Daniel Milne: Str 3, Dex 11, Con 10, Cha 13, Wis 15, Int 15. Solitary Creature, appears as an indistinguishable man in his late 20s. Most commonly found in Salt Lake City, this creature is known to voraciously devour video games and roleplaying books with equal zealousness. Sudden bright light (such as sunlight) will disorient for 1d4 rounds. Takes double damage from cats and card games.



Matt Morrow has been creating illustrations professionally since 1996. He worked for a computer magazine as an in-house illustrator until 1999, where he crafted hundreds of editorial illustrations. Since then, Matt has been juggling being a stay at home dad with three great kids and working on freelance projects in various areas such as newspapers, children's books, and RPGs, drawing subjects from hedgehogs to zombies. You can find a portfolio of his work at *www.facebook.com/mattmorrowart*.

Gumshoe whistleblower reporter hero? A narcissistic antagonist out for blood? Fall-guy for a horrifying nanite invasion? Sleeper agent for extraplanar feline intelligence? The FACTS on **Juan Ochoa**: He is a straight-dealing, smooth-lined, grit-teethed artist, twainsplit mirror-master-magician-carouser-cavorter, and noted wizard, with knowledge bilingual, exotic, and esoteric, who theoretically does most of his thinking in Español. Find him at *www.juanochoa.co*.

Elizabeth Porter is a compulsive doodler currently found in the wilds of Alberta. She can often be found working on making images of imaginary places and inhabitants when she is not being distracted by birds. You can reach her at *snowbringer@gmail.com*.

Martin Ralya got his start in the RPG industry in 2004 as a freelance writer, with 25 published credits for Goodman Games, Paizo Publishing, and others. He has written over 1,200 GMing articles on *TreasureTables.org* and *GnomeStew.com*. Martin founded Engine Publishing in 2009, and now works as a writer, designer, editor, and publisher; *Focal Point* is Engine Publishing's sixth book. His work has won multiple ENnie Awards and been nominated for ENnies, Golden Geeks, and an Origins Award. Martin lives in Utah with his awesome wife, Alysia, amazing daughter, Lark, and nutty dog, Wicket, in a house full of games.

Don't let the tough-guy image fool you; **Kurt Schneider** really does have a soft nerdy core. He's been gaming since the first time disco was cool, is a once and (hopefully) future contributor to the game mastering blog *GnomeStew.com*, regularly contributes to a number of gaming forums and mailing lists under the nom de keyboard Telas or TelasTX, and is a contributing author for Engine Publishing's books *Eureka*, *Masks*, and *Unframed*. He currently resides outside Austin, Texas with his wife and three children.

Phil Vecchione began blogging in 2008 as one of the founders of the award-winning *GnomeStew.com* GMing blog. As a member of Gnome Stew he has written numerous articles on all facets of GMing over the years. As an author, Phil is one of the leading writers in the area of GMing advice. His work through Engine Publishing has earned a Gold ENnie, as well as multiple ENnie and Golden Geek nominations and an Origins Award nomination. Phil is also a podcaster, a freelance game designer, and owner of Encoded Designs.

FOCAL POINT

The heart of roleplaying is the **gaming session**, that point when everyone is gathered around the gaming table—and exactly when so many of your game mastering skills are most needed. To the best of our knowledge, there's never been a system-neutral book focused on running great sessions. Until now. ***Focal Point: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Running Extraordinary Sessions*** is that book.

Focal Point is the third volume in Engine Publishing's "accidental trilogy" of game mastering advice books, which began with *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's to Session Prep* and continued in *Odyssey: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management*. You don't need those books to enjoy and make use of this one, although they do complement each other well. ***Focal Point* is a standalone guide to running great game sessions**.

Each of *Focal Point*'s award-winning authors—Phil Vecchione, Walt Ciechanowski, and John Arcadian—is a veteran GM with years of experience, and each of them excels at a particular aspect of game mastering. John is an **entertainer**, a GM who loves props and drawing his players into the game world. Walt is a **storyteller**, an adventure-writer who makes his living in the RPG industry. Phil is a **facilitator**, an organized GM who specializes in helping his players work well together.

These three roles—entertainer, storyteller, and facilitator—are at the core of *Focal Point*. From building "sets" for your gaming table, to using flowcharts to structure your adventures, to making sure everyone in your group feels comfortable during play, this guidebook addresses everything that goes into running an extraordinary gaming session.

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