

7 Ways to Instantly Improve Your GMing



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Introduction

The following tips and advice is aimed at game masters looking to improve their craft. We can always be a better GM, even if we grey hairs have been running games for decades.

In this PDF you will find great techniques for becoming a better GM. You can apply them instantly to your games, but some will take awhile to master.

Have patience. Try to introduce one new technique and take a couple of sessions to get a feel for it and explore its boundaries. Then grab another technique and try it on for size.

I hope you find the advice herein useful and applicable. If you've signed up to the Roleplaying Tips email, expect more such great advice to come your way.

If you are not subscribed, it's free and you can get more information about the GM tips email at:

<http://www.roleplayingtips.com/signup/>

If you find ways to extend or improve these techniques, please [drop me an email!](#) I'd love to share your learnings with your fellow game masters.

Now, onto the tips!

- Johnn Four, July 2012

Technique I: Improve Your Voice

Your voice has more influence during sessions than any other game element.

Think about that for a moment. This is a major GMing trait we're talking about here that has power over whether your game is fun.

For example, consider these things that need your good, strong timbre at the game table:

- ◇ Describing people, places and things, plus the action
- ◇ Roleplaying NPCs
- ◇ Discussing the rules and making judgments
- ◇ Directing the game
- ◇ Offering praise and feedback
- ◇ Managing combat

And that's only a partial list!

But those voice-based items make up a huge portion of your game's content and its quality.

If you have poor voice and speech skills, your sessions will suffer for it.

How to Develop a Strong Voice

A rich voice gives you confidence. It's a bootstrap thing.

When you speak, people listen. That attention gives you influence.

At the game table, this takes the form of:

- ◇ Players paying attention and listening to you
- ◇ Players respecting you more
- ◇ Better NPC roleplaying
- ◇ Better game direction and management
- ◇ More GMing confidence

Speak From the Diaphragm

Your diaphragm is located right beneath your lungs.

When we speak from our lungs, instead of our diaphragm, our voice raises in pitch and gets thinner.

Learn how to use your diaphragm to speak with more power, timbre and effect.

Step 1. Practice Deep Breaths

Our first goal is to figure out where the diaphragm is and how to fill it with air.

Once you know how it feels through breathing exercises, you'll know when you're doing it right when GMing.

Take several, slow, deep breaths. Breath in deeply through your nose and push out your stomach/mid-section as you inhale.

Don't stick your upper chest out as you intake air. That's not your diaphragm. And don't stick your tummy out either.

The diaphragm cavity lies between your stomach and lungs and that's what should "take in the air."

Here's a four minute video I found on YouTube that demonstrates this:

<http://www.roleplayingtips.com/url/rpt546iaphragmaticcreathing>

The first several times I did this I was not used to it and there was a little discomfort, so I did not breathe as deeply.

Keep at it and the area will relax and strengthen over time.

Step 2. Practice Speaking From The Diaphragm

At first, doing this is a bit like patting the top of your head with one hand and rubbing your tummy in circles with the other, at the same time.

The brain isn't used to the coordination of speaking and diaphragm use, so you need to train it. We're developing a new skill!

Breathe in and fill your diaphragm.

Then speak out loud while putting a little squeeze pressure on your diaphragm.

I think of it as tensing my stomach for an incoming punch or tickle while speaking.

You will need to try this a few times before getting it right.

This video describes it another way - using your lower voice register:

<http://www.roleplayingtips.com/url/rpt546projectyourvoice>

When I do it, my voice does not drop so much as become subtly deeper. This makes it project further and it becomes a bit fuller.

You might not notice a huge difference either. Record yourself and have someone observe - they'll confirm the difference even if you do not notice it and are wondering if this is still worth doing.

Make it a habit to always speak from your diaphragm. It is worth doing. Your muscles will build in that area and it will get

much easier and feel more natural over time.

Try speaking from your diaphragm at game sessions and let me know your experiences.

Speak Clearly

Mumblers frustrate listeners. Mumbling also damages your self-confidence because it repels your audience and you pick up on these signals and feel worse for it.

As a great GM, you want to speak clearly so you are heard, understood and confident.

To do this, slow down.

Remember that what you say is critical to the gameplay experience.

It's more important to be understood and enjoyed as a speaker than it is to rush through what you have to say to save time.

You might also be shy, and want to speak faster to get what you have to say over with.

In either case, you need to slow down to the point where it feels like you're speaking too slow, and get used to that feeling with practice.

If you feel like you're speaking too slow, you've reached a good pace. It will feel weird at first, but your players will appreciate it!

Pick up a book and read a passage out loud. Then read it again slower. Slow your reading until you hit that point where it feels awkward.

Read more at this rate for at least five minutes. Read to a mirror if you need an audience. :)

Now summarize what you just read without looking at the text. Your reading speed is slower than speaking speed. Once you

get a feel for your ideal speed from reading out loud, switch to speaking without reading.

An easy way to do that is summarize the passage you just read, to give you something immediate to talk about. Repeat until you achieve that slower pace.

Once you've got your desired pace nailed down and you feel more comfortable with it, go talk to someone. Match your slower pace during the conversation.

It'll feel weird, trust me.

If you want to test, get that book passage and read it out loud to someone at your normal pace. Then read it again at your slow target pace. Ask them which speed they prefer. And ask them if your enunciation and inflection was better at the slower rate.

By speaking slower, you give your tongue and brain more time to form words.

End mumbling by speaking slowly.

Pause More Often

Filler words erode the effectiveness of your speech.

Um, so, but, like, you know - these are all fillers. You use them to buy a fraction of time to figure out what you're saying.

These extra noises just put off your audiences.

Instead, you want to replace them with pauses.

Like the other techniques, this will feel weird at first.

You have to practice until it feels comfortable, because it does make you a better GM.

First, you need to become aware of what your special filler words are and how often you use them.

Each of us uses a different combo of fillers in different amounts.

For example, I say "ah" and "so" most often. "Like", "you know" and "um" not so much.

Record yourself GMing. Replay a few minutes of the session afterward, and record how often you use each filler word. Add any other expressions you use that I haven't listed here, as well.

You might be surprised how often you fill your speech with these crummy words. Notice how you make less of an impact when using them? It's time to change this bad behaviour.

Next, pick one word. Focus on removing it from your speech as a filler word.

For example, I'm focusing on "so" right now. It's ok to use it as part of a normal sentence, because it is a real word. But I want to get rid of its use as filler.

Just being aware and targetting one word at a time should improve your speech.

In the word's place, use silence. Just pause. Form your next thought. Carry on.

Extended silence is awkward. Aim for a second or less pause most of the time. That should be long enough to move onto your next thought without needing a filler word.

Longer pauses are ok, especially when used for dramatic effect. But in our case here - standard GMing speaking - use shorter pauses.

In turn, as you eliminate each filler word and use pauses, your voice will improve because players will hear and understand you better.

Improve your GM voice by speaking from the diaphragm, slowing down and ridding yourself of filler words.

These three techniques will let your voice and speech come through clearly:

- ◇ Deeper voice that projects
- ◇ Articulate your consonants better
- ◇ Pronounce all syllables in each word
- ◇ End mumbling through articulate speech
- ◇ Be more confident

Keep recording yourself to measure progress and pick the next thing you want to improve about your voice.

Technique II: The Game Master as Public Speaker

People fear speaking in public more than they do dying. Even though game mastering is not quite the same as public speaking, I admit I still feel a twinge of nervousness each time I GM a new group or start GMing again after a hiatus.

I think it's of great value to view game mastering as a form of public speaking and for you to always look for ways to improve your public speaking – or game master oratory – skills.

Here are three easy and effective public speaking tips to add impact to your sessions:

Make Eye Contact

Look your players in the eye to make them feel connected to you and to draw them into your game.

You can also do this to help distracted players refocus. For example, you are describing something and a player is fiddling with his cell phone. So you aim your description at them until you get their attention. Once you've got that, you make eye contact for a moment – looking directly into their eyes, not at their eyes or faces – and then move onto another player.

The distracted player will now be focused and stay that way because of the eye contact. It's magic and it works.

This example brings up a good point. Do not be too intense with your eye contact. That comes across as creepy.

Avoid too much intensity by keeping direct eye contact short (a second or two) and by making your facial expression neutral or friendly.

Use Gestures

Make purposeful hand, face and body gestures to add colour to your words. Gestures increase your own energy and enthusiasm, as well as bring your stories to life.

Hand gestures are easy.

Step 1: Drop what they are holding.

Step 2: Unlock them. (Sometimes we get in the habit of holding our hands.)

Step 3: Get them out of your pockets.

Ok. Now your hands have nowhere to go. It should feel less awkward to start gesturing with them now than it is to leave them hanging there.

Stand up when possible. This gives your hands more range of motion.

A killer use of hands is during descriptions. Hopefully your descriptions are full of action. When describing action, use your hands to act things out.

Another great use of hand gestures is to show sense of proportion (the thing is this big!) and relationships (the things are this far apart).

Pointing works too. Point at players to get or keep their attention. This works especially well when roleplaying NPCs.

Be Enthusiastic

Your enthusiasm will raise the energy level at the whole table. Enthusiasm is infectious, so lead the way.

Use voice volume. Speaking loud at key moments drives energy into people. Add inflection and modulation to your voice for texture that makes you more interesting to listen to.

As game sessions go on, it's too easy to sit back in your chair, slouch your shoulders and bury your head in books and charts.

By using eye contact, gestures and enthusiasm, you will add a whole new level of ongoing energy that your players will bounce back to you. Your GMing will have much more impact and everyone will have a great time.

Technique III: Top 5 Ways to More Compelling Encounters

I believe encounters (some GMs also call them scenes) are the workhorses of roleplaying.

Campaigns are simply the sum total of all the individual encounters you plan and play out.

Therefore, if you make every encounter an exciting, memorable event, you will have a stellar campaign.

Here are several ways to make easy tweaks to your encounters for maximum excitement and enjoyment.

1. Choose a Compelling Location

Encounters become boring if they all take place on wide city streets, in the middle of a plain or in 10 foot wide corridors.

For example, place the scene on the edge of a cliff, in a beautiful garden, on a rickety bridge or beside a raging river.

2. Mix-Up the Weather A Bit

Is it always bright and sunny? Change the weather every so often to very cold, extremely hot, windy, foggy, hailing or a fine scotch mist.

How does the weather assist or impede the characters' actions? Also under the weather category can be placed such things as rainbows, northern lights and ball lightning!

3. Alter the Lighting

Dusk, dark, too bright, glowing red, strobing colors. While different lighting can affect game mechanics and character actions, it can also be used subtly to make the encounter interesting.

4. Change the Footing

Just like lighting, you can change the ground so it helps or hinders the party.

You can also use it to make the encounter stick in your players' minds for a long time to come: loose gravel, mud, sand, puddles, deep moss, pot holes, slime....

5. Put the Reward on the End of a Stick

It's fun hiding treasure to making characters hunt to find it. The sense of discovery delivers story reward.

But try putting the reward or treasure in plain sight on occasion to provide extra and immediate character motivation.

For example, hang the treasure from the ceiling out of arm's reach, put it at the bottom of a clear pool, have the foe wear it or use it, put writing on the wall for all to see "Here Be Treasure".

Then put something in between the characters and their displayed reward and watch the fur fly.

6. Hit Them with Several Challenges

Put more than one challenge, foe or conflict into the encounter and hit the party from all sides.

Panic is a result of feeling overwhelmed. Allowing the players to focus on just one challenge at a time will not overwhelm them, so add additional simultaneous challenges to create panic:

- ◇ Multiple foes (i.e. another foe drawn in by the sounds of battle)
- ◇ Impending doom (i.e. the ceiling's slowly dropping)
- ◇ Impending calamity (i.e. she's tied to a log that's headed straight for the screaming saw blade)
- ◇ Cut-off the party's escape
- ◇ Add a time limit (i.e. return before sundown or...)
- ◇ Add bad weather, bad footing and bad lighting!

We all fall into habits. And we are also pressed for time to fully flesh things out.

Use these simple encounter enhancement tricks mid-game to add immediate interest to encounters. Your players will think you're a genius GM.

Technique IV: 5 Tips to Creating a Truly Evil Villain

Your players must hate your villains. Nurturing this emotion makes your stories stickier than crazy glue. Once your group gets a good hate on, things get exciting for everyone!

Here are five ways you can get your players to despise your villains.

1. Numerous, Non-Lethal Attacks

My new villain does not have the resources to completely wipe out the character party and still keep her other plots and plans going. So, like the mosquito, she is going to use many non-lethal attacks upon exposed areas to drive the characters as far away as possible.

Examples of her intended attacks?

- ◇ Use her minions to destroy weaker allies (i.e. those 0 level villagers the characters seem to love so much)
- ◇ Attack the henchmen so the party must carry its own stuff
- ◇ Prevent the PCs from getting rest (and therefore healing) at night (e.g., strange noises, ambushes, forest fires...)
- ◇ Have minions target equipment, such as sundering weapons and armour and breaking potions
- ◇ Use of the [Bestow Curse](#) spell

2. Expected Surprise Attacks

Meaning, the players will know she's out there, but they won't know when or where her next attack will be until she's already drawn a pint of blood.

More examples:

- ◇ Bribe immoral villagers and friends to betray the PCs
- ◇ Spread nasty rumours about the characters so they cannot convalesce in nearby villages or towns (e.g., they carry the plague, murderous troublemakers, seeking young daughters for wives)
- ◇ Send sneaky minions to poison the PCs' food
- ◇ Endear herself to the PCs' friends and family
- ◇ Planting cursed magic items where the PCs will find them and think they've won the jackpot

3. Make the PCs Do Things They Don't Want To

How many of us enjoy slopping on Off!, Deet and other chemicals to protect ourselves from mosquitoes? Or what about sitting inside behind screen doors on hot summer nights?

My villain is going to earn the party's eternal enmity just by forcing them to change their plans, modify their behavior and do things they don't want to.

Examples:

- ◇ Block paths and roads with fallen trees
- ◇ Flood the PCs' village by damming a nearby river
- ◇ Make the PCs check all food and provisions for tampering
- ◇ Save the Princess or the innkeeper's daughter – but not able to do both

4. Create an Annoying Itch Afterwards

Imagine how you would feel if your worst enemy performed some heroic deed and saved the day, and all you heard afterwards is how “so and so is such a great person” and how “so and so is so brave and beautiful”?

What would you do if you found your trusty steed has been permanently marked or branded with insults about you?

It wouldn't take much for my villain to cast a single spell and shape the stone of a local mountain into a likeness of herself to remind everybody how great she is.

That would itch!

5. Lethal Danger to the PCs Without Risk to the Villain

Mosquitoes potentially carry deadly diseases. That element of risk turns them into true villains.

And so what if you kill one? There's a thousand more with empty bellies buzzing closer....

It's the same with my new villain. She has a small horde of minions whose lives she is perfectly willing to throw away while making the PCs' lives miserable.

She has also done her research and knows it is against the morality of the PCs to kill her in cold blood.

The Last Straw

My villain also has a reverse disguise. She is herself in public, but hides her identity before her minions and victims. That means none of her crew can betray her identity, and the PCs will

have no reason to attack her in public – they can't prove she's the villain.

In addition, her style is to work in the background and let her flunkies do her dirty work. She can therefore live in the same village as the PCs, go to the same parties and flaunt her presence without risk of retaliation. That's GM evilness!

So, while the PCs will suspect her as the clues build up about her identity, they won't be able to act directly against her in good conscience and without the wrath of the PCs' allies and neutrals in the area.

Meantime, in public she's an irritating rival who steals the spotlight and puts the PCs in tricky situations. And in private she's an evil villain who threatens the PCs and all that they hold dear.

It's like it's Christmas for me because I get two villains the PCs hate for the price of one!

Technique V: 10 Ways to Surprise Your Players & Enjoy the Fun

We love fun surprises. Gifts and perks are nice thrill. Besides, we all like to be appreciated, right?

If you show appreciation for your players and gratitude for taking time out of their day to game with you, group morale will go through the roof.

And a happy group = great gaming!

Here are 10 ideas for surprising your players and showing your appreciation.

1. **Snacks.** Give them each a chocolate bar, homemade cookies or tasty treat halfway through the session.
2. **Props and toys.** Buy each player a cheap toy. I gave my players silly putty, crayons, balloons, pick-up sticks, a mini-lego set and modelling clay. I'm not sure who had more fun: the players, or me when I borrowed their toys.

Bonus: find toys with tie-ins to the PCs. For example, a certain noise-maker might be perfect for representing a special attack or spell.

3. **Free loot.** Ever find money on the ground? I have and it's a pleasant surprise. Give some minor treasure to the PCs with no strings attached, and tell your players it's Good Karma Day.

4. **Help them make a new ally.** Often, characters have to turn the world upside down to earn the respect of their peers. Let them make a new ally through a friendly conversation or simple deed.
5. **Let them find or make a good deal.** Maybe a merchant has something the PCs need and it's under-priced. Perhaps a rare item is found for sale. Let the PCs win a bartering match and win big. Or maybe the PCs pay for an item and discover it is of higher than normal quality or has a secret boon.
6. **New family.** A new family member, or a long-lost one, contacts a PC. Make this family member friendly and useful to the party in some way. Again, no strings attached.
7. **New henchman.** How about giving a PC a free, useful, **non-annoying** companion. Everybody likes a servant/helper/gopher.
8. **Good luck.** Have the Bad Guy make a mistake in the PCs' favour. Or, an unexpected boon gives the party an advantage over their enemy.
9. **Free dice.** Each Christmas I give the players small RPG-related presents. Buying a pound of dice for \$20 and dividing it up, for example, is inexpensive. Specialty dice are a bit more. Or maybe you craft cool dice bags. And why wait until Christmas?
10. **Success.** And here's the grand-daddy of all happy, unexpected player surprises: one of their plans works without a hitch.

Technique VI: 8 NPC Parley Tricks

Roleplaying NPCs well is a fine art. It takes more than the [gift of gab](#). It takes timing. And you need to portray someone different than yourself in a believable manner.

For most NPCs, especially the minor cast, you can get by with great parley. Here are a few tips.

Avoid Contractions

Avoid using contractions when “speaking in NPC.” It’s more dramatic to say “it is your misfortune”, “do not think to presume” and “you cannot understand my woe” than “it’s”, “don’t” and “can’t”.

There are times when contractions are OK. But just be aware they ruin dramatic speech.

Avoid Swearing

Using modern swear words has always struck me as wrong when roleplaying NPCs in a non-modern setting such as fantasy, sci-fi. I still let the occasional profanity slip through when in-character, but I’m working on it.

Before you play again, decide what the “bad words” are in your world and consciously use those instead. Even if they sound funny at first, everyone will get used to them – and by Crom they’re much better flavour-wise than using modern ones!

It Is Arrogant To Assume

It is arrogant to make assumptions about people. So, when playing arrogant NPCs start making assumptions!

For example, the classic assumption is big and strong people are stupid.

Without even glancing back at you the grizzled veteran spits out, “Hey musclehead, grab that blaster behind you and make yourself useful. And don’t drop it!” [Good use of a contraction there, by the way, heh.]

Um, A Classic Error

Avoid all the stalling and hesitation words: um, so, like, you know, ah...

Everyone uses these words, but in the game they dilute the great effects of your parley (just like they impair effective speaking in public).

The best way to stop using them is to tape record yourself for a little while and listen to the playback. You often do not realize your crime until the evidence presents itself.

Another method is to have your players callout when you use these words. Maybe when you make five mistakes you have to give the PCs a small boon. That will stop your bad habit quick!

Make a conscious effort these stalling words only when playing NPCs who would use them. Every other time, these little demons water down your acting and sabotage your NPC’s drama.

Timid NPCs Pose Choices and Problems Instead of Making Decisions

Maybe you know somebody like this. Instead of reaching a decision quickly and decisively, they flounder, worry about all the bad things that could go wrong with any choice and would rather suggest more choices than just choose.

Try this out next time your players hire a guide who is a little timid:

Guide: *Should we go left or right, sir?*

PC: *I thought that was your job? Let's go right then.*

Guide: *But if we go right we could get ambushed.*

PC: *Let's go left then.*

Guide: *But if we go left we could lose a lot of time. And the way looks very dangerous too.*

PC: *Well then, what do you suggest?*

Guide: *I do not know but we better decide quick because it is getting dark out.*

PC: [Sigh] *OK. Let's camp then and discuss it.*

Guide: *Oh, but if we camp here we could be noticed by bandits.*

PC: *Let's camp over there then, behind those rocks.*

Guide: *Ohhh, but snakes and scorpions often lair in those kinds of rocks.*

PC: *Well then, what do you suggest?*

Guide: *I do not know but we better decide quick because it is getting dark out.*

Shall I continue or are you ready to punch this guide in the head yet? :)

Jason's Tips

Jason, a Roleplaying Tips subscriber, had these great tips:

- ◇ **Speaking in the 3rd person** for some characters can make them sound different. I played a wizard in MERP once and said stuff like, "Wheston is not a man of any small girth" "Wheston will guide, be not afraid lass."
- ◇ **Watch out for contagious character voices.** In Spelljammer, whenever they met a pirate it wasn't long before everyone was a pirate without really knowing it.
- ◇ **Use objects to change your voice.** Paper tubes, voice recordings players played fast or slow.

Thanks Jason.

Adjust the Volume

Try speaking loudly or quietly once in awhile. Loud NPCs are memorable and yelling is easier to do than trying to keep an accent consistent.

And whispering sure does make the players lean forward and become attentive! Some players have been known to shush other players up just to hear a soft-voiced NPC.

Dealing With Rude or Aggressive Characters

Here are some great tips from a web site about, of all things, preaching for ministers. These will help you when your players start to treat your NPCs rudely:

- ◇ Don't be intimidated.
- ◇ Look the person straight in the eye while you answer the question.
- ◇ Cut the attacker off by turning your head, before you finish your response, and calling on a new questioner when you're ready. This keeps the heckler from dominating the discussion.

Just be sure to use those techniques in-character, PC vs. NPC, otherwise you'll make it personal and offend your players.

Technique VII: 6 Devious Villain Tactics

Back to villains, because they are so important to great adventures. Here are a few ideas on how to make villains more effective with great tactics.

Seize Control with Questions

He who asks the questions controls the conversation and what comes from it. Therefore, help the villain gain the advantage in any parley by having them ask the questions.

If possible, the villain should try to begin conversations with a question, which should lead to another question and so on.

If the villain is asked a question, he has two choices:

- ◇ Answer the question and then quickly ask a question before the other party has a chance to ask another question of their own.
- ◇ Answer the question with a question.

The skills you need to develop as a game master, through practice, is to have your villains control conversations and ask questions in a manner that doesn't tip players off or shut down the discussion by being too aggressive. Sometimes you may have to give a little to keep things going in the villain's favour.

He Who Speaks First Loses

This is a trick a real estate agent taught me long ago and it can definitely help your villains. In a conversation, when your villain wants something and you think the time is right, then be

direct and have the NPC ask the question...and then be silent....

He who speaks first loses. They lose the high ground in the conversation. They are now reacting or have given up control to the other.

Go ahead, try this out next session and you'll see what I mean.

There are tricks on turning the tables, but this will work most of the time.

This is not a guaranteed trick. The PCs could always say no (if they do, just stay silent and watch what happens...). But no matter what, he who speaks first will not get what they want at that time.

Be On the PCs' Side

Do you ever wonder how a sail boat can sail into the wind and still move forwards?

I'm no sailor, but I do know that by turning your sails at a certain angle, combined with the angle of your hull and rudder, you can make good progress even with the wind in your face.

Your villain can do this too to further his own ends – even when the PCs are trying to fight evil.

Just have the villain employ the PCs in ways that further the characters' goals but also end up helping the villain.

Examples:

- ◇ Return a portion of loot recovered from places the villain knows of and which are not offensive to the PCs (i.e. tombs, abandoned ships, ruins, greedy rich folk).

Villains can always use more money. Better yet, after the PCs clear the place, the villain moves in and makes the place his new lair!

- ◇ Helping the PCs fight other evil bad guys who also happen to be enemies of our villain.
- ◇ Hitting a bee's nest with a stick. The villain hires the PCs to attack a group of creatures or bad guys who will then retaliate against the nearest settlement, city or group of peaceful people.

Give PCs Choices, Not Ultimatums

If your villain gives the PCs an ultimatum do it or else he makes the PCs choose between yes or no. That's not good.

The villain should present choices where any choice the PCs make somehow helps the villain's cause. This gives players a feeling of control, thus lulling them into the trap.

It also offers a nice GMing sleight of hand, where the PCs think they are defying the villain by avoiding the obvious trap. Players will typically see the choice that helps the villain the most, and not delve further to see the hidden benefits the other choices have for the bad guy. Orcus loves lazy players!

F.O.R.M.

Villains should take the time to learn what's important to their adversaries so they gain some advantage.

Use F.O.R.M. as an easy-to-remember guide:

- ◇ Family
- ◇ Occupation
- ◇ Relationships
- ◇ Money

The villain should send agents to chat with the PCs and those who know the PCs to gather this kind of valuable information. Once the villain knows what's valuable to the characters he can

go after it and use it against them.

- ◇ "Where are you from?" leads the villain to relatives of the PCs.
- ◇ "What do you do for a living? Where do you work?" leads the villain to the PCs' employer(s) and co-workers.
- ◇ "Married? Kids? Women troubles? Know anybody in these parts?" leads the villains to all kinds of potential victims.
- ◇ "Looks like it's time for new armour eh? Did you see that ship they've got for sale down at the pier? Heard taxes are going up again..." can help the villain learn if the PCs are poor and money-hungry.

The classic GM mistake puts F.O.R.M. elements in direct jeopardy. This makes players callous to having any attachments in the game world, to the detriment of campaign flavour, depth and realism.

Instead, have the villain use **third parties** indirectly in such a way that F.O.R.M. elements serve as positive plot hooks for the PCs. These plot hooks should resolve to the villain's advantage.

Note the key elements in that strategy:

- ◇ **Third parties.** People not in the villain's organization. Mercenaries. Best case is parties who are Good or allied to the PCs. A nice twist there. Using third parties gives the villain a layer of protection without sacrificing important minions while throwing PCs off his scent.
- ◇ **Indirect.** You don't kidnap, rob or steal from Family, for example. Instead, you kidnap, rob or steal from a friend of the family. This gives players that needed feeling they're not being directly manipulated or are vulnerable to the ruthless GM. Create up to one to three degrees of separation from the F.O.R.M. element and use the F.O.R.M. element as the hook, clue or seed.

- ◇ **Positive plot hooks.** In real life, we'll react immediately to avoid pain or trouble. Not so in-game. PCs are far more motivated by gain than from loss.* You'll find this out when you put a PC's day job in jeopardy and the PC just shrugs and fills out a resume. Instead, position every hook so there's Something In It For Me from a player or character perspective.
- ◇ **Villain's advantage.** As mentioned before, choices and results should secretly create wins for the villains. PCs should not discover this until it's too late. For example, a PC's uncle finds a treasure map (planted by villain). The PCs follow the map to a dungeon and clear the dungeon out. If the PCs find the artefact hidden in the dungeon, the villain attacks the (hopefully weakened) PCs when they emerge. If the PCs do not find the artefact, the villain's minion saunters in when the PCs leave and finds it.

* The exception is PCs will always react to theft of their stuff. Be it money, equipment, home base – anything tangible that helps the PC get more of what they want in the game.

Followers Are Expendable

Evil villains should never be afraid to use their followers and regard them as expendable. There's always more people or creatures who can be bought or dominated into servitude.

So, go ahead, send that poor scout ahead to learn where the PCs are hiding. Have those slaves dig till they die in the gold mines. Use that army to start a war and draw the forces of good away from the secret entrance. Make that bureaucrat steal those documents and risk his career.

You and I would never do those things, but don't let that stop your villain from doing them.

Thank You For Reading

I hope you found a useful nugget or two in these GM tips you can put to immediate use in your games.

Stay tuned to your inbox as you'll be receiving game master tips and ideas from me – johnn@roleplayingtips.com – by email regularly.

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Cheers,

Johnn Four

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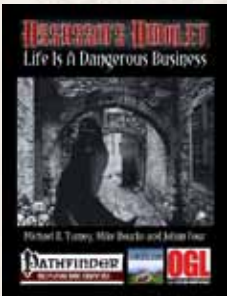
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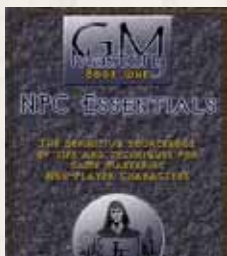
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