

ADVICE FOR GOOD ROLE-PLAYING

Or

"How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Game"

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A NOTE FROM THE WRITER:

They do exist. You assume the urban legends are false. We all know some truth resides somewhere. If you role-played as much as I, eventually you'll come across that one player that you swore didn't exist. Or you're a player and you join a group once known only as legend...that's right. The nut-jobs. The prime reason why RPG's developed such a bad reputation originated first with the religious groups finding fire in the fuel of incidents of individuals playing these games snapping and taking out their family (which you should NOT do!). I will not attempt to create a wake-up call to the arguments as to why RPGs and Dungeons and Dragons specifically do not influence and corrupt the innocent mind. Many others offered better arguments more than a decade ago. I will not waste time here. The truth is, these people do exist. I encountered more than one myself--those that use the RPG as a venue for a mind wishing to lash out. They existed before RPGs and will exist well after the last Monster Manual falls to dust. They simply chose one of many roads available to express their vices. These warped minds with problems best fit for psychologists and institutions don't always follow the path of Mazes and Monsters.

Some people addict themselves to Murder Mystery Night; some follow paintballing religiously, some recreate detailed medieval costumes and beat other similarly attired people. All these acts use the same muscle. Some take them too far... like stalking superstars, deluding a false sense of emotional connection. These people subsist in every walk of life. A madman uses his genius destructively; a genius uses his madness constructively. I sat with players that sink into a character better than Pacino on a good day. The moment the game ends, a snap of a finger, they resume normal life, never taking anything in the game personally. I know of some great actors spurned from Role Playing (Mike Myers ring a bell). Others fail to distinguish.

It's important to note that no RPG game can be blamed for these people's actions. They simply choose a path and decide to vent their hatred of the world--the same people who take guns to school and murder their classmates, the same people that massacre their coworkers (Oh how religious groups wished these folks played D&D). We might not have played with these unsavory types...but we must acknowledge some will take this game too seriously. Of course, the legends of the fella who attacked a waste truck with a broadsword and the group that locked themselves for a twelve-hour play and killed each other are false. However, we must keep a keen eye on the lookout for the warning signs that a member or several members of the group may be going too far. Bringing weapons to the game, revolving their life around a fictional character, and taking everything personally should send up flares to the other members. The group must sit down and deal with the situation before it escalates out of hand. The best thing is just removing them outright. I write here on how to enjoy and maximize game enjoyment but I wrote it for those who realize in the same light that Star Trek isn't real and the Tooth Fairy is simply a fable. I wrote this for those who enjoy role-playing as they enjoy reading a good book and letting their imagination wonder—watching a movie and thinking, “what would I do in that situation?” Also, the opinions and advice presented here is my own and are not endorsed by any game company. So...please read on...and remember...it's just a game. Now excuse me, its now time for my daily Satan worship...

Chris Tavares Dias

A QUICK GLOSSARY

RPG	--	Role Playing Game
PC	--	Player Character
NPC	--	Non-Player Character
Mecha	--	“Mek” and “Mech” – Japanese influenced robots piloted by humans.
GM	--	Game Master – runs the game. Also “Referee.”

Games I refer to I created...

Pathfinder	--	A space-based RPG I created similar to Alien. Used GURPS rules.
Terminals	--	A Mech game using R.Talsorian Rules.
Conestoga	--	A Dune inspired Mecha RPG.
Ships of the Line	--	A space-based RPG using Cyberpunk 2020 rules.

The lines in these boxes have either been said by the characters or the players who played them in games I have either refereed or played alongside. All of these are direct quotes. People actually said these during sessions.
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THE TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR GAME MASTERS

10. *Thou shalt not intentionally try to kill a PC because of smite.*
9. *Thou shalt not wrest character control from a Player.*
8. *Thou shalt not play favorites.*
7. *Thou shalt not let NPC's be more important than PCs.*
6. *Thou shalt not tantalize and then take away.*
5. *Thou shalt never say, "That's for me to know and you to find out."*
4. *Thou shalt not take out stress on the group.*
3. *Thou shalt not plagiarize UNLESS I can get away with it.*
2. *Thou shalt never put the game ahead of the players*
1. *Thou shalt not play if I don't believe I will have fun.*

Indivion: *"I can't believe you didn't see that. You are supposed to be our lookout."*
 Elric: *"I missed it."*
 Leopold: *"It was a huge friggin' bird!"*
 Elric: *"I didn't notice it."*
 Leopold: *"My HORSE noticed it!"*

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR PLAYERS

10. *Thou shalt not take another Player Character's attitude personally.*
9. *Thou shalt not fib rolls.*
8. *Thou shalt not lie about my character's skills.*
7. *Thou shalt not BECOME my character.*
6. *Thou shalt not take out stress on the group.*
5. *Thou shalt not try to sabotage a group (unless part of the game story)*
4. *Thou shalt not attempt nor conspire to kick another Player from the group.*
3. *Thou shalt not date another Player.*
2. *Thou shalt not strut.*
1. *Thou shalt not play if I don't believe I will have fun.*

GM: *"You need someone with Weaponsmith."*
 Sevarion: *"I have Blacksmith."*
 Leopold: *"Well, if we need to make something blunt, we'll call you."*
 Palarian: *"I have Weaponsmith but not Blacksmith."*
 Leopold: *"So you can make a sword, but not a nail?"*

PLAYERS

CLASSES OF PLAYERS (What to expect)

SLASHERS:

Most gamers start their life as a Slasher. If you started your role-playing life with D&D, it's almost a guarantee. You pick a class, get some magic if necessary, and go off to do some good in a dark, damp dungeon. The games are often referred to as a Hack & Slash game. Character personality is slim--most just wait for the next battle. Some Players never grow from this phase and perfect their technique to find out, in a game, what the best weapons are and how to best wield them.

Inexperienced ones lump themselves with other novices. Placing an inexperienced Slasher in a group of experienced players of any class leads to disaster. The novice lacks the expertise to create a competing character. The majority of novice AD&D games are Slashers. Mecha games are renown for quickly distinguishing between experts and novice novices. A GM introducing a new Slasher to a combat-orientated game should assist the Player in making a character that can compete with the rest. A GM wanting a story driven game should lower his/her standards when dealing with a group of Slashers. Keep the opponents coming...at least one fight per session. An experienced GM keeps a good story going with one or two fights per session. Make sure they receive rewards on a regular basis. Don't go overboard, but GMs should occasionally drop a new gun someone's way.

These italic sections refer to actual incidents of my life in role-playing. The names of all other characters and players have been changed to protect their privacy...except, of course, for me. Now, I started life as a Slasher in AD&D. When I moved from that onto others like Star Wars and Robotech, I drifted towards creating personas and the need for weapons fell. I have player every game imaginable. Mostly, I refereed most games but I played a few times to. One instance, I came as a Role Player but since this was my first foray into GURPS, I found my character (an ex-cop) overwhelmed by gun toting cyberpunks. After more than 4 months of falling behind in the group. I changed my character and turned him into a hitman who could hold his own with the others. The first moment a PC drew his weapon on me, we rolled our quickdraw skills. While his gun was being drawn from the holster, I pulled back the hammer on my pistol in front of his skull. The game folded a month later...but I had my moment...

ROLE-PLAYERS

Usually, after several months or even years of playing, a Player deviates and discovers that fighting gets somewhat monotonous. Even though they might still enjoy the odd gun or swordplay, they yearn to create a character holding the potential to grow with traits and skills not designed solely for combat. They strive to develop and live in a story. The story becomes the priority, and not the next battle. The Role-Player is born. Role-Players might continue with AD&D, but often enough, drift away onto more creative venues. For many, the "World of Darkness" series of games produced by White Wolf called to them. Why not join a game that renamed its Game Master a "Storyteller."

Not to seem sexist, but my experience shows that the only Players that start their gaming life as Role Players are women. Men can start with some minor role-playing skills, but most of the time, they can't wait to start their first fight. Role-Players often are experienced but unlike Slashers, novices and expert Role Players often get along since, surprisingly, it's easier to create a PC designed for role-playing over one designed for combat.

Watching an inexperienced GM dealing with a group of experienced Role-playing is a sight to behold. Quickly enough, the GM stays silent, almost overwhelmed by the constant chattering players. In an open-ended game, players often go off on tangents doing their own tasks and resuming the story when fit and ready. A good GM must be able to anticipate this or be overwhelmed as the novice Slasher stated above. When an experienced GM finds a group of pure role players, there's seldom a bad session. Role-Players don't require tangible victories. They love it when a GM uses intricate points of their character in the grand scheme of the game. Their reward arrives when their character gets the opportunity to shine. Combat in these game happens eventually, but battles are not tacked on like so many bad action flicks. These game are the equivalent of an Indiana Jones movie over a Steven Seagal movie. Hell, the really

good ones are the Reservoirs Dogs games, when players seldom need to look at the GM unless they need something explained to them and most of the activity floats between the Players themselves.

Derrick and I knew Bill's mech game didn't require much role-playing. Derrick and I role-played together for almost a decade until this point. We often would goof off together in our characters (whether they liked each other or not). Also experienced designers, our Mechs showcased a pinnacle of construction. After two hours in the first session, our mechs found themselves surrounded by twenty large opponent machines demanding surrender. Our simple answer came in a barrage of missile fire. Two hours later, after a nonstop mech fight, Derrick's and my mech were barely hanging on. I lost all but one weapon and Derrick pummeled a mech to death with another opponents dismembered arm. However, we defeated them. The game came to grinding halt. The GM assumed we would have surrendered. The story required it...Bill never refereed to Derrick and myself again. Well...he should have known Derrick and I have fought greater odds in other mech games and won.

MIXTURES

When you carry the best guns and the best magic but know when not to use them, you have achieved the pinnacle of role-playing. Mixtures are players that know their game so well, they can create the best their character can be with a personality all their own. This is usually the most fun because it means these folks are going to be entertained no matter what happens. Only experienced gamers can mix combat and character growth successfully. When referees become players, mixtures often result. I have encountered a few of these in my time; most are my friends whom I have played with for years.

When I joined Doug's game, I could have designed a killer mech with one eye closed and both hands tied behind my back. After all, I created Conestoga a year earlier and built no less than 20 different designs for that game. The Mekton Technical System was like a Bible and I could quote scripture with the best of them. I also liked role-playing and created a combination that both worked well in combat as well as a personality I was itching to try...an ass. I always played the nice guy...but I wanted to try a jerk for once. The other players had some experience but the group suffered eventually from not one but from EVERY single conflict I list later in this essay. In combat, of course, while the inexperienced players banged away with mechs with six or seven different guns (the first sign of a novice), I racked up as many kills as the rest of the group put together. However, my personality became unpopular and since most of the group couldn't disassociate me from my character, I found myself on the street within three months.

BLENDING CLASSES

In a group of experienced Role Players, the novice Slasher can find even his blossoming hacking skills inferior to players that have gamed for so long and just know the best combinations of weapons and skills to become Steven Seagal on speed. If a GM creates a game populated by experience players, a novice Slasher is the most underused. Worst-case scenario, the player sits silent, unable to function and when the battles start, the characters finds his only purpose in life overwhelmed by his cohorts who dominate the fight.

A GM adapts his game to his group. More Role Players, more role-playing, and the usefulness of a Slasher reduces. If you have an experienced Slasher in a group of Role Players, you have a gun maniac in a group who basically only needs to be woken up when a battle starts. The character turns-on and deals with the threat almost single-handedly. Now if this game is story-driven, the Slasher must learn to adopt some new talents or soon be bored at the lack of excitement. Amateur gamers of any time in a story driven game populated by Role Players find themselves suddenly unable to understand and cope with the situations at hand. GMs must learn to help the inexperienced players but be careful. Many Players, if forced into a situation they don't understand, often simply throw their hands in the air and give up. The larger the group, the greater the chance one member won't have the experience to keep up with the rest.

Jack sat in my Terminals game, without speaking, for more than two hours. Derrick and James, totally in characters, controlled the room at the moment. The crisis dealt with Derrick's son controlling a fleet of not so nice enemy spacecraft and James having the capacity of killing Derrick's son. The other three members of the group tried to ease the situation. I turned to Jack and tried to get him involved. Mouth almost gaping and eyes wide, in shock, Jack replied, "I have absolutely no idea what to say."

In episodic gaming (a series of adventures rather than one long story), a GM can tailor each episode to use the skills of certain players. If the reverse happens and an experienced Role Player joins a bunch of rookies, disaster awaits in the ditches in case the game should veer too far. Often enough, the PC is assumed to BE his/ her character and any little character fault is mapped onto the Player. If joining a group of novices, the experienced Role Player should create a nice guy...seriously; otherwise you risk being kicked out of the group for being an ass. As for the novice Slasher joining a Role Playing group, try to tone down your Rambo mentality and work on some eccentricities of you character that are not gun-related. It may be difficult...give it a try.

Joe was a Slasher in my Pathfinder game, but not an experienced one. He bought all his weapons from the High Tech Supplement from GURPS. However this setting utilized a tech setting from Ultra Tech (My Pathfinder game before I modified the game system to match my needs). When Joe started pulling out his weapons, getting hard to showcase what he had to flaunt, he fell back as an experienced role player, Craig, yanked out his x-ray laser and minced the enemy in no time. Soon, I had to bring everyone to the same level...down unfortunately, to even the playing field. However, the game was story driven and gunfights were few and far between. I encouraged Joe's character by giving him a great conflict...he was a spy. When his dark side came out, Joe's lack of efficient Role Playing skills proved detrimental and instead of coming clean or perhaps growing his character to understand the plight of his comrades he just betrayed, he pulled his gun and tried to escape...on a spacecraft...less that two football fields long. Five against one...not so fair. Joe was 'cuffed and placed in a cell. Never once did he attempt to offer amends, instead trying more ways to sabotage the ship. He wrote me notes on which of his devices in his quarters were rigged with explosives. When the seasoned Players searched Joe's belongings, they didn't bother studying what he had, they simply "spaced" everything he owned into the deep. His personal spacecraft? Ejected as well and towed behind in case it was also rigged. Disarmed, Joe became quiet and anti-social. Unable to win the groups trust again, the character left. Joe tried later with a new PC. I allowed the group to "interview" this new character...low and behold; it was the same type of character. Joe walked out of the game and was never heard from again. The high point for me, and what made this incident fall into the "good memories" department, was that all I needed to do for four full hours was watch five role players completely sink into their characters with no input from their GM. It was like releasing a bird and seeing it fly.

AGES

Simply put, the older the better. There definitely appears to be a critical mass of Role-playing. If they are younger than twenty, they are predominantly Slashers and inexperienced ones at that. Between 20 and 25, the lines blur a bit. After 25 the ratio falls in the favor of role players. I have met few players over 30 that were just interested in fighting. Why? I have never encountered someone who began his or her role-playing life at that age (unless the year was 1978 and you were all playing Chainmail). Almost every one started young and continued through their twenties. There are exceptions of course, but few. Older players generally are more experienced of course but most of them migrate towards solid role-playing.

As a general rule, having the age gap between players ten years apart or more is a recipe for trouble. Rivalry is almost a given. The similar aged will stick together. The GM should be one of the older players or at least, not the one that could be a Player's son/daughter. The younger player/s soon get overwhelmed. This is especially true if the young player is in the minority. If the older player is alone, he/she may be an outcast, but can at least attempt to fit in with some moderate success. It is seldom successful the other way around.

When I played Martin's fantasy game, I was among the age majority, between 25 and 30. We all knew each other and role-played well. The concern came from three other players. Divided straight down the middle. Three were circa 25 years of age; three were circa 18 years of age. The lines were drawn. We never came to blows in the game but whenever older players became cynical and annoyed, it never directed itself to any older players. With age comes experience. Jason and I played in a Cyberpunk game with three much older guys, above 30. Two of them held bachelor degrees. Suffice to say, the GM never tried to dumb them down nor did he try to keep us on the same level. You can imagine who made most of the decisions in that game...

Ironbelly: "I bless myself."

GM: "You're currently drowning, that won't help."

Leopold: "Well, at least he'll go to Heaven."

GAMES MASTERS

THE THREE-STAGE PROCESS

Stage 1 the Monty Haul Campaign

The novice GM is frequently so worried about keeping his players happy with the game that other methods of accomplishing this end do not occur to him. Instead, he takes the most obvious route of supplying tones of treasure and items, score of magic, and easy ways to advance in levels and skills to hold the players' interest. The new GM has not realized that the main attraction of Role Playing is not necessarily the collection of gold and goodies for relatively minor accomplishments. If a GM exhibits these properties, don't fret. Most of the best GM's started off like this.

Miranden: *"We don't have the money for horses."*

Leopold: *"Just acquire a couple of asses..."*

Indivian: *"Ohhhh...Gnomish prostitutes..."*

<Dead Silence...>

Stage 2: Letter of the Law bunch.

This step begins with the realization that the campaign has gotten out of hand. The characters can buy and sell most kingdoms or corporations before breakfast. They can walk up to Odin, kick him in the shins and get away with it. They have killed off all their enemies, all the demons, and big nasty boss mechs. If they are into AD&D...then they have moved onto deities. The GM reasons, "I must be doing this all wrong." There quickly ensues a sudden 180-degree change of course to strict adherence to the rules. They regard the written word as a set of holy laws, and death to the infidel. Fortunately, this Stage is relatively short-lived and ends quite abruptly, either with all the players quitting in disgust or with the DM losing his cool at the countless times he's consulted tables made die rolls. This latter stage is frequently achieved amiss loud profane screams of frustration and anger, usually accompanied by endless sheets of paper sent flying through the air like so many weird rectangular butterflies.

Calli: *"I worship my god, Guido."*

Claren *"Guido? What? Is your god Italian?"*

Mika: *"I didn't know there were Italian gods in Forgotten Realms."*

Claren: *"Badda Bing Badda Boom, FIREBALL!!!"*

Stage 3: Normal

This is by far the most common style and is the easiest to referee. It is a blend of the official rules, the GM's unofficial rules, and basic, run of the mill, common sense. While this method will usually not be seen in tournament play, it is the form most frequently found in the average neighborhood get togethers. Since it doesn't require constant reference to the many tables, it permits smoothness and speed of play, as well as allowing the GM insert his own results, if he were so inclined.

A GM using the Normal method still needs a solid grounding in the actual rules of the game, but he is no longer bound by the inflexible results of the die. Provided the altered results do not unbalance the campaign, and are more consistent with its goals, he can feel free to reward or punish the characters' actions without making a die roll. He must still remember that no one appreciates a GM that plays favorites, is inconsistent, or who makes decisions without regard to balance or merit (see later for details).

GM (to Elric and Miranden -- scouts>: *"Oh, my God, you notice the sun rising in the East and setting in the West."*

Leopold: *"And these are supposed to be our scouts..."*

Indivian: *"Where did we hire these people?!"*

PROPERTIES OF GAME MASTERS

...TO PLAYER'S LIVES EXECUTIONERS

We hate this guys, don't we players. It is one thing to be fair. It's another for a GM to willingly attack his PCs. Most GMs who plan a short game can sometimes become executioners, killing off their Players willingly and wantingly. I personally have never agreed with that. Fairness works better. Now if a PC is killed fast in a game through the rolls of combat, the argument can always be made, "it was in the rolls." However, the GM should never press the finger of god upon a PC and kill him outright, story be damned. The are only a few exceptions where these character death's are warranted:

- a) The Player wishes to start anew with a new PC.
 - b) The Player plans on leaving the gaming group.
 - c) The Player and GM have a previous knowledge of the fate of the PC when the game begins.
- Otherwise, these GMs lifespan remains short unless they move from this very short phase.

Combine with... Any type of player group and game type ... they don't last long though.

Craig created two characters for the blossoming Pathfinder game. These characters were created simultaneously as the setting was being fleshed out. At first, it's was just him and me. We put out an announcement and soon found five more players to flesh out the crew of the Vanderov. Soon, over a period of time, having two characters proved useless. The Captain character, Heather, was prominent. The security chief, Bjorn, proved less useful in lie of other characters. Sure, he could donate, but even Craig understood that it reduced the role playing of both characters as well as robbing other PCs of playtime. After two years, Craig and I agreed that Bjorn would go at a good time. However, soon after, Craig revealed he, himself, was moving. I didn't wish to kill them both off. So Bjorn took a round for the group in a great season cliffhanger and Heather left to find herself, leaving an opening for a return.

MASACHISTS

I will admit falling into this category for the bulk of my role-playing career. Instead of trying the kill the characters, the GM simply wants to completely torture the players, bringing them as close to death as possible, but never killing them. I must admit this property is common with GMs. They, all, at one point, try this out. This is most common with long games or smaller groups. Characters become more and more important in these classes of games. The GM wishes the PC to live but will make that PC fight with blood every step of the way. The only time Masochists will consider killing a PC is only at the end of a game. The mentality with masochists is that the Players must have the fear of death coursing through the veins at every minute to enjoy the game to its full extent.

Combine with... Mostly with Slasher players since most Role Players don't require fear of death to motivate them. However it is not uncommon. Masochists often create the "Never-Ending Story" and the "Continuing Adventures" but not often with an "Interactive Novel" because usually they have more detailed stories and often don't have scenes where the player's lives are in danger.

Max: *"It isn't important."*

Gabriel: *"Can we make that decision?"*

Max: *"Well there is a possibility that flight from Alpha Centaur might get hijacked."*

Group: *"ISNT THAT IMPORTANT?"*

HUMANITARIANS

More common than you might think, Humanitarians are usually masochists that just stop bothering with trying to keep the players scared. This is also common with starting Game Masters. Some players find this trait annoying as it removes much of the joy of playing. If playing with an executioner can be compared to an old Sierra Computer Game, than Humanitarians are born from a Lucasarts game. There is no fear of death, so don't bother saving every minute. This gives Role Players the opportunity to develop little eccentricities of their character, ripe with the knowledge that it won't be in vain when their character takes a round to the head at the end of the session. I have never had a problem with Humanitarians as long

as the story created it interesting and dynamic, something to offset the lack of challenging fights. Humanitarians are most common in smaller groups (three or less players) or with long, intricate game stories. A Humanitarian may still occasionally throw fear into a PC. Its difficult with a fantasy game...however, in the plethora of Mecha games out there, its easy (see my experience below).

Combine with... Interactive novels mostly. Where the GM creates an intricate story, where the player's lives are paramount. This is only fun for pure Role Players since Slashers don't enjoy a game where they don't look down death at every turn.

The great thing about mecha games is that the Human pilot could survive but could lose several mechs over the course of the game. Derrick Role played a very interesting character in my Conestoga game. He was the first to try the game...he was also the only player. (It's his game where I got all the dialogue in the Conestoga Game section) Obviously, his death was never at hand. However, he did go through three mechs. When he first clashed with his primary opponent, Jagheel Adaigo, they seemed evenly matched. Then Rolaan (the PC name) strikes down Jagheel's brother. Jagheel activates his Z-Max system (an Mekton term referring to kind of nitro boost) and assaults Rolaan's mech. Derrick had little chance and his mech was sliced across the waist. Derrick survived of course. He lost his second Mek crashing it at close to Mach speed across an ocean. His third lasted the rest of the game, even taking down his opponent at the finale.

(THE RARE AND OFTEN NEVER SEEN) NEUTRAL GM

The True Neutral GM might seem common but they are as rare and as hard to recognize as a True Neutral Character in AD&D. These GMs usually can improvise the whole game and create whole side adventures that last months on a whim. They follow the rules fairly strictly. NPCs are slim. The GM is there to create a universe for the players to voyage around in.

Combine with... Neutral GM creates continuing adventure mostly. Player often love these GMs because they know their victories are fair but also it can get annoy since most Player do appreciate some leniency. Honestly, I have never seen this type of GM but friends tell me they exist.

Max: "Don't bother running, we'll never make it."

Heather: "Fine you stay here and accept that...We're running."

...TO THE GAME UNIVERSE

NEVER-ENDING STORY

Nothing says frustration when a game begins with a story without a climax. The GM starts with a story—something to tempt the players—and the game moves forward without seemingly finishing this story. Oh sure, there may be off quests and side stories, but the primary arc that begins never resolves. It meanders and weaves through the setting, the PCs settle into their lives, but even when main bad guys are killed, they somehow always survive. Like a soap opera, it seems the main villains are always out of the grasp of the players. These games can last for years. A good GM can keep the interest high. However, eventually, the PCs will get restless. The big difference between this type and the Interactive Novel game is that the PCs may seem to have more control over their characters but they seem as far away from a resolution to the grand story as the day they started. Fantasy games are the most common of this type.

Combine with... Any type of Players but Slashers like tangible victories and are usually the first demographic to exhibit frustration over the lack of a big climax. Any type of GM tackles this story since, often enough; the PCs are not as intricate to the story as the other classes of games. As for the Game Masters, I have noticed more inexperienced GMs use these types of games. More skilled GMs give tangible victories and the game transforms from Never-Ending Story to an Interactive Novel.

I never tackled this idea. Pathfinder started with broken episodes (Below) and turned into an interactive novel. I like victories. The ending may still be far but the PCs at least feel as though they are moving in a solid direction. I have played in Never-Ending Game before. The GM was an old friend, Ivan, and Derrick and I played together. This game lasted almost a year and a half, broken into two major parts. The first was moderately successful—I had successfully struck down the man who killed my PC's girlfriend. However, at the start of Part 2, he miraculously resurrected. Boy was I pissed. I soon lost interest in the game. It seemed I kept missing all the important facts being held from me by the other player (more on this later). My PC left and started his life again, basically giving up on the plot of the game. For three months of Role Playing, my character did NOTHING. It reached a climax and ended...but to this day, I still don't know what that RPG was about nor what Derrick's part of the adventure was about, as our character split to find out own paths...little did I know I had no path.

CONTINUING ADVENTURES...

A very common style for Science-Fiction gaming. This game doesn't tempt PCs with a beginning arc, but like the Never-Ending Story, there is no real end. The game continues until the Players or GM decides they have had enough. Good fantasy games are like this, as a group of wanderers seek fortune and reputation. For Sci-Fi games, common with spacecraft adventures, the Players either (as independent) wander from planet to planet or (if part of an organization), get mission assignments on a regular basis. GMs with a bit of flare may even have an opening theme score to match it up as some form of interactive television show. If this type of game is done well, it showcases the best a GM can be. Really good ones can create new episodes on whim. A knight walks to a bartender by chance and hears about some legend the GM improvises on hand and the Knight tells the group. The group decides to take a break from body guarding the king and trumpet off to the forest for glory. GMs whom lack the experience or improvisation skills who tackle this type of game don't last long, as anytime the players stray of the beaten path; they hit a wall of dead ends and plot strings that don't go anywhere. This is the most common game where the Player introduces his/her own character that he/she created totally separate from the game being introduced. The PC histories are usually not important to the main setting and path of the game.

Combine with... Mostly Role Players although Slashers might find enjoyment if the GM tosses in the odd random encounter. Humanitarians often don't try this type of game unless they are in a mecha game.

Terminals was my first real attempt to create an episodic game, ripe with theme music. It succeeded for a while but the game didn't last more than eight months. Most of the Role Players were too used to sitting in a Never-ending adventure without set goals for each adventure. If I had to do it over again, I would give the game a more open-ended feel and rely less on presenting the game as a Television show. Being with mecha, I was able to throw some fear into the players but there was one problem (unlike PCs as part of a military organization), how do you replace a mecha for a character from a different Universe. At the seventh adventure, I came up with the first incident. Derrick controlled a wonderful PC named Kael'No, an egocentric warmonger with a god-complex to boot (a great character but, as you will read later, caused problems). His mecha was a wonderful design of a supreme overlord machine powered by a miniature black hole. I was aware of the danger of his mech exploding considering the power plant. So when a PC fired on him (long story), Derrick's mech, instead of incinerating itself and everything for 500 km, simply imploded and vanished. Derrick ejected of course. What happened? Basically, his mech created a wormhole from the tremendous explosion and his mech vanished through it to another dimension. At the same moment, Derrick's mech from another Universe (that wasn't destroyed) was sucked back through it...along with the pilot. If the group had troubles with the ego of one Kael'No...now there were two of them. Derrick controlled one or the other and I controlled the one he wasn't using. I was fully prepared to kill one when the time came. Alas, the game ended before that happened.

Bjorn: "What do you have?"

Rio: "Axe, you?"

Bjorn: "Pipe...What do they have?"

Rio: "Machine Guns."

Bjorn: "Good. Let's get 'em."

INTERACTIVE NOVEL.

A very rare and very hard game to do right; the Interactive Novel often results in failure. It all relies on the GM. The "Novel" often can be replaced by "Movie." This game is usually designed to be shorter than the long campaigns. Some run as long as 3 or 4 months while others only last a few game sessions. These GMs create a story with a definite middle and ending. Sure, the game may not follow the standard three-act structure of a screenplay, but the GM still attempts to give the idea that this game has a purpose. Players too used to having total freedom to do anything they want at anytime often hate these games that seem very tight and confining. Bad GMs usually force the Players down paths that seem illogical from their perspectives. Straying off the planned path often results in total disaster. The trick is knowing the PCs so well, the GM can anticipate and find out ways for the PCs to follow the proper game path of their OWN choice and not one laid obviously in front of them by the GM. In every Interactive Novel game, the GM will always have a say in the creation of the PC in some way. Usually making sure the personality fits or doesn't contain traits that would fracture the game. Most Players don't mind this as long as their basic pitch of a character still pulls through. If it doesn't, the GM must either, alter the game to fit the new PC, or plan a new game with the new template. Don't put a PC into a game like this unless you are sure the PC won't destroy the setting or do something terrible stupid in character. Bad GMs often consider this game and the story more important than the PCs, running it like their own personal "Choose your own adventure" Novel where the Players input very or little creative input and the GM goes on from there. Most amateur GM's that start these types of games will do this at least once. In fact, most Players will claim this type of game to be their least favorite. However, some will admit, if done right (and rarely they are) they enjoyed themselves more than they could have imagined. These GMs are most likely to employ music, encourage choreography, and plan detailed scenes (see below). Players beware. If a novice GM tries this game type out, you might be cautious since these GMs have the highest probability to take over your character at a critical moment. Most GM playing Interactive Novels start getting paranoid that the PC will start messing with their vision. These Stanley Kubrick wannabees start an idea but basically can't improvise so they start forcing the players down their path. Be weary.

Rio: *"Yeah, just lock in that psychosis."*

Combine with... Role Players mostly. Avoid Slashers since most of the time, they simply won't care about the details of the plot. As for GMs, they are almost always humanitarians because Player deaths are factors not planned in the story of the game. Executioners are rare and seldom if ever seen in this type.

Conestoga was a three-month Interactive epic. Derrick considered it a Mini-Series, but I thought it was more of those 3-hour epics like Lawrence of Arabia. I designed the game as a heavy plot campaign for one or two players. I played it twice. Derrick finished it first. He introduced a great character that fit well into the setting with his own personal motivation and sense of honor kept him on the narrow line of the story. Derrick enjoyed the game story, even though it had many side-scenes and a plethora of NPCs. Ships of the Line, however, played by Bill and Derrick, failed after one session. The problem was that I didn't do a very good job overseeing the creation of the characters. Instead of creating a Captain and 1st officer of a spacecraft crewed by over 300, the Players became independent people fighting each other and other officers, ignoring the chain of command and going so far as to running security cameras on every deck and flying wherever they wanted to, forgetting that this game had threads of "Trek" and they needed to follow SOME rules. Putting rules down is not the problem, if the Player creates an honest cop, he should follow rules...same goes for creating PCs in a military setting. I didn't clarify that and the game folded quickly. Derrick admitted later that he didn't think he could mesh with Bill as a player and doesn't lay the failure of the game on me.

Sandz: *"You want to shoot down four jumbo jets to kill four people?"*

MaCleary: *"Its a solution, isn't it?"*

PAUSE

Sandz: *"Be Quiet."*

THE TOP FIVE REASONS WHY A GROUP FRACTURES

THE CIRCLE AND THE REST

Often enough, a GM does not invite players into his group; a group would invite more players. However, this may create a wall between the new players and the old. Another symptom is when a group of close friend start getting tight and the remaining players start to be pushed back. This is not a major problem, unless the GM is involved. When 95% of the of a group's role playing falls to only 3 members of a six member group, problems will arise. The inner circle forms a bond and soon the slightly unpopular Players find themselves lacking weapons, money, and role-playing time. Novice and Experienced Players will come across this. If a player sees this circle forming, chances are, they are not the only one. Discuss it with the other outcasted player, but not with anyone in the inner circle. If they concur with your findings, discuss it with the group.

However, a really tight group will be difficult to break and the end of this group is soon at hand...check that. The Inner circle will still play, chances are, by themselves. Now don't confuse this inner circle with an experience group letting in new players. There will always be a settling-in period where the new player/s get used to the their surroundings and vice-versa. I am referring to the games that go on for months or that start with a large group only to have a few members suddenly having all the fun.

Pathfinder never really had an inner circle but I will admit that Craig got the most role-playing time. For one, his character was made a full three months before anyone else, during the time the game was being created itself. In fact, the first RPG session had passed before we both agree this game required a larger group. Two years later, after Craig had moved south, everyone else had settled. However, our resident female player, Carron was a devout role player in a game that did throw in the odd gunfight now and then. As a result, I will admit her character didn't have as many moments as the others. However, I was never trying to intentionally exclude her even though some other players had grown to dislike her character. I refused, however, to cut her out.

It was a different story however in Derrick's game. After I was pushed out of the group, the circle had formed between the GM and three other players, leaving Carron and Tamara on the side. It wasn't long before they both were reciting to me later their own stories of being suddenly delegating to singing back up. Both admitted that the game became less and less fun. Both admitted that the only reason they stayed was because of the company of the other.

Brown: <i>"The only time he opens his mouth is to change feet."</i>

INTER-GROUP DATING

Now, I am not referring to those who Role Play with their significant others. We have all heard those horror stories of two players who get a bit too close and the resulting stress shatters the group up. What if they break up? What if there is jealousy? What if, what if, what if. Point is unless two people are rock solid, a role playing game is great grounds for separation. Anxiety, for those who take the game too seriously, rise from the paranoia of how someone reacts if their loved one's character being attacked by another. People in relationships have a tendency of falling out of character a tad bit too quickly. Dating players also adds anxiety for the GM, as it limits his ability t create situations freely without getting flack for the opposing mate. Now, all of these examples stem from mostly novice players. Experience Role Player that can separate life and fantasy usually don't have problems...but the whole group must fall into this category. The only thing worse than two Players dating is one Player pursuing another. If they were dating previous to the game, at least folks are used to it and the game can adapt.

Max: <i>"Jesse, there is a purple blinking icon heading your way."</i>
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I have seen two games in my time fall apart because of one Player's pursuit of another. I must admit almost falling victim to this. However, my deep friendship with the player (female to those who need obvious pointing out) kept us from feeling uncomfortable after a quick cooling off. Someone I knew in another group met someone through role-playing and they are engaged now. They are exceptions...but remember...I know of two games personally that fell...

Bjorn: "We're all human."
 Rio: "I'm not."
 Bjorn: "You're not..."
 Rio: "Just a very close facsimile of one."

TAKING EVERYTHING TOO PERSONALLY

Notorious with novice players, especially Slashers. Some Players simply have trouble distinguishing a personal attack from a character attack. This is most common when mixing experienced role players with novice ones or when mixing players that don't have a personal history with other players outside the group. Suddenly doubt is raised whether or not the inflammatory actions of the character really originate from motives of the player. The fault here does not fall to the player being misunderstood, despite what others may say. The fall first lays with the GM, for not reading the warning signs before the group formed. If the group is split down the middle over the situation, or if the people taking the situation personally sits in the minority, usually the group stays together.

It's when the group gangs up on the sole player, usually an experience Role Player. This is compounded if the GM is also inexperienced and/or sides with the others. This hardly ever happens with a group of friends who have been playing for years. Often it happens when this group lets in someone new without practical experience with the group.

We weren't sure if Carron's character was just an echo of herself. Several other players expressed disliking the game because of her. However, since I never felt she was reducing Pathfinder's enjoyment, I would not have kicked her out. Since the game dropped Charles when he moved south (and he expressed joy with Carron), I began worrying of the group's situation. In fact, Charles expressed dissatisfaction to the point of leaving the group at the end of the season. One day, Carron arrived with matching denim jackets for all to wear with our group's insignia on the breast. No one spoke against Carron's involvement again. Charles admitted that he had misjudged her.

<Two PCs run out of a building, into a cab>
 Evans: "Quick, to the barracks!!"
 Howell: "But that where you are?"
 Evans: "@#\$%...Out of the cab!!"
 <The two PC exit the cab and run back into the building>

MIXING SLASHERS WITH ROLE-PLAYERS

This depends entirely on the game at hand. However, often enough, a group of dominant role players will often pick on the minority Slashers and vice versa. Since many Slashers are inexperienced, they will often exert qualities above and take it personally. The biggest problem simply lies with the fact that Role Players have a tendency of banding together, as do Slashers and often enough; a line draws in the sand. A worse case scenario finds the two parties soon fighting each other. Friends or not, if there is a Slasher in the group brandishing firearms like so many reproductive organs, Role Players band together and often play against the unwanted fighter. Of course, the opposite also occurs but more than teaming up, the minority role players often find themselves isolated and the opportunities for excitement and fun reduce.

This only really applies to larger groups. A Two-player group with one Slasher and one Role Player don't often fail and conflicts seldom occur.

As I mentioned before Joe was a Slasher in Pathfinder surrounded by mostly Role Players. He discovered himself outcasted quickly. I found myself in a similar situation in Daniel's game, sides reversed. I was trying to create a deep character (an ex-cop with a past, yadda, yadda, yadda) but everyone else focused their skills in weapons rather than the miscellaneous. One day, an explosion ripped through a major battle, injuring many PC, forcing a hospital race. I was the most severely injured. A good example of the other PC disdain for my character, they left me in the hospital alone, strapped in the ICU. But before they left, another player wrote down where the group would be on a post-it note and stuck on my character's forehead. My PC made a point to slugging that character in mouth the next time I saw him. I designed a more gun-orientated character (a hitman) and replaced the character and found greater success.

Bryce: "I'm going to church."

Rio: "Church?"

Bryce: "Isn't that the place where they give you a cracker and a shot of wine."

Rio: "A four day old trisquit and a shot of Baby duck."

Bryce: "Sounds like a very cheap strip joint."

Rio: "I hope when I die, get nailed to a tree, you'll all do the same..."

Bryce: "Yeah, you'll get a sip of coke and a Dorito."

INEXPERIENCE

A GM's frustration increases tenfold when he/she creates a game, runs it, and must face with the fact that not a single player knows what to do. Soon, the GM head spills blood from banging on the desk too hard. Players wander around like chickens with their head cut off, unsure how to play or what to do. A group of inexperienced players in a true story-orientated role playing game can often get lost and meander off into no-man's land. The GM wonders why in the world he/she spent so much work developing an in-depth game, only to have it destroyed by immature, inexperienced players. The same happens opposite side of the mirror. Like the example I gave way above with Bill's game, a group of experience Role players with a green GM can spell disaster quickly as the GM cannot anticipate the actions of his or her players and soon the game meanders in different directions until finally, in both situations, coming to a grinding halt.

Ivan was a good friend but a bad GM. Derrick and I role-played in his game for more than six months. However, I had difficulty finding anything close to a plot since Derrick kept vital plot points from me. Since the GM made no attempt to create much role-playing, my PC found himself quickly without anything to do. And nothing I did...four three months. The game became a PC living, not gaming as the other Player did all the work. The game ended with a whisper rather than a hurrah. To this day, I am still not exactly sure what the last three months were about and if I was in the game a little older than I was, I would have left after three months.

Rio: "@#\$%..."

Max: "What's that?"

Rio: "That's the "you are dumb" light. Its going to take me a lot longer to figure this out."

THE USE OF MUSIC

Music is a feature I believe all GMs experiment with at least one point in their lives. Either it be just background music from a radio or fully choreographed symphony music, everyone tries it once. However, there is a curve of skill in using music. There are ways to use it so effectively; some players will think they are actually involved in an interactive feature film, as every action taken seems punctuated by some wonderful chosen score.

The first trick is to get a theme. I don't mean a theme song (we will talk about that later); I mean a theme to the music. Whether it be songs or symphony or both, a GM must choose the music to fit the game and more importantly, be consistent. Don't start with epic soft music from *Gattaca* and segue into *Front Line Assembly* (Techno Industrial). You can mix songs and symphony but this skill is the hardest to master effectively. And despite what some might think, if the music is consistent, it doesn't really matter what music is chosen for what type of game. The feature film, "A Knight's Tale" proved 70s rock could mix into a medieval story effectively and very successfully.

Also, make sure the choices are distinct. This is really easy to screw up using symphony music (see later). You don't need to make your own music, but perhaps try to stray away from music everyone has used. The unsung rule is that if you hear the song in a TV commercial, chances are, it's heard a lot. Also, if you only have once CD of music to work from, its probably best not to use music since Players will get sick of hearing them same music over and over and over again. Also some players might not respect the idea of music. Good, experienced Role Players always do. Usually only inexperience players or Slashers might be distracted by it. This is a touchy subject, especially for GMs very protective of their game. For my, music is PART of the game, and insulting that is insulting the game. The use of music is the GM discretion. Try it out; see how it works with the group.

When Daniel and Joe played my Necropolis game, neither had heard a really effort in integrating music before. I had already played Necropolis twice before using music and this was my first great experiment using it. When a suspenseful track from Aliens cued in as the two PC were encroaching upon a house that may or may not, contain something very dangerous, the mood set. Daniel, a very experienced gamer, expressed amazement at the success of them music and noted that scene as what convinced him since he had not seen music done effectively before. He said his heart was actually racing. Later on, when Daniel, Joe, and three others sat in my Aliens RPG game (I had all three soundtracks at that point—Resurrection had yet to be made), all congratulated the perfect merging of music and game. On the other hand, Terminals was my first attempt to not use symphony and instead try out new age music like FSOL, Enigma and Delirium. This proved less successful since my collections of songs were less extensive and the tastes of music between the players were too varied. This only lasted a few sessions before I went back to symphony.

GM: "Its a micro-plutonium core..."

Finlay: "So we just wrap it in cheese-wiz and create our tiny star."

THE SET UP:

Keep with CDs. In this new age of CD burners, the highest quality music is the best. I started with tapes but soon became exclusive with CDs. Either way, it would be best to not just have you favorite bands or composers nearby. Instead, to avoid halting the game as you set up the next CD, burn a CD of the music you will need in order you believe you need them. Or perhaps make several CDs for every type of music I list below (Mood, Action, and Choreography).

The speakers should be set up behind the GM or, with extensive cables, behind the PC themselves. Try to avoid having them in front of the GM. Don't be too loud. I hit this wall and was stubborn to concede. The music sounds quieter from the GM's perspective because the speakers point away from him. To combat this, let the players adjust the volume to a level they are comfortable with. It might seem quiet...but not to them. Of course, there are situations where music can be louder. This only applies if the music is IN the game. If the PCs are also listening to the music, it could be louder, or more intrusive to the scene since it is actually part of it.

Derrick and Joey bolted into a nightclub at the beginning of Necropolis, pursuing a drug dealer they had a bounty out on. That evening was rave night. The doors opened and the music kicked it, full blast. I didn't make it realistically club-loud but loud enough so the Players had trouble talking to each other, as did their players. When the crowd became too dense, and the threat of losing their prey seemed imminent, Joey rose his magnum to the air and fired a shot in hopes of clearing the crowd. No gunshot was heard. The music was so loud, and everyone was so into the dance, no one heard or noticed the boom. Joey lowered his gun in disbelief and look back to Derrick across the dance floor, who shrugged. They pursued and finally caught up the bad guy. Joey fired another shot, but this time, the shot flew through the crowd, between dancers and missing heads, impacting on the villains shoulder and pushing him out of the window, through a parking meter and into the window parked next to the street. The music never stopped.

There are three types of music depending on the situation of the game:

GM: *"This is some amazing armor you got there...How did you make it?"*
 Hollister: *"I don't know, Evans was trying to bake cupcakes the other day..."*

MOOD MUSIC:

Mood Music is more or less the first type of music GMs experiment with. Usually, this is a softer track in background to set the emotional level the GM is hoping to convey with the scene. If this were a horror game, of course, something creepy and ominous would be played. A little extra tempo introduced helps a suspenseful scene, like PCs breaking into a high tech corporate building. However the first mistake is when a GM uses it ALL the time. Constantly having music in the background was the first mistake I made, as the players never really bother to pay attention when an important music is played. Mood music does that...it sets the mood. Only play it when a mood needs to be conveyed. Mood music tracks need to be long and very simple. Too intense, and they become a distraction. Only Symphony music is really effective with scary or suspenseful mood music. When a mood is supposed to reflect some more upbeat, songs are more appropriate.

Charles was one of the first players of Pathfinder and he stuck with it until the end. I perfected my musical technique through the course of the game. My collection was so large, I used music no one had heard before or could easily recognize. Charles hadn't seen Crimson Tide by the time I was using its music in my game. He told me later that he finally saw the movie and throughout, listening to it, all he could think of was moments from Pathfinder. Months later, he still told me the music garners more recognition from the game than the movie. Perhaps that was an indication I was using that soundtrack too much...so I stopped with Crimson Tide and moved on to others.

ACTION MUSIC:

Action music is usually where a GM makes a mistake. An action scene in a movie can take anywhere from thirty seconds to 5 minutes to play out. However a game action scene, with its rolls and charts—that same five-minute action scene is stretched suddenly to an hour. A GM might have a great action track but no action music lasts an hour. Instead, the GM either loops the same action track over and over again or connects a whole bunch together. Action music sounds like a great idea but only in theory. The group grows tired very fast of hearing the same music over and again, especially in a Slasher game, where battles are more frequent.

Instead, a GM should reserve unlooped action tracks to permeate specific moments in an action scene or wait for a "Choreographed" Scene (see below). Some action can use action music. Short encounters are a good example. A car chase or plane crash. Sword and gunfights are often bad examples considering the amount of rolling and dodging involved.

A good exception was my first Alien RPG (many years before FUZION). There is so much music available for that one series alone, when the aliens attack, I was able to keep the fast pace going and still link up 15 minutes of music that never repeated. However, if I were to do it again, I would have cut down the amount of music and reserved the action tracks for Choreography.

Brown: *"We're making progress. Things are getting worse at a slower rate."*

CHOREOGRAPHED MUSIC:

The ultimate evolution in game music, but don't confuse the title with "no control."

Choreographed music is a track that perfectly fits the scene at hand. Even music cues coincide with moments in the scene. These scenes are often crucial plot points in the game as well. Choreographed music can be mood, action, or just a well-placed music set to fit the scene. Choreographed action is usually reserved for set piece action—that means action set around a prop including cars, planes, boats, trains, etc. Sometimes these are scenes of sudden realization, or of horrible defeat. See how vague this can become.

It is important for the GM to get accustomed to the music. Listen to the track over and over again. And then listen to it again. Get to understand the music, its highs and lows. Find out where the tempo reaches its zenith and when the track changes pace. You will be surprised how successful the music is and how impressed a group is when you scare them and the music follows your lead. This is why I called it the ultimate evolution of game music, because it takes significant amounts of discipline to understand a piece of music that well.

I may sometimes have very one-dimensional games with stories that are hard to veer away from, but one aspect of my gaming that I am the most the flaunt is my use of music. I own more than 100 soundtracks from various composer and movies and have memorized almost half of them. I usually can figure out what track and from what CD to use before the scene is required, forgoing the obvious delay that is created. The tricky part is finding a way so than a choreographed action track ends the same time the game action ends. This is the hardest thing of all. A few times, I used that to my advantage. Pathfinder had two examples of using a music's finally as part of the game. The most prominent was an episode on Stasco. For those not familiar with Pathfinder, Stasco is a giant of a words where the population live in monstrous city block that move on tracks to keep pace with the six suns of the system to supply power. The group's spacecraft as well as a ship they were helping, crash lands on Stasco. Later, they discover that they have unfortunately crashed on the tracks of one of these buildings. The buildings will not stop. In the final minutes, as the monstrous building closed it, the PCS raced against time to free trapped friends in the other ship and escape in their own. I began the final track of the Se7en soundtrack, which is eleven minutes long. I told the PCs that this music will not stop and when it hits the 10-minute mark, the building WILL reach them. Coincidentally enough, the music track chosen builds in tension until the climactic final three. It worked marvelously. The crew escapes one ship and flees to the other. The building demolishes one craft; the crew escape in the other, the music closes and the ship flees.

THEME SONGS:

Or scores, take you pick. In episodic gaming, a theme track is a great idea as it gives the players the feel they are in a television show, with a score that can get them in the mood for playing. However, don't make these themes long. Don't start each session with the full version of Queen's We Will Rock You EVERY session. It will get old very very fast. Instead, mix it, cut it down. The theme song should not be more than a minute or a most, at minute and half. The theme should be as hard to recognize as possible so that when the group listens to it, they identify it as the game, not the movie the music was taken from.

SONGS:

Songs are surprisingly the most difficult to use. The tastes of the individual players come into play. Some would even speak up at their dissatisfaction of a certain song. Songs are also the most easily ignored and often fail miserably to set the mood. Choreographed songs work well as does action music (how many GMs have though of using Spybreak from The Matrix?). Mood music however, seldom works. Never has consistently be needed more than in a GM using songs. Don't mix rave music with Country...it just doesn't work. Keep the songs varied but make sure they don't dominate the scene. Don't be exclusive to one band either. Change the songs to match the scene but remember to be consistent. If you are using 80's tunes...stick with them. The same goes for Heavy Metal, Techno, etc.

Max: "What are those spinning symbols?"

Carpenter: "...Ummmm...Ever see Predator?"

Recommendations: It's hard for me to recommend specific bands or songs because of the obvious variety and numbers of songs available. Although I will admit some preferences. Terminals used songs to start. I used Delirium, and Front Line Assembly. Like I said, it depends on taste. I won't mention the big bands (U2, AC/DC, The Who), but I do recommend you avoid one style: stay away from youth—Brittany, Christina, N'Sync, etc. Do us all a favor...Thank you.

Front Line Assembly – My friend called them Techno Ambient Industrial, but if you run a cyberpunk game, FLA's Tactical Neural Implant is a fantastic recommendation. The Music is sparse on lyrics but the sounds are intelligent and quite original. Also, they have dabbled in very ominous tracks fit for mood music.

Moby – Great varied music that offers wonderful emotional tracks well.

Vangelis – The king of mood music. Ridley Scott can't be wrong.

Delirium – lighter, ethnic style music from the same members of FLA.

SYMPHONY:

My specialty. Symphony music, if done properly, can propel a game into a new field. But the tricky part is finding consistence. It would probably be wise to stick with one style of music or maybe even one type of composer. Symphony is great mood music and fantastic action music, but when it's choreographed, its magic. There is so much variety out there; a GM can find anything to work in a scene. The problem is acquiring it. Certain composers work better than others but the problem is using soundtracks from easily recognizable films. Never use Star Wars music unless it's a Star Wars game, for example. It doesn't matter how hardly heard the track is...stay away. Usually, the idea being if the film made 400 million or more and/or won an Oscar or original score, it's not a good idea. There are some exceptions of course. The worst thing that can happen in a game is to play a music that someone recognizes or just even forces him/her to say over and over again, "Where's this from?"

Recommendations * The best

Hans Zimmer: Hans is closely becoming my favorite composer. Many of his works are not film-specific and his later films have only gotten better and better. Steer clear of his early work (Top Gun, Days of Thunder). Backdraft may be an obvious example, but stay away...its used way too much.

*Thin Red Line – The best mood soundtrack out there that no one's heard. Fantastic musical tracks and some real epic scores that last upward of ten minutes.

Gladiator – A little overly used for a Zimmer soundtrack but now there are two CDs available. Great action music in several tracks and some good ethnic work as well.

Broken Arrow – Really good for action music but the country motif may be too distinct.

*The Peacemaker – A great soundtrack with good action music that no one can identify.

Hannibal – A good ambient soundtrack save for those that contain dialogue. I hate those.

Jerry Goldsmith: My old favorite. Jerry has been composing for almost 40 years. He has amassed a lot of almost every type of music. Here is his best work. Stay away from Star Trek.

The Omen – The sole Oscar Jerry won came from this very creepy work. Anyone thinking of doing a horror game or a story about the paranormal should give this a shot.

*Air Force One – Action Abounds. Really good choreographed action music here. Executive Decision – Another action Track.

*Total Recall – A new CD has been released with more than an hour from this classic soundtrack. It's a must for good sci-fi games.

*Alien – Even though Aliens is very unique, Alien can be spread out to other types of games. Good scary music.

Outland/Capricorn One – A hard CD to find but it contained 74 minutes of good music, more from Outland than from Capricorn.

Eric Serra – Unique, unusual and hardly recognized, Serra music introduced itself with the films of Luc Besson (The Professional, The Fifth Element). Although his earlier synthesized work is very amateurish, his later work is fantastic.

*The Fifth Element – A good length but still not long enough. Great and varied music.

The Messenger – A failed movie but a great soundtrack. \

The Professional – Unusual at best.

John Williams – Williams is so good at what he does, his music wins awards on a regular basis...and that's the problem. His music is always so recognized, any music played in a game separate the players and they can't help but think of the movie. Williams's music is grafted on its movie, and virtually impossible to separate...however...

Empire of the Sun – One of Spielberg's lesser known films (and why is that?). Great music really only suited for choreography.

Lost World – Avoid the Jurassic park theme, and what remains isn't bad.

The all time best soundtracks for each Genre (*must buys)...

<i>Fantasy – (D&D, Middle Earth)</i>	Conan (Basil Polendouris) *First Knight (Jerry Goldsmith) The Mummy (Jerry Goldsmith) Thin Red Line (Hans Zimmer) *The Messenger (Eric Serra) *Gladiator (Hans Zimmer) *Stargate (David Arnold)
<i>Space Opera – (Star Wars, Mekton)</i>	*Thin Red Line (Hans Zimmer) Lifeforce (Henry Mancini) The Abyss (Alan Silvestri) The Fifth Element (Eric Serra) The Messenger (Eric Serra) *Gladiator (Hans Zimmer) *Stargate (David Arnold) Wing Commander (David Arnold) *Total Recall (Jerry Goldsmith)
<i>Cyberpunk – (Cyberpunk 2020, Necropolis)</i>	Hardware (Simon Boswell) *The Fifth Element (Eric Serra) Alien (Jerry Goldsmith)
<i>Space Gothic – (Alien, Pathfinder)</i>	The Abyss (Alan Silvestri) Dark City (Trevor Jones) *Total Recall (Jerry Goldsmith) *Alien (Jerry Goldsmith)
<i>Modern Action –</i>	*Air Force One (Jerry Goldsmith) *Face / Off (John Powell) Broken Arrow (Hans Zimmer) Ronin (Elia Cmiral) *Peacemaker (Hans Zimmer)
<i>Horror --</i>	*Alien (Jerry Goldsmith) Sphere (Elliot Goldenthal) The Omen (Jerry Goldsmith)

<GM and group>

Penner: "You guys were supposed to surrender."

Fidler: "Bah....10 to 1 odds...We've endured worse."

<Three hours later>

Penner: "Okay...there is one left...what do you do...He flees--"

Dias: "OH, he aint gettin' away! Chase him down."

Penner: "I think you've proved your point."

Fidler: "Kill him!!"

CONFLICTS (Between Players and between Players and GMs)

PRIDE

Sometimes a GM Looks across and sees the enemy. Players that seem to take joy in destroying the structure of the game...or maybe they just have another agenda as players. They are not mind readers. Sometimes Players just don't know where the GM wants them to go. Good GMs have no direction. Just eventual destinations. However a player reaches that is up to them. Certain conflicts arise whenever the motivations of GM and Players collide. Pride is deadly in a RPG. Here is one weakness with the GM and a trait that must die if that GM is to grow in skill. A GM must learn to swallow his/her pride. The buck stops with the GM.

Don't move so fast players. However, players are allowed a bit of give. A player that refuses to stand down can suddenly snap and take out his frustration on a group—doing whatever is necessary to bring everyone else down. Pride doesn't always mean a conflict between who's right and wrong, it's between people you don't know when to admit they have been beaten. When PCs fight, sometimes it can be fun if both Players are not taking it too seriously. However, if they both are refusing defeat, suddenly the stress level rises. When players start to hold their own and the GM recognizes it being more than just a Character trait, its time to step in and stop it. Find out who is the victor and award it. The time has come to bruise some ego. If the conflict is between the Player and GM, the GM should eat it and take the fall...unless of course, the GM feels the Player is trying to force the GM down. In most Character groups without an authoritative structure, conflicts of pride don't always happen because of the agendas of everyone is usually different so the PC concentrate on those rather than try to impose themselves on others. However, the instances where characters fight it out can still occur. If an authoritative structure exists (a leader or commander and a rank and file below), it can turn into a ticking time bomb. One player who just doesn't accept the authority stands up and soon a war breaks out. If this is a character trait, and the GM did not wish this, than it is up to the GM to fix it by facing the rebellious player and setting him/her straight. If it the rebellion was planned, the GM must keep track on how personal the commander is taking this rogue.

This type of authoritative conflict arose in Ivan's game with Derrick and myself as players. At the very beginning, we were a squad of three soldiers, Derrick, myself, and a third NPC. I was given command. This level of authority did not settle with Derrick at all and right from the get go, he made it his mission from the start to buck authority, disobey orders, and pretty much do whatever he wanted. I must admit taking this a little personally and also made it my mission to bring him down. However, the GM had no problem with Derrick's attitude and did very little to support my hurt pride. This continued for many weeks until I simply had to give up. No disciplinary action was ever taken to Derrick's character for his action. If we had simply been created equal, I might not have complained as much.

PLAYING FAVORITES

One of the biggest problems with GM is when 90% of the all the cool items and good role-playing go to one or two members of a six-person party. Sometimes this is so obvious, soon only those members are playing. Sometimes it is subtler and the game usually requires weeks or months before this trait arises. The fault of course, lies with the GM, who must, of course, be totally objective in every aspect...or at least try. Players, on the other hand, are permitted to be subjective to an extent. The extreme version of this is when the GM punishes one player and rewards another. Playing favorites is reserved to amateur GMs only. I have yet to see an experienced GM that exhibits this trait. Sometimes this is not from friendship. A Role Playing GM with favor Role Players and not slashers. How do you resolve this conflict? Unfortunately, it's very hard to do that. The Players feeling outcasted either should face the GM or just...quit. GM, if seeing themselves playing one or several favorites in the group, should stop for a moment, and think if ways to make it up to the other players. Something big, and do it a couple times to starve off suspicion.

Playing favorites is commonplace in almost any game, especially ones with friends in the group. I have been guilty of both doing it and I have been the victim of it more than once. When I committed it, I realized the problem and tried to offset it. With Joe the slasher in Pathfinder, I didn't. Joe was given the bottom end of the stick soon because of his problem with Pride. I should have given him more chances but everyone wanted him gone. In those cases where I was the victim, I had to leave the group...in every scenario.

Marlee: "I'm going out the way I came in..."

Berlin: "What, blind, naked and covered in your own crap?"

Marlee: "You know, you're really not helping."

THAT ONE CHARACTER / PLAYER THAT DOESN'T BELONG

What to do. There is that on Slasher in the group that insists on pulling it when he should be withholding. Fighters instead of thinkers that kill the witness instead of thinking of taking him alive. That player, whose character is such a diametric opposite to the group's motivations, becomes outcasted. There are many reasons why one player/character falls out of favor from the rest. This is not necessarily the player's fault despite what others might think. Whose fault is it then? Believe it or not, 90% of the time, the fault lies with the GM. Sorry to all those out there, but the buck will often always stop with the GM. If no one knows who to blame, default falls to the Games Master. If a GM can't handle that pressure, then you can never be a really good GM. How could an excluded Character or Player be the GM's fault? Well, if the problem is with the Character (and often if the group takes it personally, the player as well), then the GM is at fault for not recognizing these conflicting traits in the character in the first place. The GM should see that a conflict will arise and deal with it before the character is introduced. If the problem is the player, then it is everyone's fault. The first for the GM for not seeing this ahead of time, the other players for outcasting the player and not helping the person integrate better, and the outcasted player, for having the conflicting attitude in the first place

However, the damage is done and now you either have to remove the player or find ways to the player or character to work. If the character is at fault and the group know the Player is not to blame then the solution is simply: Replace the character. Work with the group to find a PC that works. If the situation allows, perhaps (and I have tried this), allow the other "Characters" to interview this potential recruit to see if the profile is adequate. The Player should accept that their character is not working. Sometimes its not the group that decides but the PC that figured that a new character would work better. The obvious option would involve killing off the other Character, but honestly, try to avoid that unless it works to benefit the story. Simply have the PC move on other pastures.

In situations where the Player remained but a character was replaced, I often tried to avoid killing off the character. In Terminals, a game dealing with multiple realities, characters discovered soon that nothing was impossible. As per the game's coda, every PC was created separate with no one knowing any information from other Players. The mecha in the game were also totally unique. Charles created a very powerful and unique Esper PC with a mecha that amplified the power to amazing levels. The design was simply—everything channeled through the esper lens in the mecha, so no visible weapons could be seen. The PC was a female fighter pilot betrayed by her own kind. Her psychic abilities stretched to every color in the spectrum. However, for some reason, Charles began to believe that he was pressured by the other PCS to create the esper profile, being convinced it was unique and new. Charles started becoming disillusioned about the PC and requested a new character be introduced. I created an adventure where the group fought against a telepathic and telekinetic monster on an abandoned military base on an alien planet that was frozen in time (kinda had to have been there...). The fight came down between Charles' PC and the demonic HR Giger inspired monstrosity. The monster was killed at the expense of the PC's life, taken in a brilliant explosion. The next week, Charles introduced a "Platoon" inspired Ground-Pounder mech design that could easily hold his own with the rest of the group. However, the PC was thin in my eyes. The first one was more geared to good role-playing but this new one was a "Slasher" concept. Soon, Charles began thinking he had made a mistake. The last adventure with his Psyker (named "Crufix") was exciting, and Charles began having regrets even before her death. I even paused and gave Charles a

chance to decide otherwise. But in Terminals, nothing is too late. A month later, the “Grunt” was killed in a blaze of glory and Crufix was-introduced from another reality. No one ever really dies in Terminals.

Now if the problem lies with the Player, it becomes a lot more uncomfortable. This is also the hardest task for a GM and group to handle and more often than not, it is handled poorly. Even the most experienced Group will often resort to an attitude usually reserved for Elementary school players. The obvious route and taken more often than people would like to admit starts with either the GM or Players turning on the outcast IN the game. Suddenly, the battles become fiercer or another PC decides to betray and turn on his comrade. Soon the shunned PC finds his hit points low with little help from the group. The PC is killed and the GM decides to not let the Player create a new character. A good warning sign for the shunned player are rules or sudden changes of heart in the GM. These don't often happen in honest games and if they occur, get ready for a sudden shock. The example would be the never used “Players get one chance rule” where the GM explains that if a PC is killed, the Player is not allowed to make another. Make no mistake, this rule is a complete mistruth. It is created by GMs to oust players they or the rest of the group are not happy with. Trust me, if the Player was widely loved with a character they beloved, the group would be happy for the Player to join again. This rule is only the most prominent examples. There are others. The most common simply comes from other Players turning and killing the outcast. However, it falls to the GM in the end to tell the PC they are not welcome back. This is a key strength in the GM at this point—BE HONEST. Tell the PC the truth. I know it's a far out concept, but the outcast deserved it, no matter how bad they were. Tell them that this was coming. That's why it's somewhat common for the PC to be forced out first before telling the Player that this was the last session for them. Telling them this is the last session before would result in a sudden disappearance of that Player. They are not going to come if they are not liked. Its best to tell them first and let the GM take control of that PC and remove them in a way that best suites the game. Don't let the outcast be attacked verbally and physically in the game and be abused in the open, the other Players taking out their stress on the exiled Player. Tell the truth. I don't care how much you may hate the Player, be professional. People will respect the GM if the GM treats others with respect. There is no exception here. Remove the Player and then deal with removing the character properly from the game. Just don't have the PC magically vanish into thin air unless the PC only attended a few sessions. Work it somehow. But do it well, don't make it feel like you are picking on one PC.

I have run the gauntlet in these scenarios. I have been the outcast; I have been the king. I have been the better, and I have been the worse. This, above all conflicts I talk about, is the most common in gaming. With Joe the Slasher being put in the brig by his own fellow PCs in Pathfinder to myself being kicked out of Doug's game, I have seen it all. With myself being kicked out, I still firmly believe today that the procedure used showcases the absolute worst possible route for kicking someone out. The GM wound the tall tale about bylaws in the marines (we were part of a unit). I have never been a marine, but simple and everyday common sense told me that this GM was changing codes for his own good, including (get this), me getting kicked out of the group for disrupting morale by “criticizing” other PCs (It was a PC trait, not mine). However, another PC was given a slap on the arm even though he drew a firearm and fired it in the direction of another PC (mine). Honestly, this is the Military, not grade school. While researching Alien-FUZION, I got to talking to some real Marines from the US. I told them the story in greater detail. Both of them laughed their asses off and told me that real marines treat each way worse than my character did and the other PC that fired on me would be in jailed and placed before a court, no matter how good a shot he was. Discipline is paramount.

In Pathfinder, I will admit, letting the PCs let loose on Joe. However, in the beginning, I was not fully aware how much the group disliked Joe. I was willing to let him create a new PC. However, if I knew how personally Joe would have taken the rejection, I would have talked to him personally. The sessions were fun leading up to that fateful day, but even though the other Players don't condemn me for letting him go (as they wanted him gone), I still feel guilty for the way it was handled in that last session and I should have apologized to Joe (If he reads this—and you know your real name—I'm sorry).

Rio: *"I must be totally wasted."*

Max: *"Why?"*

Rio: *"I just tried to change the TV with my cell phone..."*

Max: *"Yeah?"*

Rio: *"The strange thing is I pulled the antennae...and tried it again."*

THE INNER CIRCLE

(see above)

There is no real solution for one or several members that see a close-knit group of players getting all the action. If this also involves the GM that is only a matter of time before the GM either realizes and does better, or the Player just leaves the game to the others whom are actually having fun. The PC can attempt to talk to the GM, but it entirely depends on the attitude of the GM and if he acknowledges the fault. If the circle doesn't involve the GM, then the GM probably recognizes it offers balance to the group.

PLAYERS FIGHTING

This can be fun if within character. I have sat through many session where Characters fight and the PC love it all. However, the GM must be aware of when it goes too far and Players take it personally (see above). Characters often fight each other within the game. When a new campaign starts, its almost common place. It eventually calms down unless the game is about the PCs fighting each other. I must admit never having tried a game where the PCs are constantly at each other's throats. I have to admit, I have been temped to create a game where another PC played the villain. Interesting concept, eh?

When all the PCs in Terminals squared off for the first time, they were all extremely hostile. Wouldn't you be, after witnessing your world destroyed? It didn't take long for these conflicting egos to lash out (actually it was only about 10 minutes). Derrick's egomaniac Kael'No (my personal favorite PC) strutted and was soon fired upon by Charles' esper mech. Not thinking Charles was armed, Derrick attempted to intimidate. One massive blast, and Derrick's was thrown back a quarter mile. Martin fired on Charles and damaged his mech, just getting through his Esper shield. Derrick struck back but fired on Craig. Craig fired back with a massive 20-kill mega beam, shattering Derrick's spherical force shield. This went on for about twenty minutes before they calmed down and started talking.

However, Martin and Craig's PC still engaged in a massive fistfight later. Martin played a bully to perfection. Being defeated, the PC sauntered and walked away to sulk. When Kael'No tried to do that later with Crufix (the esper), one telekinetic burst and Kael'no attitude changed. Great character development occurred later, the two became close friends...until Crufix's untimely death however, which proved a great blow to Kael'No, an honor driven conqueror.

However, sometimes the fight is not routed in the character. Sometimes a good Player just gets into a bad mood and takes it on the group. This might be a phase or someone taking out the stress of work on the game session. A good group—a close-knit group—might recognize this and understand. To prevent problems in the future, the game should halt...temporarily, and the conflict sorted out. Of course, this is great in theory. First of all, this fight should not INVOLVE the GM. The GM should check his rage at the door. If a player is doing something that aggravates the GM to no end (like any of these other conflicts listed here), then action must be taken. If this involves removing the PC from the group then unfortunately so be it, but make sure it is the intelligent thing to do. If it a result of rage, then the other players may believe it could happen again...and to them. The GM should NEVER be in a raised voice argument. Remain calm at all times, even though the PC may scream back. A disagreement over rules, conflicts with other PCs—anything can set off a Player, the GM must deal with it like a Court Judge--The good ones never start screaming back. They may enforce their decisions with a raised voice but never reduce to a shower room mentality. Also easier said than done. This all sounds good on paper but in the moment, a GM or even players may understandably snap and just kick someone out. Here is the possible alternative. If the group begins to grow agitated or one player that usually performs well starts to become aggressive, perhaps that session should end early. Just end it and resume another day. Perhaps take an hour break and let everything cool. If the session becomes a role-playing write-off, the GM may always just do that, just write it out. Just explain to the players that the last session did not exist and they are going to move on. Remember GMs can be aggressive and create a fight as well, especially when it comes to how the Players are responding to his/her actions. Sometimes the GM loses all sense or professionalism and goes on a rampage in the game. Best to settle the nerves and take breather. Just don't play for a bit. Getting together for six hours or gaming doesn't mean you need to squeeze in six hours of gaming. There are breaks and

time outs and off topics. Don't dispel or prohibit these. They are natural and help the mood of the session, especially if nerves are frayed.

I wrote off one session once. Charles was simply in a bad mood. He arrived totally frayed from a really really bad day at work. We could tell he was on edge. He later proved that when his character gambled all his money away in the casino then proceeded to light the gas tank of his bike and drive it into the same building. His character was arrested and put in jail before I decided enough was enough and ended the session. Charles later apologized and we accepted. I told everyone that the last session never occurred and we all moved on and no one mentioned that again.

<p>GM: "Grab the binder, will you?" <There is one binder on the shelf...a yellow one> Max: "The yellow one?" GM: "No...the other one..."</p>

DEALING WITH CHEATERS OR JERKS

Above the printed word, there are rules to gaming—codes of conduct that must be followed. It is okay to be upset with someone who thinks these rules do not apply to them. This falls to the group and not the characters, which are freer to do what they want. However, the Players and GM have more strict regulations.

Cheaters – Now I am referring to the Players since the GM is provisionally allowed to cheat now and again...but I do mean provisionally. If the GM is caught trying to cheat in order to kill a character, all hell will break loose. Now, I have noticed fewer players fib rolls than many might think. True Role Players seldom cheat. Inexperience players and Slashers often do (they have to be the best). A group of Slashers will often let each cheat while often Role Players frown upon it. The larger the group, the greater the chance there will be a cheater, but as the group gets larger, the fewer cheaters versus non-cheaters, and the pressure to play it straight increases.

Is a GM fibbing rolls? Well, does he have a screen up? How big? Just one fold...or does He has the entire front half of the table corded off? That last one...good chance he/she glosses over rules more. Open GMs have little to hide except the odd map or to. It is a common myth that Players can read typed text upside-down and from four feet away. A GM with no screen is obviously very open and not worried what the dice say. GMs may argue the screen give vital info. I tell you now, that's wrong. One fold--two little 8"x11"s--give out plenty...you don't need six. I have never needed six. I only used two pairs of two-fold screens to cover my game and my dice rolls.

On one game, I sat on another table and used one screen to cover pictures I was going to reveal...in the end. In the beginning, I had the frickin' Berlin wall separating us. GM cheating to keep a player alive is more tolerated as long as it is unbiased. A GM trying to keep his group alive more than just one player is more accepted...but the players may still object. Check that, they will object. The reason why I said its kinda okay for the GM to cheat is routed in the same acceptance in people who copy software—You're not supposed to do it, but we all know your do it...just don't tell anyone. A GM caught fibbing rolls will loose stature in the group. A Player is given a bit more leeway. If it refers to rules, then the GM is doing it almost always out of spite, to get the Players in some way. Getting caught is drastic and much easier to do. Experienced Role Players relish in nailing a GM on a rule violation. As we know, the GM is responsible to know all the rules so above all; he/she is NOT allowed the cheat on this subject. The only exception is if the GM announces it before he does it if it benefits the better of the game.

Players are allowed a bit give as I said before. This applies to game rules as well. They are not expected to know all the rules so if something happens, they can simply say they were not aware of the rules. As for dice fibs, the common sign of cheaters are not ones that cover their dice rolls since that is all to obvious to the experienced player. More often, look for players that continually roll their dice during a time when die rolls are necessary. They pick up the dice and roll. If the result is good, they keep it and say they rolled already. If not the result is not good, they pick up the dice quickly and start rolling over and over and over again, like its just a odious habit' and they won't "really" roll until called upon and the real roll happens. Despite rumors, loaded dice are rare. Players do not need screens and the GM is open and free to ask for their removal.

CREATING THE GAME

CREATING A CHARACTER IS A COLLABORATION

(say that 2 times real fast)

Unless the GM really has no care in the world about what the PC is introducing, he/she should always have a hand in the creation of a player character. If the GM does not care about the backstory, it means that PC might not live long. If he does not care about the skills chosen, the GM will soon find the game hard to play, unprepared for the mismatched and unbalanced group. A GM should be on hand for the preliminary creation process. This includes: The statistics, the skills, the advantages and disadvantages, and the backstory. The specifics of the character can be left later, but the GM must be there before the Player gets his/her hopes up. The GM can also lend a hand to give the player the option to flesh out the backstory. The more detailed the better. The GM should also have all the players together to make their characters stats unless it is important that they not know each other. The procedure for character creation is different for every Player. Slashers differ than Role Players—amateurs differ than experienced players. I offer my technique below.

THE NAME AND THE LOOK:

I just stare at the page and think of the setting. I think of an actor or a look I want to try. Sometimes I will just get an actor I would like my Character to look like. Actors posting became very popular in my groups. I started it off only from a GM point of view. I assigned actors to the NPC but never forced the PC to assign them a star. I kept mine to good actors and not A-listers. When I reach Pathfinder, I eventually did ask the PCs to chose looks. Of course, the inexperienced players chose actors they enjoyed other than actors that really fit. Actors should always fit and then the GM should ask, "Would this actor ever play this role." I know it may not make sense as an argument, but I never liked choosing big actors for small roles because you know they would never do that. In Pathfinder, which I considered a TV show, I gave the players lots of room for the actor choices. One still chose to go with a drawing, which was fine. There was never a problem with finding pictures. PCs should stick with good actors and not huge ones. So no Stallones, Schwarzeneggers, Cruises or Gibsons. Instead, try actors people really like but don't often carry films. After being in several games where PCs have chosen actors, I have noticed repetition which include: Gary Oldman, Tim Roth, Michael Ironside, Steve Buscemi, Winona Ryder, Rutger Hauer, Michael Beihn, Sam Neil and Linda Hamilton. After I have a look, I usually have a name to. When I created a character with Buscemi, the name jumped to me, "Frank Finlay." Many Players don't assign a name until the character is complete. I am the other way around.

THE PITCH:

Usually, when I have the look and name, down, I start on a personality...and pitch. A pitch is where you expect the character will go. His/her personality starts to form and the Player starts getting good idea where the statistics and skills are going to be.

STATISTICS:

Rolling for statistics in my eyes are never a good idea. It forces the player down a path that he/she might not wish to traverse. If a statistic is really low for a class the player wishes to chose, the GM should raise the statistic to a good level. If a cleric in the group has a higher strength then the fighter, the GM should considering rising the fighter. That's why I recommend a statistic pool a'la GURPS or FUZION. It assures everyone is equal in their stats and that the players can disperse them anyway they see fit. I have never agreed to the D&D old-fashioned roll-for-your-stats rule and have not implemented it since I gave up on the game more than 8 years ago. If a GM still chooses to endorse it, then he should at least give the PC the option to re-roll low numbers. Like give them three free re-rolls to change any numbers given. That is the only good alternate I can give. I would still go for the pool.

Fargo: *"I shoot the window and I dive through!!"*

GM: *"Okay...bulletproof glass, the shots ricochet, as do you."*

PROS AND CONS:

They work to add character personality more than additional skills. They apply to advantages, disadvantages, perks, disabilities, and super-powers. However, they can radically alter a game if the GM is not aware of their ramifications. Be wary of major advantages like contacts with major corporations or massive amounts of money. The same goes for disadvantages as well. I once made a character that was epileptic. The GM should feel free to void any pros or cons that don't work for the game. Common pros include anything that improves skills or statistics. Another common choice is money.

BACKSTORY:

Backstory is very important and the more detailed the better. However, a GM must give the players an idea of what to expect. If their characters have a high chance of dying, then the players should be made aware of that, less they make a character with a five page backstory only to have the PC killed off in the first session. You probably won't see that player again. Also, a GM must know that the better the setting, the better the character. The PC should find ways to connect important events in his/her character history with events in the GM's setting and not invent their own. The more the character fits in the story, the more role-playing that character will get. Some players like making universal characters that be plucked out and placed in any game with the same rule system. I have never subscribed to this and have never let players bring in characters from other games. They must invent PCs for my game alone. What they do after that with their PC is their choice. But a PC with no connection with my setting will not get a lot of role-playing. I have noticed that the characters disposition comes from completing a detailed backstory, and not vice-versa. Some games really encourage detailed back-stories. R. Talsorian Games products come to mind and even when I don't use their system rules, I often still use a modified version of their backstory creation.

BACKSTORY NPC'S:

Another great idea that is often overused. A player will create a NPC in their past with the hopes that the GM will include them in the game somehow. However a player must be prepared for one eventuality: The GM will play the NPC differently than you expect. The fear is that the NPC will be mutated into the mirror opposite. Unfortunately folks, this is a freedom the GM has. God knows what that NPC has been doing in the years since the PC last saw that person. There some leaps the GM should not take, like changing characters sexuality or turning priests into psychos. Mild alterations are more than welcome to the GM but not always to the player. NPCs should be fleshed out as well as they can be if the GM plans on incorporating them into the game. However, the chance increases that the NPC will behave against the PC's wishes. This alienates the Player almost to the point if the GM were taking control of the PC directly. It annoys the Player, especially if the NPC behaves completely opposite to be expected. Make the transition make sense. Write it down. Follow a path the NPC walked in the absence of the PC. All too often the GM matts his own character plate over that of a player's Backstory NPC. Don't. Use the NPC, but don't mutate him/her into a complete opposite with no rhyme or reason for the change.

Be cautious of "lost loves". Mutating "lost loves" into something against what the Player expects will create the largest resentment in the Player. I am not sure what is it about them, but lost love NPCs stand on real fragile ground. Don't put too much weight into them or the whole structure will collapse. Making the love into a mirror opposite will almost always backfire. I often steer clear of using them unless I can do it in a way that won't alienate the player. Often enough, I just kill them off. Nothing gets a player obsessed with a bad guy like killing off that NPC.

Carron's PC was once a separatist for a suppressed government in Pathfinder. She left the group before it got destroyed. Soon after, her best friend, Jeff, from that organization took over a space flight she was one. It was intentional as he was still a terrorist and wished the PC to rejoin the movement.

Doug's best friend was an engineer. After Derrick's 45-year absence, Derrick became depressed. He lost his wife a few years before Doug's return (at the beginning of the game). However, he has become a little unstable. For one thing, he is 75 years old. He is an inspector and ended up actually causing accidents during his inspections.

It was easy to get the Pathfinder crew to go to Storren. Charles was from there and had a good friend there. Since Charles flew the ship, when he got a distress signal from him, Charles simply changed course without telling anyone.

BAD GUYS AND GOOD GUYS:

On paper, good guys and bad guys seem very distinct and very obvious. However, PCs often interpret actions differently. A good guy that is too good is often suspected of hiding something. Villains being too evil are a little fake. Give them some motivation to be more believable. If the villains and allies are rooted in the PC's past, then no problems. The PC just fills in the blanks. If the NPC was evil, then it will be really hard to break that mold. It is quite fun for PCs seeing what looks like a bad NPC only to find them to be friend of another PC, and that PC is the first defend. Changing a good guy into a bad guy is tricky since PCs are rooted in their ways

Carron's ultimate enemy in her PC's backstory was a dark figure played by Michael Ironside called "The Cleaner". He pops up in a picture after a month role-playing and Carron was not sure how this man who killed her PC's parents factored into the story. She hated this NPC with boiled blood. What she soon learned was that this NPC was a hired gun for a larger organization and has grown dissatisfied with their bureaucracy. Amazingly enough, he has also grown soft. He used the rage of vengeance to occupy his thoughts on a hit, but soon, after finally enacting revenge, finds himself incapable of doing the job. He contacts Carron's PC and offers help in bringing down the true opponent. How horrific would this be? Carron must swallow her own personal hatred for this man because he contains vital information that could help bring down their true opponents. In the end, Carron wouldn't get her chance to personally kill Cleaner. He gives his life to save the PCs. It was the better story even though Carron probably would have been happier if he was a simple bad guy she could kill and be happy.

Richter, Hour 1: "I think we should take him out."

Richter, Hour 2: "Guys, I want him dead...I want him on a platter."

Richter, Hour 3: "ARRGH!! I'm going to kill him. GRRRR!! Kill!!!"

Richter, Hour 4: "AAAHH!!! MMM!!! GRRR!!! ARRRGHH!!! MMEEE KILL!!! AARRRGHH!!!"

BE AWARE!

A GM must be conscious of his surroundings...and the PCs are the greatest feature. A GM creates the game for the PCs and not for himself. Entertainment arises from seeing the game blossom and develop. The moment the PCs become secondary is the moment the game starts to fall apart. However, the GM must be aware of the PCs attitudes. Most often enough, a game will fall apart and the GM won't exactly know why. It is a good idea to ask the players at the end of every session how they liked it. What did they not like and what they thought should be repeated in the future. The GM is free to develop new ideas and new approaches to adventures and then ask how they worked out. The PCs may enjoy it but may never want to do that type of adventure again. Also, if running an episodic game, at the end of every season, run a summary. Go through every episode, recap what happens and get players opinions. Maybe even request reviews and ratings from one to five stars or how much they enjoyed the episode.

As for each session, the GM must read players expressions on how much they liked the newest game twist. One common misconception is when the PCs are frustrated the PCs are not. Often enough frustration flows through the PC to the player. If something is not working, perhaps the GM should make a new approach. This is common especially when the group is faced with a puzzle that no one can even come close to solving. The GM is stubborn about handing the answer to them but still gets frustrated when the game grinds to a halt. Should the GM hand the answer to them...no. But the GM should lead the smartest character to the solution first or the ones with the best intelligence.

Sometimes it is not puzzles; sometimes the GM is not explaining a situation right. He/She tries and tries but the PCs just don't get it. This falls back to stubbornness from the GMs part. The GM can be insistent and not extrapolate in the details, convinced the initial description is enough. The GM must make the leap of logic than sometimes what makes sense for them does not make sense for the group. Sometimes the PC thinks they understand and go off on a tangent that totally confounds the GM. Perhaps it is better for the GM to stop and go, "I think you have confused the situation." Remember, often enough characters can be technically smarter than the players playing them. You can have a Character with an IQ of 180 played by someone who has a very decent 130. It is no crime and is often welcome for the GM to go to the player with the highest PC IQ and just tell them something their character can figure out.

This is clearly the most overlooked fact about the GM / ability of the Player, unused brains. The GM doesn't have a higher IQ; he/she just knows more about the setting so can vain intelligence. The GM must be able to pass that knowledge unto the players since their characters would know more about the setting than the players...unless, of course, it is a fish-out-of-water story.

Derrick hasn't refereed much. One day, he played with Ivan and myself in a mecha game. We found ourselves in a monstrous underground cavern. The walls crept up for many stories. We reached a dead end. Thinking that perhaps the rock face was possibly not made of rock, I threw a stone up into the air to one of the far walls.

This is how Derrick's description was heard. He passes his finger into the air. He made a little buzzing sound, followed by a "ping". The finger dropped to the table, with two more "pings" and then another buzz. This was it. Derrick refused to offer more explanation than that. He simply repeated the same description: "Buzzzz" "Ping"... "Ping" "Ping"... "Buzzzz." An hour passed, Ivan trying to figure it out. In truth, what transpired was that the rock vanished behind a holographic rock face, struck a wall behind it, dropped to the ground and rolled out from behind the holographic image to my PCs feet. If only Derrick had told us this, it could have saved and hour of my life I still want back.

I have also been guilty of doing that but I refuse to take sole responsibility for that. I gave the PCs in Pathfinder a letter addressed from a friend in Charle's PC's past. Hidden in the message were brackets with numbers: (120N), (45MIN), (35SEC), (65E), (52MIN), (15SEC). These were planetary coordinates. Arrrrgh!!! It took two hours--TWO HOURS--for the group to find the hidden message in that file. Carron points out right away about the strange words and numbers in "()" in the file but Craig shrugs and says, "Oh it's probably nothing." and I privately slap myself in the head and everyone else wonders what to do next when the answer was right in front of them. They knew there was something in the message but couldn't figure it out. I was pretty stubborn about pointing these numbers out. Finally...When Carron finally brought it up a second time, Craig realized his mistake and confirmed Carron's thoughts.

"But you said it wasn't important." Carron said.

"What the hell do I know? I'm an idiot" Craig retorted.

BAD IDEA, GOOD GAME?

It is possible for a GM to create a cool concept but have it fail in session. It is possible for the game to completely seem stupid on paper but it blossoms into months of gaming. Sometimes the best games start with virtually no planning and last for years. Others are meticulous in preparation, only to last a session. Like successful movies, it is unclear which games will work and which won't. Like the many blockbusters out of Hollywood, some games with massive hype can start with a roar that teeter out of existence from lack of interest as one by one, the players leave.

It all comes down to chemistry. A GM role-playing to a group of his/her close friends will often create a game with the potential of lasting a long time while games with many foreign players might patter out after one session. It depends on the classes of players playing at the type of game the GM is running. The 1st session is like a pilot episode. It does not need to be fantastic but be interesting enough to gauge the player's interest. There should be at least a small victory in the first session. But it's not usually for several sessions before the first chinks in the armor of the game expose themselves. Games that offer total freedom often are welcome to experienced role players but even they can get bored if nothing happens for several sessions.

My biggest complaint is when the game group breaks up into several smaller groups. This is often part of the game in design. This is a game facet that the GM can often avoid. Some GMs however, don't consider this a problem. I do. I have a severe problem when the GM takes a player out of the session and role-plays with that one for too long. This commonly happens and even I do it...my problem is with length. If you take a player from group, be quick and don't spend a whole session. Don't alienate the group for one player. Ten minutes is pushing it. Avoid game battles since they can take hours. Other players can often believe they are wasting their time. If the group does split up and it's important for the one side to not know of the other's actions, then make it fast.

Keep the split ups quick, no more than thirty minutes, and keep battles small. The battles must also account for the time. Too often thirty minutes extends to 3 hours to finish the battle and the GM goes to the other group for once again, only thirty minutes. Not exactly fair is it? Keep an egg timer going. No

matter what...stop at that time and go to the group. If you can't finish the fight in thirty minutes, don't start the fight in the first place. The group is MEANT to be together. Keeping them apart for sessions on end devalues the point of having a group in the first place. If the PCs don't get along and split, this is partly the fault of the GM. Get them back together. The game is meant for them to play together, not apart.

Also, make sure that the story is developing for everyone, not just one player. If the game suddenly feels one-sided, soon fewer players will show up for the sessions. Some Players have secrecy complexes. They don't like revealing stuff told to them in private by the GM. The game may get very confusing if only one player knows what is going on. If the one player is holding back important information, the GM should find ways for others to learn as well. This is not a self-centered aspect of the Player, it might only be a character trait. Or not...

A GM must understand player motivations and incorporate them into the game. Why would a PC engage in action he/she would never do only because it was necessary for the game? The same goes for the group. Players are, for lack of a better word, selfish. They only think of themselves...either the good of the PC or the good of the group. Very few groups engage in encounters because it was "the right thing to do." The larger the group, the more self-absorbed they are. They concern themselves only with their progress. You don't often see PCs working for a charity. Unless the GM incorporates a motivation rooted in the PCs past, they seldom go off on adventure without the desire of personal gain. Nothing shocks a GM more at the beginning of the game than to drop an adventure on the group's lap only to have them shrug off and ignore it. Make the players motivated other than the fact that it is expected of them. It's a fear of the GM to hear from a Player, "Let's do it because its what the GM wants us to do." A good game is like a good movie—you get separated from reality and for brief moments, you forget you are even in a game. A good sign for the GM is to watch the player's faces. During action scenes, check to see if there are tapping their legs in anticipation. If it s a descriptive or moody scene, see if the Player's eyes are closed.

I have mentioned the incident with Ivan's game where Derrick and myself were split for over three months of gaming. He developed a story and I just basically lived the game and did nothing. The game ended without myself even knowing what the last three months were about. For Terminals, I admit the game concept was slightly flawed...not because the pitch was flawed, but because the game is honestly one of the hardest to GM. This game involved Players created their own universe separate from the other PCs and have them plucked from their world to ours, and meeting the other PCs. It was a great concept that many Players adored. However, the game was executed poorly. For one, I had an improper mix of player classes (also mentioned before). But I also admit the game should have given more freedom to the players. I was unprepared for what some of the PCs were willing to do to beat the enemy. I should have gone with the flow. But perhaps the game gave them too much freedom. They all had powerful mechs. They group flew around in a massive spacecraft and even stumbled on an even larger one that could fold to different parts of the Universe.

In the end, the game fell because of PC conflicts. The game was rooted in them intentionally but I believe too many developed and never resolved. Terminals was a great idea but it didn't work with that group. I believe the concept to be valid and may work with others. Ships of the Line was another good idea but for me, it was overkill. I had successfully created a very choreographed interactive novel with Derrick because I knew him too well, but S.O.L went even further. The first two sessions were almost 30 pages of story and descriptions. I also played with a player I was not experienced with and could not anticipate the clash the two players would encounter with each other. I never created a game that choreographed again. I learned my lesson—an important one to learn.

Now Daniel the GM was different. The players didn't always get along. The adventure rolled by as swiftly and as surely as the hundred years war. Many sessions would pass with very little happening...however, the game just worked. Every time we turned as corner, something new would happen. The GM had a great improvisational skill and even though the mission lay before us took six months of role-playing; I could not even begin to talk about all the little plots that happened. This was due to the skill of the GM. Now with Martin's game, the keys were the players. We just got along so well; we sank into our characters and just played off each other. I don't even remember a story even developing in the few sessions we engaged I, but I enjoyed it so much.

<p><i>Carpenter "You know if I had to analy rape someone, I think I would not be the one being made fun of." GM: "That's right, "big dog.""</i></p>

N.P.C.'s The why's and the when's

Now I am not referring to villains (that comes later). I am referring to those NPCs that seem to pop up, join the group, stay a while—sometimes forever—offer something, and once and a while dish out information surprisingly important to the flow of the game. There are three traits on NPCs. They can occupy any combination of these traits:

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA:

The NPC will often reveal information the Player either don't know about the situation or have forgotten. As always, the NPC is never wrong and seldom offers bad advice. More often than not, the NPC shockingly know the right path...of course the GM might be aware and throw in the odd red herring or two.

THE GM's CHARACTER:

A common trait of GMs that double as Players in the off time is to incorporate one of their own. This is honestly a good thing as it offers the GM the chance to infuse the other traits of NPCs. GM Characters are often more independent, are more fleshed out, and sometimes can have their motivations, like a real PC. However, the GM must not make the mistake of making the NPC an equal of the PC. The NPC is never that important.

THE FILLER:

Sometimes the group just cannot cover the spectrum of skills required to good playing. Especially in D&D groups where suddenly, someone notices there is no magic user or on a spacecraft missing an engineer. Some NPCs are there only to donate the few extra skills needed to handle needs not covered by PCs.

There are those NPCs that enter only briefly. These are simple game plot NPCs and are usually there for a specific purpose and then leave but the regular NPCs can sometimes be as important as PCs, just as long as they are not more important. NPC should not monopolize the game. Also, don't have too many of them. Spending half a battle dealing with NPC is not a good idea.

Pathfinder's spacecraft carried a crew of eight but only had four PCs. The remaining were: Brooklyn Taylor, Jessica Quaiice, Finland Boothe and Willas Bryce. Brooklyn was obscure in her role as the Tug operator. She basically filled the missing technical side and became the assistant to the engineer when necessary. She also controlled the ships auxiliary functions. I utilized her more for backup skills that didn't fit in other roles like computer programming. Jessica was the NPC gunwoman. She was my good guy in gunfights. She was often the only good NPC with a gun. She also was the pilot before Charles' joined the group. She later was delegated to navigation and flew the backup spacecraft when Charles was occupied. I kept her after Charles joined the group because I was hoping perhaps developing an eventual relationship between her and Charles' PC. Boothe and Bryce were much more refined as personas. Boothe was the engineer. He contained vital skills and proved very popular. His skills covered the spectrum and he could repair anything. Bryce was the doctor, also very important. No PC was willing to spend that many points as I did for Bryce's medical skills. Bryce eventually became the most fleshed out NPC in the group. I even attempted an experimental adventure and made him the center of an episode and the PCs played off of him instead of vice-versa. Now that breaks my rule but I still wanted to try it. The point here is that I hardly ever utilized two NPCs at a time. All four were never in a gunfight together. After three years of role-playing, the PCs considered the NPC crew members as much of the family as the other Player characters.

Marlee: "I saw this on a show once..."

Berlin: "How did they deal with it."

Marlee: "Well, they "beamed" out."

Berlin: "That doesn't exactly help US!"

USING OTHER SOURCES (You know, ripping off)

What? You think you don't do it? You do. You think your idea is original? Its not. You think they won't find out? You pray. Simple as that. Few GMs are successful novel writers. Maybe they were, but it's doubtful you have a game idea worthy of a \$100 million summer movie event. It could be eventually...with a little work and some college courses. However, I wage to guess that almost all the games ever played in role-playing have something ripped off of another source. Few are totally original. Hell, most movies aren't either. You probably were inspired by a movie, a game, a TV episode you watched. Maybe the group has seen it as well and looks forward to your translation. Maybe you ripped it off so much you pray they haven't. Here is they key: Make sure. For one, don't rip off a \$200 million dollar blockbuster. The larger the group, the harder it will be to disguise. Modify it just enough that it bears resemblance but there is still a lot of originality. If they have not heard of it at all, then just file of the serial numbers and enjoy yourself.

If you wish to introduce a new weapon lifted from previous source or a spacecraft you don't believe anyone will recognize, draw it. Do you have the skill? Try. Just draw the weapon. Give the illusion it's original. However some great pictures exist if you know where to look for them. They are unique to themselves, not connected to any publishes material. Photos for cars exist everywhere; the same goes for famous weapons, both past and present. Probably the most ripped off is futuristic technology, namely spacecraft, robots and cool guns. Mecha are simple because so many Anime influence each other a lot just look the same. Surfing the net will reveal thousands of mech pictures, many most players won't recognize. I have also noticed that most players in a mech game won't care if the design is lifted from another source...just as long as the design fits in the game. As for spacecraft, avoid using any from movies unless the movie is an unknown. Luckily there is a solution on the net as before, this time in the form of hundred of space painting from artists from around the world. Search for names like Jim Burns, Ron Cobb, and Chris Foss for some truly original looking and totally unique ship designs.

It's OK to lift ideas for specific adventures, but try to avoid ripping the whole game off a source and trying to conceal the fact from the players. It may really tick them off when they find out.

WHAT CAN YOU RIP OFF:

Stories: Stories are hard. This is the worst situation for a GM if he is caught. More than any other type of plagiarism. Ripping off a plot shows a lot of weakness.

Technology: Lifting designs like weapons, vehicles, and spacecraft are just fine and even recommended to improve the visual feel of a game. However, don't rip off the obvious. Stay away from signature devices like light sabers and Green Destiny Swords. There are tones of photos online that a GM can use that are not only hard to identify, but even totally unattached to any major source. So go ahead and use those guns you lifted from Timecop (not a huge blockbuster), but don't use Aliens (unless its Alien-FUZION of course).

Actor Photos: Totally free. I mean where else are you going to get good photos for actors. Just avoid any notable peripherals that may throw the illusion. You want Leonard Nimoy for a role in your game...sure...just don't show a picture of him with pointed ears.

Concepts: Concepts are the most lifted. A movie or book has a good idea; a GM takes that and develops the idea into something new. Most of the time, the players join because the concept is familiar.

My first refereed game in a science fiction setting was a complete and total rip-off of the movie Outland. I admit it. I still lifted material later but did it more and more gradually. Pathfinder was almost 50% unoriginal material, but I mixed it nicely so the taste didn't seem too abrasive to the group. I used hundreds of space pictures from my extensive collection of space art from around the world. The concept of the game itself was influenced and was openly declared a tribute to the great dark SF of the types of Alien, Outland, and Pitch Black. Some adventures were very much ripped off, some very subtle...some not so much. I can admit that one of the most famous adventures I did was based on an Anime called Green Legend Ran. All I borrowed was this cool concept of massive boat shaped vessels cruising across a desert

that responded like water while traveling through it. I even took plot points of the movie Explorers for an adventure once. I learned that mixing original with unoriginal was the key. From Explorers, I lifted bits of the spacecraft, and the attempted alien takeover of the craft. Everything else was original.

ENCOURAGING CHOREOGRAPHY

Step back and just look at the game being played. See how a battle would look in life. Is it just two guys in a room, standing erect, firing shot after shot. Does someone simply dodge by bobbing their head left and right or do they roll over a table and fire backward a la John Woo? Game fights can get increasingly monotonous and even boring if it's simply dice rolling. The GM should make the first step. Make sure that a battle area is explained in complete detail. Draw it, position people, place props—Make objects deformable; make things breakable. Offer barriers and block line of sight with dangerous hazards. This sets the scene and offers a mood sometimes better than any music score can. A skillful combination can change a comical gunfight in *Naked Gun* with the climactic scene in *LA Confidential*. Encourage the PC with experience points to choreograph the action the scene they best they can. A good way is to incorporate the critical success rule. If the GM is endorsing the critical success rule, reward a good role by a good move. Don't just say, "okay he is dead instantly." Reward the PC with an acrobatic or a gunshot that would make *Wo Ping* proud. In a car chase, throw in some obstacles, pedestrians, animals, casual traffic or incidental accidents. A gunfight – Offer obstacles, flammable items, and bystanders. Action scenes need to be unique and fit into the setting at hand.

I love rewarding critical successes with interesting maneuvers. One time, Charles jumped off a car before it exploded, soared through the air, shot through the window of another car, took out the bad guy driver, and landed in the passenger seat. Over the top? Yeah. What's your point?

Gabriel: *"He controls the Horizontal and the Vertical."*

Rio: *"We would be in the Outer Limits for the bad pun of the week."*

VILLAINS

Here is the big problem though with GMs: Never taunt the PCs by dangling the bad guy over and over again without the opportunity to fight. And if they do, give them a chance for victory. If not, it can prove very frustrating for the PCs to engage in a fight they have no hope in winning. And if they do win, nothing pisses a player off than bringing that villain back again and again. The Players need victories. So never include just one villain. Always toss in a couple subordinates. Take one down once and a while. Make it personal. The GM should create a handful of villains rooted in the past of the Player Characters. There is no need, then, to create antagonistic feelings for them since they already exist. In fact, greater rifts will occur in the old enemies rather than introducing new ones, often no matter how evil the new NPC is. Players love to encounter NPCs from their past and they follow through with a deep-seated passion, more so if the NPCs are age-old villains. New villains, especially big ones, have to be fully thought out characters to be effective. They need all their abilities written down with all applicable skills at hand. The biggest villain does not need to be the richest or the strongest, but the one the PC/s feel the greatest rage over. That villain should be left for a massive climax and unless a very good point is given, should never come back. It totally sucks the life and reason out of the game. The PC/s direct themselves to one purpose when a master villain they are obsessed over presents himself or herself. Never achieving the goal of conquering this foe makes the PC/s doubt the reason for playing.

Shifting loyalties can be tricky. A new villain presented at the beginning of the game then turns around to be later, an ally, is a concept easier to swallow than a GM might think. However, turning loyalties to an old PC rooted enemy into an ally is very difficult. PCs can be obtuse that way—incapable often enough of letting the villain a chance to be a good, or at the very least, not to evil. Even allies out of necessity (fighting a common enemy) can sometimes be hard, that final concept is much easier to swallow. Just watch for a sudden turn by the PCs unless they are convinced the Enemy has righted his wrongs.

A big stop sign springs up, however, to the mirror opposite of what I just mentioned. Turning Old PC friends into enemies or anything other than what the PC had conceived is a sure fire route to

aggravation. Simply put, the NPCs the Players have created to be their friends are often, as close to their heart as the PCs themselves. Turning a high school best friend into the arch-villain, can be tricky, and may backfire to the GM as the PC constantly insists that this path would have never been an option in the NPCs life.

It is always a good idea to have a villain unless the specifics of the game prohibit it. However, even though it is encouraged to create allies in the PCs past, avoid asking them to create villains unless you plan on using them. They offer a lot of opportunities that shouldn't go to waste.

Finally, to quote the great M. Night Shyamalan's masterpiece Unbreakable, there are two types of villains, the ones that defeat the hero with his fists and the greater enemy, that uses his mind. The same applies here. Now, even though the master foe should be last to go down, often enough the main underling, the commanding foot soldier, is the greatest victory the PC/s can achieve. Make it big and make it glorious. Suspend the moment, and make sure everyone knows how great this victory was.

Conestoga is perfect example of using villains. For a game with a solitary player, it contained no fewer than six PC created NPC allies and more than four PC created villains. On top of that, I added more than six enemies myself on top of those. A total of almost thirty NPCs came and went during the course of the two-month game, some more important than others. The biggest opponent of the game was Jagheel Adagio. He was the main villain for Derrick's PC even though there were opponents of higher rank above him. He presented the greatest victory for the PC but also his greatest disappointed. Jagheel and the PC had a respect for each other because of a sense of honor both possessed. The other villains were truly evil but Jagheel was more logical, more like just a soldier on the other side passionate about his values. Other villains included a massive thug...the beast, known as Sole Giros who became this monstrosity that was actually dealt with AFTER Jagheel was killed. Another was the main commander, who was killed when the Mothership detonated at the climax. My six villains were the main villains. Derrick's NPCs, villain or not, all had to band together to deal with them. Since the enemy NPCs created by the PCs were not inheritably and totally evil, I was able to get away with that. However, the two-hour battle/ordeal between Jagheel and Derrick's PC was a battle of wits and morals as well as strength. Making a villain the PC wants to bring down but not necessarily kill is a hard balance to achieve and Conestoga succeeded.

KNOW YOUR GM / KNOW YOUR PLAYERS **AND MAKING THE GAME CLEAR**

I would venture to guess that perhaps 5% of all game players actually follow all the rules, use only officially approved character classes, and permit only sensible balanced items in their campaigns. Check that...maybe 2%. I could have mentioned this above with the reasons why games collapse but this is rooted in the creation of the game itself. When the GM creates his game, he must outline in detail what he is looking for in characters and he must be aware of what is being created. If a PC being created just doesn't work, the GM must know that ahead of time less the game falls apart later

Williams: "Sorry, I am being an ass..."

<Silence>

Brown: "Hear that? ... That's the sound of nooobody disagreeing with you..."

PLAYING THE GAME

WHO IS RIGHT?

When GM's and Player's clash, who will emerge victorious. The answer is no one, however, the common rule with most games gives power completely with the GM. So is the GM always right? Not exactly. True, the GM does receive the power of God over his/her game; however, they do not receive the power of smite. A common failing to all GM at least once in their career is pride. There are ways to avoid being proved wrong.

THE GM'S VETO POWER APPLIES TO:

Game storyline: The GM creates it. He/she has total power over history and backstory.

NPC attitudes and personalities: NPCs are just that. Even if the NPC are friends of a PC, they are controlled by the GM and will always do what the GM says. If they deviate from the profile given earlier, they should have a good reason.

Character Creation: The GM has full right to deny or bring down any attributes or skills the character wishes to tack on his/her character. This also goes for Backstory, Personality, Perks and Stats.

Rule Modifications: The GM, at the beginning of a game, can choose to modify or remove ANY rules he/she see fits to improve the flow of his/her game.

THE GM MUST ADMIT DEFEAT TO:

Common scientific laws the game chooses to endorse: Common laws, not disavowed by the GM must be followed if the situation comes up.

The attitudes and motivations of Player Characters: The GM should never put words in the PC mouth the Player feels is not within their character.

Plot Holes: A weakness in the game, especially if the GM has been Improvising a lot. The GM should try to work out the hole the best he can. If not, the GM should just make a final word on the situation

Information on institutions he/she is not informed about: If the GM runs a game rooted in heavy Catholicism, then re-writes the bible, he will definitely annoy the devout in the group. This applies to any group where the GM tries to include an organization another Player knows more about. This is a GM weakness—the GM should have done the research. Power falls to the common right. If the Player knows more about the group than the GM and counters a decision the GM has made, the Player must back it up. If proven right, the GM should rescind.

I already mentioned the incident with the Marine Corps RPG. In Pathfinder, everyone knew the game so well; there was never a conflict in the game Universe. However, my biggest problem came with Craig. He did nothing wrong. Not at all. It all became routed with the fact that Craig...was a genius. I am not exactly sure where his IQ is. I think we did a test once and his is about 10 or 15 more than me. He also has boatloads of raw technical knowledge where my expertise was in the more abstract. He admitted to me several times that he does not have the brain for imagination. However, I admit defeat when it comes to intelligence. I had to be extremely careful when it came to using techno babble since I knew if I was just guessing and I was wrong, Craig would speak up. However, there was one moment where he nailed me on one very bad cliché. My attempt for a standard ghost story lost all forms of tension right at a pivotal point. One crew member announces like some great revelation, "Guys...I think its the Captain..." and then Craig blurts out, "Well of COURSE its the CAPTAIN!" And all mood is flushed down the proverbial toilet. At that point, the game was a crawl that was only saved by the overlying plot of the adventure around it. Ghosts never popped up again. Thank goodness.

I do remember Craig's PC adding the remark, "Oh, come on, this is so clichéd!"

DICE ROLLS Vs. GAME FLOW

Sorry players, but this MUST fall into the GM territory but there is a gray area open for argument. If a character is struck without warning from behind by a very large bludgeon and is knocked out, unless the player offers a very good reason why he should turn and pop a cap in the ass of this bat wielding goof (“Shouldn’t the four other players behind me have noticed this chicklet brain before he cold-cocked me?”), he is out cold.

There are many moments in a game where to keep the flow of the game fast, the GM will avoid using die rolls, however, this rule really applies to the situations where the PCs feel there should be a roll when they shouldn’t. Some players insist there should be a roll—a chance they have to change the outcome of a situation. The obvious symptom is when a PC is listening to a speech a NPC is making and all the PC can think of is butting in. It’s common that that a PC will always try to have the last word, no matter what. Unless the conversation is over a radio or a phone and the NPC says something and hangs up, the PC will always try to get in the last word.

With rolling, the Player always will try to justify rolling for something that the GM has decided already against the Player’s favor. Sometimes, a failure is just a failure. A GM may, in compromise, offer a difficulty so high, it would be impossible. This is both a good thing and a bad thing. It offers the player a slim chance of altering the future (leaving the room for an optional critical success) but it may also upset the Player by giving him a difficulty he/she has no hope of succeeding, making them think that their path is forced. However, most experience role players with an experienced GM can encounter these fixed events and not worry that the adventure is linear.

My biggest and probably only conflict in the years playing with Derrick came from a D&D adventure where Derrick played an Elf. Now, the adventure was a published work, not an original (called The Egg of the Phoenix). In a Dungeon crawl moment, the group comes across a strange artifact. Simply put, the slug said that the object “places a charm that will effect everyone who touches it regardless of saving throw or race.” Derrick would not have this and promptly and rather pompously rolled his percentile dice. Some might recall that elves are 90% immune to charm but this artifact was quite direct about its effectiveness. Derrick became very upset and thought I was just picking on him. However, the rule held and his elf was charmed.

So in this case, I always go for game flow unless, as said before, there is a good reason for a die roll. Like someone pulls a knife and lunges in towards the PC in plane view, the PC should be able to make a roll to avoid. Every GM can weave tales of Players engaging in action no other human would attempt only because they know they may critical success. This is common with Slashers—they commonly shoot first, shoot second, shoot some more, and then maybe ask a question. A villain holds a bystander hostage with gun, ordering the PCs to drop their firearms. In movies and most likely, real life, the PCs would lower their weapons knowing they are not that good a shot or that human life is too precious for such a risk...not so in many a game. Blam... “Oh, I hit the hostage...oh well.”

Another example, this time with the PC/s surrounded by insurmountable odds (like 10:1). Anyone would surrender...seldom do PCs... hardly ever actually. PCs feel indestructible and knowing that they, for some reason, can withstand fifteen shots to the scrotum or a broadsword through the abdomen, they will take their chances, safe in the knowledge that most injuries that would send the normal human to the morgue, merely glances off the toughness. The GM should not even give the Player/s the option. Just say to them, “the odds our insurmountable. Pulling your gun is a death sentence...guaranteed.” Make it clear to the PCs that no on rolling will be done. They will not survive. Something aspects of the game will be out of the players hands...just as long as the GM does not control the PCs directly, there shouldn’t be problem. Just don’t do it all the time, less the players think they are stuck in some Sierra game (King’s Quest anyone?)

I already mentioned the incident with Bill and Derrick and the mech game where he we were surrounded 10 to 1, fought, and still won. Derrick was renowned for never backing down from a fight. He usually assumes overwhelming odds meant an exceptionally long fight. Even in Conestoga, he would go up against amazing odds and I WOULD expect a fight from him. PCs with guns think they are indestructible.

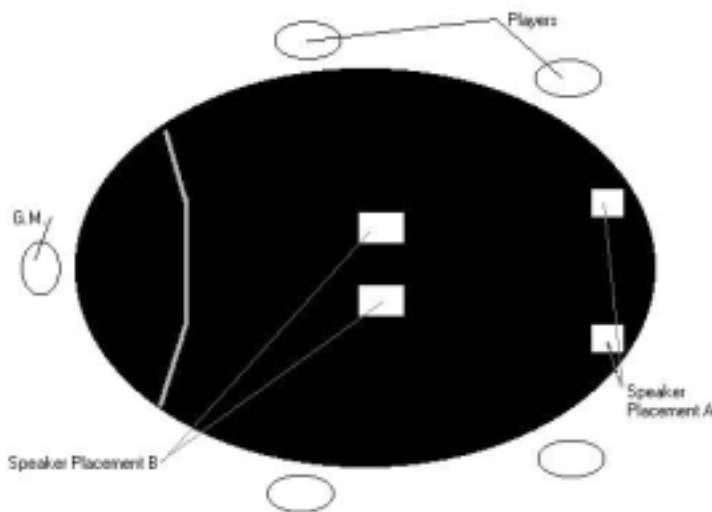
PCs with mechs think they are god. However, one moment in Conestoga, I wanted him to surrender. It would lead to him finally coming face to face with his arch-nemesis—his equal, Jagheel Adaigo. However...he would have to surrender. Let me tell you. When you have no weapons, and a 30-foot tall robots bears a weapon on you...you surrender. If I recall...that was the ONLY time Derrick ever surrendered. Subtle, wasn't it?

THE GAME ROOM - DO'S & DON'TS

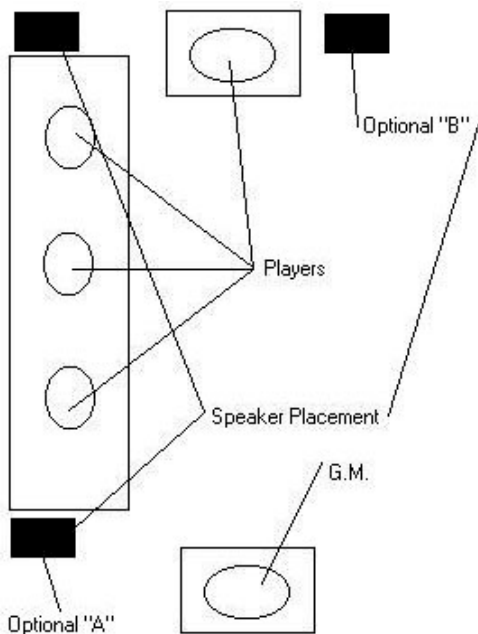
The room can sometimes make or break a game. Don't believe me? Trust me, cramping six players in bedroom with no chair and inadequate air circulation will piss off many and result in a group of uncomfortable and very smelly players. You would be surprised how much heat five or six people in a closed generates

BIGGER IS BETTER:

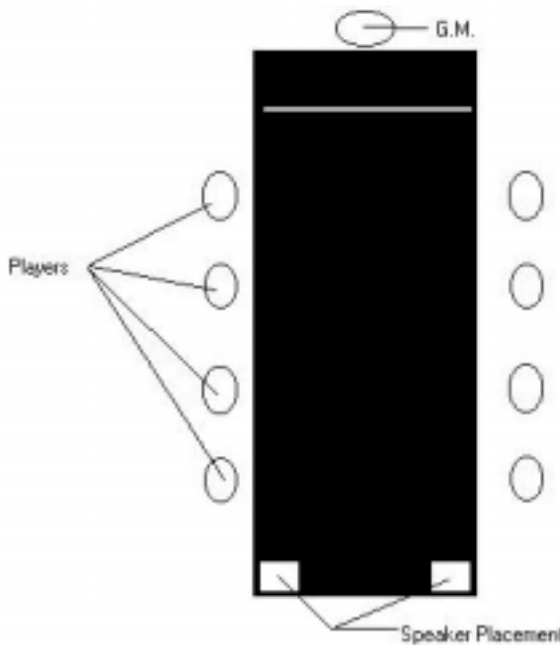
Classrooms have often been the greatest place for role-playing. They include desks, chairs, and even blackboards! They are also large, often secluded, and offer great ventilation. However their greatest asset is that they're neutral. They don't belong to anybody. The group isn't imposing on anyone.



"Kitchen Table"



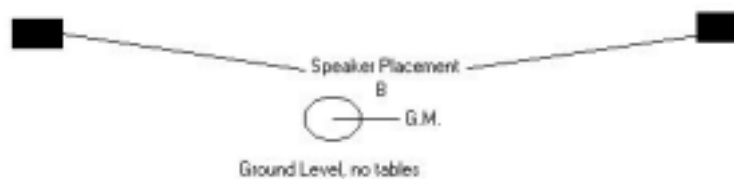
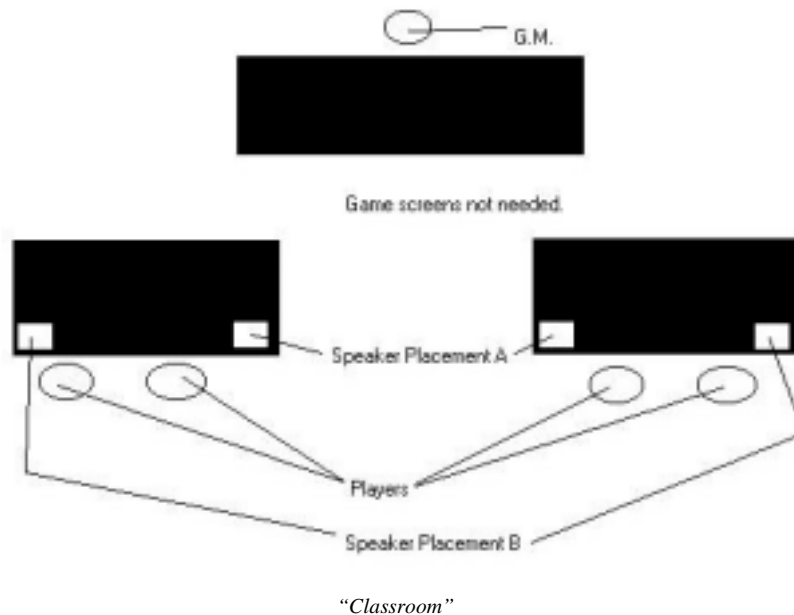
"Living Room"



"Long Table"

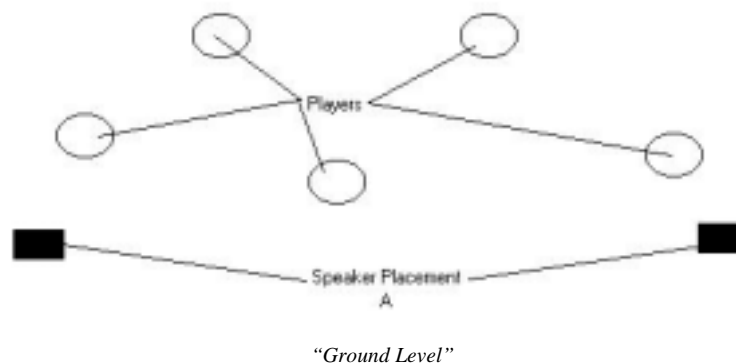
MEMBER LOCATION:

If the game is played at a player's location, the game can suddenly come to a screeching halt if that player suddenly skips a session or worse, quits. If anyone volunteers his or her house, best it is the GM. It's his/her game. Either the case, the house location maybe appropriate but elements can add chaos. This includes kids, parents, siblings, and animals. Often enough there is time curfew or a volume restriction. The group surrounds a Dinner table often enough, as people move in and out commonly, throwing off the moment of the game. If it's a basement, a room that can be cut off, even better. However, try to keep the ventilation high. It can get real hot, real fast. And make sure everyone has adequate playing space.



MUSIC LOCATION:

As I said, keep the speakers behind the Players via extension cords or perhaps behind the GM, but never in front of the GM, facing players. Avoid having the radio playing. It's just a plan bad idea.



Weston: "What was it like over there?"

Brown: "I have developed a permanent pyschological quirk. I'm not exactly calling it Disneyland."

DISTRACTIONS:

There should be as little distraction as possible. Open windows, but close doors. Parents can be the most annoying. Honestly, though, they don't hang around long to be a large annoyance. My biggest annoyance is from siblings and boyfriends/girlfriends. Many want to talk, often as questions, and usually say very stupid things to ruin the moment.

You name it, I have played there: Bedrooms, Living rooms, Basements, and Pool Halls. My computer room was a popular venue for smaller groups. However, the heat buildup was extraordinary. Even with fans, unless the window was opened, eventually no one could breath. I have noticed basements

work better than almost every location except for one...schools. Schools offer an unbiased location for all to meet. There were two basements that did stand out. Both Derrick's three couches on cement with massive wood tables and Charles' massive living room with couches, a loveseat, a recliner and a futon was great for large groups. The local college was best. It allowed great side moments when I would GM with just one player. We would walk away down the hallway and just talk secretly. The group played every Saturday at 7:00, and we were often enough, the only people in that section of the school. We often got secluded rooms in the corner. The only distraction came from a security guard that would arrive once every three hours. We sometimes wouldn't have the door unlocked for us and we would have to hunt for him. One time, a new guard wouldn't unlock the door for us even though we had the time booked and blocked. So...we just sat there, in the hallways and played right there. We were in the top corner of the school and no one came by. It was an odd session. The only down point came when I was late for a session. I tripped on the rug and broke a rib. I still have trouble sleeping on my left-hand side.

THAT BLASTES AWARENESS CHECK

Call it what you will, there is always that famous out of the blue roll to notice something. INT check, Combat Sense, Awareness roll, all the games have them in one form or another...it also give a player a complete lack of surprise when he/she discovers something. But GMs still insist on using them because they believe it offers the Player some form of victory if you hadn't just told them, "You notice a reflection in the bottom of that pond." Most of these rolls are automatic successes. Unless you critical fail a roll, chances are, the GM will tell you anyway, especially if it's critical to the plot somehow. If the player fails, guess what, the GM will eventually ask you again soon. This is especially true for large group games—It assures SOMEONE will succeed. Combat Sense is another annoying skill. It basically sucks the fun of a "Surprise attack." For smaller groups, try these ideas out.

RANDOM ROLLS:

Just lob a couple out here and there. They have no importance and it sucks the fun of knowing "you're about to discover something." However, this still sucks out the surprise. I prefer the latter option

PRE-ROLLS:

Very successful in smaller groups, at the beginning of the session, have everyone pre-roll the respective "at the moment" skill, and then randomly or in order, refer to them when need be. This is successful because A) it offers the player the use of the skill but still gives the surprise when the event happens. And B), it gives the GM the opportunity to "fib" it. You want a surprise attack on your group, go ahead and use that failure... A player complains that he should not have been knocked out because his combat sense would have warned him...simply shrug and say, "You did roll...you failed."

IGNORE THEM ALLTOGETHER:

More successful than you might think. When a Player plays a PC technically smarter and wise than themselves, sometimes the GM must interject some obvious knowledge. You will be surprised how happy a Player is when the GM simply looks at the Player and says, "No need to roll, you know this area like the back of your hand." Or something similar like. "Your character knows this nefarious type, the guy's hiding something." Etc.

Of course, combining all three techniques is totally valid.

THE RICHES CANBE PLENTIFUL...

A common failing in many games is when the GM gives too much. What's even worse is when he takes it all away soon after? It can be extremely frustrating for a player to be tempted by something he/she can never possess. I have noticed PCs care less about hard money than cool items they could use. Most players are not rich, using the money soon to buy them...Cool items they could use. Little eccentric items with seemingly a very unique purpose can often be greater treasures than the GM had imagined. The problem comes with the GM giving too much. Suddenly the small victories are less important and the

players get bored of their rewards. However, its still fun to award miniscule unimportant items that many players take to heart. Its best to avoid rewarding PCs with planes or battleships unless it is vital to the plot. However, a new car is a viable option. A pair of PCs I GM once came across a pair of superbikes once. In Pathfinder, the PCs ran across a boat...of all things...but using a technology foreign to them.

The most common reward is weapons. Fighters like swords, Wizards like wands, etc. However, avoid dishing out +5 weapons unless you are aware of the impact. With modern games, guns are common treasures, especially for cyberpunk. PCs love wielding odd and unique firearms, especially if they wander into some rare gun shop or find some advanced gun in a vault four miles below the Ptolmic River. However, it is too easy to dish out weapons that radically unbalance the game. The cool secret with cool guns, limit their ammunition. Make the bullets very hard to come by or make bullets REALLY expensive.

While in a weapons shop in some far off space colony in Pathfinder, Charles asked if the clerk had any really rare weapons. Charles has been known to do this often at every outskirts colony shop. He bought rare powerful guns. But upon running out of ammunition, he would simply toss the weapon. For the longest while, I never sold him a gun he had any desire to keep. Only an old flachette 14mm seemed to hang around. But this day was different. The clerk pulled what was known as a Z1-Deckard. This was an advanced pistol that fired self-propelled rocket shells. But not only that but it would also auto-aim on vital organs or exposed vulnerabilities. The first time Charles fired it, it took off the rear axle off a futuristic hummer. "You're a keeper!" Charles said and pocketed the weapon. He never threw that gun away. He even, at one point, walked back into an enemy base to confront a main bady just to get his gun back. However the downside was ammunition. They cost more than \$1000 per bullet and were available in only half the places he checked out.

IMPROVISING

Some GMs are natural at this...some can never figure it out. Some GMs can weave adventures out of a whim. A GM that cannot improvise should never be put into a position to do so. To keep that from happening in an open-ended adventure, a GM should create several side adventures always on hand that can activate in a moment's notice. They may seem improvised, but in reality, the GM thought ahead. In the case of an unpredictable group moving in a direction unexpected to the GM...the GM should just wing it. If the game universe is very colorful, there should be no problem. There is little advice to be added here. Some GMs just have it...some don't. It improves with skill, and as the GM gets more comfortable with the group. As the group plays longer and longer, the need for improvising reduces as the GM learns to predict a head of time where he believes his group would be going and plots encounters down that road. The hardest moment for a GM is the first few sessions...they are make or break.

During Pathfinder, I attempted an experiment in the first season. As like a dungeon crawl, I incorporated random events in the life of the group like Raider attacks to ship malfunctions to unexpected windfalls to name a few. Some specific instances of note included the crew finding drugs smuggled on their ship to a stowaway kid, and the life support shutting down. The rarest type of encounter I rolled for was a new story. I rolled such an instance during another adventure. Halfway through a very edgy episode dealing with Joe's PC's loyalty and a race to locate this rare vessel equipped with nuclear weapons, the crew suddenly came across another vessel equipped with an automated computer system that had gained sentience. Joe made an improper conclusion that this was connected to his adventure somehow and started lying to the group. This didn't help his cause...

Rio: "I can't believe you are shooting me with that piece of Mail-Order @\$%!!"

CUE CARDS & BASE SKILLS

Here is an idea for the GM...keep it simple. You never need to write down every single statistic of your NPC or even the players. So for every thug and villain, create a cue card. On this card, place the following applicable numbers: Hit Points, Armor, primary weapon stats, and all-important Base skills. Base skills are derived from the old THACO of early AD&D and only apply to certain games. Figure out all the skills the Character uses the most and add them to the applicable statistic. As said, this only applies

during the game that cripples a player will just annoy the group and make them believe the GM is picking on them. There is the rare case when the rule benefits no one. This is when changing a rule just makes the game easier, not better.

SPECIAL NOTE--RANGE:

If I asked what the most forgotten rule in combat was, “Range” tops the list. Why? Honestly, in the heat of combat, Most forget to check. Luckily science back the omission. With the exception of arrows and blow darts, most ranged weapons easily can hit any target in the battlefield. The only factor the GM needs to worry about it accuracy at those ranges. Unless the combat involves a sniper, chances are, everyone shoots in range. Of course, unless you ride in a mecha, then range really does matter. In mecha games, the range of the weapons are intentionally retracted to keep the combat close and allow the opportunity of melee weapons top shine. In firearm combat, just forget ranges and the GM should just force difficulties based on situations at hand (firing across a crowded street, etc).

SPECIFIC GAME TYPES

HORROR GAMES:

Horror games are often the biggest experiments a group attempts in role-playing. The first idea is to bathe the room in almost or total darkness. Obviously, stat rolls are unimportant at this point. Sometimes, dim red lights can be substituted. The music has to be carefully chosen here. Ambient music is best but chose wisely and don’t always have the same music playing over and over. Hold back until you need it. Keep their players on their toes. If they can’t see it, throw a dice to the wall behind them. Its cruel but it works.

The lights were off, bathing the room in total darkness. I was conducting some private gaming with Ivan. He was outside the massive spacecraft “Maelstrom” as it closed in its ultimate destination, the sentient star known as Millennium Moraes. Monsters started appearing on board the ship. Ivan tried to shortcut around them to reach Derrick on the bridge. Derrick was pinned. I role-played privately with Ivan. Derrick donned headphones and quietly sat out for a moment. It got fairly warm after a while, even with the lights turned off. We were all in the mood of the session. Dave found the roaming fan somewhat annoying so he turned it off. However, it got hot real fast. While Derrick was out of tune, headphones on, I asked Ivan to turn the fan back on. The Fan spun to life and started sweeping across the room. At full blast, the breeze crept up Derrick’s legs without warning. Derrick JUMPED and screamed. It scared the hell out of him.

DUNGEON CRAWLS:

Oh the horror, the horror. Dungeon crawls are the bane of many experienced players. Usually a good sign of a weak GM. However, this is not exactly the case. Some experienced GMs still utilize Dungeon crawls. Of course, the futuristic “Spaceship crawls” falls into this category as well. The biggest problem with these easily is their predictability. You know treasures come with monsters. Traps lay around every corner, and the group will always get lost. Suffice to what a GM wishes, a group getting lost in a maze is NEVER a good idea. It only leads to stress to the group. Crawls are usually devoid of plot and are often including lengthening a game session, or to give the players some much needed fighting and victories. Here are some suggestions to ease the swallow of crawls:

Have the map make sense: Even some mazes baffle the intelligence. But some maps double around, seemingly overlapping themselves. They are there just to confuse and to frustrate the players. Maps should make sense. Place locations in proper areas. On ship maps, don’t go overboard on repetitive locations. The first mistake GMs make in ship maps in making the ships like a dungeon. Ships rooms and hallways have to interlock, with little to no spacing between unless there is a reason for it. Dungeons don’t have to work that way and can be a bit more erratic.

Draw the map for the players: When players start drawing maps based on the explanations of the GM, something will be lost in the translation. Even if the GM sees the map being drawn, his judgment on how close the Players got it may be a bit off. Its best to go right to the source. It is a good idea then for the GM

to draw the map for the players. If in a classroom, draw it on a black board, or just hand the PCs an updated map, or just grab theirs and fill in the new areas.

Don't randomize the enemies: There is such a term of “too many monsters.” When the PCs fight something new at every turn, it can get uninteresting really fast. The problem is that the GM starts thinking of cool monsters for the PCs to fight but does not think if that monster should EVEN be there. Throwing in cool monsters because they are cool showcases the lack of a unique image for this crawl. The morale drops substantially. Fit the encounters to fit the setting. A GM will be surprised how enjoyment a dungeon crawl can be even if it lacks thirty battles. Keep the fights important to the theme of the crawl. Don't randomize. A battle out of the blue won't spark up a crawl...it will make it drag.

Give the location a purpose: The word “random” is actually the bane of many players. A maze crawl with no purpose other than to suck up game time can be very irritating. Even if the GM is throwing it in to break up monotony or give the players some fighting time and some rewards, make it mean something. Throw in a story. I don't care how, just make a destination. Have a purpose. Make the players motivated other than the sense of adventure.

“Iron Helix” was an attempt at a science fiction dungeon crawl. The Pathfinder crew came across an old space bomber. It was not a huge vessel but it was a very detailed and logical five-decked spaceship. Every deck had a purpose with plans that made sense. It also contained a trio of defender robots almost impossible to defeat and very persistent. By the time the first one showed up, the crew had already explored most of the ship. I drew the maps of the various decks for them and soon, by the time the robots made their appearances, the group already knew their way around, but still could get lost and again. It was one of the best episodes we ever had. They were not aware of three robots that are launched only in single patrols—they first explored the ship to uncover why it never completed its mission. The group split up of course. Charles, Doug, and Carron explore the engine room and hear the elevator door in the hallway open. But they hear the other group on the radio on the bottom deck. The three hide deep in the service conduit deep in the reactor (a blind spot for the droid which cannot scan the tunnel because of the shielding). The other group spots the first droid on the bridge deck. It chases the groups that eventually find each other on the top deck. The first droid is disposed off in the garbage incinerator. There are two ways in, a service hatch and the main door. The group led the droid in through the hatch but Doug had to hide in a service space to close the hatch behind it so the incinerator can work...lotsa tension there. The second droid arrive in a standoff with Charles. The exchanged firepower across an outside hallway, emptying every clip. He destroyed it but there was still one left. It was ejected out of an airlock. This adventure was chopped full of great examples of choreographed music and detailed action scenes with interesting twists and character development...but its still basically a dungeon crawl.

MECH GAMES:

You can quickly discover in a mech game which players are experienced and which aren't. Count how many weapons the mech carries...eight? That one is an amateur. Beginning players, when given the opportunity to design a mech of their own, usually go overboard. They create a six limbed, transformable; techno-organic...that gets destroyed in the first session. Clearly, the Mekton Construction System by R. Talsorian Games stands far and wide as the best Robot builder on the market, with more freedom than any other constructor around. The GM firsts task is to assign the budget the players will have to build their machines. This can be very tricky since it will form the basis for the rest of the game. Too much and the mechs becomes almost parodies, almost impossible to destroy and the players start to flaunt egos and the game turns into the really flamboyant Anime like Dangaio and Detonator Orgun. Too little, and the fragile mechs explode too easily, forcing replacement and new designs every month, turning the game into Gundam. If the GM is proposing this, then march on and good luck. However, the GM must determine ahead of time where he wants the PCs to sit in the spectrum of giant robot combat and stay there. Keep the freaky modifications like Transformations and Techno-Organics away unless there is some reason to have them.

As for the designs themselves, effective mech designs should master two of the three strengths of robots: Maneuverability, Strength, and Toughness. No one should ever attempt to conquer all three. The super light fast mechs should also not be carrying the biggest gun. Save that for the 80-tone monstrosity taking up the rear. Remember how these rule systems work. The smaller it is chances are the more

expensive it is. Keep the flamboyance to the look of the mech rather than stupid modifications it does not require. Making weapons unique is fine, but designing six is pointless. Study your fights. Honestly...do you use more than two in a given fight? I know the logic: We need one for long range, one really powerful short-range weapon—oh, oh, need a melee weapon. Can't forget the melee weapons...or missiles...lotsa missiles. Better get another long-range weapon case the primary one is taken out. Suddenly, you have your budget spent on weapons, half of which you don't even use. These are points you could have spent on armor, weight reduction. The GM should place a theme on the designs. This is hard since every Player usually has a favorite anime mech show they want to emulate. However, if the GM places some ground rules at the beginning of the design process, everyone is happy to work within the rules. If this game is a military style, then mechs should be camouflaged and chances are energy weapons is nowhere to be found. Suddenly the roles are reversed if the game is a medieval theme. Now the mechs showcase huge shields with crests and everyone sports a melee weapon of some sort. I say keep the weapons to a maximum of two or three. Don't slap wings on unless you really want to fly. Bigger mechs should have more armor and carry the biggest weapons. The GM should identify the pitch of each PC mech and make sure no one else steals his or her thunder. If one PC is hell bent on being the fastest, then let him. If someone else contests it, then the GM should stop one of the players...bring him or her down. Let one player be the fastest. Make sure the other player has something to be proud of. One good way is to flag important and unique modifications to one mech. Really cool modifications like energy shields or mega beams can be exclusive to one player only, prohibiting other PCs from duplicating the design.

No one will know for sure how a mech will play until it enters combat for the first time. It may be dynamite on paper, but under practical application, even the greatest idea could fall faster than the Shuttle Challenger. And just to note, these design alterations and knowing how to maximize your points, only refers to players. The great aspect of being a GM in a mech game is that they don't have to look at the budget when they design a mech.

Just to reiterate, I know mech designs. Many of my friends do as well. I have had my share of dumb designs. I discovered fast that in the heat of battle, you forget the little eccentricities of your mecha and just want to shoot with the biggest gun. My best design was the Warhawk for Doug's game. It was the best because how it maximized its points. I went for total efficiency. No transformable. A decent sized mech but not too small. My mech ended up not only being one of the fastest (only a transformable jet was faster) but I was also the toughest. I had the second toughest armor on the second most maneuverable mech...and I had the best gun. It was a rapid-fire energy cannon that dealt more than TWICE the force of any other weapon. It had unlimited ammunition and extremely long range. I had another weapon for emergencies, a point-blank range energy weapon that dealt even more damage. By making it short ranged, I was able to keep the cost down. I also made it fragile with a bad accuracy since point blank shots were easier and no one would think of taking my secondary weapon out before my main one. Suffice to say, I ranked up more than double the kills of anyone else the group.

I made errors too of course. When Derrick and I created our meks for Bill's game, we included a mod where we could combine and form an even bigger mech. Well, it was a great idea...but we never used it. We were better separate. The only advantage was that we were faster when merged. It was a waste of points. Like I said, though, a GM has lots of fun designing meks because has no budget. Jagheel Adagio's mech for Conestoga brandished seven weapons, was faster than Derrick and could even achieve light speed. It cost more than twice than Derrick...not including the light speed mod. The best way to achieve skill in designing is to just trying out ideas...over and over again. I designed more than twenty meks for Conestoga alone.

Terminals was a great concept. Everyone flagged two modifications available in the Mekton Technical System and this prohibited anyone else from using them. Since the game dealt with people from different realities, each mech was completely unique. One flagged Techno-Organic, One flagged Esper. Another flagged Energy Shield and Gravitic Propulsion. This allowed each design to be total unique. And with each player having a pool of 2500 points to work with (that's a lot), the meks were powerful to.

Max: "I don't know what it is but it was shiny, small, and probably pissed off."

THOSE CAMEO PLAYERS

The final hurdle with larger groups brought together from a regular call in arises when certain players make sporadic appearances. Some join, create a character, sit in one session, and soon vanish thereafter. Some simply only show up when convenient or when a work schedule doesn't conflict. They arrive once every third or fourth session. Suffice to say, this can really disrupt game play. These events will occur so the player should not be punished for not showing up. How the game responds depends on the situation.

ONE SHOT WONDERS:

They create them, they play them, and then vanish. Sometimes only one session, sometimes maybe two or three, but eventually, a player either loses interest or leaves because of one or several of the conflicts listed above. No matter what situation makes them leave, the GM should never just let them vanish if more than one session. One session wonders CAN simply "never exist." One of those guest stars on episodes of Xena or Star Trek that arrive and magically vanish, never to return, even if, technically, they are still around. Several session players that vanish should be removed "in game." If they are never to return, kill them off. If there is a chance, have them leave the group with a chance of a return. The important thing to know is that the GM should NOT take the absence personally. A GM shows weakness if the GM takes the opportunity to settle a grudge.

Joe left the Pathfinder group in controversy. He was kicked out and I thought of killing his NPC off but at the last minute, I decided to just have his PC walk away. He left the ship and vanished. The other PCs assumed Joe's character would join up with the organization that he spied for. Joe (as mentioned above) tried with another PC but the character was denied entrance and the Player left, obvious never to return. A year and a half of gaming later, Doug, the resident fighter pilot, encounters a nemesis pilot controlling an advanced craft as high-tech as his. They tussle once above planet and the PCs main craft, the Vanderov, crashes during the fight. Doug encounters the pilot later in a café in an intentional meeting, big surprise, I brought back Joe's character as an NPC, still working for the bad guys. Doug never played with Joe and only came on AFTER Joe left. The talked. Doug suspected his identity but wasn't sure until the end, where the NPC revealed himself.

In the climactic scene of the last session played (at the end of the last season played), Joe's PC (now NPC), ambushes Doug's PC's in the cyberpunk world of Stasco. They fought for twenty minutes. In the end, Doug struck a fatal blow and the NPC crashed into a building, ending the life of Joe's PC, two years after the player left the group.

SPORADIC PLAYERS :

Things come up—school, work, spouses and children demand greater attention. Suddenly a Player starts showing up less and less. Missing a session is not a problem. It's when the player only shows up every second session or third...then once a month. What is to be done. Well, first talk to the Player. Does he or she really want to play or not. If they still want to commit, there are two options:

Semi-Regular Cast-Member: Like TV shows, PCs can be semi-regular. If that the case, give the PC an outing to leave game and return and have it believable in the story more than just suddenly "beaming in" in the middle of a scene. Make a scene where the PC can re-join the group. And have a scene where the PC leaves again. The problem here is that if a session ends prematurely in a spot the PC cannot re-join, he or she might have to wait in the new session for a moment where they can enter believably.

Doug once missed the first session of a two-part episode of Pathfinder called "Mouth". The episode dealt with the group driving across a bridge on a planet and arriving a 1000 years in the future and the city has been taken over by a maniacal evil AI that has turned the metropolis into a Biomechanical nightmare. It sounds cheesy but the creepy music and artwork by HR Giger really helped. The episode was disturbing and scary. The second session started with them still in the future but Doug didn't join them across the bridge. Unfortunately, he waited for two hours into the next session when the others returned from across the bridge and he missed all the fun. Of course, they related what happened and

Doug related that perhaps it was best that he not have been there. One PC that did go across developed a permanent aversion to blood.

Auto-Pilot Players: Of course, if its just one session they missed or it's a session where the PC cannot just walk away to go shopping, then the GM must take control. They GM cannot make grand decisions on the PCs part. All the GM can do is donate the useable skills, participate in combat, and offer commentary in the most Spartan degree showing character traits that are the most obvious. And the most important part is this, when under control of the GM, the PC CANNOT permanently change. The PC would only be killed under the control of the Player and never the GM. Then the Player is away, they should be content with the knowledge that their character will not loose any weapons, armor, limbs, and especially not their lives. This stems from the Players anger for GMs controlling their characters. They hate it when they are there or not, but they have got to live with the fact that the GM will be playing them if they are away...but at least the Player will not return with the sudden shock that their character is suddenly a quadriplegic

Derrick arrived at almost every session of Terminals until his schooling became a higher priority. Then he started showing up less and less. His PC was not popular with the group and something happened which upset me to this day. While he was away, one PC became angry with what Doug had done in the previous session. Unable to really speak on his behalf, I tamed the arrogant character a bit and kept him in the BG. However, it still did not work and the group decided that for the time being, his character (and his clone from another dimension...long story, see above) should be placed in a cell until they figure out what to do with both of them. I tried to avoid this but hand to relent to PC demands. When Dave returned two sessions later, I could not find a away for the PCs to let Doug out of the cell and he ended up sitting there for a full session. He stopped showing up after that. I didn't blame him.

Rio: *"I am just having dinner with Aunt Sapporo and Uncle Ichiban."*

RESPECT THE PLAYER, RESPECT THE GAME

Don't strip them. Don't confiscate player's valuable possessions unless there is a good reason in the plot to do so. Also, don't destroy those players' possessions that they paid for with their good money, unless, of course, it serves a plot point. Just stripping a player or group's possessions, especially those prided weapons, can cause real problems. It can upset the Player as he just lost a something he/she spent hard earned money on. Mecha are the biggest example. The only way to destroy a player's mech is at the hand of an opponent in battle. Never just blow it up maliciously. At the very best, take it away or give them the opportunity to get it back or another design later. The more personalized the item, the bigger the risk the GM takes removing the item from the player. The same goes for NPCs as stated above. Don't mutate NPCs the Player has taken to heart.

Doug was a friend and a good player...but a bad GM. He lacked good improvisational skills and felt no compunction of thinking that save for killing the PC, everything was up for grabs. The game in question was Robotech. Those who played know of the Beta fighter from the Invid Invasion. Well, I loved this mecha. Don't ask me why but its my favorite from the whole game. During the course of the two sessions Doug refereed myself and Ivan, I went through two of them, and neither were destroyed I combat. I lost on from sabotage (blew up right in front of me). The second was simply stolen. That last one upset me. You would think I would lock the stupid thing...

Berlin: *"Thanks...I'll remember that the next time I'm driving on the surface of Jupiter."*

LAST THOUGHTS...

Respect the player. Don't mock them, don't devalue them. Enjoy the game. Don't take it seriously, walk away at the end, dust your hands of the session and value what you achieved from it. Each session should never be longer than six hours, in my humble opinion. Any longer and people tire, wires fray and emotions wear down and expose themselves raw. Try to be in a good mood going into one or else you'll take that negative energy into the room. Smile going in, smile going out. Remember, this is supposed to be fun. Don't arrive at a session because you feel you are obligated. Don't let someone guilt you into playing. Role Playing is a dead-end, not like sports where a past time could lead into a professional career. RPG can segue into writing or acting but no one ever made money being a professional role-playing gamer...well...few enough to the point you shouldn't be expecting it. So please bear in mind the number one commandments for gaming for both players and game masters. Its supposed to be fun, not an ordeal, not traumatic. Have fun. In the end...it's only a game...