


# KOBOLD GUIDE TO GAMEMASTERING



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EDITED BY SEAN K REYNOLDS

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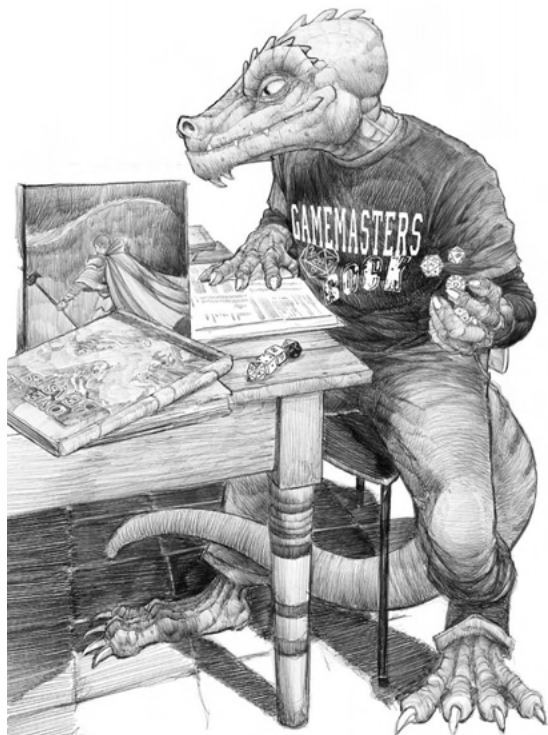
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**KOBOLD**  
Press



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	9
<b>UNDERSTANDING PLAYERS</b>	
Making Players Shine <i>Dan Clark</i> .....	13
Let's Play: Creating a Fun and Inclusive Game For All <i>Amanda Hamon-Kunz</i> .....	19
GMing for Kids <i>RpgGamerDad</i> .....	25
Giving Initiative: Engaging Shy Players <i>Shanna Germain</i> .....	31
The People at the Table <i>Frank Mentzer</i> .....	37
<b>PLANNING THE GAME</b>	
Advice for New GMs <i>Dan Dillon</i> .....	47
Tips for Long-Time Gamemasters <i>Michael E. Shea</i> .....	55
Planning Your Campaign in Four Stages <i>Monica Valentinelli</i> .....	61
Character Love Interests <i>James Jacobs</i> .....	67
Gamemastering on the Fly <i>Brandon Hodge</i> .....	73
One-Shot Adventures <i>Keith Baker</i> .....	79
Winning Player Investment <i>Lillian Cohen-Moore</i> .....	85
<b>THE GAME IN PLAY</b>	
Knowing the Rules vs. Mastering the Game <i>Bill Webb</i> .....	93
The Art of Theatrical Gaming <i>Stefan Pokorny</i> .....	99
Laughter, Cellphones, and Distractions from Serious Gaming <i>Clinton J. Boomer</i> .....	105
Roll With It! What to Do When It Doesn't All Go As Planned <i>Steve Kenson</i> .....	111
Feasts And Famines: Handling Large Groups or Just One Player <i>Ed Greenwood</i> .....	119

Ditching the Miniatures: Playing A Smoother RPG <i>Wolfgang Baur</i> .....	123
Getting Things Going Again <i>Steve Winter</i> .....	131

**IN BETWEEN SESSIONS**

Dealing with a TPK: How to Save Your Players, Your Campaign, and Your Reputation <i>Zeb Cook</i> .....	141
Moving the Perspective <i>Kevin Kulp</i> .....	147

# INTRODUCTION

The people who wrote this book are an incredible assortment of GMing talent. Some ran games for or with this hobby's founders. Others were creators of famous game settings, editors of the biggest gaming magazine in the world, creative directors for the world's most popular RPG, novelists for fan-favorite fantasy and sci-fi settings, or winners of marathon-like GM competitions. These people have faced and defeated all sorts of crazy game problems; now their collective wisdom is in your hands so you can use their experience to prepare for your next campaign, make your current one better, or prevent a small problem from becoming a full-on disaster.

In the first section, *Understanding Players*, the authors talk about things you should think about before starting a campaign—what you want or don't want from of the campaign, what the players want or don't want, handling communication, tailoring the game to be suitable for the players, and making sure everyone has the opportunity to be in the spotlight. Of course, all of these articles are useful in an ongoing campaign; it's helpful to pause every now and then to evaluate how things are going.

The second section, *Planning the Game*, is all about preparation, such as how much think-work you need to do before a session, how to handle romantic storylines, how a one-shot game is different than an ongoing campaign, and what sorts of things you can put in your campaign that'll make the players eager to come back for more.

The third section, *The Game in Play*, is advice for things that come up in an actual game session—what to do when the players try something weird and you're not sure there's a rule for it, how to enhance your GMing using

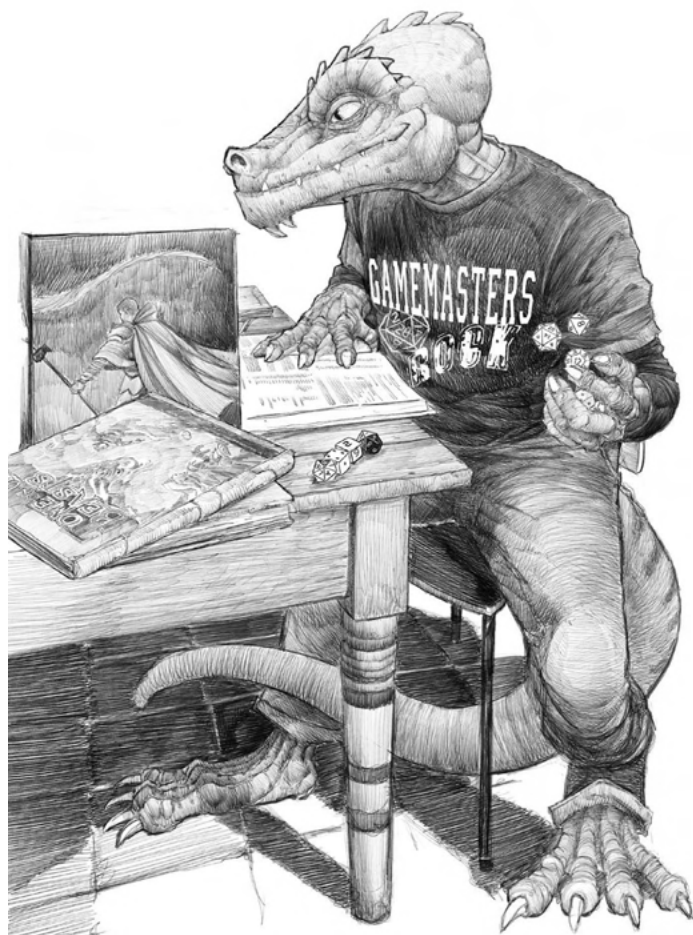
theater acting tricks, using imagination instead of miniatures, dealing with players who pay more attention to their texts than to you, or when the PCs race in the opposite direction as the prepared adventure.

The final section, In Between Sessions, covers issues that require quick thinking at the table and also some work outside of the game, namely what to do when the entire party gets killed and how to keep the PCs informed about other things going on in the world.

Whether you're a newbie GM or you've been doing this a long time, there's plenty of great advice in this book. The point of gaming is to have fun, and as the GM, you have the most influential role and the greatest amount of responsibility for the fun everyone has in your game. As you read these articles, think about how this information applies to your campaign and how to put your own unique spin on it. Be open to experimentation—try a piece of advice you've never done before or that goes against your normal inclinations. Just as a good writer improves their craft by trying new techniques, a good GM becomes a great GM by considering new ideas from other GMs who've had to deal with the very same things that happen in your campaign. Good luck and good gaming!

Sean K Reynolds

# UNDERSTANDING PLAYERS





# MAKING PLAYERS SHINE

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*Dan Clark*

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A gamemaster is a “service sector” job. As GMs, we are there to provide service to players by way of refereeing tactical activities, giving rules judgments, providing story hooks, and keeping the wider world of the game spinning. It’s a lot of work, but keep in mind that the right group of players can keep a game going without a GM, a GM is useless without players. We’re there to make the players shine and the world come to life, and the nice thing about doing so is that both activities feed into each other. The more engaging the world is, the more players feel encouraged to get involved and make their characters shine. The more the PCs shine, the more engaging the world becomes.

GMs can make players shine by giving them as many chances as possible to succeed and look cool while they do it. That’s it! Where things get complex is in the different ways that can happen. A strong warrior or paladin with a big sword has many opportunities to succeed—and in the most obvious, public, and stereotypical way possible in tabletop RPGs—by slaying the bad guys! Every character has a chance to do this, of course, but it’s not always a big moment for them. For example, a bookish wizard PC is a professor at a school of arcane arts; not only would this character probably avoid confrontations that would lead to combat, but destroying a rare or unique monster might well be abhorrent to them. The GM’s goal is to help a character like this have cool moments of success, ones that all the players at the table celebrate, and how that character’s contributions can lead to as many great table experiences as the mighty warrior slaying monsters.

Thinking of GMing as a service job helps make the game as great as possible for all of the players. If your focus as a GM is on your players and their awesomeness, and you are constantly engaged in making “shine moments” happen whenever they can, then you create a positive feedback loop: Players work to do cool things with their characters, you make the world react in a cool way to what they do, the whole table recognizes and celebrates the cool moment as it’s happening, which encourages the players to do more cool things with their characters, and the loop continues. Players get more invested in the game, the world, and the story, and contributing more great ideas and story grist as a result. Everybody wins!

There are many ways that players can shine. The following topics cover some of the most common and frequent ways you can help make it happen, and include techniques that work for any kind of player character—especially if you stay in the mindset of GMing as a service job.

## Shining With Dice

When I first started playing tabletop RPGs, I was young enough that I had a hard time understanding how they were supposed to work at the story level. I understood why I was rolling dice, but the whole concept of “collaborative storytelling” was beyond me. I didn’t know how to get to the dragon and treasure depicted on the cover of my gaming books, but I knew how I was supposed to beat him. As such, my earliest memories of excitement in RPGs all involve rolling a good old natural 20, or at least rolling well. I’ve since learned this is a common experience—a new player focuses on the dice results as obvious signs of success and only later learn the other ways to succeed.

As GM, when your players roll well, remember our definition of making players shine and why it’s desirable; we want to give players as many chances as possible to succeed and look cool while doing it because it encourages engagement and proactive playing. In this case, the chance to shine came from rolling a die, and the success came when the player rolled well. As GM, when this happens we can help the high-rolling player shine by making sure we celebrate their roll by prolonging the moment; make sure everyone at the table knows what just happened and how important it is, and then really get into the description of the roll’s results; if it’s an attack, play up how devastating that attack is to the enemy, including their dismay at the hero’s skill and power. If it’s a skill check, create a vivid description of the actions performed and the startling result. Even

if it's just a character making a knowledge check, couch the result as clear memories of ancient tomes they once read, or a crucial bit of info their sharp eyes caught when they were reading over someone's shoulder. If it's a saving throw, then play up their indomitable will, iron constitution, lightning-fast reflexes, or the talent and training that got them those attributes. Make the description awesome and awe-inspiring!

## Shining Without Dice

This is an advanced method of making players shine. It requires more work on the part of the GM, but can be the most satisfying kind of shine moment. These strategy and story shine moments happen when a long story arc comes to a conclusion, or when the PCs' strategy for dealing with a particular opponent pays off tactically in the form of a quick victory, or one with beneficial side effects. When the long con a sneaky PC has been running finally pays dividends, or the NPCs the party befriended several sessions ago come through to help out at a crucial juncture, that's the emotional reward the player gets for making those plans. All these things are examples of ways to make players shine that are more roleplaying-focused, and they don't require rolling dice.

If you as the GM are focused on your players' awesomeness, and on providing service to them, then it is much easier for you to execute this particular kind of shine moment. There are two things required to really make this work, and both are quite effort-intensive: First, you should be aware of what's happening in every part of your game world at all times. Second, the world should be moving on regardless of what the players are doing; intelligent monsters, commoners, nobles, generals, and crime lords all have their own agendas

For example, the party is captured by a tribe of bugbears who want to sell them to slavers from Leng. Just as the buyers are arriving, the party attempts an escape. The warrior and rogue PCs want to slay every bugbear during the escape, but the peace-loving cleric convinces them to stand down, at least sparing those bugbears that didn't fight, and emphasizing that the heroes only have a little time to get away safely. The party escapes and their adventure continues. That story thread could end there, but as an expert GM you're undoubtedly thinking about how the remaining bugbears react to this mercy—are they angry at being denied slaves and profits? Will they team up with the Leng slavers and try to recapture the PCs or other victims? Or are they grateful they were

shown mercy, lick their wounds, and seek weaker prey? This is where the second technique comes into play: Taking note of moments that could lead to great story opportunities and chances for players to shine without dice. Write it about these bugbears in your notes, think about what their goals are, then spin this story out in your own head over the next several sessions, eventually dropping hints to the party that someone is looking for them (the bugbears). A reckoning will come, and no matter how things turn out, the payoff will be extremely rewarding and allow some of the players to shine. If the bugbears are grateful that their lives were spared, maybe the merciful actions of the cleric are rewarded and the party gains the surviving bugbears as wary allies. Or perhaps the bugbears are spurred into action by the angry denizens of Leng, killing and capturing other people, justifying the warrior's and rogue's intent to exterminate the whole tribe. Either way, the resolution of this character arc is sure to be fun and memorable for the players.

## Shining Through Failure

It's a natural instinct to celebrate great successes, but great failures should get the same treatment. After all, any huge event has the potential to affect the story and the party, and while celebrating successes brings everyone together in joy and solidarity, celebrating failures can bring everyone together in laughter and a shared, rueful dismay. These are the events that are brought about in spite of the party's best efforts. They can come from critical success or failure die rolls, but can also come about because the PCs acted rashly, or without full knowledge of what was going on.

Much like the singular thrill brought by rolling a critical success, critical failure can cause a thrill of anticipatory dread to rush through the party. When a player rolls a 1 on an attack roll or diplomacy check, when the arrogant wizard PC insults the enemy general during a parley, or when a sneaking character sneezes or coughs at exactly the wrong time, everyone at the table wonders how the consequences of that are going to play out in the rest of the encounter. The GM's job is to answer the following events in the most epic and interesting ways possible, as is appropriate for the stakes and the situation. Just like with other shine moments, make sure the failure is recognized for what it is by everyone at the table as it's happening, really indulge in a great description of the event, and then make a note of it if the failure is something that could have further consequences in the future.

## Shining Through Noble or Ill-Advised Actions

Any time a PC acts in a manner that is consistent with their character design and personality, then that's a great time to make sure that player shines. A player puts a lot of time and effort into the character's personality, and the things the character does based on that should be called out and emphasized. It's in the best interest of everyone at the table for all players to act in-character as much as possible and emphasize engaged role-playing as much as possible; any chance the GM gets to emphasize and reward that behavior should be seized so the players can shine.

When a samurai acts in strict accordance with their code of honor and when a barbarian rushes foolhardily into a burning village to save people, these are noble actions. When a chaotic goblin alchemist dares to push the boundaries of science and magic past their breaking points, and when a wizard opens a cursed, intelligent magic book, these are ill-advised actions. Both types of actions serve to define a character, though, so don't let these activities go by un-noted and unremarked-upon! Put them in your notes, and make sure others at the table take note of them. After all, it's in their interest to know how their fellow adventurers are going to behave in a given scenario. Ill-advised actions can serve as especially powerful shine moments as they usually arise from situations where a character's code or personality dictates behavior that is counterintuitive, like our barbarian example up above. These are actions that are often preceded by a knowing sigh from the player and a comment like "I know I'm going to regret this, but..." before they dive in. This lets you know that the player is engaged with the history- and personality-decisions they made about their character, they're playing in the correct mindset and avoiding metagaming (where the character doesn't take an in-character action because the player knows it'll have bad consequences); all things that should be rewarded and held up to shine!

## Shining Through Fulfilling Character Design

You should be aware of what game-rule choices your player made for their character, and make those choices count in the campaign. This technique is easily the most effort-intensive for GMs, but also one with high potential for a rewarding game. Read their crunch (choices like specializing in using a longsword or being resistant to poison) and fluff or flavor (choices like learning calligraphy or a musical instrument), understand those choices, and set up scenarios in which they can engage

as many aspects of their characters as possible. Do your best to provide opportunities for them to feel justified for investing in little-used or esoteric skills and abilities. If they took the time to buy climbing gear, give them a cliff face to scale. Make sure their crunch backs up the character's backstory; if the player says the character spent years studying ancient tomes, but the character doesn't have any knowledge-based skills or abilities, ask the player why, and challenge them to justify these choices. If the character has a sibling who ran away when they were young, make sure the sibling shows up at some point in the story. Every little detail the player puts in the character's biography is free story grist for you to make them shine brighter, and make the story and world that much richer. There's no reason not to use everything (eventually) the player includes in the character's build and backstory.

Of course, not all players just naturally provide excellent background and story hooks in their character designs, and that is a perfect opportunity for their GM to be of service. When faced with this situation, help the player out by asking them questions designed to flesh out details beyond just ability scores, skill selections, and combat abilities. Question the character's family status, wealth level, home life, and social circle. Find out why they might have set out on a quest, or if they were forced into it. Ask them if any of their weapons have any kind of significance beyond whatever tactical benefit they may provide. Once that process is complete, be sure to incorporate those details into the story in significant ways so the player's story shines as much as everyone else's. This type of activity can lead to fun story hooks that otherwise never would have been forthcoming. For example, a PC cleric who joined the clergy after their family business fell apart might be more sympathetic to a struggling merchant, poor farmer, or anyone extorted by the thieves' guild for protection money.

Remember; the GM is there to be of service—to make the players shine. The more they shine, the better and more memorable the game is, and the better a GM you are.

*Dan Clark is a long-time gamer, musician, and programmer. He is the 2015 Iron GM World Champion, and is always running as many concurrent Pathfinder campaigns as he can fit in. He lives in Milwaukee with his partner and a very nice kitty.*

# LET'S PLAY:

## Creating a Fun and Inclusive Game For All

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*Amanda Hamon-Kunz*

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It's a simple goal, really, when you break it down: Tabletop gamers just want to have fun.

Cheesy '80s song references aside, this is a key component of our hobby: whether you're a by-the-book GM or an any anything-goes story guide, it's pretty likely that you are looking to have a great time creating shared stories with your players about heroes, villains, and just about anything else imaginable.

However, having fun during the social experience of tabletop gaming is not as simple as making sure your own time at the table is great. As a GM, you bear the particular responsibility to try your best to make sure everyone at your table is having a good time. After all, every gamer has an equal right to enjoy their gaming experience, and you are in the best position of authority to help that happen.

The first step toward cultivating a gaming space that's fun for everyone involves realizing that every tabletop gamer has had different life experiences, and identities and backgrounds inform those experiences. For gamers of color, women, queer and transgender folks, and other marginalized individuals, tabletop gaming is as much an exercise in fun escapism as it is for white, straight, cisgender men.

But for marginalized gamers, a game that starts out enjoyably can quickly become one which seems like those more societally privileged than they are having fun at their expense. Something said in irresponsible jest can cause someone to remember a terribly painful experience. A derogatory comment can shatter the fun immersion of the game. The list goes on.

If that sounds heavy, it is. However, if you as the GM embrace your responsibility to keep the game fun for everyone, and if you keep the following advice in mind, you can help create an environment in which every player's fun and comfort is prioritized.

## **On Privilege, Self-Reflection, and Recognition**

In a hobby where imagination is key, magic is high, and fantasy is the rule of the day, it might seem strange to mention real-world, societal privilege. But it's more than important—privilege often determines whose experiences are considered default, and who is most vulnerable to the harm that can arise when privileged gamers don't consider how others might feel when they joke, criticize, or act aggressively in or out of character.

As the GM, you should understand privilege, how it works, and how to recognize when someone's privilege is ruining another player's fun.

Privilege is invisible—it's the way society has treated a person their entire life based on their skin color, their gender, their sexuality, or any other factor, identity, or experience. Gamers with the most privilege are straight white men who are cisgender, meaning that their gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth. Having privilege certainly does not mean that you've faced no struggles in your life, but it is something individuals have whether they want it or not. It also means that the privileged can never fully understand the lived experiences of someone who, for example, has not lived their lives as a white person, or as a man, or as a straight person.

So, what does this mean for gaming purposes?

As the GM, it is important for you to recognize where you have privilege. Without making assumptions about your players, you might consider where they have privilege, as well.

It's also particularly important to recognize where your marginalized players might be most vulnerable. Until you engage yourself in honest conversation about these key elements, it will be difficult for you to build a game that is inclusive of all of your diverse gamers.

Once you have acknowledged the requisite privilege and marginalization at your table, you can best take the following under advisement to make sure your players know that everyone's fun and comfort is important.

## Prioritizing Inclusion, Comfort, and Fun

Once you've given some thought to the concept of privilege, you'll want to think about the game you're running and how your specific players might interact with it. Sometimes, a game's content itself might run counter to your goals of running a fun and inclusive table.

Many times, published adventures—especially older ones—assume that players have the highest level of societal privilege. Some even reinforce insulting stereotypes about women, people of color, queer folks, and other groups. Some simply have no representation of those groups at all, and don't allow marginalized gamers to see themselves reflected as heroes in their favorite games.

As GM, you should always feel empowered to change anything about a published adventure to suit your group's needs. Perhaps that might mean changing the genders of a cadre of all-male NPCs, or the appearances of NPCs who are all white. It might mean making even bigger changes, and that's okay. You should never feel worried about preserving a writer's vision if it would mean presenting material that would obviously make one or more of your players feel unwelcome.

Once you're comfortable with the game you'll be running, it's a good idea to reach out to your players and ask whether there's any specific content or topic that would make them feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe at your table. This can be a casual question, posed privately, or during character creation or any other pre-game or mid-game activity. Information your players give you in response to this question can help you avoid problematic situations during the game. It might also prompt you to revisit your planned campaign and make any appropriate changes.

After all, even if you're playing with your best friends, it can be difficult to know what life experiences your players might have had that could affect their gaming outlooks. So, ask them. And when you do, keep in mind that, unless the player expressly tells you otherwise, anything you're told should stay in confidence between you and your player. It's key to make sure your players know that they can trust you.

Finally, before you start the game—or at any point during an ongoing campaign, really—clearly stating your commitment to everyone's inclusion, comfort, and fun is a great way to set a positive tone in an arena that all of your players can experience firsthand. It doesn't need to

be a lengthy speech to achieve this end. The following, or a nuanced or group-tailored variation thereof, might work:

“Before we start, I just want everyone to know I’m committed to running a game that’s fun for everyone. Racism, sexism, homophobia, or anything else that makes anyone at the table feel uncomfortable isn’t cool. If you ever feel uncomfortable or unsafe, please feel free to speak up. If you’d rather bring it up privately, I’m always available, and I’ll always want to help.”

Allowing for dialogue after giving these reminders of your priorities can help ensure that you and your players are always on the same page. Periodic reminders of this priority during a campaign are a good idea, too.

Of course, there may be some topics that are simply too painful for players to disclose to you publicly or privately, or there might be some content that players won’t realize is uncomfortable until they experience it. That’s why, in addition to asking your players about what troubles them, it’s important to keep an eye out for brewing problems during the game.

A helpful tool to make sure players always have an out when faced with content they find difficult is to use what’s known as an X-Card. Place an index card with a X drawn on it on the table. At any point, a player can touch or hold up the card to signal that something in the game has made them uncomfortable. The idea is that anyone can use the X-Card at any time and without any necessary explanation, and when they do, the content is simply edited—or X-Carded—out. This technique, by John Stavropoulos, is further detailed in a Google document available for free online.

## Recognizing When Gameplay Turns

Sometimes, regardless of how much thought and effort you’ve put into inclusion, situations arise in games that can become tense. Perhaps a privileged player makes a remark directly or indirectly to a marginalized player, or perhaps someone is reminded of something terrible through an in-game situation that might otherwise seem routine.

This is a normal gaming occurrence, and it doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ve done anything wrong as GM. It’s important to always pay careful attention to your players’ behavior and reactions at all times, but especially when you begin to sense tension at the table. As the GM, recognize that it’s not incumbent on players to potentially put themselves at risk by speaking out when, for example, they feel threatened by another player at the table, or they are grappling with a traumatic memory.

Below are some examples of common topics that stop players' fun in its tracks, presented in no particular order. Statements or situations that might bring these ugly topics to the surface could include active hostility as well as microaggressions, which are insults or charged comments that isolate and otherwise marginalize individuals.

- **Racism.** Telling a player she doesn't act like a "normal" member of her race, or jokingly asking if their character speaks "Asian" if they're of Asian descent themselves are examples of racist behaviors.
- **Sexism.** Telling a female player that "girls" should always play healers, or constantly hitting on her character in-game even after she expresses discomfort about it are sexist behaviors.
- **Sexual Assault.** Making rape jokes or putting rape or sexual assault into NPCs' backgrounds can cause a sexual assault survivor to relive terrible, traumatic experiences.
- **Homophobia.** Insulting a player or his character for being gay, or making derogatory comments about players or characters whose gender expressions don't fit typical masculine or feminine norms are homophobic behaviors and may also be transphobic, depending on the specifics.
- **Transphobia.** Remarking that transmen and transwomen are in any way undesirable or abnormal, or making negative or derisive comments about trans players' or characters' gender is transphobic.
- **Ableism.** Teasing a hard-of-hearing player about her special needs or making fun of a character with a physical disability is ableist.
- **Ageism.** Deriding a player who is significantly older or younger than other members of the group is a way to ruin that player's fun, and it is ageist behavior.
- **Religious Intolerance.** Making fun of a player's real-world beliefs or insulting his character's behaviors because they align with the player's religious practices are intolerant behaviors.

## Addressing Problematic Situations

When you're aware that a situation is unfolding, addressing it immediately is the key toward reinforcing your game's boundaries and moving back toward a fun environment. A quick and strong word from the GM can often immediately put an end to an uncomfortable situation.

Sometimes, it can be as easy as saying the following:

“Hey, what you said really isn’t cool. Please don’t do that at my table.”

If the game moves on from there, that’s great. But if it doesn’t, you should always feel empowered to stand your ground and stand up for marginalized players who might have been the butt of a joke or the target of hostility.

If something happens during a game and a player brings it up to you later, listen to them, and address problems as might be necessary.

Reiterate to your player that you’re committed to making the game fun for everyone, and that you value his or her presence at the table. Most importantly, believe the player when they tell you they’ve been made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable.

If another player has caused a problem, address it with that player. It’s important for you to address a person who has done harm to another and not to punish the individual who’s told you they’ve been harmed.

## Let’s Game—Together!

When trying to build inclusive games, the simple act of wanting and trying to do the right thing can go miles toward creating a fun and safe environment for your players. Combined with communication, socially conscious philosophies, vigilance at the table, and a deep commitment to listening, these efforts can result in amazing games for you and your players indefinitely.

There is one key thing to keep in mind, though. If you think you’ve never ran a game that had an inclusivity problem, you’re wrong. It’s important to accept this fact: no game or GM is ever perfect. As long as you don’t let stubbornness or ego prevent yourself from taking any necessary steps to restore inclusivity when needed, you’re making inclusion a priority. If you’re always trying to be better, you’re doing the right thing.

When GMs actively cultivate inclusive environments for their players, everyone wins, because everyone can have fun. And, in the end, isn’t wanting to have fun what our hobby is all about?

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# GMING FOR KIDS

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*RpgGamerDad*

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Kids bring a huge amount of passion and creativity to their gaming, and it is a tremendously rewarding experience raising your game to try and keep up with them! In case you are worried it won't work for you or the children you're GMing for, bear this in mind: *What works well for grown-ups usually works for kids*. Children are small human beings that behave in completely baffling ways; adults are larger human beings that also behave in completely baffling ways. We adults have a lot in common with kids!

Mostly when we game, there is a GM and there are players. There are PCs, there are NPCs. There are monsters, there are mysteries, there is intrigue, a chance for each player to shine—and there is an outrageously exciting story built in collaboration with every player at the table. This was the experience I fell in love with as a young boy and wanted my kids (the GamerKids) to enjoy in the same way—the idea of treating an RPG as a dungeon-crawl board game, or using that kind of board game as a lead-in to playing RPGs.

## The Dungeon-Crawl

Dungeon-crawl board games often contain few actual roleplaying elements and focus on moving, combat rolls, and searches for treasure and traps. With a few tweaks you can turn a game like this into a proper full-blown RPG session with awesome kid-friendly props and visual aids.

I first played this kind of game as a child, shortly before violent storms knocked out the power in my home town for a week. It was a bitterly cold winter, and the schools had no choice but to close. I and my many siblings

spent each evening congregated in the sitting room playing *HeroQuest* by candlelight and firelight. We were allowed to stay up as late as we liked because my parents wanted to keep us near the warmth of the open fire for as long as possible. At age 10, I was allowed stay up until 1 a.m. while pretending to be an orc! To this day, that experience remains one of the greatest things that has happened in my life, and at family gatherings we still speak of it in tones of wonder.

For atmosphere, I strongly recommend you start off kid-friendly gaming with a dungeon-crawl session in a darkened room lit by candlelight. It is very cool indeed, and the eerie flickering shadows help to heighten the 3D effect of the doors, furniture, and miniatures (plus, if your miniature painting is as woeful as mine, it covers your shame). We started this with my son, GamerBoy, at age four. My daughter, two-year-old GamerGirl, was perfectly happy to sit at the table with some specially-chosen indestructible miniatures and a couple of small battle-map tiles.

The following are my top tips for turning a dungeon-crawling board game into an introductory roleplaying experience.

## Backstory and World-Building

Ask your players how the heroes got to the dungeon. The heroes—and the children—probably have a lot more motivation than the short paragraph in the quest book tells you. Have a brainstorming session with the kids before you even start playing the game. Work with them to create some interesting things about the world. Flesh out the player characters with a little backstory. Make it important that the heroes succeed. If this is fun, it can be your entire first session “playing” the game. As an example, here’s what I and my kids came up with in our first session:

*Why is this dungeon full of orcs?* Because the world is full of orcs. The orcs rule the land.

*Where do the humans live?* They live in a city in the clouds. It’s the only safe place for them.

*How do the humans get there?* They have developed skyscraper technology in a medieval world. There is one small city on the ground, heavily fortified. They use the skyscrapers to access the cloud city.

*Why are the heroes venturing out?* The orcs suspect the existence of the cloud city. If they find it, the consequences will be dire. The heroes must cause a distraction in order to save their people.

## Treat the Game As An RPG

If a kid gamer wants their character to stop and listen at a door, but that's not described in the rules, let them do it anyway. Make up the rules for these things on the fly! If the heroes are making a whole bunch of noise just outside a room filled with zombies, the zombies are going to know something is going on, and they may well investigate. If you are the GM and the players latch on to something that is particularly of interest to them, run with it. Encourage description and talking in character and—if someone comes up with a particularly awesome idea—work together to make sure it happens. Everybody loves it when their ideas lead to an awesome outcome.

## Create Mysteries

If you are the GM, add mystery and puzzle elements where you can. A search for treasure reveals a coded note or a torn section of a treasure map. There is a rusty key at the bottom of the pit trap. A sound can be heard through the dungeon walls. The players overhear news that contradicts the “truth” they were told about the situation. When I am GM, I look over the quests beforehand with an eye to where I can throw in these details—but I am also primed ready to take opportunities when the players throw them at me.

## Monsters are Mooks

Kids (like most adults) find multiple turns of attacking the same monster to be pretty dull. Instead, make sure standard fall quickly. If you are the GM, reduce their hit points if necessary—or give the players bonuses for imaginative (not graphic) descriptions of how they make their attacks. This method also helps to avoid making the violence seem too real. You might want combat to be the least important thing in these game sessions, and so encourage non-combat resolutions. Here's a personal example of using these methods:

GamerBoy came up with the idea that two of the orcs in the dungeon were discontented. They rebelled against their gargoyle overlord and spent much of the game running around trying to win other orcs over to their cause. GamerBoy cast a spell to summon a genie and have it hold a door closed so that the orcs thought it was locked, and the orcs had to take an alternative route that led them away from the heroes. We had so much fun in this session—so much more than if we had just treated it like

a simple board game encounter (open door, see orcs, move miniatures, roll dice, kill orcs, search for treasure).

On a side note, spells and other special abilities in the game are a fantastic way to allow a bit more imagination into a dungeon board game. Don't be restrictive about the way they are used. According to the rules, a genie spell might only be able to open doors and fight, but if it can open a door, it could instead hold a door closed. A spell that lets you pass through rock is meant to let you move through walls, but maybe it could be used to jump through a boss monster and attack in from the rear where it is less protected. This of course ties back to the earlier point about encouraging imaginative descriptions. When GMing for kids, it's more important to keep them having fun by letting them be creative than to say, "the rules don't let you do that."

Also bear in mind that kids like to be good at what they do and to know they are accomplishing something worthwhile. If you run a game for adults where everything is a cakewalk, it will be boring for all concerned. You have to present an adult with a certain chance of failure if you want them to feel they have accomplished something with their success. This is not quite the same for younger kids. Children spend enough of their lives being confused and uncertain. In a dungeon crawl with monsters that might be genuinely scary to an imaginative child, make sure the kids understand that this is a cooperative game where everyone wins if you tell a cool story, get a genuine sense of achievement, and have a great time—you aren't going to punish them with deadly spiked pits every time they forget to search for traps!

## **Kids and Combat**

Combat is very often a focus of roleplaying games. Most of us love combat, even if we discuss at length how to get the pacing right, how to make fights interesting, and so on. We love the feeling of dice in the hand, the numbers on the character sheet. Some players revel in gory descriptions, others prefer to focus on the numbers and keep it neat and tactical. Some like to narrate outrageous Hong Kong cinematic stunts. Depending on what suits the game and the players, I use all of these techniques, but combat in RPGs with kids can be a sticky issue.

GamerBoy and I once played a game where we particularly enjoyed detailed descriptions of the characters and the scene. Part way through that session, he gave a very gory description of stabbing a goblin in the face. It

was a bit much for me; I had to tell him, “I’m kind of uncomfortable with this... we need to take a step back and treat this as dice-rolling.”

I started to offer extra rewards for completing the quest with minimal combat. It worked incredibly well. This became one of our favorite sessions. Since then, I always have an eye on rewarding imaginative play that skirts around combat—perhaps some good role-playing and a decent dice roll. Of course, when the chips are down and we fight, that’s fun, too. We even come up with creative descriptions of cool moves:

*The dwarf leaps at the table and uses it as a springboard to gain height for his axe-blow.*

*The hero pushes the door open a crack and levels his crossbow, taking out the first orc before they even know he is there.*

*Bright light streams down from the ceiling and a genie appears—rushing towards the enemy and disintegrating it in an instant.*

These are creative descriptions which are not actually graphic, and in our family’s gaming this is the rhythm we’ve naturally fallen into. We all love a bit of sword-and-sorcery, and sometimes that means killing bad guys.

## Rules Don’t Matter

If you have ever been a GM, you are qualified to GM for kids. You will need to make minor adjustments and learn from your experiences—but don’t dumb things down too much. Children should be treated more like grown-ups than they often are. They understand a lot more and can deal with more complexity than many people believe. And they have a great deal to contribute - you just need to find something that grabs their attention (whether that’s elves and dwarves, space pirates, flying ponies, or something stranger) and be a little patient.

Many roleplayers, especially habitual GMs, like to have rules for a game and to know what their characters can and can’t do. And then they like to play havoc with those rules, bend them to the point of breaking and have a tremendous amount of fun doing it. This stands you in great stead when gaming with kids because most kids are exactly the same way.

When I was young, I loved reading the rules, pouring over them, learning every tiny detail of how many yards a human can leap compared to a dwarf, just how good a swordsman your character can become, how to specialize in detecting traps, and so on. Coming back to gaming as a

father in my thirties, I found I couldn't devour rulebooks and setting-books like I used to. Instead I focus on making the gaming experience as fun as possible for everyone around the table.

Everything I do is geared towards the session being fun. When I game with my grown-up gaming group, we play-act our characters as much as possible, talking in character most of the time. RpgGamerUncle loves story above all else—he wants verisimilitude. Other players in my game belong to historic re-enactment societies and love to live the experience. In gaming with my family, we play fast and loose with the rules because the kids aren't interested in pausing the game to look things up—and they aren't interested in being told what they can't do. For young kids, gaming is an awesome extension of storytelling in which they get to live out the exciting ideas in their heads as a group. Every kid I have ever met wants to tell stories where the main character (they themselves) does awesome things.

As a GM you have to roll with this. Your players want to be enabled more than they want to be challenged. You can set the pitch of the game and allow things which you might not normally allow for older or more experienced players. Consider altering difficulty levels during gameplay. Something a character tries might work the first time without a roll just because it's a cool idea. Come up with good reasons for a player to get another try at a failed roll. Keep things moving, exciting, and fun.

## The Golden Rule

One important thing to always remember when gaming with kids it is be patient and massively, massively encouraging. If they have fun and feel like they accomplished something, they'll want to play again. If they're bored, frustrated, or don't feel like they're making progress, they won't want to play any more. If you're calm, patient, and attentive—or at least look do your best to appear as if you are—the kids will be able to use their imaginations, tell some shared stories, and have an awesome time.

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# GIVING INITIATIVE:

## Engaging Shy Players

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*Shanna Germain*

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When I was in high school, I attended a performance of aerial dance. I was so excited about the event that I begged someone to trades seat with me so I could sit next to the aisle and lean over to see the stage without adult-sized heads in front of me.

About three minutes into the performance, though, I discovered something a thing out of my worst teenage nightmares: the dancers were walking the aisles, pulling audience members up on stage. I tried desperately to get my powers of invisibility to work (I knew I had them, I just hadn't figured out how to turn them on yet), considered climbing over the people next to me to get a safe spot in the middle of the row, and eventually spent the entire event panicked that I would be chosen to go up on stage. I have no memory of the performance, the dancers, even what the audience members did when they got up there. All I remember is my own thumping heart and my waistband getting caught in the seat as I tried to scrunch down in it as far as I could.

Now that I'm older, I know that most volunteers are either plants or are chosen because they are expressing some sign that they want to participate. But the truth is that my fear isn't that I'll be pulled up on stage. Once I'm up there, I can take action and find my way through the experience. My real fear? It's that I'll have to sit through the entire performance worrying about being pulled up on stage.

I find that this fear—this preemptive worrying that the spotlight is going to swing around and shine your way—carries over into roleplaying games for me as well. Once my character has the stage, I can easily talk about what

my character does and says. But when I'm still in the background, when the GM's gaze is roving across the table, looking for a volunteer, I find myself shrinking into my seat and trying to tap into my invisibility spell again.

This is the way that my shyness manifests, but it's not the same for everyone. For some shy roleplayers, this fear and worry of being pulled into the spotlight can be worse than the moment of actually being there. For others, actually interacting or speaking while the attention is on you is the trickiest part. It might be all of these moments, or something else entirely.

When I GM, one of my goals is to help all players get the most out of their gaming experience—and that includes shy players, no matter how their shyness manifests. But there are some things to think about before you jump in and start shoving a quiet player toward the spotlight.

## Is the Player Actually Shy?

Shy, in its broadest sense, means someone who's nervous or reserved around others, especially in a social situation. Players who are shy are often very quiet both in-character and out, they might seem like they're getting shut down or run over by the more gregarious players, and they might contribute less (verbally, at least) to the game overall.

However, these characteristics can be signs of other things as well. A player with social anxiety or who has a fear of public speaking might act very similar to someone who's shy. A player who's having a bad day or who has things on their mind outside the game might be quieter than usual. Some players might just have a lot going on in their mind that they're not expressing; imagination is an important part of roleplaying, and some players do their best storytelling in their own heads. It's also possible that something is happening at the table to make that player uncomfortable, but they're unsure how to talk about it. And, lastly, some players are just slower to collect their thoughts and speak, which means that in a fast-paced scene, everything happens before they have a chance to put their voice out there.

The only way to know what is going on with a player is to ask them. Preferably in a private moment, so that they have the space and safety they need to give you an honest answer. You might learn a lot about why they game, what they enjoy about it, and what is hard for them. You might learn that they're going through a divorce, struggling with depression and anxiety, or just not feeling well. Or, you might learn that they actually are shy.

Note: Not every player will be 100 percent self aware, and they may not know exactly why they act the way they do, and that's okay too. As long as the conversation leads to the next important question, which is:

## **Is it Actually a Problem?**

If it turns out that your player is shy (or really, is dealing with any issue that's keeping them quiet during a game), then the next thing to consider is whether that's actually a problem.

Most importantly, is it an issue for the player themselves? If the player is enjoying themselves, and doesn't want more spotlight time or interaction than they're already getting, then there isn't a problem that needs solving. (Unless the player's lack of involvement is somehow affecting the rest of the group negatively; if so, you might sit down with everyone and remind them that everyone has different play styles and interaction levels, and that's just a normal part of playing any game).

If it turns out that your shy player actively does want to be more involved, but is nervous about taking that first step or is unsure how to do so, there are a number of ways to help them feel more comfortable and outgoing at the table.

Before you start making changes, ask them about their joy and goals. What is their favorite part about roleplaying games? What would they like to get better at? What do they actively despise (or at least wish the game did less often)? Knowing these will help you create a working plan for engagement.

## **Ask Them What They Think Would Help**

Shy players have probably been shy people their whole lives. They're intimately familiar with the mind tricks that one can play in order to pretend to be comfortable in a situation where they're not.

So ask them what's worked for them in the past. The answer might be "nothing." Or it might be something you would never have thought of. By asking the question, you're also agreeing to trust the person's instincts. If they say, "I need to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the spotlight and forced to speak to get over that first hurdle," then be willing to try using that technique for them. If it doesn't work, you can try something else.

## Create Room for Everyone's Voice

This is true of more than just shy players, of course. You as the GM have the responsibility of helping set the rules and expectations. These rules should include making a safe, non-judgmental space at the table, where everyone has the opportunity to have a voice. Making that happen is a group effort, but when you're working with shy players, you might have to help them make space (since part of being shy is that it's often hard to make space for yourself). You can do this by keeping track of the time that everyone at the table spends interacting and making sure that the shy player is getting time. It doesn't have to be equal time if the player's not ready for that, but it should be some time. If that's not happening naturally, you can enlist your players to help (see below) and/or you can step in.

Stepping in shouldn't be a big deal. You don't want to turn the spotlight on a player in a way that potentially feels negative. Instead, make sure that you're actively inviting the player to participate—"What is your character doing now?"—and then protect that answer space for as long as you need to. If another player starts to speak, ask them politely to wait. If the player is too uncomfortable to speak or respond, you can help them out by offering a suggestion of something their character might do, or gently let them off the hook by saying something like, "Would you like to hold your action and do something next time?" The point isn't to force someone to interact, it's to give them the space to do so if they can and want to. Hopefully, after time, they will start to use that space more and more.

## Reward Players for What You Want Them to Do

It seems obvious, but one of the best ways to get people to interact more is to reward them heartily for doing so. This could be as simple as saying to the player, "That was a great bit of roleplay tonight, I really enjoyed it." Alternately, you can give out XP or other rewards to the character when the player goes all out by giving having their character give a particularly moving speech or gleefully describing their actions in combat.

On the flip side of that is: don't skewer a player for things you don't like. Again, this is true of every GM and every player, but it's the fastest way to send a shy player back into their shell. If they're just starting to feel comfortable roleplaying, and they're talking about their character in third person, but you prefer first person, let it go. If they fumble their character or flub a rule while actively roleplaying, let it slide. And encourage the other players do the same.

## Enlist Your Other Players

Helping shy players doesn't have to be solely the purview of the GM. Instead, enlist your players to help you.

First, talk with your players who have big personalities, asking them to help you give other players more time and space to talk. You don't have to narrow in on your shy player, in case that makes them uncomfortable. Just a general conversation about making sure that everyone has a moment in the spotlight is usually enough.

Then, enlist their characters to develop deeper relationships with the character of the shy player. Have them ask for advice or for help with a task. Sometimes, these one-on-one conversations on the side are the perfect entryway to deeper engagement. The shy player has the chance to act and talk as their character, but in a way that doesn't put all of the attention directly on them.

## Use In-Character Traits

For some shy players, the most difficult part of roleplaying might be the talking. So help them come up with other ways to communicate. Perhaps their character is temporarily or permanently mute and can only write things down or communicate via mental images (which the player can present as pictures or drawings). Maybe the character is shy too, and isn't prone to talking much.

Or maybe the character's a historian, note-taker, or map-maker. Their job is to watch, listen, and record, not to speak. This lets them off the hook most of the time, but also invites them to engage under specific circumstances—when the group is lost, they'll turn to the map-maker and ask for help, and the map-maker has an opportunity to shine because they'll know the answers and will be able to help in a big way. Or perhaps they keep an extensive diary, which later becomes a useful tool in discovering a clue to the big mystery. Having a prop like a notebook or a drawing pad can also give the player something to do with their hands if they feel nervous while they're talking.

You can also encourage the player to give their character a catch-phrase (or two), a unique way of interacting, or a small side goal (or all three). If the character is in a post-apocalyptic world, and is always searching for her favorite food—candy bars—then every time they enter a new place, she has something to do. She can search for candy bars, she can ask the

others if they found any candy bars, and eventually the other characters will start giving her any candy bars they might find, which creates more one-on-one interactions for the player.

## **But What if it's a One-Shot?**

Mostly, I've talked about helping a shy player in a regular, long-term group or campaign, because I think it's hard to make big changes in single-shot, pick-up, or convention games. You don't know the players, you can only make guesses as to who might be shy, and you often have your hands full focusing on other things.

However, I think that many of these suggestions are still useful, namely the ones about talking to the player, creating space at the table for everyone's voice, and rewarding the players for what you'd like them to do.

Becoming less shy at the table is a long road, and if you as the GM can help a player take just a step or two down that path, that's a huge success for you both.

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# THE PEOPLE AT THE TABLE

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*Frank Mentzer*

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As we examine and fine-tune the hobby gaming experience—specifically tabletop roleplaying—we tend to focus on the *games* and their details. This, however, is about the *participants*. Let's start with a meta-topic, and zoom in from there.

## Hobbies

When we choose a hobby, we expect to spend our resources (time, money, and more) in pursuit of its pleasures. We play, collect, create, or find a personal path to joy. The intensity varies widely, but is still a hobby.

Time brings change, especially in technology. From our chairs we choose from a sweeping buffet of digital entertainment and media on a global scale. This is very far from my mid-20th century childhood, where the dining room table was the arena, and all else had to be physically imported, starting with card and board games. We never imagined that our physical presence, the real people sitting right there around the table, would become... optional.

“Tabletop” is one convenient term among many, suitable for its emphasis on human (not computer) opponents, and its interaction without digital masks. The personal experience lives on, despite the new and beckoning toy box. Cyberspace is flexible, and we can now “sit around a table and roll dice” despite the fact that we are physically far apart. This is not new; I've been gaming online for 25 years.

## Roleplaying Games

The “roles” part of the hobby is oft called rolegaming or roleplaying, and was first introduced in 1974. A player immerses themselves in a character, imagining nearly every aspect of that character’s life. Role assumption (a lesser form) is common in earlier games. You were the general of a battle, or biplane aviator, or other specific vocation... but the character’s “normal” life was irrelevant to the conflict at hand.

Roleplaying is a very personal mind-exercise that reveals and develops many aspects of our inner selves. It is an enticing and even addictive experience—thus eminently suitable as a hobby. And it is a very social interaction, affected by the myriad things that comprise society.

## Rules

We usually do not debate the rules of board, card, or tile games, other than to clarify existing parameters. The narrow scope of such pastimes facilitates precise definition. In addition, these are competitive games, and someone wins.

The non-competitive nature of a roleplaying game is a feature unique to that medium. The written rules always attempt an abridged reality simulation, leaving much implied or unspecified, and are thus subject to interpretation and debate. Comprehensive rules would be ponderous and impractical, and may even be impossible.

Abridgment has consequences. Within the narrow context of the imaginary characters and their world, we immerse, examine, and push the envelope—the arbitrary constraints of any such depiction—to find and even extend those limits.

When participating in a roleplaying game, a genre and a specific set of rules have been agreed upon. Two or more participants are gathered at a table, and one is a manager—the gamemaster, or whatever term applies. Beyond the actual rules of the game, there are unwritten rules in the social contract of coming together to play.

### **1. All the participants want to have fun by playing a cooperative game.**

We should all treat previous sentence as a fundamental truth. To play successfully, everyone makes fun the common goal. To do otherwise is self-serving and contrary to the cooperative nature of the experience.

Try “being the other players” as a role. Briefly imagine things from their perspectives. Then just be considerate of the other players. Would the phrase you want to say evoke a conflict of opinions? Does that joke target a particular gender or culture? Lots of things are fun, so why choose to indulge yourself at someone else’s expense?

And yet while striving to minimize interpersonal conflict, we can often become too cautious, too fearful about any possible infraction. Most people don’t deliberately try to offend others, but errors (often regretted) do occur. This “overcorrecting” is common, so don’t stop talking with the other people at the table.

## **2. All players are equal.**

Differences in appearance, background, or opinions should be irrelevant. Please set that aside for the duration of the game. (“Leave your baggage at the door.”)

The game experience is mutually beneficial. Four decades of experience have proven that with exposure and interaction, people of different backgrounds often evolve from suspicion to tolerance to acceptance, and often to admiration of game-related skills.

Of course, there is an exception: All players are human, and human issues exist. When these interfere with the game, it may be better to enjoy pastimes with those of like mind as yourself. This can be especially true for those seeking relief from specific stress. If you choose this option, remember the benefits of broader experiences, when the time is right.

## **3. Actions contrary to these core tenets should be addressed.**

Aye, there’s the rub. We want compromise so everyone gains... but when we seek a “level playing field” at the gaming table, are we pursuing a group-think mandate, an oppression of dissent? Think, discuss, and find the right path for your own gaming table. Consider what you read here and elsewhere as input only... opinions not rules.

Peer pressure and other social vectors can and do maintain stability in an ongoing hobby gaming group. The GM has a dominant social role, and will provide social leadership whether intentional or accidental.

Do you ask the gaming group to make specific environmental decisions? Topics may include rulebook access, preferred accessories (figurines, mats, terrain, etc.), digital device usage, food and beverages, and (for adults) use

of alcohol, nicotine, and other substances. Are these decisions revisited occasionally? Try having a “group meeting”, using standard rules for such, and invite discussion of old and new business (issues and concerns). Do it for the fun of it, and you may be surprised at the results.

The players’ out-of-game dialogue and attitude are deeper waters, oft with hazards visible only after time and experience. A good GM will observe trends, and weigh their effects.

As usual, “the devil is in the details”. Good leadership is a real challenge. When an incident occurs, the manager must (almost instantly) gauge its level of importance (from trivial to serious), select a productive course of action, and achieve good results with tactful diplomacy. Remember that we all err without intending malice.

Note well that “enforcement” of these social norms is a repellant concept for many. Its converse in this case is a type of honor, the ability to rise to a greater good. Believe that the group will live up to it. Optimism is contagious, so spread it.

## Created Equal

Equality is fine in theory, but our human variations make us better at some things and worse at others. Some are more outgoing, others more introverted. Some players enjoy flamboyance and other dramatic tools, others do not. Some players just want to slay a monster, others enjoy meticulous resource planning.

How then are these differences somewhat equalized at the table, in ways that value the contributions of each without creating implicit “standards of play” that all may feel pressure to achieve?

The answer again lies amongst the many duties of the GM. Evaluate each and every person’s preferred style, and act proactively to include it. This is obviously a demanding duty, and should generate notes to use in adventure planning. Once assembled, the information will point toward both problems and solutions. Opposing styles need to be balanced. Once you see your gaming table more clearly, you can think of things to try.

You may have already been doing this by instinct or happenstance. You can do even better by organizing your thoughts and methods.

## Dealing With Introverts and Extroverts

The withdrawn or shy personality often warrants extra consideration, and so that topic is addressed in excellent detail elsewhere in this work. (See “Giving Initiative: Engaging Shy Players,” page 31.)

An outgoing or dominant individual is usually not a major problem, since they are already communicating quite a bit. Solutions involve only fine-tuning that communication. This individual has already experienced real-life conflict because of that personality, and has found solutions—but, in choosing cooperative play, is often quite willing to “tone it down”. An appeal to reason is the most common tactic here.

## Action or Story?

A “storyteller” prefers plot, romantic elements (though not necessarily romance per se), and a dramatic approach to the overall game. When this conflicts with those who are more action-oriented, compromise is key.

Stories can be complex, requiring adequate time for their development. The player (or players) should provide a list of desired goals and alternatives, their “story” as imagined, and further development can be done privately. Make your own notes, and weave the key public parts into your own plans, keeping your current events to the fore.

As GM, you might enjoy this kind of story, or you might not. Devoting extra one-on-one time to plot development might be distasteful or even impossible. In that case, delegate! Place the tasks firmly in the hands of the story enthusiasts, and they can create another game within yours, often to the delight of all. As above, balance these elements in group play, and watch for a level of insertion that satisfies most of the players.

## Options

One error in table-talk is so universal that it warrants a note. After you describe a situation, don’t ask “What do you do?” Silence follows. You may have been unclear. One or more players might have been distracted and unable to visualize the situation.

Instead, give them some obvious options, such as, “You could do A, or B, or C, or something else, so what do you do?”

## Rules Again

The “rules lawyer” is a common feature of most roleplaying games. As the complexity of these simulations has increased, so has the emphasis and dependence on the rules. Some GMs treat this situation as a threat to authority or capability, but that doesn’t have to be the case. If the “rules lawyer” can be talked into becoming the group’s “rules Expert”, that converts a hindrance into an ally—and emphasizes the GM’s priority of cooperation over conflict.

## Competitor Player

A competitor in roleplaying believes that the game is a subtle competition between a hostile GM and a group of potential victims. This is groundless, since the GM has infinite resources to the characters’ few. Such competition is imported from other media, and is not part of a healthy roleplaying campaign. Both players and GMs can display competitive behavior.

A game with high lethality can easily produce this reaction, but it is more commonly the result of in-game stress due to players’ failures to enumerate specific actions. “You didn’t say you looked up as you walked through the doorway, so this falls on you!” or “You didn’t say you drew your weapon in the last room, so you’re unarmed when it attacks!”

This is “gotcha!” GMing (a form of entrapment, whether deliberate or accidental), and is ultimately destructive and uncooperative. It is unfair, with the natural result that the players eventually fear and distrust the GM. The tendency lurks, and may strike without warning; beware it.

(As an historical note, the adversarial style was common in the early years of roleplaying. Some gamemasters would even rule “if you said it, your character said it!” A side comment could escalate into a mortal battle... and in the long term, you learned to say less.)

## Radical Alternative: The Biased GM

Your game’s rules emphasize the GM’s neutrality in performing impartial tasks. All games include that aspect, but it need not be continuous. Consider this friendlier option.

Be on the party’s “side”. Instead of purely impartial adjudication, have bias in the party’s favor. This isn’t about combat or other regulated situations.

The bias will arise in the myriad game details that are not covered by specific rules.

Here's an easy way to start. Explain that the characters are professionals at what they do, and are far better at it than most of us (the real-world players) can even imagine. At the table, the players choose to not mention things that are routine. Tell the players that when you adjudicate unspecified details, this professional level of character competence will be the primary guideline.

Find opportunities to summarize actions, and therein itemize specific and competent professional actions that you are assuming. Example: The two rogues in the party are examine an area for traps and hidden items. While handling that (describing what they see, making dice rolls, and so on), you comment “meanwhile, the fighter examines the area tactically, and comments that you might want to spread out a bit. The wizard eyeballs the area for the purpose of optimal spell area attacks, and will gain an initiative bonus if something happens. The dwarf notices that the floor isn't perfectly flat, and some moisture has accumulated along this wall.”

Of course, you should always allow players the chance to reject your summary of their professional assumed actions, and to specify a different action entirely.

By giving out relevant information, even when it isn't requested, and by summarizing productive and professional “assumed” actions, you demonstrate your trust in the characters and their competence. When repeated over time, you can show that you really are on “their side” (which actually means “our side”—cooperative fun for all).

To be fair, you can warn the players that it's also your job to run the monsters efficiently, without mercy or pity.

## When You Fail

Some players just can't seem to fully internalize consideration for others. Although the general guideline is “equality for all”, repeated infractions may point toward a fundamental problem.

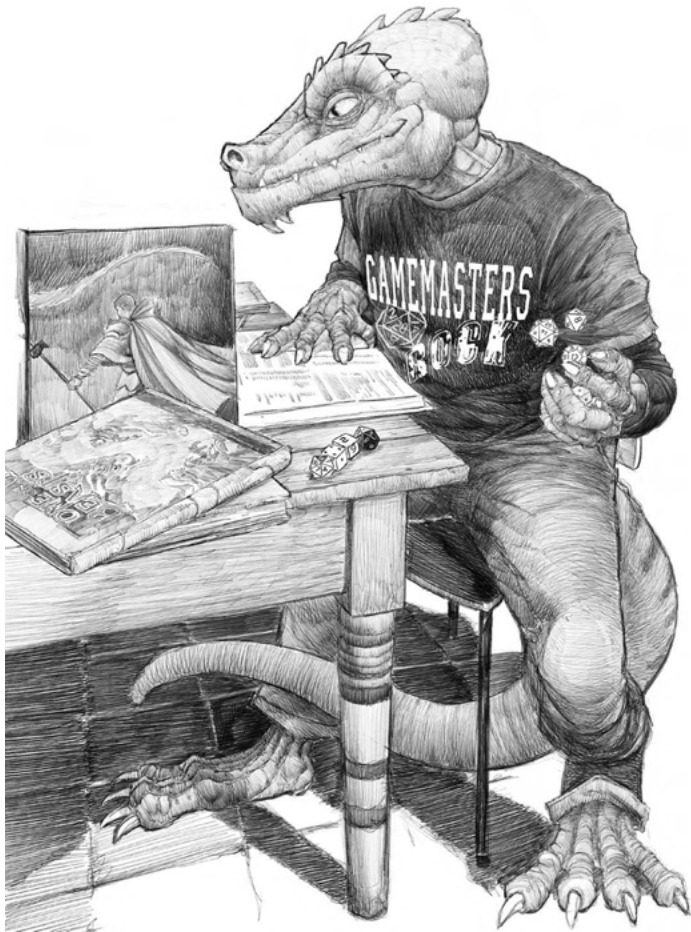
Appeal to reason and consideration of others, and urge that controversial topics (“baggage”) be left at the door to the game room. This is a fine ideal, but sometimes nothing works. Either you or the individual may just not be up to the task, and forgiveness may be difficult.

In such extreme cases, someone may be asked to leave the gaming group. This should be handled privately, avoiding blame, attributing the conflict to a more general problem if possible. The individual might heal or change, and may then want to return after the issues are resolved. Try not to lock them out with personal attacks.

You're a roleplayer. Use that skill, and try to see things from that individual's viewpoint.

*Frank Mentzer is an old-school gamer best known for writing five D&D rule sets (Basic, Expert, Companion, Masters, and Immortals) and other D&D products (including Temple of Elemental Evil) with his friend and co-author Gary Gygax. Frank is happily married, was once a professional musician, and has always had a dog.*

# PLANNING THE GAME





# ADVICE FOR NEW GMs

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*Dan Dillon*

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Whether you're new to RPGs in general, or you're an established gamer planning your first foray into the GM role, welcome! Stepping into the GM shoes is deceptively challenging, extremely rewarding, and completely necessary for this wonderful hobby to thrive. Without the GM, there's no game; we need you to step up and take the game experience from imagination to reality. While there's a lot to keep in mind and it can be daunting, a few key things can help keep you on track to building the best RPG experience you can muster.

## **Read the Book**

First off, and this is sound advice for the veteran player as well as a pure newcomer, is read the book. It sounds like a no-brainer, I know, but stick with me. This is where the whole thing starts (and you might be surprised how many people don't actually do it). Not only does the book (or PDF, or whatever medium) for your RPG of choice hold the rules for resolving conflict and action, it also sets the stage for what the game itself is. The vast majority of RPGs come with at least some level of a setting, or genre—a backdrop against which you and your players will weave

your stories. This palette is just as important as the rules that govern the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of the game side of the equation. Dice rolls only get you so far, and to give them meaning and impact the mechanics need to reinforce the story of the game at large, and whatever specific story you're creating for and with your players. Some games integrate mechanics and story throughout, while others might have them spit off into separate sections. Make sure you spend some time with both halves of the RPG coin. At their best, story and mechanics work together and inform one another.

Understanding how a given rule works in the game is important, but more important is understanding why it works the way it does, and what that means to the overall tone of the game. If you have a handle on what types of rules are most prevalent or most detailed (such as combat versus exploration or social interaction), that tells you a lot about the assumptions of the game's designers, and about what the game system is supposed to handle straight out of the box. Sticking with what a system is designed to do—what it's good at—will make your first steps more certain. Additionally, most RPGs include advice, suggestions, and tools specifically for GMs. This advice is tailored to that specific game's themes, mechanics, and flavor, and it can be invaluable. Listen to what the game designers have to say about their game, and it can help you lay a solid foundation on which you can build throughout the course of your campaign.

Reading a game for the first time means you may have uncertainty and questions about some parts of it. Most of the time those questions are probably answered in the game's text. If you start your foray off with a full read of the rules and setting material presented, chances are it will answer most of your questions by the time you finish the book. I strongly recommend that for your first time out at the very least, you run your game with the established rules as presented in the book. For example, you might not like how the sneaking rules work, but you should try running it their way before tinkering with that. Later, once you're comfortable with the whole deal, you can start branching out and experimenting with changing the rules.

Most games are going to have a lot of material for you to read and digest, so don't get discouraged if you have to go back and investigate something

that doesn't make sense. Even veteran GMs don't remember every rule correctly every time it comes up. The game's materials are there for your reference, so don't hesitate to double-check a crunchy bit of rules or an obscure quirk of setting that didn't stick with you the first time. With time and practice you'll find that retention of these little details comes easier and faster, but don't be discouraged if it takes you a few reads to hold on to some bit of game lore. Especially when you're just starting out.

## Communicate

Once you've read up (or refreshed) on the game you're planning to run, it's time to get into the nitty-gritty of establishing it with your players. It's time to communicate. Before you ever meet for the first session of your soon-to-be epic, get together with your players to talk about what everyone wants out of the game. What kind of characters do they want to play? What kind of adventures and stories do you want to tell? Are there specific goals the players want to accomplish with and for their characters in the long and short term? What inspires you, and them? Are you going to change or ignore any stated rules, or add any of your own house rules? These are simple questions that can spark useful conversations. They get you and your players on the same page. Do not make assumptions about what your players want. Ask them. This collaborative communication process is helpful to you as the GM so you can anticipate what your players are interested in. As a result, you can write stories they'll want to see through to the end. It also helps your players feel invested in the game, and it gives them an idea about what kind of GM you're going to be.

During this pre-campaign collaborative is the perfect time to bring up a crucial discussion—what topics people are comfortable with portraying, and anything that's strictly off-limits. The point of any game is to have fun. RPGs are unique in that they double as social interaction, and offer a massive potential for depth and emotional engagement. This is fantastic when done right, but it can be disastrous if not. Open the door to the players pointing out any topics that they are uncomfortable portraying, or reacting to over the course of the game. Make it clear what kind of topics you are thinking about including, and ensure that you are comfortable running stories that include topics the players want. This comfort is a two-way street. It might be helpful to think of your campaign as a film

or video game, and give it a “rating.” Make sure the general content isn’t going to become unduly uncomfortable for anyone, yourself included. If a player is struggling through a story involving a topic that has deep negative emotional implications for them, they’re going to be hard pressed to enjoy the game. You always want to be respectful, and that starts with open communication regarding boundaries, and comfort zones. (See also the “Let’s Play” article on page 19.)

The important part of communication as a GM is to keep expectations on the same page. This extends beyond any pre-game discussion. If something comes up mid-adventure that strikes a bad note for a player, be ready to accept that feedback and adjust. If you decide a ruling you made earlier isn’t working because of a new situation or rules interaction, the players should expect you might reverse that ruling, or alter it for the good of the game. When you have that first sit-down with your players to talk about the upcoming game, emphasize that you’ll keep communication open throughout the life of the game. That way the players are aware of possible changes mid-game, and they also know they have an open line to make requests and offer feedback. On that note, periodic check-ins over the course of the game to solicit feedback are beneficial. When in doubt, ask.

## **Integrate**

When you’re setting up a game’s story, no matter the system or genre, you want your players to engage with the story. You want them to care. You need to integrate their characters into the narrative. Remember all that communication we talked about above? This is the first place where it pays off. Once you have a good idea of who the player characters are, think about what motivates them. What do they want? Who do they love or hate? What places or things are important to them? The best stories aren’t you telling the players what happens, nor are they you reacting to whatever whims strike the players. The best stories come about from an interplay, and that starts on your end. It doesn’t matter if you’re using a published adventure, or presenting something you created yourself—look at the overall story that you’re going to present, and identify the characters, places, events, and things that are important to that story. Once you have those key points in mind, start looking for ways to tie the player characters to them.

The quick and easy (and also quite effective) way to do this is with people. Look at the NPCs that are important to the narrative at any point, and imagine which of those could also be important to the player characters. NPCs offer you a quick hook to pull the players in and create investment. If the NPC who introduces your first story is just some random stranger in a bar it has far less punch than if that NPC is a parent or mentor to one of the player characters. If you give a player the opportunity to forge an instant and strong attachment to the NPC, that attachment also connects them to the story hooks the NPC presents. That PC instantly integrates into the story, and the player has a reason to care about seeing it through.

Places can create the same integration, but generally less so on their own. Places work well when paired with another element, such as a PC's childhood home where their family lives, or the site of a great victory or tragedy that factors into a character's backstory. Creating player investment in a place usually happens over the course of time. If you run several stories concurrently that focus on, or are set within a location, you're building those connections behind the action. For example, several adventures take place in the same town. The PCs aid its citizens, they discover its history, and they might even put down roots in that community. Now you don't have to leverage a specific NPC to tug at the player's interest, you can use the environment around them. Threats to the town (whether natural or the result of villainous action), beneficial opportunities to grow and secure their home, or even the chance for PCs to gain clout and influence within the local infrastructure all become integration points and levers for future tales.

Events can occur in the background to set up some future flashpoint; perhaps a character survived a virulent plague, only to discover later that a villain was responsible for unleashing the disease and threatens to do so again. Events can also integrate the players organically in the present, such as when the consequences of a seemingly-harmless bargain immediately threaten the PCs or those they love. Like places, events tie very well to other integration points and serve to strengthen them. Setting up the right events with and around other plot elements helps cement those elements together, and pulls the players in to their unfolding narrative.

Physical objects can be why PCs integrate themselves in the narrative, whether they serve a role in the story or if they're merely a plot hook to move the story forward. The easiest way to do this is with a "MacGuffin"—an item or goal that the protagonists need to acquire, whether or not the exact reason for it is ever explained. A MacGuffin also integrates the villains into the story—for example, if an ancient magical orb would be dangerous in the hands of an evil overlord, that's a reason for the overlord to try to acquire it, and a reason for the PCs to try to stop that from happening. The trick to using an object to create integration is to make sure the thing has connections to the other elements and to the characters. A MacGuffin usually loses its importance in the final act of a story, so you have to make certain the connections between the PCs and other elements of the campaign are solid before you get there, otherwise the end of the adventure falls flat. An object can be as subtle as a family heirloom stolen in a robbery, or it can be as grandiose as a mystical artifact capable of saving—or destroying—the characters' world.

## Prepare

When you're running an RPG it's all well and good to have the big picture set down and planned out, but that's far from the whole story. You must be ready to sit down and make it happen in small pieces over time, usually the size of a weekly gaming session. To be ready, you've got to prepare. Preparation starts before the first session, of course, and pops up before every individual meeting throughout the life of the game. This can take different forms depending on the game in question and the style in which you're running it. To use a standard example, you might have a long story arc that will take many sessions over the course of several real-world months to complete. If you have the material written out ahead of time, either of your own creation or from a published source, read over the entire thing before you play. This gets the overall narrative arc into your head and lays another one of those solid foundations.

Every time you sit down for a session you need to have some idea of just what you're going to say for however many hours you'll be playing. You have to know what NPCs the characters will encounter, and which of those are hostile or benign. You have to know what treasures or other rewards they'll earn if they succeed. You'll need locations for them to explore, events to catalyze their actions, and descriptions of important

objects that drive each piece of the campaign. The trick to weaving together a story like this is having pieces of it ready to show so the players can put them together. Read over whatever it is you plan to do in a given session before the session starts. You don't want to be scrambling through notes or adventure books to find an answer if you don't absolutely have to, after all. You want to keep it moving along and maintain the players' engagement. It's okay if you prepare something for a game session and it doesn't happen that night—anything you prep but don't use is always there for another session.

## Forget It!

Instead of planning, you can just wing it. By all means, change things on the fly or run with a crazy idea the players tossed out off the cuff. If you do that, though, take some notes. Jot down what's changing or what you're adding so you can keep consistent from session to session, and so you can do a little extra preparation between sessions to add depth and dimension to the sudden inspiration.

Speaking of winging it, the last piece of advice to bear in mind as you set out to forge worlds and test heroes, is to forget all that other stuff. Or rather, be ready to forget it if it serves the needs of the game. The only hard and fast rule in a game is to have fun. That's the point of this whole endeavor, so if some other piece of advice, rule, or story element gets in the way of having fun, you need to chuck it out the nearest window. Your fun, and that of the players, is paramount. If they get it in their heads to go explore some far-flung temple you mentioned in a throw-away line of dialogue, go with it. You can take something you've already got prepared and change the description, fudge the names, and file the serial numbers off until it fits the new direction. (For more on winging it as a GM, see "Gamemastering on the Fly" on page 73.)

Rules are the same way. No GM I've ever heard of has used every single rule as presented in a game book without at least some alteration, and you should feel free to adjust whatever needs tweaking to serve the needs of your gaming group (though I think you should stick to the book's rules for at least your first game session). The important thing to keep in mind is what serves your enjoyment, and that of your players. At the end of the gaming day, that's what sticks with us—we remember the fun. We remember the tense moments, and hilarious mistakes. We recall great

triumphs decades later, mourn our failures and fallen heroes, and vow to rise up when next adventure calls. That's the role you choose when you decide to become a GM—you become the chronicler of stories. It's not a mantle donned lightly, and it takes practice to master, but you and your companions will carry the rewards for the rest of your days. (See also “Knowing the Rules vs. Mastering the Game” on page 93.)

*Dan Dillon fell into RPGs by accident when a family friend pawned off a bunch of AD&D books on him in 3rd grade. Now he's gone pro to make it look like he did it on purpose, and to justify all that time and money he's spent on the hobby since grade school.*

# TIPS FOR LONG-TIME GAMEMASTERS

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*Michael E. Shea*

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While a great deal of advice exists for new gamemasters, long-term GMs can still learn much, if you keep your mind open to it. It's easy to hang on too tightly to your venerable nature. You think you know it all. You think you've seen it all. But the world continues to change, and if you don't change with it, you won't be wise—you'll just be older. Luckily there is one single tip, one single trick, one single mantra that you can hang on to that will help you continue to evolve and continue to be a great GM.

## **Always Keep Learning**

There's always more to learn in this limitless hobby of ours. Each new experience you receive while gaming or talking about gaming can add to our pool of knowledge, a pool that will never completely fill.

Regardless of your long-time experiences, there is so much more you can learn. You may have more overall experiences than other GMs, but they're also different experiences. You can learn from everyone. You can learn from every game. Keep "Always learning" is the philosophy that will always improve your games. It is the one tip that will keep you growing instead of becoming stagnant in a own myopic view of this infinite hobby.

## **Be Open to Others' Experiences**

Your gaming and GMing history brings a lot to the table. Your experiences benefit other gamers greatly. You can share your experiences, keeping in mind that these experiences are just one path in a sea of other experiences. It's likely that you have a lot you can share with your fellow GMs. You can help newer GMs navigate the difficult waters of running great games.

However, your experience can also be a hindrance. Things that might once have been true for decades may no longer be true. The world changes around you. Your understanding of what constituted a fun game 30 years ago (like the constant threat of a total-party kill) may not find the same acceptance in a gaming environment where players are used to video games with infinite lives.

You have as much to learn from the experiences of new players as they have to learn from ours. Learn from their experiences and try to see your hobby through a new set of eyes. You can find entirely new ways to run your games. As much experience as you have, watching, listening, and taking the time to understand will help you remain sharp and continually improve. You can't get better if you think you're right all the time or that the way you've done it is always the right way. You get better by absorbing as much as you can from many different paths.

## Play with Other GMs

Playing with other GMs gives you a vector into what running an RPG looks like outside of your personal experiences running the game. If you've been in the GM seat for decades, you might not have a lot of experience being on the other side of the table.

Conventions and local organized play games are a great way to play with lots of different GMs. You can watch, listen, and learn. Just because they're not doing it the way you did it in the 80s and 90s doesn't mean they're doing it wrong because. There are few better aids for a GM than playing in a game run by someone else. Study their methods, take what works well, and toss out what does not.

Sure, some of these games might suck. You can follow the wise interview techniques of Truman Capote and ask yourself some questions about why the game isn't living up to your standards: Why do you think it sucks? Why are you not having a good time? What are the other players feeling? Is everyone having a bad time, or is it just me? Even when you're in a badly-run game, you don't have to shut down your ability to learn from the experience. Use a bad GM as an example of what not to do, just as you'd use a good GM as an example of what to do.

## Watch Live-Play Game Videos

The RPG community has started paying a lot of attention to live-play games. Video and audio broadcasts of all sorts and all lengths (such as on Twitch and YouTube) gives you a view into a limitless number of games to observe. For many new gamers, live-play videos may be their first exposure to what playing an RPG even looks like. For experienced GMs, live-play broadcasts can show you what RPGs look like today, and maybe it doesn't look like your game at all.

Spending time watching from the outside how other GMs run games can give you an entirely new perspective on the game and GMing. Since you are neither playing in it nor running in it, you can observe all sorts of interesting things in the mannerisms of the GM and the body language of the players you might not have seen if you were participating. You can rewind and look at a particular scene again. You might pick up a trick or useful habit used by a GM—a nuance you might have missed if you were directly involved.

## Study Other Game Systems

The last decade has opened up the doors to hundreds of new roleplaying games, from those with a heavy focus on mechanics to those that are almost completely freeform improvisation. Sometimes you can learn up a game mechanic that transports well into your system of choice. Other times you might find a philosophical point that really strikes home. For example, the *Dungeon World* game's core philosophy is “be a fan of the characters”; that's a simple idea, but many times in a mechanics-focused game you might forget who the heroes are and start to think of them as competitors to the GM.

## Conduct Small Experiments

As you watch other GMs and study other game systems, you might pick up all sorts of ideas you want to incorporate into your game. When you see something new you might try to figure out how you can do this for a single scene or a single encounter without upending everything you and your players already know about the game. New rules might take effect only for one scene.

For example, what does a battle look like on the side of a waterfall, or high above a city on a bunch of fast-moving floating disks? What does

a battle look like when some of the characters have to coordinate their ongoing actions to prevent a horrible trap from affecting the rest of the PCs? And what other strange rules exist within this dream environment?

Without completely changing the rules of your game, you can insert particular scenes like this and see how they go. If they go well, you can add them to the toolbox. If they go poorly, you can throw them onto the scrap heap.

## **Ask for Feedback**

How often do you ask your players about their experiences playing in your games? If this isn't something you do regularly, why not? There are a lot of potential questions you can ask them. What parts of the game do they like best? What parts of the game do they want to see more of? Which NPCs do they remember and enjoy? Remember that not all feedback comes from questions. Watch your players. What parts of the game have them reaching for their cellphones or heading to the kitchen for a snack?

## **Check Your Ego**

It's hard not to be proud of your longevity when playing RPGs. You might have been playing them for 30 or 40 years—longer than many new GMs have even been alive. That's not insignificant, but it's also not necessarily the most important factor in being a great GM either. In fact, that ego might get in the way of getting better. Are you asking questions, or are you making statements? Are you watching openly, learning from what you see, or are you judging? Are you assuming all games are like your games and all GMs should be like you, or do you recognize the huge variance in players, GMs, and games in the world? When you check your ego, you're opening your eyes and learning. Your ego might be a wall that limits you from growth. Don't let it limit you.

## **Accept Your Personal Preferences**

This hobby of ours has limitless possibilities and keeps you coming back to it week after week, year after year, for, hopefully, the rest of your lives. Even though millions of people play RPGs, these millions break down into small groups of five to seven people. At that point, like a submarine, the hatch is shut and it becomes a universe unto itself. Each of these little universes has their own laws, their own physics, their own interactions and their own styles. None of them are exactly alike.

You do a great injustice to yourself and the hobby when you assume that all games are like yours. Likewise, you do equal injustice to your own group when you assume it must be like everyone else's. You can learn from every game you see, but when it comes to your own game, only the joys and desires of *you* and *your players* matter. Just because everyone else starts playing “hippy improvisational collaborative worldbuilding” games doesn't mean you or your group of hard-core tactical wargamers will resonate with it. It's great to try new ideas, but your joy and the joy of your group is paramount. The joy of having fun with your friends is what it's all about. If you and your group don't want a gritty low-magic campaign, don't play it—you don't have to prove yourself to anyone.

## Embrace New Demographics

Since the beginning of this hobby, it's been dominated by white males. In the past decade it has started to change, and you can do your part by supporting diversity of gamers and making your game as inclusive as you can. A player of a different race might have incredible insight about why dwarves and elves in your world don't get along. A player of a different religion might have a new perspective about one of the major churches in your campaign. A player of a different gender identity or sexual orientation might have a new take on a campaign plot about an arranged marriage in the royal family. Just as playing with different GMs can open your eyes to new GMing styles, having diverse players can create nuance and depth in routine campaign elements.

Remember that people of different races, genders, and backgrounds may not be comfortable coming into a hobby dominated by white males. Just as your gaming experiences are not the same as anyone else's gaming experiences, your life is not like anyone else's life, and you can't assume they'll just be comfortable in your group.

Embrace new players to your hobby, whatever their race, gender, background, or physical abilities. Give new players a safe and comfortable place to learn how to play. If there is a problem (like someone is making off-color jokes), address the problem directly (and perhaps privately, to avoid making anyone uncomfortable in front of the rest of the group) and explain to your players how they're making the game less inclusive. Remove players who actively attempt to discriminate against those who seek to join the game. Make your game warm and inviting and show them how wondrous these worlds can be.

## Recapture the Fantasy

The longer you play fantasy RPGs, the more you start to see the same things again and again. As you get older and the longer you play these games, it's easy to lose track of the fantasy behind it. The stats on a magic sword can mean more to you and your players than the tale of its creation and all of the hands that once wielded the blade.

Recapture the fantasy of this game of ours. Let's become kids again and let your minds build the worlds you're bringing to life. Sometimes this might mean actually gaming with much-younger players; by seeing the game through their novice eyes and reactions, you can re-learn the wonder and discovery of playing RPGs.

You can remember the roots of your games when you watch great movies, read great novels, listen to great songs, and follow great TV shows. You can be inspired by beautiful art. You can take a break from this internet-connected world of ours and immerse yourself in the view of an amazing natural landscape. The very sourcebooks you buy are wonderful sources of pure fantasy. How often do you relax under a tree on a fall day and let yourself spend an hour reading about the history of dragons?

You can help your players recapture this fantasy as well. You can bring in important details to the world that, though they have no mechanical connection at all, help bring the world to life. What are the months called in your fantasy world? What sort of currency do people use? What are the festivals of the seasons? If you're building your own campaign world, these are interesting details that can breathe life into the setting. The festivals of the seasons may not be as sexy as the 10,000-year history of the empire, but it's more likely to be something the PCs will see with their own eyes.

Above all, you do well to remember that the core of your game lie in fantastic stories. Let's be kids again and dive into them.

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# PLANNING YOUR CAMPAIGN IN FOUR STAGES

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*Monica Valentinelli*

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Though no two GMs are exactly alike, most agree that planning campaigns can be time-intensive. Often, GMs devote energy to world-building to ensure they have enough setting material should their players go off track. Alternatively, they might spend a lot of time creating NPCs, or developing a main plot to deter their players from wandering from town to town.

It's easy to fall into the trap of concocting side plots you don't need and characters you'll never use, especially if you're not clear what kind of campaign you want to run. Having a vision helps get you excited to run a campaign, but enthusiasm only goes so far. The four stages of campaign planning outlined here help GMs who get lost in the details.

## **Stage One: Brainstorming**

By answering a few questions, you can sharpen your focus to devote more time on what you'll need for our game. Brainstorming is a very effective use of your time, because there really are no wrong answers. Don't be afraid to be creative!

- *How long is your campaign?* Consider the scope of your story by planning increments or milestones you can safely plan for in three, six, or nine sessions. This gives you a definitive goal to shoot for, and firm up how many sessions you need to fill. (For advice preparing for a one-shot game, see “One-Shot Adventures” on page 79.)

- ***How many scenes do you need per session?*** Scenes are a great way to contain and plan your campaign's plot. A guideline for a typical session might be to one to three scenes that include at minimum one round of combat. Extended combat scenes can, pending the number of players, eat up most of a session depending upon their complexity (in terms of number of antagonists and their threat level). In general, however, the more scenes you introduce, the greater potential for combat, and the more sessions you'll need to run them.
- ***Can you define important milestones?*** Think of these as the goals you want to accomplish in a scene or session that are tied to your main plot. They could be a conversation or a fight scene. They could also relate to the discovery of an antagonist, a MacGuffin, or a hidden NPC motivation. Whatever your milestones are, having these once-per-session goals can serve as the backbone for your plot that you can then build around. They can also balance the goals to give your campaign some variety and depth so every session isn't run the same way.
- ***How many NPCs do you need to create?*** If you don't have enough characters (antagonists and protagonists) your game can quickly fall apart. Though it's easy to create a bunch of NPCs, consider attaching them to the scenes you introduce to ensure they're useful and interconnected. Another way to look at an NPC is to think of them as an active player with their own wants, needs, and motivations. By doing so, you focus on the NPC's goals and can assign them to multiple locations where they might be encountered during a session.
- ***Do you have a sense of how many fight scenes you need? How long they take to play out?*** One way to stretch out the action in your sessions is to drop in an extra fight scene or two. Knowing if you want a combat-heavy session ahead of time enables you to plan ambushes or figure out which antagonists you'll use. Fight scenes reduce the amount of time players are investigating mysteries and interacting with NPCs, which helps you set the pace and figure out what secrets you'll reveal. Combat scenes are also useful in the sense that they can give the appearance the plot is moving along, act as a red herring to distract the players from unraveling the main plot, or used as a delay tactic to give an NPC a chance to escape.
- ***Are there any active NPCs?*** Think about the NPCs you might need, and then figure out which of those NPCs are acting out their own

agendas. NPCs that are actively thwarting the player's schemes should be on the move—which means that they can be found in multiple locations. By adding a line item or two when you're designing an NPC, you can give yourself more options to introduce the NPC in a later session if the players miss the opportunity the first time around.

- ***Do you plan on using downtime for your players?*** Downtime is a great way to fill in the blanks between sessions, and it's also helpful to generate the depth of story your curious players hunger for. Downtime can be used for mini-scenes like investigating a dusty library or talking to a mentor—both of which might generate story rewards that can then be applied to the live sessions. If you're going to use downtime, knowing that up front helps you save time prepping your plot, because you don't have to allocate as many narrative resources for individual player goals during a game.
- ***How much time do you have allocated to creating or finding aids like maps and minis?*** If you use maps and other accessories, think about whether or not you want to draw maps to enhance your game—or if you want to use existing, pre-printed maps. Pre-printed maps can save you a lot of time, especially if you grab a map and plan a session around the map as a central theme. (For finding suitable maps in a hurry, see “Gamemastering on the Fly” on page 73.)

By asking yourself these questions, you'll figure out what type of game you're running, how long it'll take to run, and what basic components you'll need. Having this clarity also allows you to assess goals and weigh how much time you need to plan, which reduces the chance that you'll waste time on world-building or secrets your players might never dig into.

## Stage Two: Sketching Your Plot

Most of the time, GMs and players alike spend hours world-building, because we love to do so. When prepping for a campaign, however, you may not have the time to create multiple towns, crypts, or forests. Having a picture of your plot can help rein in your enthusiasm and narrow your focus, but it can also further shape the story you want to tell before you finish your preparations.

In Stage One, you figured out how many sessions you are planning to run. Assigning a number of sessions and scenes to a campaign often traps you in the idea that plots must be linear, and the scenes become points along that line that always advance the story forward and in a specific direction.

If or when players go off-script, GMs then compensate by creating other towns or NPCs to lead the group back to the main story.

To reduce linear-campaign situations like these, reshape the plot to accommodate for movement. Instead of a line, picture your game you want to run as a spider web. This helps you prepare for your game by breaking out the story into manageable components.

Here's what the elements of a spider web represent in terms of plot:

- **Center:** At the center of your web lies the heart or purpose of your story. In game prep terms, this is the last session you plan to run. All threads that are directly related to your plot lead to this final moment.
- **Rings:** Each ring (including the center) represents a session you want to run. Sessions relate to your central plot or theme in direct and indirect ways. They surround the last plot, but they can be run as plots of their own.
- **Nodes:** Nodes connecting scenes to scenes and sessions to sessions are elements that move the story in one direction or the other. These can be quests, revelations of secrets, combat scenes to eliminate antagonists, or characters that are related to your central plot in an indirect or direct fashion. If a node connects one scene to another, that plot element indirectly impacts your overall plot. Nodes that connect one ring to the other are stopping points in a session, and directly move the story along.
- **Connecting Threads:** Threads drawn from one node to another represent scenes related to a specific session. These are the elements you design, but may not appear in a game session if the PCs don't move that way. The scenes that you do wind up running draw a path to the heart of your campaign.

The spider web method clarifies campaign planning in a few different ways. First, it cuts down on the amount of world-building you need to do, because it lessens your anxiety about players who go off-script by creating pathways (connecting threads) to keep them contained within the overall story. IF needed, these pathways can represent additional scenes, but they might also symbolize additional mini-settings as well that can be quickly introduced with a few, ready-made maps.

The thing to keep in mind is that the spider web diagram lays out the possibilities of scenes you might run, as opposed to what scenes you must run. In this way, you control the narrative even if the players go off-script,

which gives them the illusion of control. Additionally, those connecting threads can also help you brainstorm how two seemingly unrelated NPCs might share something in common by giving you a visual picture of the threads that connect them through a node.

The shape of your web changes depending upon what campaign you're preparing for, but it is also impacted by the number of scenes you run. Even if you prefer to structure and design your campaign using a different methodology, consider assigning scenes and revelations to separate points on a grid like this to get a clear sense of what you need to develop. The scenes you plan highlight pathways the players can take to achieve that revelation and, by having an interconnected web instead of a line, the players can earn that milestone in multiple ways while always moving the plot forward.

Lastly, when it comes to figuring out how many NPCs you'll need, keep in mind that you don't have to create as many as you think. If your NPCs are dynamic and not static, you might introduce them at any point during a session—sometimes on multiple occasions as well. The more compelling and relatable your characters are, the longer they'll hold your players' interest, and the more fleshed out that particular scene will be.

## Stage Three: Recording Wants and Needs

After you have a mental or physical picture of the campaign you want to run, record your decisions and the work you've done. Writing down what you want helps solidify your vision before you start developing characters and finding names for them. It can also serve as a means of seeing where the holes are, which helps you spot missing pieces you need to flesh.

One method to finalize your plan is to make a “Need vs. Want” list. Grab a sheet of paper and split it into two columns. On the left, label that column “Need.” Then, list all the components that you must have to run your game. Your list might include dice, character sheets, copies of the game, maps, plot hooks, GM characters, etc.

On the right, label this column “Want”. This column represents your pie-in-the-sky wish list for your campaign — the elements you'd love to have but can do without if necessary. You might list a new, fancier map that you spend hours drawing yourself, those minis you've been eyeing for a long time, or that you want to run a twelve-session campaign instead of the six sessions you're planning for.

When you're done, review both lists and figure out if you need to make any last-minute changes. Then, give yourself a brain break—set your preparations aside, and come back to your list a day or two later.

## Stage Four: Campaign Outlining

After you're satisfied with your list, you're ready to put the finishing touches on your preparations. A campaign outline narrows down your vision and zeroes in on what you want to run. Switching the organizational structure for the finished version of your plot from a picture (like a spider web) to an outline can give you fresh clarity and focus. In the previous two stages, you spent time channeling your brainstorming session to shape your vision. Now you are reordering your ideas to fine-tune them one last time.

To reorganize your information, use a scene-by-scene structure that shows the *ideal* path you'd like to narrate during a session. Then add any optional scenes and clearly mark them as such. Lastly, collate your NPC and monster stats and have them available at the end of a scene. Story rewards and milestones should be written down as well, just to make sure that you have all the information in one place.

These four stages are designed to challenge how you think about building your campaign by giving you a clear approach to brainstorming. Asking questions allows you to formulate a vision, sketching out your plot gives you the freedom and flexibility to control and plot sessions, and to-do lists further highlight exactly what you need to run your campaign. Lastly, the outline acts as a summary you might find in any roleplaying game or supplement, which serves as familiar format that solidifies your plot.

By following these four stages of campaign prep, you'll have a solid foundation for a game that you can then fine-tune in an outline or between sessions. What are you waiting for? Kick off your next campaign and brainstorm away!

*Monica Valentinelli is a writer, editor, and game developer who lurks in the dark. She writes both original and media tie-in fiction and works on games and comics, too. Monica is best known for her work related to the Firefly TV show by Joss Whedon. Find out more at [www.booksofm.com](http://www.booksofm.com).*

# CHARACTER LOVE INTERESTS

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*James Jacobs*

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Love is at the core of all great tales. When you consider the plot of most stories—be they told via print, film, poem, song, or whatever—themes of love come up time and time again. Love for a parent. Love for a sibling. Love for a nation. Love for an ideal. And of course, romantic love.

So why is it so many tabletop RPGs seem to ignore this theme? The most obvious answer is simple: most tabletop RPGs spend the vast majority of their focus detailing rules for combat, and thus the focus of the game itself shifts to character options to bolster battle prowess. In most games, once you step beyond the rules for fighting, what remains generally focuses on elements that merely provide gateways to more battle—rules for exploration, for equipment, for monsters and foes, building things, and so on. Given the limitations of page count restrictions, by the time all these elements are set down in print, there's precious little space left for love.

Which is a shame, since love is arguably the most important of all emotions. Certainly, many creators of modern video games understand this, and the introduction of love plot elements plays key roles in an increasing number of computer- and console-based entertainment. Be it a series of “side quests”, or be it the primary element that drives the central plot, video games have increasingly looked to include love as a core part of their experience. Whether or not they include such elements in a well-thought-out, artistic and responsible manner varies wildly, but the point is, at least in this increasingly enormous corner of gaming culture, love has an established and important place.

So why not in tabletop RPGs as well?

## Introducing Love to the Game

Of course, some RPGs do focus on love as their central purpose, with more games like this being published every year. Yet the bulk of tabletop RPGs remain “mired” in the arena of combat, and when rules or suggestions for how to incorporate love into plotlines do exist, they do so on the edges of the rules, often even accidentally (such as part of the rules for diplomatic encounters). More often, guidelines for how to include love (and its even more complex subordinate—romance) are regulated to support books, if indeed such rules and guidelines ever get published at all.

The most important thing to do before you decide to introduce love into your game is to make sure your players are comfortable with the topic. For many people, love can be a touchy subject, and just as it’s important to have the consent of your players before you spring any storyline with mature content involved, you should ensure that your table is ready and interested in including elements of love in the game.

Of course, there can be multiple tiers of how love impacts the game. In fact, if you’ve ever run an RPG before, chances are good that you’ve role-played characters in love already and may not even have realized it. A husband and wife team who owns and operates a tavern might interact with the PCs and display their affection toward each other in offhand ways. A bereaved NPC might hire the players to track down her abducted lover as a mission. A worried parent might hire the PCs as guards to protect a child in a time of danger. All of these have at their core love, and your players can use these elements as well in subtle, relatively non-intrusive background elements for their characters. A PC might have traveled to a new land and joined an adventuring party to earn enough gold to impress the parents of an aristocrat they wish to woo, or perhaps a character might be on a long-term quest to track down what happened to a missing sibling, parent, or lover from their pre-adventuring days. These background goals need not ever directly interface with the main plot of the game (although many players who add such elements to their characters’ backstories do enjoy seeing these elements come up in play), but that doesn’t mean they’re meaningless.

In fact, if you want to encourage your players to have minor background themes of love in their characters’ pasts, you can encourage even players who have very little interest in role-play elements by offering boons or perks. Perhaps the character eager to impress a lover back home gains a

small bonus on all skill checks relating to braggadocio and performance. Or a gallant knight who carries a token of a romantic partner might gain a small bonus to resist attacks that rely upon the manipulation of emotions or loyalty. Sometimes, all it takes for a timid player to come out of their shell and embrace something like this is a tiny little thing, and being able to attach an in-game benefit can help ease them into a new arena of gaming.

Of course, regulating love to minor background elements isn't going to have a significant impact on your game or change things up. If you really want love to play a key and important role in your campaign, you're going to have to be ready and comfortable with characters falling in love. So when you've decided to include love front and center in your campaign, and you've got the consent of all the players involved, you'll need to make several decisions for how to proceed.

## Mechanic or Organic?

Roleplaying game designers love building rules and systems to model events in-game, be they combats, the mechanics of building a structure, the methods of exploring an unknown wilderness, how to resolve a chase, the details of creating a weapon, and so on. Certainly, you could build a system to track the progress of romantic relationships between all characters in your game. In fact, for some tables, specific rules that govern whether or not two characters are officially “in love” (as well as what in-game bonuses that might apply to their morale or emotional state) might be the preference. Many gamers value the ability to interpret the status of their character's well-being and the world they live in by comparing numbers to charts. This is certainly how most games handle the classic question of “are you alive or dead?” by assigning numerical values to health, hit points, stamina, or the like. Giving each character a “romance” score that fluctuates during play based on how successful their courtship actions are can help to distance things between the player and the character. For some groups, this might be a necessary comfort issue, since it can be easier to roleplay something in this abstract, mechanical way, especially if a player isn't comfortable blurring the lines between their real emotions and their character's emotions. Additionally, it's far easier to put balanced mechanical advantages in play if you use something like a romance score. For example, you might say that a character needs a romance score of 40 to be officially “in love” with another character, at

which point that character might gain the “loyal” trait that gives them a bonus on mind-affecting effects that attempt to compromise any action they’d take that could put that relationship in danger.

Yet others might feel that reducing something as magical and personal as love to a set of numbers on paper marginalizes the entire concept. In this case, whether or not a character falls in love with another in game ends up being resolved much as it does in real life—each person involved (for example, the player of the character and the GM who’s running the NPC) gets to decide for themselves at what point the two characters are in love. Since this decision isn’t governed by actual game mechanics, it’s not entirely appropriate to attach game mechanics to love. Instead, this version of love in your RPG works best when it fuels storylines or affects personal choices the characters make as events unfold in play.

Which method of tracking love in your game you use at your table is up to you. It may be that some players simply aren’t interested in these elements for their characters, but don’t oppose them being in the game itself. In such a case, it’s generally better to go with a more organic option, or at the very least keep an eye on any tangible in-game benefits a character might earn through love so that game balance between PCs is preserved.

## Who can Fall in Love?

Much of this article makes an assumption—that the two characters in question who’ve fallen in love are a player character and an NPC. In such cases, the NPC half of the relationship, who remains under the control of the GM, can be portrayed without much concern about impacting the enjoyment of the game for another player.

But what happens when two players decide their characters are in love? Obviously, both players in such a case should consent to this development. Sometimes, the two players are romantic partners in real life and seek to mirror that romance in game. Other times, it’s merely an in-game exploration of building character and a shared history together and need not imply anything more for the players involved, no more so than your role as GM controlling an NPC lover implies anything between you and the PC involved. In a case of PC/PC romance, your role as GM shifts from having to help maintain the relationship to providing context in game for the player characters to build upon the relationship.

Beyond this, the question of what sort of character can fall in love with another is best left to individual tables to determine, but if you find that some players at your table, due to their personal beliefs, are uncomfortable or even hostile toward the possibility of certain pairings in-game, you need to step back and consider whether you want to abandon romance in-game at your table entirely, or perhaps seek different players to play with entirely.

## Sexual Content

Romantic love and the building of a relationship goes hand-in-hand with sexual content, yet such content can be incredibly awkward for many people to speak about in public, or even in private with their friends. Determining the role of sexual content in your game is something you'll need to decide from the outset. In most situations, it's probably best to leave sexual encounters in the background. If you do wish to include sexual content in your game, make sure you handle it respectfully and maturely, and most importantly, that you have the consent of all of your players in the game to include such content.

## Incorporating Lovers into Plotlines

Regardless of how you incorporate love into your game, as a GM you need to keep one thing first and foremost in mind: Love should never be included in an RPG merely as another way to manipulate or punish player character choice. Furthermore, when you allow a PC to develop feelings for another character, you need to respect those feelings. Certainly, the plot wherein a hero's lover is placed in danger is a classic story trope, and you may want to include such an element in your game as a way to motivate the player character in question to undertake a certain series of actions or quests. But before you do so, consider carefully: Would the player enjoy being put in that position? Would the motivation work equally well if the lover in peril was a different person entirely?

In other words, a player should never be made to feel that their choice for their character to love another is a disadvantage or a punishment. The love should be more a source of positivity in a PC's life than negativity, and if you do opt to place a lover in danger, you should make sure that the player's character has ample opportunity to rescue them, and should be rewarded for such success.

A far more productive way to include lovers in plotlines is to not portray them as victims at all, but as strong characters who provide significant

advantages. Rather than have a PC's lover be abducted every encounter, consider having the lover be held in reserve to swoop in (perhaps with allies of their own) to rescue the beloved PC in the event of an unlucky roll of the dice. Or perhaps the lover grants access to certain resources that the PC and the party as a whole can benefit from now and then. For example, a PC could fall in love with the local cleric, and as a result whenever the party returns from adventuring to rest in town, that cleric could volunteer their services for free to heal wounded characters. Or perhaps a PC marries a talented wizard who agrees to not only identify magical items discovered during adventures but to periodically research new magic for the PCs to test in the field. Or what if the PC's lover is in fact a powerful monster—a dragon capable of assuming human form, or an envoy from a magical realm like Elysium or the realm of the fey? Such a powerful companion could unlock a wealth of custom-built boons and options tailored to your campaign as necessary. And of course, there's always the classic scenario where a character weds into power—a PC who becomes married to a prince or princess might unlock a (literal) wealth of benefits for themselves and their adventuring companions!

## Be Mature and Responsible

Introducing love to your game can bring your table's experience to an entire new level—it's an important element and aspect of real life, after all, and by including it in your RPG you make the events in that game more important as well. Just make sure that you treat the topic of love maturely and responsibly—and keep in mind that the whole point of gaming in the first place is to have fun and enjoy time spent with friends. No one falls in love merely because they want to experience the pain and despair of being rejected, and you should not do the same. Love should be introduced to your game to bring an element of hope and delight to the table, and done properly, can make your game all the more memorable and beloved by all involved.

*James Jacobs is the Creative Director at Paizo Inc., and over the course of his time there has written about all manner of torrid and beautiful and complex and self-destructive and loyal NPCs in love alike. Sometimes it works out, but sometimes the other person's a succubus or a polymorphed frog, and said relationship just takes a bit more work.*

# GAMEMASTERING ON THE FLY

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*Brandon Hodge*

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Don't tell my players, but I just make it all up as I go along. Seriously, I'm on year 2 of a campaign that I have run on the fly in its near entirety. I have the same excuses you do, of course: kids and work and sick pets and family and obligations. And maybe that's your story, or maybe this week you were put on the spot to run something last-minute, or you've been busy and the group will be there soon, or... well, it doesn't matter. Thankfully, there's an art to bringing entertaining and exciting experiences to the game table in real time with minimal prep-work, and without being a master of improvisation. In that desperate half-hour before your players arrive, you're going to bluff, cheat, and steal your way to a great game. And the longer you practice, the less time it takes, and these days I'm prepping exciting and satisfying games for my group in only ten minutes or so. So let's talk about how that can happen for you!

GMing on the fly isn't much different than the normal prep work you'd undertake writing an adventure or planning out a regular session for a campaign—it just renders all of your normal choices down into a rapid-fire succession, with a shorthand system that leaves the details and connective tissue for during the actual game. To indulge in a brief artistic metaphor, if the luxury of extensive prep-time usually allows us to create vivid landscapes in the mode of Monet, Cézanne, or Pissarro. Without that time to prepare, we must become Mondrian, reducing complicated landscapes to their most basic constituent elements with simple squares, lines, and rectangles—and trust ourselves to reconstitute these elements into

convincing portraits at the game table in collaboration with the players. These basic elements are choosing a loose theme or direction, deciding on a setting, and populating these two aspects with NPCs and combat. Together, these let you build a cohesive narrative that will fluidly adjust to player choices. And you're going to do it all in less than half an hour.

## The Theme

The first thing you'll want to decide is the theme you're bringing to the table. This might already be decided by where your campaign left off in the previous session, and you may want to continue that or begin making a transition to a new theme. Maybe your murder-mystery has taken a violent turn with the discovery of a cult behind the murders, and the time for bloody conflict is at hand, with a shift from investigation to conflict. Or maybe it goes the other way, and your previous session left off with the final defeat of a vicious nosferatu, and cryptic clues and cursed treasure discovered in the battle's aftermath have opened up a new avenue of adventure to investigate and explore. Maybe the PCs are between adventures, giving you a chance to shift gears into new themes, providing leads to steer them toward a haunted asylum perfect for a horror game, or shipwrecking them on a foreign shore where survival becomes tantamount. Maybe things are taking a turn toward pulp, with a big heist or rescue of an important NPC. You don't even have to settle—you just want something to work toward, even if your upcoming session doesn't complete the thematic shift completely or this is just a one-shot game. Spend a minute, think on how your night might play out exploring your theme or campaign's direction, and move forward toward choosing an appropriate stage for your upcoming game. You have 29 minutes to go.

## The Setting

Like your theme, your setting may already be dictated by your group's previous game, or maybe you're getting a fresh start. If time were not an issue, maybe you'd spend hours carefully mapping out and crafting a devious dungeon or sprawling urbanscape. But you're on an emergency time-crunch, and you're going to steal everything you need. Luckily for you, game designers have already spent thousands of hours creating this stuff so that, right now, you don't have to. If you need a forest map, go online and search "forest game map" and stand amazed at your options. Same goes for "fantasy dungeon map," "medieval city map," "monastery map," "Victorian mansion floor plan," and "fantasy sewer map." Or stroll

over to your bookshelf and thumb through any number of published adventures and select something appropriate. Love that haunted mansion map, but you used it last year? Use it again! Your players will never know. Trust me. I've built my GMing career on recycling the same maps from *Dungeon Magazine* #11 since it came out in 1988, and never once has a player noticed they're walking the same repurposed corridors for the tenth time. This might take a few minutes of scrolling to settle on the right environments for you, and be sure and pick something you can easily describe and reconstruct at the game table, but save them or print them, and set them aside. You've got 20 minutes left and it's time to populate your setting.

## Populating these Aspects

Your theme and setting will help dictate the next few minutes of activity, because it's time to populate the evening's encounters, and you'll want to work toward your foundation. If you're going for a big museum heist, you're going to need NPCs and encounters that can reasonably work in an urban environment, such as city guardsmen, informants, and turncoats. Even if you're in a high-combat dungeon setting, you're going to want to mix things up with other types of encounters, such as freed prisoners, abused and outcast minions, or talking doors. Whatever the sort of things you (and your players) like, that's what to include.

So you need to spend the next few minutes building an NPC bank. Your campaign may already be populated with go-to NPCs; if so, now's the time to go to them. The PCs' favorite bartender just uncovered a secret rune-covered chamber in his wine cellar, and shows up on their doorstep to have them investigate. Their go-to blacksmith can now only speak in an unintelligible demonic garble. The innkeeper is hearing strange whispers in the corner of his hostel. The town wizard's hand won't stop unconsciously scribbling a mysterious arcane script. You know the drill: give your established NPCs hooks that require the intervention of adventurers. Concentrate on the hook, and you don't have to know what the resolution to their problem is—if your players choose to pursue it, you'll discover the resolution along with them.

If your PCs are stuck in the middle of an unfamiliar forest, deep in a dungeon, or it's a brand-new group, your usual stable of NPCs is likely unavailable. If that's the case, spend this time creating a pool of interesting new characters from which to draw. There are lots of

published tools both online and otherwise to pick random traits for characters, and if you have them, use them now! If not, get to work and don't get bogged down in the details. I just make three lists: names, memorable characteristics, and hooks. Making up names on the fly gives a lot of people trouble and threatens to break immersion and reveal lack of preparation, so look up some interesting names, and pick six, and put those in your name bank. Pick a couple of normal ones, a couple of strange ones, and a couple in between. Gender-neutral selections leave your options open later. Follow this by jotting down some distinctive characteristics you can assign to these names to bring them to life when needed. Maybe they have an interesting voice or accent—scribble down the name of an actor, singer, or even politician you can emulate. Do they have distinctive gear? A big magic sword? A tattered spellbook? Glyph-covered armor or robes? Write it down. How about physicality? Maybe they've got a pock-marked face, a missing limb or disfigurement, or a facial tic. Make it a memorable identifier, and think about what it might convey to your players if they encounter this NPC. Lastly, make a list of six short theme-relevant hooks you can connect to any of these names and features, such as: "Needs help transporting a saint's corpse," "pursued by something since acquiring a magical tome," or "found a weird rock." If you aren't feeling inspired, there are dozens of adventure hook articles online that can save you a few minutes.

I don't define race, gender, age, and so on for these potential encounters, leaving those options open, and they don't even have stat blocks (but see below). The trick here is to not overly define these potential social encounters—don't assign them to a role, or else they'll get locked in your imagination and be less mutable than you need them to be when it's time to plug them in. Remember you can jumble these traits and hooks among the candidates in your NPC bank at will, as needed. If you're done, set them aside. That's it. The purpose here is to construct a set of mental triggers, so you don't have to make up a menu of traits for NPCs on the spot.

Now you need to populate a combat encounter list. The good news is that most game systems are already set up to make this relatively easy. Many games have a "challenge rating" stat for encounters, which you can use to guide what encounters are appropriate for your PCs. The point here is to play toward your theme in the same way your NPC trait selections do. For me, this is a several minutes of ferocious copy/pasting of stat blocks from an online reference, or literally rapid-fire flipping through a bestiary

or two with a stack of bookmarks to mark appropriate pages (I'll also tag or copy a generic NPC stat block or two to fill in for my potential social encounters). If it looks good and you might use it, save it! It's all about having options on the fly and the means at hand to smoothly transition from one encounter to another.

When selecting my antagonists, I work toward four power tiers: low-power minions used in groups, mid-level leaders of these minion groups, powerful associates of the enemy (like guardian creatures), and a leader. I typically work from the top-down—first I find a nice final challenge for the session's climax. Maybe I find a stat block that works great as a demonic presence trapped in the walls of a ruined monastery used for a thieves' guild that must be exorcised to wipe its influence from its insane and bloodthirsty rogues. That decision will trickle down to your next selections. My minions are thieves, so I flip through a bestiary, adventure PDF, or favorite gaming site and find an appropriate pre-made stat block for cutthroat rogues. Your choices might shift as you work through this process, but don't linger on them. Maybe during this stage you'll decide that a ghoulish stat block works great for your rogue minions, and they're actually a *cannibalistic* cult, so roll with it and adjust the theme of your monastery-haunting entity accordingly. Then fill in the gaps with some appropriate servants of your main antagonist (like ghouls) or creatures that might reasonably populate the setting of your adventure. This lets you stretch your creative wings a little bit and color a little outside the lines, allowing you to populate some encounters with unusual creatures that still fit the theme. Maybe you have a tribe of goblins working for an evil dragon, and it makes sense that they have an enslaved troll. If you've settled on an urban adventure, your sewer-dwelling cultists might have alligators and rat swarms at their command. Find their game stats and paste them into a big encounter document. If they *might* work for you, include them! You might not use them all, but you want them at your disposal to populate your encounters as you move from one scene to the next.

## Finish Up and Play

Any minute now, your doorbell is going to ring.

You'll note we haven't discussed codifying a plot. That's because I've found that on-the-fly games need to remain somewhat organic and responsive to player choices, and I like to place the onus on the players to pursue the avenues of adventure they are interested in, placing my prepared challenges

in their path as they activate them. Use your on-the-fly NPCs to drop juicy hooks you think you're reasonably prepared to run with the materials you've assembled. If your players don't bite when your strangely-named town drunk with Tom Waits' voice asks for help relocating a saint's corpse because they're more interested in seeing their blacksmith about forging a magical sword, that's OK. Not only did you just provide a memorable encounter they may choose to return to (and used up some table-time in the process), they might be more intrigued by the blacksmith's unintelligible arcane garble as he points out a false wall in his wine cellar leading to strange chambers below. Your PCs will never know that in either instance, they were headed for that haunted monastery map you printed out from an old module.

Lastly, this preparation is about proceeding with confidence and letting PCs' choices determine the narrative along the least-resistant path. You have all of an adventure's basic elements at your disposal: multiple meaty hooks that play toward your desired theme, a set stage, memorable NPCs, and a cast of villains to pit against your PCs when the time is right. In fact, you might have just acquired multiple game sessions' worth of usable materials, so use your time in subsequent weeks using this quick-prep system to stay a few steps ahead of your PCs and refining your outline to account for their interests. When they find something they like, stick with it, and steer the encounter toward your prepared elements until the PCs change course. I've had urban occult intrigue campaigns turn toward deep subterranean dungeon-crawls when PCs decided to use the sewers to get across town unnoticed, and decided to just keep going deeper and deeper enthusiastically following hooks that took them that way. They loved the feeling of that sort of off-the-map exploration, and while it was genuine, I was also prepared! The trick is to remain fluid and organic as your PCs explore the loose framework of your adventure, and let a plot unfold before them, rather than wrestling them toward it. I have found it kind of liberating compared the shackles of preparation GMs are typically characterized as wearing, and I hope that you will, too!

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# ONE-SHOT ADVENTURES

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*Keith Baker*

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When you begin a novel, you may know nothing about the characters or what they need to accomplish. The plot will unfold over the course of many chapters, and along the way you'll get to know the characters. The protagonists themselves will likely evolve as part of the story; the farmer becomes a champion, the smuggler finds they have a heart of gold. This is a natural and organic process.

The same thing is true of a roleplaying campaign. The characters began simply and develop over the course of the story. And while players may develop backstory ahead of time, the most important elements of their story will evolve over time based on the actions they take and their triumphs and failures over the course of the campaign.

If a roleplaying campaign is a novel, then a one-shot adventure is a short story. You don't have chapter after chapter to discover who the characters are, and you can't slowly build towards an epic goal. You have exactly one session in which to create a memorable experience. If all your players want to do is to kill some monsters and grab some treasure, you can use random characters and toss them in a random dungeon. Creating a truly satisfying short story is very different from simply writing the first chapter of a novel—and same ideology applies to making the most of a one shot adventure.

In developing your adventure, consider the following things.

- Who are the characters? What binds them together? Why will the players identify with them, or care about what happens to them?
- What is the plot? Why will the players or characters care about it? What makes it an interesting standalone story? Are you confident it can come to a compelling resolution in the amount of time available?

## The Characters

The player characters are the foundation of an adventure—the window through which players will experience the story and the world. When developing a campaign, I want the players to create their own characters, and I'll craft the story to cater around their ideas. In a one-shot, you don't have the time for this. Also, the player characters may or may not have the skills that will be useful for your story... or may overlap, so there are four medics in a story that really only needs one.

Pregenerated characters ensure that the players have the mechanical skills they need for the scenario, but they are also a critical tool for presenting the story to the players. If your game's a heist scenario, the players will get the idea pretty quickly when presented with a party made up of a grifter, a safecracker, a getaway driver, and a cat burglar. This is also the chance to establish why these people are working together. Here are a few examples.

- The characters are professional associates. They could be a unit of soldiers, the crew of a ship, a group of thieves who have worked together on previous jobs. They've been in tough spots before. Examples of this sort of grouping include *Ocean's Eleven*, *The A-Team*, and *Firefly*. You can also have a tight-knit group with one character specifically called out as an outsider—like Ripley in *Aliens*, a civilian embedded with a military unit.
- The characters are friends or family. They've known each other for a long time, even if they haven't worked together—and even if they don't actually like each other! Consider the hobbits in *Lord of the Rings*; they certainly aren't professional adventurers, but they have shared history.
- The characters don't know each other at all—but they are forced to work together by a situation none of them can control or resist. Examples of this include the criminals in *The Usual Suspects* or the students in *The Breakfast Club*.

The goal here is to create a situation where no player can say, “I don’t see why my character would be part of this.” In the first two examples they have a prior connection; in the third they simply don’t have a choice.

The advantage of using pregenerated characters in a one-shot is the group has the skills required for success, and also establish the foundation of the story. However, pregenerated characters carry an inherent risk: since your players didn’t create these characters themselves, they may not feel an attachment them. Players are only going to live with these characters for a few hours. So how do you get them to care about these strangers?

My advice is for the GM to ask the players some questions about the pregenerated characters. Let the players establish the details about the character. For example, take the heist group mentioned above. You know the group needs a safecracker. You’ve decided the safecracker needs to get \$100,000 by the end of the week to pay off a debt. You could present the player with the following questions:

- You owe \$100,000 to the Grey Knife Mob. How’d you get involved with the Grey Knives in the first place?
- The Grey Knives are holding the one thing you care about as collateral against the debt. Who or what are they holding hostage?
- You and the grifter worked on a job together two years ago. How did they save your life?
- You keep a good luck charm in your pocket. What is it?

By doing this, you are establishing the framework of the story. You’re setting the challenges and ensuring the party has the skills required to face them. By asking questions, you give the players a chance to feel ownership and attachment. In this example, the player tells you what would motivate them to earn the money. You don’t just tell them, “You like the grifter”—you have them tell you why they like the grifter. The good luck charm is a quirk, something that makes the player think about their character as an individual person rather than just stats on a piece of paper.

It’s possible the players don’t have the knowledge they need to answer some of these questions. If you’ve constructed a byzantine web of warring families, the players may not know enough to answer the question, “Why does your family have a bitter rivalry with House Dorsain?” In these cases, offer three possible answers. This allows the player to feel some sense of personal ownership with the character, while giving the player a window into the world by presenting examples of what the answer could be.

## The Story

When you're designing a one-shot, you want to start with a story that feels significant and self-contained. In a campaign, acquiring wealth, experience, or equipment can all justify a session. But in a one-shot the players may never see these characters again, so simple character improvement isn't enough. This doesn't mean you can't have a story about acquiring wealth: but if so, you want the takeaway to be about more than just "We split the loot and my character ends up with 100 gold pieces and a magic dagger." You want the players to feel that they have an investment in the story—you want them to want to succeed. This ties to the previous points about developing characters and asking questions. If your story is about a heist, the players themselves won't actually keep the money... so why is this important to them? Well, perhaps the safecracker needs the cash to pay off a debt and save the thing that's dearest to them... while the grifter doesn't care about the money, but wants to hurt the person they're stealing from. This is where questions come in. How did the rich target of the heist ruin the grifter's life? If the player has answered that question, then they've got an investment in the story.

Consider the following plots.

- **Duty.** The characters are part of an elite unit, and they have a job to do. Hold the pass against impossible odds. Recover a comrade from enemy territory. They aren't doing this to get treasure; they're doing it because it's what they do. The challenge here is to ensure that the players have that same commitment toward the goal. With this sort of scenario, you might use questions about previous missions. How did one of the other characters save your life? Why do you trust the squad leader? You don't just want to tell the players, "you're a team and you should work together"—you want them to believe it.
- **Heist.** Can the characters pull off an amazing scam? In some ways this is a puzzle; some of the player satisfaction can come from finding a solution to the challenge.
- **Investigation.** You've got four hours to solve a mystery. It helps for the characters to have an investment in the mission, but it's even better if the players are intrigued.
- **Survival.** The players could be in a zombie apocalypse, or trapped on a crashing spaceship... the challenge is simply to survive. This doesn't require a strong initial bond between the characters; instead it should quickly become clear that they'll have to work together to survive.

While one-shots are an easy option when you're working with a group of new players or running a game at a convention, they can also be a great way to show a different aspect of the setting you use in an ongoing campaign. If your primary campaign involves a war against goblins, then you might spring a one-shot on your players where they take on the roles of a goblin strike force. Or you could have a one-shot that takes place in ancient history, showing how this centuries-long feud first began. Players may not want to play goblins in game after game, but a single one-shot can be a great opportunity to explore a very different story and get a fresh perspective on a campaign.

## At the Table

So you've come up with a compelling short scenario. You've put together an interesting, balanced set of characters and come up with good questions that will help draw the players into the story. People select characters, answer questions, and the game begins. Now what?

One of the first challenges is to understand your players. People enjoy roleplaying games for a wide variety of reasons. One player likes to delve deeply into story; another may be entirely focused on the mechanical aspects of the game and be uncomfortable being put on the spot with a creative challenge. Someone may seek out conflict while another player prefers to avoid combat. In a campaign, you'll learn what everyone enjoys over time. In a one-shot you don't have time. And if you're running your story at a convention or a similar situation, there's a decent chance that your players may not know each other at all. This means it's up to you to try to identify their styles and desires as quickly as possible.

The character questions can help here as well: the player who writes a paragraph about their family's feud with a rival clan clearly enjoys storytelling, while the player who gives you one word answers isn't that excited about it. It's not too hard to figure out who will enjoy being put in the spotlight and who's going to prefer to focus on dice rolls and rules. The challenge is to strike a balance between players with different desires. If one player wants to kill everything in sight while another is really invested in engaging with the story, it's up to you to find a way to keep both players happy. If you can't find a way to bridge the gap, you can have different players take point in different situations. Ask the roleplayer to take the lead in the social situation, and turn to the wargamer for the direction when combat is approaching. The goal is for each player to feel

they have an equal amount of time in the spotlight, focused on doing what they love; you just don't shine that spotlight on the wargamer if the current scene has no need to be violent.

Another thing that's different about a one-shot game is that a character's survival isn't the necessarily the ultimate goal. As players won't be using these characters again, survival is less important than player satisfaction with the story. This allows you to put players in situations you might never do in a standard campaign. For example, the balrog can't be defeated unless someone defends the bridge as it collapses under them, or the bomb for destroying the enemy base can only be detonated manually. These stories are ideal for one-shots, because the player can choose to make a noble sacrifice without losing a long-term investment. Likewise, in a zombie apocalypse game you can make clear that anyone could die at any moment. Perhaps anyone bitten by a zombie will eventually turn, but it takes time... so how long will a player risk letting an infected comrade live? If your character is infected, will you end it yourself before the character become a threat to others? Exploring these sorts of questions is one of the strengths of a one-shot, because the player isn't losing a year's investment if their character dies. But again, the critical element here is player satisfaction.

If you're planning a lethal scenario, be sure players whose characters die will enjoy the rest of their time. Think of ways players can participate after a character dies. You could have back-up characters, if there's a logical way for such a character to enter the scenario. But there are other things people can do. Are there NPC parts you can pass to the player? Are there atmospheric questions they can answer? "The walls of the final sanctum are covered in slick green slime. The arms of the guardian statue have been snapped off. But there's one additional detail that's truly disturbing. Chris, what is that?" The goal here is to let the player feel that they are still part of the overall experience, even if they no longer have a horse in the race.

Designing and running one shot adventures is a challenge. You can't lean on player investment in the long-term story. But a one-shot gives you an opportunity to tell a story that doesn't fit in an ongoing campaign, or to provide a group of strangers with a challenge that draws them together.

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# WINNING PLAYER INVESTMENT

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*Lillian Cohen-Moore*

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You want your players to be excited about your campaign, the story, and the people in it. This requires them to be emotionally invested in playing the game and interacting with PCs and NPCs. Building the groundwork for player investment starts outside of the game. If you want your players to come back session after session, hooking them starts before they ever get into character. Have you ever had a game you weren't particularly excited about playing, but you kept going back because you really liked the GM and the other players? That is an example of a game where the emotional investment was there outside of the game, but not in game. The flip side of that isn't uncommon; players may keep going to a game where they're deeply invested in their character, even though the group is a disaster outside of the game. Ideally, we get both kinds of emotional investment from players.

## **Don't Kill Relatives**

One of my early lessons to carry with me as a GM came up in high school: nobody likes going to a funeral. If you kill NPC family members, you cut out an entire section of a character's life. Every story that could be told with living family is off limits if you kill that NPC. If you leave them alive, then they're around to be the source of new joys—and conflicts. Killing off NPC parents is potentially a tragedy for the PC. But if instead the parents are alive, and confess to their PC offspring that they're behind on the mortgage and might lose their house, that presents a whole Pandora's box to that

player character. Maybe the PC becomes an off-the-books corporate spy to help their parents with the house payments. By keeping NPC family members alive, you have stronger grounds for player investment than you might recognize, particularly if that family connection is important to how your player plays their character. Killing the character's family is a "nuclear option," one that you shouldn't casually reach for as a GM, and usually ends up forcing characters into revenge or murder-mystery plots.

## **Tell Me What You Want**

Each player at the table has different needs and wants. Even people you've known for years may have concepts they always wanted to play but never had the right group to do it with. Make time when you start up a new group to find out what people are looking for. For some, a gaming group is an extended family. For others, they're casual friends seen only around gaming. That's a social expectation that doesn't have to be shared, but people should be aware of if differences exist in the group. Whether it's a movie night at someone's house or a backyard barbecue, giving the group out-of-game time to talk and visit can help players bond, which helps build their out-of-game emotional investment.

## **Potential Personality Conflicts**

People are individuals, and some personality differences can cross from "people are different" into "this might be enough of a problem that the group will break up." When planning for a new game, have some one-on-one talks with the players and some initial group conversations (perhaps over email or at a casual social gathering). This can help you recognize if there are any players who will mix like propane and fireworks—and if these volatile combinations are too big to ignore. Some people can happily game together even though they have wildly different wants and personalities, but it's your job as GM to screen out people if a conflict is likely to end in hurt feelings or worse. When people feel like they can show up for a game, have fun, and that everyone has roughly the same expectations for how they're going to act, it reduces anxiety and allows people to invest in the play experience without worrying about out-of-game issues.

## Player Expectations

In regards to starting a new character, players usually have an idea about what they want and don't want for their character and the campaign. Ask them about these ideas! If a player has something they don't want to do, take it to heart as much as listening to what they do want. For example, one player might usually play a character who protects weaker members of the group, and the other players might expect that person to continue that role in a new campaign. If that player actually wants to try a different sort of character who's unable or unwilling to play that role, the GM should account for that by encouraging other players to account for this change and creating a story where that player can experience this new role.

Outside of the game, a player who knows their GM is understands what they want is more likely to go all-in with their personal investment in the campaign. In the game, the GM has to bring out a sense of investment in the character. If you can win that investment in a character, the player usually isn't far behind. It reinforces what they know outside of game—that the GM wants them to be connected to the campaign and its story. This shows them the campaign is a place where they're going to have fun, be listened to, and have an experience they want to repeat. When the game is good, the players rise to the occasion. This is where we cross into the in-game ways of getting our players to invest their emotions and their imaginations in the campaign.

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### TECHNOLOGY AT THE TABLE

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For some people, whether or phones or other technology is allowed at the table can be a powder keg topic. You may allow phones at the table, but you could have players who are offended when other people whip out their phone while waiting for their turn to cycle up. Before the first game happens, have a clear conversation about tech; can it enhance your group's experience, what kind of hard limits do people have, do those who use doodling on their phone to not interrupt other players have leeway or understanding from the table when it's made clear why they like to keep the device in their hand. (For more about phones during a game, see "Laughter, Cellphones, and Distractions from Serious Gaming" on page 105.)

## Imagined Motivations

Like people in real life, a mix of internal and external motivators drive a PC's personality. Starting with their experiences and stats, we already have plenty of things to turn into character motivators. For example, phobias can come into play where the character must make a choice between remaining comfortable or facing their fear. These aren't moments to force a character to act (or refrain from acting), but potent moments of choice. Maintain the player's trust and investment by not forcing them to make bad choices against their will.

The character's ambitions and motivations for acting are just as important as what makes them hesitate. A would-be dragonslayer might look for others who have the calling. An overly-curious professor may open boxes they probably shouldn't and ask dangerous questions they really, really shouldn't. If a character can't find another PC who shares one of their ambitions (even if the approach to it is different), it can help story-wise if there's a reason for that lack of connection.

Do you have three players who want to play wizards, and your fourth is inspired to play a martial dragonslayer? Give that difference of motivation a moment in the spotlight. In a game where everyone is playing the same type of character (investigators, spies, ninja bakers) the chance of them all having the exact same reason for that choice is very low. Highlighting those differences (infrequently but consistently) gives the player characters a chance to think on their own motivations and reflect on those of their compatriots.

If players focus like this, the absence of a certain character type (such as a healer) is going to be a sharp note they feel for the rest of the game, and it's up to you to alleviate some of that sharpness. The storyline shouldn't punish the players for making these decisions—the game itself may already be making it hard on them. If you don't browbeat them for not having a particular character archetype, it helps them trust you to not screw them over for making choices about their characters. While it's an old piece of GM wisdom that no campaign survives an encounter with players, embracing that flexibility will help players trust you. If you can accept unusual problem solving—particularly methods that hadn't occurred to you while planning for the game—players get that sense that they're able to make their own decisions.

## Invisible Ties

NPCs and other PCs are another avenue for character investment. If you see family-like relationships bloom between characters, encourage it. That emotional investment, like a closed-off PC bonding with another PC like a sibling they never had, that's a investment gold mine. It brings joy to the characters and it's thrilling to players. Draw in a PC by presenting a relative with a powerful storyline-affecting decision to make. When a sibling who works as a reporter turns to the PC for advice on whether to pursue a corruption story, that plotline can encompass both characters regardless of the actual decision. The PC wants to keep the reporter sibling safe, but also wants the truth; that mix of motivations wouldn't be possible without the close bond those characters share. By giving the PC ongoing reasons to care about the other characters, they'll come to the game eager to tackle whatever problems are coming their way.

## A World of Stories

There's more than just NPC family members to get investment out of players. Colleagues, neighbors, childhood friends, old flames, the barista who knows their order, the mechanic who has kept their rust bucket running years past its prime—these are all potential people for a player character to care about, hate, or be drawn in by. If your NPCs seem like actual people to your players, it helps smooth away the mental block of “this is just an NPC.”

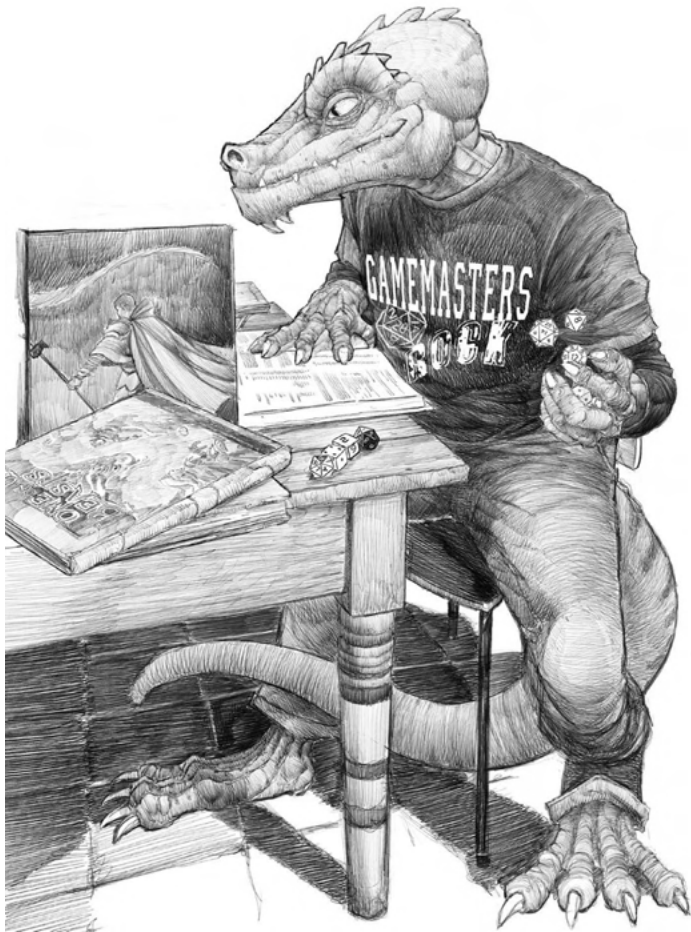
Be responsible about depicting an NPC as a fully realized person—if the PC's background says they have a contentious relationship with their academic advisor, but you run the advisor like an uninteresting academic, interacting with that NPC is unsatisfying for the player. This often leads to the player avoiding interacting with that NPC, cutting off the player from something they specifically included on their character sheet as a fleshed out person in their character's life. NPCs shouldn't be more important than PCs, but by thinking at least a little like a player as wear that NPC's hat we allow ourselves to engage in the moment, making it satisfying for the player and solidifying their investment in that NPC relationship. Even an NPC without a strong connection to a PC should still come across as human, with feelings and experiences. You don't have to stat 50 NPCs with extensive backstories, just be willing to step into them with some of the forethought we give to the PCs we play in other

games. Players want a sense of living in an inhabited, breathing world, one where their story is important, and that requires interacting with lifelike NPCs.

If you individually present your players with an enjoyable group of people to game with, in a campaign tailored to what the group wants, they'll be emotionally and temporally invested as they can. Game management, player talks, and interior and exterior motivations of characters are firmly rooted in treating your players with attentive listening, curiosity, and imagination.

*Lillian Cohen-Moore is an award winning editor, and devotes her writing to fiction and journalism. Influenced by the work of Jewish authors and horror movies, she draws on bubbe meises (grandmother's tales) and horror classics for inspiration. She loves exploring and photographing abandoned towns.*

# THE GAME IN PLAY





# KNOWING THE RULES VS. MASTERING THE GAME

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*Bill Webb*

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Understanding when to strictly apply rules instead of maintaining game fluidity is one of the true marks distinguishing the novice GM from the master GM. Learning how to do this is one of the most difficult parts of running a game. The GM has to learn how to balance the impacts of ruling on the fly to ensure that the game continues without making it “too easy” as well as ensuring that the carefully-crafted player character abilities are not swept away and ignored.

Game play can be improved in both the short term (flow) and long term (keep using a good ruling once it’s made) by improvised decisions. To master the game, you, the GM need to be agile enough to decide when to just make a decision rather than go with the rules or rulebook. Disruption to the game is generally a bad thing—it kills excitement, slows down play, and generally results in a situation that places “roll” playing at a higher value than “role” playing. I will provide several examples that illustrate a few times I have done this or seen GM improvisation done well that I hope will guide your thoughts about this topic.

As many of you would suspect, this old grognard gamer has different views and approaches than many of today's GMs when it comes to game flow and rules application. In the old days, we had few rules, and often had to improvise or come up with a ruling on the fly for the myriad of situations for which no rule existed. We did not have "optimized" characters, nor did we have a rule for virtually every aspect of game play, often presented today in an endless variation of feats, skills, and other applications of game mechanics such as prescribed difficulty checks.

What this left us, in the old days, was the need to develop rulings on the fly. Without so many rules, we had to improvise on a regular basis.

Anyone who has played with me knows that I use few rules, and that virtually my entire game is run based on situational rulings. By application of common sense around a loose base of rules, I am able to keep the pace up, moving along swiftly, and accomplishing many encounters while keeping numerous players engaged. This style of play comes from almost 40 years of game play with hundreds of players of varying ages, skill levels, and motivations.

Most of my games require only two dice and some character sheets. That being said, most of the more modern versions of the game are steeped in rules. There is no better or worse version of the game, it just gets down to preference of style of play. Rules are neither good nor bad, it's just their application that can make or break the game. What is important is that you spend game time actually playing, and not consulting rulebooks every 15 minutes. True mastery of tabletop roleplaying means that a GM has control of the table, and that all of the participants enjoy the experience. This, in my humble opinion, is best accomplished by maintaining game flow and progress.

## **Rulings not Rules**

Frequently in the course of game play, situations arise that require the GM to decide what happens when no set rule exists that defines the outcome. At this point, the GM must decide whether to spend several minutes consulting rulebooks, or just resolve the situation immediately with a die roll or decision. To invoke a concept inspired by my dear friend and co-conspirator Matt Finch, the clever GM needs to make a "ruling" and not apply the "rules." One of the most definitive differences between modern games (such as Pathfinder and 5th edition) and the old style

games (like OSR games) is that in the former, rules and not pure rulings govern play. When a question comes up about whether or not a certain action is possible, it has to be decided by either the skilled human GM running the game, or a book and some dice.

Unless it is a campaign-altering ruling, it is often far better for the GM to make the call, live with the results, and keep the game moving, rather than stop playing to dig through the books to find the “true” answer. Moving things along at an exciting clip makes for better play and more fun for the participants, and “bad” rulings can always be corrected later by the clever GM.

For example, if a mistaken ruling results in the death of a PC, the GM can add a death-reversing item to the next treasure trove the party finds. A character turned to stone as a result of the GM’s mistake can be fixed with appropriate reversal magic. If a magic sword was supposed to +4 damage against the monster instead of just +2 damage, there must have been some undefined circumstance (such as a local magical fluctuation) that caused the temporary change.

As a GM, you are allowed to metagame and add or subtract from the rules as you see fit. There are two important facets to this that should rarely, if ever, be ignored.

First, never tell the players what you did. Simply leave it as a mystery and say nothing. As I have said many times before in similar writings, many GMs cheat to save PCs. I rarely (read “almost never”) do, and only if I made a mistake and killed them unfairly. That being said, if the players know you cheated—even if it’s in their favor—they may take it for granted that they either cannot die because you will save them, or decide that it’s okay for them to cheat to save their characters.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, never create situations where the player characters’ hard-won abilities are nullified by a ruling. Examples of this are having a group of undead creatures be immune to a priest’s power to blast undead (unless this is a deliberate design choice for the encounter) or making a locked door immune to an unlocking spell. RPGs allow players to improve their characters for a reason, and just because some of these abilities make creating encounters more difficult doesn’t mean you should alter the rules mid-campaign to prevent players from using their well-earned abilities.

## Take a Risk

The real key to making a ruling without truly understanding the rules for a particular situation is to ask yourself five questions related to a ruling: *Does it make sense? Is it fair? How much does it matter? Does it radically change the campaign? Does it add to the fun of the group?*

The answers to these questions allow you to quickly determine whether it's worth disrupting the game to determine if it's necessary to look up the official rule, or if you can improvise and keep the game going.

If it makes sense, roll with it. Just because Boogin the half-orc has a 24 Strength and a 20 Dexterity does not mean he can jump 200 feet or wrestle a dragon to the ground and pin it. Likewise, Mugsy the wizard can step on and kill an uber-poisonous 2" inch spider, even though his boot is an improvised weapon and he has no skill in melee combat. Many situations occur where some obscure combination of rules may in fact exist that would allow for something silly to take place, but you as a GM need to apply common sense to those situations.

We all have encountered that player who manipulates the rules to gain an advantage for their character. Mine had a barbarian/monk/rogue with huge stats and always seemed to be able to do crazy actions that while technically legal (maybe) just made no sense. Things like jumping horizontally off castle walls to backstab flying dragons and such seem heroic at first, but can easily become abusive.

Eventually, I simply had to make a few changes to the rules to prevent this abuse, and while the player was upset at first ("but the rules say..."), the game became better afterward. My best advice is to watch out for too-good combos, like a ring of feather falling and boots of striding and leaping. With all of the potential feat/skill/alterative rules combinations that exist out there, be mindful of the potential synergies that can break your game, and simply disallow them. This overall ruling was largely made to restore long-term balance to the campaign. Even the abusive player eventually agreed that it was fair and made sense to scale back his character's abilities. Doing so also made the game more fun for all the other players.

Another memorable example involved Spiegle the mage. In the old days, one had to gather rare ingredients to craft potions and magic items. One of these (healing potions) required troll's blood. Old Spiegle kept a series of cages in his wizard's laboratory, and if he encountered a monster he

could use for ingredients, he'd teleport it into one of those cages in his lab. On one adventure, the PCs encountered a larger troll with a higher rate of regeneration than normal. Thinking its blood might make better potions, Spiegle promptly teleported it back to his lab, and the group continued adventuring. Later they found out that the big troll busted out of the cage, killed several retainers, and trashed his lab. Again, no rule existed for this—but it made sense that the bigger, stronger troll could not be contained by the cage meant to house a normal troll. This ruling made sense, it was fair, and (as it did not have a major bearing on the long-term campaign) mattered little to the overall campaign, I felt comfortable making the call. (Once he re-caught the escaped troll, I also let Spiegle craft better healing potions from its blood.)

Fairness is the GM's job. Creating situations where bizarre combinations of rules are game-breaking or unfair (either in the monster's or character's favor) is just bad. Making rulings that are unfair is the fastest way to kill off a campaign. Sometimes the players come up with a really great way to screw over your well-thought out boss monster that you did not consider. One of the best examples of this was watching my 10-year-old kid and his friends in a timed challenge of 4th-level PCs against an efreeti; they used a cantrip to throw water at the monster (damaging it slightly) while it chased the other PCs in different directions. There was no official rule in the game that said throwing water on an efreeti would hurt it, but the GM "does it make sense?" and "is it fair?" questions to the situation. In this game of rock/paper/scissors, water does in fact hurt fire (the ruling makes sense). The PCs moved faster than the efreeti (the ruling is fair). This was a one-shot scenario (the ruling has no long-term effect). The GM decided to allow it, and the heroes eventually wore down the fiery efreeti and won the challenge.

Certain situations can exist where it makes sense to stop play and grab the rulebook. Typically, these involve major, world-altering situations where success or failure at some task means the difference between success or failure in a battle or important campaign-affecting event. The bad news is that often there actually are no official rules for these situations, and the GM must think very carefully about the ruling. When this occurs, it's wise and appropriate to take a short time-out from the game and do some quick research.

Obviously, there are too many unique situations to describe in this article. The important take-away is that you experiment and learn from the flow of your own campaign about which rules and rulings are best. In this day and age of vast rules systems, it is easy to get bogged down in what “should” happen in a given situation based on the official rules. Perhaps the most difficult thing you will encounter as a GM is the lack of or confusion about rules to govern a specific situation; knowing whether to just keep moving or to stop to look something up is not a precise affair.

Expect to make some bad calls, but also expect to make some good ones. Being agile enough to keep the game moving is an art, and true mastery of the game requires the GM to become a skilled artist. Save the “research breaks” for the rare, important situation, and feel free to “break the rules” to maintain flow and fun. As a GM, you can and should consult with your players about rulings, but the final call is yours to make. The number one factor should be to make the game enjoyable by all involved. Keep rolling those dice and making our hobby better!

*Bill Webb is the CEO of Frog God Games and Necromancer Games, and has produced over 200 books over the past 17 years. His most infamous works include Rappan Athuk and The Sword of Air. His works have won several awards, including his pride and joy, the Golden Grogard award in 2007 and the Endzeitgeist best product of the year award for 2015 (Sword of Air). Bill has worked with industry giants, including Gary Gygax, Rob Kuntz, David Kenzer, and Steve Wieck, and of course, his RPG hero, Bob Bledsaw. He currently lives with Mama Frog (Krista), Lil' Frog, and Baby Frog on his farm in a remote area of Washington state with his dogs, guns, and pickup truck, where he designs roads, bridges and parks in his spare time.*

# THE ART OF THEATRICAL GAMING

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*Stefan Pokorny*

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The camp archery counselor handed me a 4 x 6 index card and 4 six sided dice. “Roll them in order next to the 6 attributes on your index card. And don’t cheat, I’ll know if you did.” That was the beginning of my grand affair with RPGs. It was the late 70s, and I was somewhat less than a dozen years old. Three decades later, the game that changed my life now feels more important than ever. The “real world” is changing. A new generation of young players who grew up after the computer takeover of our society is becoming curious about this “analog” game of funny-shaped dice, storytelling, and magic. Videogames, especially massively multiplayer types have enormous popularity and have made the mechanics and terminologies of old school RPGs familiar to new audiences. The biggest RPGs have changed and evolved over these long years and in some cases so have many of the methods of the GMs as well.

I count myself as one of the enthusiasts who shaped the game to his own wishes as encouraged by Gary Gygax, who said “but only you can construct the masterpiece from it, your personal campaign.” I took that challenge

to heart as a teen, dreaming up everything from scratch, and later refined my efforts as a classically trained fine artist. I drew countless maps, painted miniature figurines, dreamed up labyrinths filled with traps and monsters, and eventually built three-dimensional modular terrain for my players to run through.

It is hard to express my absolute joy at having found a “framework” where I could dream up fantastical things and let my imagination run wild for hours on end. To be able to take all those whimsical thoughts and share them with others, in real time, during game play was a unique experience. To have it all come alive in your mind’s eye, and with a group of friends, or complete strangers? That was a new thing. RPGs are a truly amazing form of art.

I implore novice GMs to relish their world-building and to take seriously their presentation of this most exceptional pastime. Every GM is an ambassador to the hobby that has changed many a life for the better—a hobby which has the power to preserve our humanity in the face of technological dehumanization. From our species’ earliest days when we huddled together in caves around fires, we bonded together through interaction. We told stories and passed down our oral histories face-to-face. We must not lose that to the cold digital screens of our new technological world.

## Theatrical Gaming

How to save the world? Make new friends. Stay connected with old ones. One great way to meet new people and to share thoughts and ideas and to just have great fun is to play RPGs. They are great games of imagination, creativity, and group cooperation. I truly believe the world would be a better place if it had more gamers in it.

For 20 years I played and ran “theater of the mind” games—that is, games without any miniatures on the tabletop to represent the PCs and monsters. The GM and the players had to imagine it in their minds. Because of this, it was of the utmost importance to be able to describe to the players where they are and what they can see, smell, hear, or even feel and taste. As the GM, this meant I had to learn how to add colorful details to my descriptions. There is a palpable difference between saying, “you see a 40-foot-long passageway with a door at the end of it” and,

“you find yourselves shivering slightly from the cold and damp of the underground, and your torch light flickers and sputters, casting shadows that dance along the walls... in front of you stretches a long passageway, and in the distance you can make out the outline of an ancient wooden door.” Like an actor on stage, this isn’t just a matter of reading lines, you have to make the audience—the players—feel involved and present in the scene. Use hand gestures in your movements. Make eye contact with the players on all sides of the table. Add mystery to your voice.

Remember that the GM is a storyteller. A good GM commands the players’ full attention—at the minimum, because your words have immediate consequences for their characters, and their fate depends on the precious information you give them. They will try to glean information from the expression on your face—exaggerate it! Arch your brow, add a crooked smile to your villain’s demeanor. Rather than simply saying, “there is a blacksmith down the street” put your hand to your mouth, furrow your brow, and then say, “ahhhh... yeeesss, I recall there is a blacksmith just down the street!” and then stand and point away from the table, and then turn back with a glare or smile. These little gestures add life and color to your game. You should think of yourself as a performer. When inventing an NPC, don’t just write down a name, try to add a particular trait when you act as that character. Do they squint their eyes? Do they smile a lot? Are they jolly? Is their voice baritone or squeaky? Body gestures can add some interest to the character. Should you stand up straight, or shift in your chair? Should you hunch over, or twitch now and then? Your players will enjoy meeting these various memorable characters time after time, the more colorful and exaggerated the better!

## Costumes and Masks

Wearing a hooded cloak or some sort of setting-appropriate garb adds great fun to a game. Have extra handy in case the players want to get further into character. Dressing up sets a signal to your participants that this will be a time of fun—an environment where it’s okay to be silly and where you can let your guard down. By dressing up, you are leading by example. As the costumed storyteller, your words will carry more weight as you peer out from the shadows of your cloak. Make sure not to wear anything that is too hot—I have found cheap Halloween store cloaks are better than fancy woolen ones that will make you suffer. I also have a

collection of masks that are great fun to wear; the best are ones that have an elastic string for easy donning and removing (especially because I wear glasses).

## Sound Effects and Lighting

If you really want to set the mood, turn down the lights. Direct the players' attention to you, the storyteller, and block out all other distractions within their field of view by having a light directly on you (maybe from below in order to make it more spooky). Perhaps you only dim the lights once the PCs enter the depths of a dungeon? In some of my games I have set the lights so low that I give my players little keychain lights in order for them to see their character sheets. Since technology is here to stay, use it to your advantage! Get a sound effects app for your smart phone or laptop and use it to provide background ambiance such as a busy tavern or dripping wet cave. Some of them have sounds for specific effects such as opening creaky doors, magic spells, or the moaning of zombies; these add great stimulus to your game. I also like to use a smoke machine, either for a special room like a dragon's lair, or just in general once the PCs descend into the dungeons because, well, smoke machines just make everything better!

## Miniatures and Terrain

Over the years I have collected thousands of miniatures (mostly unpainted, I must confess), taking up drawers until they're ready to see the light of day. At this point, I have managed to collect and paint several dozen PC miniatures, and at the beginning of the game I implore the players to choose minis for themselves. Unless you truly have an enormous collection, it will be hard for your players to find precise representations for themselves; let them know that the most important thing is for them to recognize which miniature is theirs. Make sure your collection of miniatures is varied and painted in bold enough colors that your players can recognize them easily in the "field of battle." It is important to remember that even when using miniatures, you must continue to give descriptions and add personal flair to the game—do not let it become a board game. My games usually start in a city, and players spend several hours in a "theatre of the mind" game, shopping, drinking in taverns, and crossing wilderness, before they ultimately reach a dungeon,

ruin, or other site worth exploring. At that point, there is a shift in the game; the lights might be dimmed, the smoke machine might be enacted, and the players are confronted with a different sort of experience.

When using 3D gaming terrain, I have found the best method is to lay it all out ahead of time before the game. Draw a map for yourself as well, precisely if you can, detailing all the descriptions of the rooms, traps, monsters, and treasures. I usually keep the monster miniatures behind my GM screen and bring them out when the encounter happens. This is important also because you may want to change the number of monsters appearing depending on the current strength of the adventuring party.

You should conceal your dungeon to the players. I do this by cutting out little pieces of thick velvet cloth. (I keep a full box of various sizes of cloth.) Use a piece for each specific area that you think the characters would see at once, such as a long corridor section with a door at the end. The room beyond could be under another piece of cloth. The concealing piece of cloth should be overlapping only slightly with the next area, so when you pick it up, you don't accidentally pick up the next piece with it. If you wish, include some "dummy" sections of terrain and cloths so that your players won't guess where other parts of the dungeon lie simply by seeing where the cloth covered areas are. Secret doors and traps are often represented in the terrain; these pieces should be "swapped out" with regular areas once they are discovered or set off.

## Using Props

Props are something that players enjoy a lot. There's nothing like handing a player a sack of fantasy coins as a reward for a glorious battle! Scroll cases are great fun, especially with scrolls inside. You can age the paper by soaking them in lemon juice and then heating them in an oven (careful, they age fast!), but parchment paper (often used for invitations) will do if you're in a hurry. I have an assortment of various "magic" rings and amulets dredged from New York City street vendors and vintage stores from around the world; craft stores and online shops (like Etsy and eBay) are a good place to look for interesting bits of costume jewelry to use as props for your game—and sometimes they can be the inspiration for a cool magic item, character, or adventure.

Remember that gaming is all about having fun! Use your imagination, and bend or break the rules if it leads to mayhem and fun. Make your campaign world your own, put your personal stamp on it, and give your players an experience they'll never forget!

*Stefan Pokorny has been running 1st edition D&D games since he was around 14 years old. In 1996 he founded Dwarven Forge, a miniatures terrain company that would go on to sell over 8 million dollars in four hugely successful Kickstarter campaigns. He has been a special guest at various conventions, including GaryCon, GameHoleCon, ConnectiCon, and others. In 2016 he was the subject of Josh Bishop's documentary film, The Dwarvenaut.*

# LAUGHTER, CELLPHONES, AND DISTRACTIONS FROM SERIOUS GAMING

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*Clinton J. Boomer*

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There are many popular properties and Internet memes that casually reinforce—and poke fun at—a particular bit of world-weary wisdom: every fantasy campaign begins as an epic story, and ends up as slapstick comedy. This phenomenon? It is real and you can fight it. Or, better yet, you can use it.

That instant when all of your players simultaneously burst out laughing doesn't have to be a moment of disappointment or disconnection from the ongoing narrative. Instead, you can use the human mind's natural desire for a brief "bright spot"—that single second of levity in a sea of overwhelming tension—to your advantage. After all, no beloved pastime should find itself caught between the ugly extremes of existing as either a single long, grim slog between disheartening fights to the death or as a series of disjointed pratfalls. As a clever storyteller, you can make the sudden spark of laughter work for you, as a healthy and cathartic piece of your meaningful, overarching epic.

But let's back up for a moment.

## What is “Serious Gaming”?

In theory, tabletop gaming is a form of organized, cooperative storytelling, as differentiated from watching a movie, playing a board game, reading a book or just wandering around the woods in character. And *serious* gaming is about a group of people telling a *serious* story.

Ostensibly the gaming group did not meet to gossip, make fart noises, gobble down chips, throw balls of wadded paper, and absentmindedly check social media. Rather, it’s more likely the players are gathering to craft a measure of fiction that means something—to build, share, and live-within a complex emotional narrative filled with the best and truest types of fear, bravery, hope, tragedy, beauty, consequence, heart, and heartbreak. In the best cases, a group’s desires reach toward wanting to weave a stirring tale that speaks to our myth-cycles of honor, family, duty, sacrifice, heroism, and betrayal, exploring a plot with some amount of sincere creative merit or to craft a gripping legend, even if it’s only shared by a few.

Within the context of this collaborative and participatory fiction, you are not just trying to make your friends laugh, nor are you trying to make up the silliest and dirtiest shaggy-dog one-liner of all time. You want to create—maybe just for you and your friends—a gripping legend, a profound and far-reaching testament of glory, a sincere and heartfelt drama the equal of any big-ticket summer Hollywood blockbuster or award-winning war-story period piece. You want to tell a tale that will stick with you, and with everyone involved, long after the dust has settled over your dice and the paint on your miniatures has faded to lusterless grey.

Admirable goals. So, what are we up against?

## Distractions

You’re always going to have distractions.

That is simply a fact of our fast, multitasking era: you and your players all have real lives and real responsibilities, and you’re used to being pulled in about thirty different directions at once. For better or worse, this is the new normal. This is what we’re all conditioned—as 21st century consumers—to think of as “customary.” When your players are plopped in a chair around a cluttered table, listening to people tell magic-stories

and do math for 4+ hours, it's natural for the human mind to rebel just a little bit. Maybe it's a song on your playlist, maybe it's a rules-adjudication question, maybe it's just a funny quote, but things will always pop-up to break the narrative flow.

“Gotta check my email,” pings your lizard hindbrain.

Why don't cable channels just release a whole season of original programming as one huge movie? I mean, why bother chopping up a complete story into “episodes” at all? It's for the same reason that we don't watch a series of movies in a single sitting or read *War and Peace* cover-to-cover in one grand, mind-crushing all-nighter: because the human mind needs breaks. We crave natural beginnings and endings. Knowing when to step away for two minutes at the commercials, when to shut off the machine for a few hours, and when to come back “next time” is healthy. And yet most movies (even extended director's cuts with deleted scenes) are relatively light and quick, at least as compared to a (short!) four-hour convention-slot game.

So think of a game session like a dinner date at your home.

You minimize your distractions: you turn off the TV in the other room, you clear the table and you close your laptop, you make sure that there aren't heaps of clutter and clothing piled-up on all the furniture, and you do your best to provide quiet mood music and dim lighting. You adjust the temperate and the scent, the sound and the sights, to become as welcoming as possible. You focus on just one thing, letting all the rest fall away. In short, you keep the space—the moment—of your private, special event isolated, existing very briefly within a quiet bubble of sense and memory.

And you occasionally take breaks, because a “date” doesn't last forever. It isn't meant to.

When you game, take frequent breaks, at least at first: just a quick 5 to 10 minutes, here and there, every hour or so. Step away from the table, stretch your legs, use the bathroom, check your email, gossip about work, get a snack, watch a quick trailer for that big movie coming out. Do anything and everything you have to do to let those distractions wash over you and remind you that the bright, clanging 21st-century is right outside the door. Then, breathe out the dross and the chaos. Step back into the story and the

session knowing that everyone is with you, here and now. And when the story ends for the night, walk away knowing that it will continue.

## Devices

Unless you're reading this by candlelight on parchment, odds are that you have a mobile phone. More accurately, you've got a mobile phone within reach of you right now, and you've probably checked it within the last half-hour. Maybe even since you started reading this article. That's okay, it's to be expected; mobile phones are, for better or worse, simply a part of the environment that we live in, work in, and game in. There's nothing wrong with that, *per se*.

But a moment spent glancing at your phone is a moment not spent in the depths of a compelling narrative, immersed within a carefully constructed shared. If there's one object in the universe that might be voted "most likely to cause distraction," it's most-assuredly the magical box in your pocket that can instantly access all recorded human knowledge and interaction.

So, why not do what you do at the movie theater? Put your phone on silent, and ask that everyone else does the same. Leave all of them in the middle of the table, if that will help, and explain very politely that the first person to reach for theirs is buying pizza and soda for the group. At the very least, keep the damn things turned off, holstered in a pocket.

The exact same rule applies to cell phones as applies to distractions in general: you need to provide your players with frequent, reliable breaks. If your player has a spouse or a kid, that player needs to be able to check their phone. If you don't provide a safe, sane way to "pause" the game, you are asking for disruption, interruption, and trouble. Make your shared gaming-space special, ensuring that your players know—not "suspect," but know—precisely when it's appropriate for everyone to take a quick break together.

## Laughter

Great stories are often funny. Even those really powerful ones, even the very serious and the very scary ones, are also often quite deeply funny. Not a whole lot of them, perhaps, but the laughs are there. In fact, if you can think of a great work of fiction that has within it not a single

funny moment in the entire story, I'd like to hear it. The darkest of all tales—seemingly impenetrable to even the barest moment of frivolity—actually invite the human mind to invent their own little break. Whether the narrative is about a zombie apocalypse, the downward spiral of a drug lord, the history of a cannibalistic psychologist, destruction of an artifact created by a malevolent demigod, or outmatched fighting a tyrannical space empire, these stories have funny moments to break the tension so it can build again—a single laugh, a hope-spot, a rebellion against bleakness. The difference between an action-packed (but funny) dramatic film and garbage comedies is that the dramas are actually pretty funny... when they mean to be.

In these serious tales, the characters certainly have funny moments, but it's never by winking at the camera or by spouting an asinine catchphrase just to get a desperate laugh out of a groaning audience. Instead, the laughs—for us, the viewer, as well as for the characters—come from our genuine human connection to their lived-in time and place: we're invested in the people we see, feeling their fear and their anger. When they lighten-up, for even a second, we chuckle with shared relief.

That's the whole difference, really.

You can do the same thing in a serious game by recognizing situations where laughter enhances the experience by momentarily breaking the tension rather than laughter for its own sake. If you can help it, never stop your players from laughing with the witticisms, the joys or even the frustrations of their characters. Discourage your players only from the sport of laughing at the PCs or at the seeming absurdities of your agreed-upon fictional universe. The darkest nightmare you can craft for your players should have at least one or two moments of levity, a time and place to take a break and laugh. The trick—as with all distractions—is to pick the appropriate time for this window in the grim shadows, and to mark it for the players.

If you're reading this, you are a storyteller.

By remembering that stories are special—that they exist both inside us and between us—you can make the game that you run memorable, funny, personal and serious. When the event is over, you can return, enriched, to the real world. This, after all, is how the ancients told the very first stories: around the fire, beneath the stars, between the hours of work and

sleep. They locked-away a certain very special time to tell their tales, and they laughed—in the safety of companionship—at the most grotesque of monsters even as they shuddered in horror, gasped with terror, and raged with righteous fury at fictional injustice.

You and your players can do the same.

*Clinton J. Boomer, demigod, is a 7th level adventure designed for 4-to-6 characters and is compatible with the world's most popular roleplaying game system. He resides in Appleton, Wisconsin—the drunkest city in America—with his little family. This is not a metaphor. He is an author, arguably.*

# ROLL WITH IT!

## What to Do When It Doesn't All Go As Planned

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*Steve Kenson*

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The military maxim “No battle plan survives contact with the enemy” can be expressed in tabletop roleplaying as: “No adventure plot survives contact with the player characters.” Sooner or later—probably sooner—your players are going to do something unexpected that upsets your carefully-laid plans. Here’s what you do to recover, keep things going, and (ideally) have the players thinking that you’d planned it that way all along.

### **Plan Loosely**

To help ensure things don’t go “off script” too easily, dispense with the script. That’s not to say you shouldn’t plan your adventures at all—unless you’re a brilliant improviser with an encyclopedic knowledge of the game system and setting. Just avoid becoming too rigid in your planning, or too attached to particular scenes or outcomes.

In particular, try to make many parts of your adventures into set-pieces that allow the characters some freedom of choice, such as a scene where they explore a town nearly depopulated by a zombie plague: They can visit any of the various places in town in whatever order, encounter some zombies and possibly some survivors, and find valuable resources. Eventually, they get to the town’s “center” where they can actually find out what caused the zombie plague and what they can do about it. The interim encounters can happen in whatever order and might stretch out for considerable time or happen very quickly, depending on what the players decide to do.

Focus your planning on two things: Describing the situation or environment, and the plans and intentions of the non-player characters (particularly the antagonists). What would the situation and the story look like if the player characters were not there to intervene? How are the situation and the antagonists likely to react and adapt when the characters do get involved? If you know these things, you can more easily adapt to circumstances than if you are planning scenes dependent upon choices the players make.

## Don't Panic

When things veer off in an unexpected direction, first and foremost, don't panic. Take a breath, consider your options, decide what's next, and keep things going. If you're really thrown for a loop, take the opportunity for a "break" to grab a drink, use the bathroom, get a breath of air, or otherwise give you a moment to collect your thoughts.

Resist the impulse to immediately negate whatever it is your players did to bring this situation about. To quote the Marvel comic *Runaways*, "A good GM always lets his players feel like they're in control, when they're really not." Reversing player decisions is a sure way to make them feel that they have no control over the direction of the game, which can bring everyone's fun to a screeching halt. So instead of telling the players, "No, you can't do that," you can use the following steps.

## Rearrange the Scene

Keep in mind that the players probably don't know they've gone off the beaten track. This allows you the opportunity to simply change where the track goes without anyone on the other side of the screen being the wiser.

Take the example of the heroes investigating a town overrun by zombies: In your adventure notes, the characters are traveling when they are set upon by a group of zombies on the road. In your original conception, the heroes fight and defeat the zombies, then investigate where they came from, leading them back to the town and the subsequent encounters. Instead, your players decide after the zombie attack the best thing to do is to forge ahead as quickly as possible, not investigating at all.

Instead of having the zombie-ridden town some distance off the road, you might decide to put it right in the heroes' path, so the road intersects with it, with no immediate signs of the zombies until they enter the town. The

players don't know they were supposed to follow up leads from the prior encounter, and they don't need to know. A clue you intended to have on the body of one of the zombies could now be found in one of the buildings in the town, or one of the zombies in town has it instead.

The players might decide the priority is not finding out where the zombies came from, but rather informing nearby authorities of the existence of the zombies. This choice might also lead them right into the zombie-afflicted area, or it could be an opportunity for a quick diversionary scene where the heroes meet with the authorities, who then ask the PCs to investigate, sending them back in the right direction with newfound purpose.

As with most of these techniques, the trick is rearranging the scene in such a way that it is invisible to the players that anything has changed. Don't tell the players what their characters "should" have done at a given juncture; just treat every decision as a given and move forward with it. Don't negate things the players have decided, add to them and build upon them. Use the statements "Yes, but..." and "Yes, and..." or versions thereof in response to unexpected player decisions:

*"We're going to make sure to burn the remains of the zombies and then get to the next town to warn them as quickly as possible."*

*"Okay, but when you arrive in town..."*

## Offer Guidance

There are two ways to offer guidance in dealing with player decisions. The first is to focus on character abilities, giving subtle hints involving things the characters would be aware of that the players might not. You can outright tell players this information or "game it out" by asking for an appropriate roll or action on the player's part.

For example, when the characters overcome the zombie attack and the players decide the move on without investigating, you can tell a player whose character would know some things about the undead: "You know that it is unusual for zombies to simply attack travelers like this. They usually appear in very particular ways, suggesting there may be something which spawned them nearby." Similarly, you can ask the same player for a skill roll, giving them same information. This makes it feel like the player has "won" this insight, but the drawback is that it's difficult to dole out useful information if the roll clearly fails. As a general rule, if you want players to have information, you should give it to them freely,

without relying on the results of a roll, unless it is a result you control. Any sort of system for “passive” or automatic results in the rules is useful to you here, as is a “secret roll” behind the GM screen, which you can call a “success” regardless of what comes up.

Once the player characters have taken an unexpected path, you may have also opportunities to re-connect that path with the main road of the adventure if you exercise a light touch in giving the players guidance. You don't necessarily want for the clouds to part, and heavenly light to shine down on the party as a booming, celestial voice shouts “NO! THE OTHER WAY!”; but you do control everything the PCs encounter, as well as all that they see and hear, so there are ways you can communicate to them what they should do.

One example is the previous mention of the heroes going to the authorities, who in turn offer guidance by asking the characters to go back and investigate the incident. You can also have the group encounter other travelers en route, who either ask about the incident and offer suggestions, or who provide additional information to help lead the players to a conclusion without necessarily telling them what to do. For example, the NPCs might say that traffic coming from the nearby town has been unusually absent of late, or that they haven't heard from someone there and are concerned.

In either case, NPCs are useful sources of guidance. They are your “mouthpieces” and a means to communicate directly with the characters (not just the players), so long as you handle them deftly. Sometimes it is helpful to have an NPC party member who can serve in this role, either just for the adventure or in general as a kind of GM stand in).

## **Confirm Speculation**

Players often spend a lot of game time speculating, to each other or just thinking aloud. Pay close attention to this kind of speculation about what's happening with your story and in your world; the players are handing you a useful tool, whether they know it or not. It tells you whether or not clues and information about the setting and plot are coming through clearly, and it gives you insight into what the players are thinking, which you can turn to your advantage.

In particular, if the players speculate about something and make a decision based on that speculation, you can choose to rearrange your adventure

behind the scenes to match the speculation and make it “correct”. Suddenly, the characters are exactly where they should be, and the players get to feel like they “figured it out”. For example, you had planned for the source of the zombies to be a cursed artifact which caused a plague in the town, with the dead plague victims arising as zombies. However, the players speculate—and convince themselves—there is a necromancer at work behind the zombie plague and focus their efforts on finding this mastermind. So you decide rather than just the artifact, it is a necromancer wielding the artifact, and instead of having the artifact in the center of town, the players’ idea of finding the necromancer’s hideout bears fruit.

Be particularly aware of player speculation that begins with anything akin to “Wouldn’t it be really cool if...?” Those words mean your players are telling you things they would like to see in the adventure, and giving you the opportunity to respond. Likewise, pay attention to where the players’ attention goes and what they’re interested in, even if it’s not your amazing plot. Why not incorporate their newfound interest into the story? You don’t have to cater to their every whim—and beware of “leading” speculation from players looking to manipulate the circumstances of the adventure—but if somebody thinks something would be fun and you’re able to work it into your adventure, why not do it?

## Have Stop-Gaps and Resources

In most action-oriented RPGs, the simplest stop-gap is one recommended by novelist Raymond Chandler: “When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand.” In other words, if you need to fill a gap, while also giving yourself some breathing space, throw a threat at the player characters. This can be a traditional “wandering monster,” an action-packed but non-combat encounter like trouble with a vehicle, or some other disaster (possibly relating to something that just happened). The threat doesn’t have to result in combat. The man with the gun could be there for reasons other than to shoot at the heroes, or a hunting party of orcs might make the PCs strike out in a different direction or even turn back, making both of these stop-gap encounters into a sort of guidance.

You can also turn stop-gaps into a form of guidance by linking them with your main plot. If the PCs are flailing about in their investigation of the villain’s plans or whereabouts, for example, the villain might get twitchy and send some minions to attack them. Then, after the fight, PCs may be able to question prisoners—or at least find clues on the bodies—pointing

towards the information they were looking for in the first place. The GM planting a clue on the body of a dead minion, when you expected the PCs to have captured and interrogated one, is another example of rearranging things behind-the-scenes.

To use the zombie infestation example, when the heroes decide to leave the remains of their fight with the zombies behind and head off in the wrong direction, you can set up a stop-gap encounter with the corpses of other people who fell prey to a group of zombies. Only one of the victims is still alive, long enough to gasp out details of what happened and where the creatures came from, and then perish, as the dead bodies all around the characters begin to move....

In games and settings with common types of encounters—monsters in fantasy, criminals for superheroes, and such—have some “stock” ones on-hand behind the GM screen that you can easily drop in when you need to fill a gap. For some games, you can also use random encounter tables and similar resources for this; a good book of monsters or adversaries is full of potential stop-gaps.

Other useful resources include things like “cheat sheets” of pre-generated character names and distinctive features when you need them on the fly, and “stock” locations and non-player characters you can re-dress for different scenes. The players don’t need to know the underlying stats are essentially the same, so long as you vary the descriptions and details.

## Just Run With It

If all else fails, and the players are dead-set on focusing on something that has nothing whatsoever to do with your planned adventure, take what is handed to you and run with it, using the tools provided here (and in the rest of this book) to help you improvise a fun scene or even entire adventure. One of the bright sides of this is that you may be able to salvage your original idea and try it out on your players again later, with sufficient changes to the problematic moment where things went awry. If you do it will, they’ll never know it was a story they had previously avoided!

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# FEASTS AND FAMINES:

## Handling Large Groups or Just One Player

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*Ed Greenwood*

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*“Ever notice humans are herd animals?” Eskraun the elf commented, wrenching his gore-soaked blade free of his 63rd guardsman. “They’re endless! Must spend all their time breeding! Endless!”*

*“Except,” Dorlroan the dwarf growled, tugging his axe out of his 81st guard, “when ye need yer tankard refilled! Then, nary a one’s in sight—every time!”*

Roleplaying gamers tend to settle into stable group sizes determined by how many friends like to play together or what the GM—or the GM’s play space—can comfortably handle, but any lengthy gaming career will feature situations where a GM stares down a table of 8, 10, or even more anxiously waiting players. Or, more often, times when a GM faces just one lonely player.

Neither extreme need be a “yikes!” moment. One-on-one campaigns can last for years and be as rich and interesting as the exploits of any roistering, rollicking band of mighty heroes—without the lone player having to run multiple characters.

## Large Groups

Let's look at the wall-to-wall mob situation first. How many players makes a "large" group depends on the GM, but every GM has an "I feel overwhelmed" number. If the GM knows beforehand that they'll be handling a lot of players (as opposed to having "surprise guests"), there are obvious things they can do to prepare. These include:

**Minimize Chances for Combat:** Because no matter what rules system is being used, combat simulations have a regrettable tendency to consume gobs of time. Such can also lead to combat encounters unfairly weighted in the players' favor, like as entire mob of character jumping a single hapless sentry.

**Crafting or Modifying Adventures to Engage All Players:** Include mysteries to be solved or class-specific tasks to be done. If you don't want actual detective work, or you or your player hate riddles, dump the party into the midst of a threat that initially bewilders them (or have them be framed, and attacked by the city watch and angry citizens as they try to find out what they're being blamed for).

**Keep the Game Moving:** Figuring out which steps in the unfolding adventure can be simplified, omitted, or glossed over to keep the pace moving. Fast-paced always wins over letting one encounter—where likely only a few characters can shine—take undue prominence.

**Don't Split the Party:** Shape the adventure to keep the party together. While there seems to be wisdom to dividing a large group into more manageable sizes, this only works if those smaller groups are then given their own dedicated times to shine. Otherwise, the GM is only relegating a whole subset of the party out of the limelight.

**Give Players Tasks:** Share the work of managing the group with other players. Rather than giving eager players the opportunity to get bored, assign players to mapping what's been explored, to recording cryptic inscriptions or pass-phrases, to shopping for useful tools for the group, or maybe providing you with list of level-appropriate magic items. Don't have any of these in an adventure? Well, put some in!

If you get surprised by a legion of players, ruthlessly cut and reshape the adventure as you go. Think of yourself as an improv comedian, listening and watching your crowd to decide how long a particular joke goes on, or what is or isn't going over. GMs are in the business of pleasing their

crowds, so if something excites and grabs an audience, give them more of it! Always keep things moving: plot holes you can fly dragons through may be unforgiveable, but they're far more likely to be forgiven if things are happening so fast and loud that players barely have a time to notice—and a partial, cryptic half-explanation or justification often works, and is certainly better than nothing at all.

If things look like they're going to crash and burn, make them fast and big so the crash will be memorable. If things are feebly dying because the players are bored by their foes, have those foes change, right away. Hey, the enemies are all shapechangers! And because they're fighting the characters, what better shapes for them to take than the heroes themselves! This is no time for subtlety, you as GM are facing a mob, remember?

## Solo Groups

Turning to an arrangement that leaves one GM facing one player, let us thank our ringing ears that the horde is gone and we can consider this probably more common situation.

In one-on-one play, a GM can focus on the roleplaying preferences of just one player (intrigue or hack-and-slash, dungeon crawl or politics, whatever they may be), avoiding any care of player-versus-player disputes. In fact, the GM had better do focus on this sort of gaming—if they can't provide the content the lone player wants, the game may be rather short-lived.

In a one-on-one game, the player needn't be limited to running a single character. If both parties are comfortable with either the player or GM running multiple members of the adventuring group, so be it. Alternatively, there's no reason a GM can't scale challenges to test one character, being mindful of how the rules of their game probably need to be finessed to allow for such. There's also the possibility of playing “a character and a half,” a term for a character plus a fighting sidekick, such as a loyal trained war dog, mind-linked dire wolf, talking steed, or even a comically weird critter. The timeworn cliché here is the PC necromancer with controlled undead minions, but much amusement might be generated by the GM running a variety of henchmen who are idiots or have minds of their own. Consider, perhaps, a coolly capable adventurer being saddled with a thickheaded, rash barbarian or a foul-mouthed imp as her wingman as she tries to do something stealthy or involving court etiquette.

If both GM and player enjoy a good brawl, it's easy enough to arrange a scenario where the lone PC can call on a group of NPCs to fight alongside them. Using this technique just once is probably best so the player doesn't become reliant on such backup—and a resulting high body count likely means “just once” in any case!

Solo PC campaigns also prove ideal for playing a secret agent of a government, rebel provocateur, or even a ruler. Roleplaying mystery-solving detective work is better suited for one-on-one play than even a small group, as it's a lot less fun playing Watson to someone else's Holmes. There are also a lot of satisfying roleplaying possibilities ill-suited to the classic large armed party of adventurers, such as missions for a lone ninja, saboteur, or stealthily-infiltrating secret agent (in fact, most videogames use a solo perspective, and can be a source of inspiration for solo tabletop adventure ideas). In any of these cases, the fast-paced challenges and developing repercussions of such characters' actions keep a narrow spotlight aimed directly at the lone player.

For any of these lone-PC roles, uncovering a shadowy cult, secret society, or sinister criminal organization might provide an ongoing progression of linked opponents to defeat, and make it easier and more believable for one solved mystery to lead immediately into another.

I once ran a one-on-one campaign for an elderly shut-in who really enjoyed playing a time-travelling government agent bringing back vital information that had been lost to the present. My player was a non-gamer, but although she knew full well it was all “make believe,” she loved feeling that she was cheating Father Time—as her own time left to live was obviously swiftly running out—by making a difference, to leave a better world behind. This time traveling agent gig seems to me a role ideally suited to one-on-one play.

In another example, I ran a one-on-one game for a player predominantly interested in bettering her spellcasting character. As a result, play was dominated not by combat and confrontation, but by thinking up how a spell might work, tracking down old tomes, and gathering fragments of lore from diaries and the memories of NPCs about the spells of others. She literally roleplayed devising spells and experimenting with them—yes, there were many “booms!” and startled neighbors. She took great pride in slowly and painstakingly building a spell roster while dealing with the sinister scrutiny of foes becoming aware of her growing magical

mastery. When she did face combat situations, boy did she know all the ins and outs of how to use her precious, personally crafted spells in unexpected ways. One casting was intended to make tools, from needles to prybars, flit through the air back to settle unerringly into the storage cavities she'd whittled for them... and in desperation, she used it and a strong magnetic "pull" magic to pass her metal tools back and forth through many attacking brigands— perforating them anew with every trip and turning almost certain doom into an unlikely victory.

Which brings us again to the salient point about one-on-one play: its greatest successes almost always occur because the GM can concentrate on the playing style and challenging elements that the lone player enjoys, crafting or modifying to meet the preferences of the player.

As with everything else, repetitive play, easily overcome scenarios, or lackluster rewards can pall, sometimes quickly, so a good GM will constantly offer other possibilities for play direction. In the jungle? Find a beach with a pirate ship careened and its crew skirmishing among themselves so pirate adventures can happen. In the city? Perhaps an important caravan leaving town and a nervous wealthy traveler wants to hire an adventurer bodyguard right now—later on, the character can discover the dark truth about that traveler. In any case, an abundance of possibilities allows the player to seize a chance for a change when they feel things going stale.

With fewer player rivalries or different tastes to cater to, the GM can concentrate on intrigue, multi-layered stories, or dramatic changes in tone should a player seize on an unlikely course of action. And, should a player thrive on dispute between characters, the GM can readily provide this through characters they play—notably through their treacheries or imagined and anticipated treacheries toward the lone PC.

Although having time enough to do this properly is all too rare, I have run campaigns in which all the PCs had day jobs, family entanglements, and other side concerns that kept them busy between musterings into their band of heroes to go adventuring together. This meant I was running games for five players one-on-one through a combination of trading notes and face-to-face roleplaying sessions between game nights. So it can be done.

Many players or one, it's all about serving up adventure—adventure that intrigues, entertains, and gives chances for characters to shine. Give them weighty choices to make, chances to succeed, and opportunities enjoy the satisfaction of knowing they've succeeded. It's that simple.

Just like life.

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# DITCHING THE MINIATURES:

## Playing A Smoother RPG

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*Wolfgang Baur*

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What do you need for an RPG? Players, dice, some rules and... those little metal or plastic figures, of course. That connection of miniatures with a roleplaying game, especially with *Dungeons & Dragons*, goes all the way back to the wargaming roots of the game, to the three little *OD&D* booklets of 1974, the *Chainmail* rules, and earlier still to the very first games in Minneapolis and Lake Geneva, when RPGs were really just a weird variant of tabletop miniatures games. The two things have a long and intertwined history, and even today, a well-painted mini on cool flip mats or Dwarven Forge terrain is pretty mouthwateringly awesome.

Despite the weight of history, I'm here to tell you that you can improve your game by ditching the minis.

### **Minis as a Focus and Limit**

The great strength of miniatures in RPGs is how they provide a bridge for newcomers, a focus of attention for the group, and a way to resolve tactical questions fairly and accurately. Each of these points justifies the use of minis some of the time. However, once you are an experienced player, the overall tradeoffs are not worth it.

**Bridge for newcomers.** New players of the game often expect a field of play similar to a board game or a videogame level. The map provides hints about the environment and a way of thinking about your character in terms of movement, with squares and spaces. It's more or less familiar, even if the chests turn into mimics and fireball spells burn out entire chambers in a flash. There's a space to explore, to investigate, or to conquer. When the map is filled in, you're done with it.

**Focus of attention.** Your character's miniature always tells you where your character is. It never tells you *who* your character is, *what* she wants, *how* she reacts to sudden shifts, or *why* she is adventuring. The where is significant, and the how is part of the rules. But who and why are more important elements of character. If you are busy working on flanking and attacks of opportunity, you are playing a great skirmish game, an part of a great tradition that goes back to Little Wars. But you could be playing a more heroic character if you spent those moments pondering your battle cry and whether to ignite a magical flare, or how to save a zombie who used to be a party member.

**Tactical Limits.** Time spent on minis and movement does a bang-up job at resolving a combat in tactical terms. As GM, you are adjudicating what movements lead to what effects, and answering tactical issues: how tall, how dark, where is the lever? The map and minis emphasize the environment and things in it constitute the field of play. As a result, you count squares, and consider your options for flanking. The presence of the minis encourages your tactical side, not your story or character-driven side.

As the GM for a skirmish game, you may spend less time on story spotlights and building up the heroic actions within the flow of combat. You have monstrous tactics to consider. You may describe the rooms rather than the heroic story of the adventurers. A rich environment is satisfying if your players have a strong sense of mission, but it's less satisfying if the party is not sure why they are plundering the tomb in the first place. All too quickly, your tactical sense erodes your roleplaying sense, because the minis are always there to draw your attention away from dialogue, foreshadowing, or plot.

## What You Gain from Freeform Play

The most surprising effect of ditching miniatures is that combat and gameplay are much faster, assuming players and GM have mutual trust and a compatible play style. Instead of each player spending part of their round moving a mini, they immediately declare an action, maybe with a little panache, and rolling dice. They ask clarifying questions like “Can I hit him?”, of course, but you can speed that up as well with a quick description of the field. Combat is faster because no one ponders squares of movement or opportunity attacks; you can hand-wave things entirely, you can sketch out a rough room map on paper or a white board if it is complex, or you can simply go with a rule of reasonable attacks.

In addition, your GMing isn't centered on moving monsters—instead you are challenging players, shepherding the action along, keeping the table flow smooth. You aren't distracted by positioning; you have some luxury to speak for the NPCs, mocking, taunting, threatening, bullying, or wheedling and importuning the PCs that this is all a horrible misunderstanding. The time you don't spend on movement and minis is time you can spend on NPC richness, threats, even NPC voices or body language.

## Story and Surprise and Solos

Narrative-focused, minis-free combat rewards those who plan some reversals and surprises in their encounters—surprises that do not depend on a map. Instead, they depend on NPC plans, schemes, and speech, and on character history and goals.

Build encounters that make your players twitch and connect to their backgrounds and goals. It might be something that enrages the barbarian, or a secret volume of occult lore that makes the sage's mouth water; use those as a starting point, and then see where you might focus on particular character's best or worst traits.

**Stealth and Surprise.** For example, you can play with visibility and tone in a shadowy set of tunnels—a lack of a grid means that stealth is a more effective option for both players and monsters. If the players are engaged in an ambush with foes, you can make it clear that the foes were prepared: out of the shadows, a goblin rogue strikes from within a wooden crate, attacking the party's weakest link! Another foe dumps boiling oil on a heavily-armored hero! Aiiieee—they knew you were coming!

This ambush is possible in a game with maps and minis, but my experience is that players will be more inclined to argue the particulars if there's a map. For instance, "I would have seen that goblin in a crate! My character walked past it!" (goblins are good at hiding!) and "Why did we not smell smoke?" (because there's a chimney over the oil).

**Reversals.** A reversal that assumes the characters are surprised is a great story beat; as a GM, you can have the goblin chief shout out "Trapped you at last!" and make the players wonder who sold them out. Running the encounter without a map and minis is likely to reward you with player surprise and engagement, and it reduces haggling over details of position and vision.

Story beats are not really about combat in terms of damage and wounds, though they certainly can have an effect on combat. Instead, you're trying to get an emotional reaction: disgust, fear, surprise, wonder, joy, relief, or determination, and so on. If you say "the spider has crawled under your armor", the player of that character is likely to think about how to pry it out. As GM, it's much more fun to hear "it's inside my armor, someone help me!" rather than, "I want you to move adjacent to me and stay there so I can get this +2 bonus."

**Trigger Events.** Other options that trigger a reaction might include a villain teleporting in some unlikely reinforcements—perhaps angelic hosts serving the villain under duress, or NPCs the party knows from a tavern. Or the arrival of an innocent bystander into the carnage, or the whispering tones of a magical mist heralding the return of a long-lost saint of the cleric's faith, a bit of music that has haunted the rogue's dreams, or even dark blessings granted to all the enemy minions (but that also aids one of the party's darker characters!).

For these story sections, use what you know about the player characters, their history, and their goals, and make it suddenly matter in the middle of combat. Rumors, gossip, hidden gifts and talents—deploy the cornucopia of possibilities as needed.

**Solo Moments.** I think of these as linked to a single character per combat; you don't want every character to suddenly react, but rather, to shine the spotlight on that character and give them a moment to solo or monologue or share their character's lore. If everyone gets to solo, it's a mess, but it's totally fine to be upfront about this and hand the ball clearly to a

particular player. For instance, “Ok, the bard’s got this scene everyone. The pipes of Azathoth sounds over the glen... What do you do?”

## Player Trust and Fair Play

Abandoning minis is an approach that you shouldn’t adopt without first mentioning it to the players, and without a plan to go back to map squares if needed.

**Consistent Rulings.** The primary determinant of your success as a narrative combat GM is your own ability to be evenhanded and consistent in your rulings and descriptions. If you ditch your miniatures only to put the party in tough situations week after week that they never see coming, your players will soon beg for the return for full-on tactical, round-by-round, paranoid dungeon crawling to avoid always being on the wrong end of narrative surprises. It is important to reward clever thinking; if the party is using reconnaissance and magic to get the drop on your favorite monsters, silencing a sentry and then charging into a barracks full of sleepy, unarmored ogres—let them! The use of freeform combat is not an excuse for you GM beat up on the PCs, it’s an opportunity for smart players to take full advantage of.

Create moments where the lack of minis lets players do something spectacular: sending an avalanche down on an orc camp, or igniting stockpiled oil in the goblin warehouse with a few quick stealth checks (rather than round-by-round stealth and movement). Describe their success in sneaking past a dangerous encounter, or spend a moment pulled back to the big picture, and emphasize that heroes have split the enemy forces in two by the timely demolition of a bridge.

**Say Yes in Combat.** Your players will quickly figure out that faster, looser movement makes for more exciting and more effective character actions. For instance, mobs and mass combats can be more about PCs keeping running tallies of how many minions they have each slain, rather than grinding it out shield-to-shield with 5-foot-steps and reach weapons. If each character is trying to win the race to 20 kills, calculating whether or not a monster can safely withdraw from its square kills the joy of the thing.

Saying “Yeah, you can hit 6 of them with the fireball” is faster and more satisfying to the group, because you get results without calculations and measurements. Because this style hinges on a GM saying yes to dramatic action, and yes to high-risk or oddball moves, a control-oriented GM

style is going to flop. Say yes often to players with good ideas—and then say yes to your own ideas for a big villain moment once in a while, too! Saying yes doesn't mean being a pushover; it means encouraging the most vivid players to say sharp, and to encourage the shy players to abandon at least some of their innate caution.

**Potential for Abuse.** The danger is that some players will attempt to abuse the system at every opportunity. If you have a contentious or adversarial relationship with some players, or if your group prefers a highly-structured play style for “fairness”, you won't get far with minis-free game. Groups and players that value optimization tend to be the ones that value concrete squares; I would not recommend this approach for a casual game with your local power gamers.

## High Fantasy Encounters Without Map Limitations

Freedom from squares supercharges the wild, planar, and extremely magical encounters in your homebrew games—over-the-top GMing or world-building thrives in a map-free zone. Cut loose and consider

### QUICK CHASE IMPROV

Turn-based tabletop RPGs are notoriously bad at creating compelling chase scenes, but dropping the need for miniatures and maps improves the situation somewhat. If you use a list to show who is running first, second, and third, that's enough to know how the chase is going. Ask each player for one primary action each turn, and keep it going smoothly around the table. Force the slowest character to drop out of the chase after a turn or two—the chase may be resolved one way or another much faster than you think with less formal movement and action rules.

The point is to make it feel fairly quick; I think that dragging out a chase scene is almost always counterproductive, and a quick chase can lead to a great twist or reversal. For instance, a thief fleeing with the cleric's golden holy symbol is a clear moment that might lead right into an ambush... with the slow dwarf warrior in full plate wildly out of position. Time for quick thinking by a fleet-footed monk at the front!

saga-level mass combat, three-dimensional underwater melees, encounters in mid-air or astral planes, chases and high-movement hunts through devilish forest, or even in deep dungeon airshafts.

Describe, then twist. Ditching the map makes it easier to stage aerial or 3D combat. It encourages swinging on jungle vines, crashing zeppelins, leaping over mountaintops and from the back of one crocodile-demon to the next over the swollen waters of the River Styx. What you want to do for these things is first describe the amazing location with hints as to what players can do with that locale. Then feed the rush with combat twists.

Remember that when you speed up play, you enable the rush of danger in story terms, rather than tactical terms. To keep that sense of drama going, prepare at least one twist for your most exciting minis-free encounters, like against the mini-boss or a duel on the precipice. You need a lot of them, so plan in advance—depending on your typical game night, it can easily be a few dozen.

A twist is a GM-planned changeup to the environment, like an oncoming storm that helps the evil druids with their lightning ritual, or the arrival of a swarm of rats released by the enemy goblins, or the breaking of a magical seal in a wizard's chambers, or an enslaved roc carrying the villain away. It's anything that would create a musical sting or crescendo in a movie, a cool moment in an action sequence, a way to trip up the existing sequence of "who goes next" and turn it into "the bridge collapsed, and now you're all carried along by the freezing stream." Unlike a story beat, this is purely an environmental change or change in foes; it doesn't have a connection to a player character's background or lore.

What Happens, Not Where. A classic combat twist depends on realizing that dangers are shifting, or seeing a bigger picture. For example, a simple sequence like a volcano's growing threat (rumbling noise, then falling rocks, poison gas, magma) changes the player priorities from victory to survival. If you never draw out map squares, it's much easier to move the scene on in a big way—there's no map to abandon or minis to reset, so saying "the magma is flooding into the room" is likely going push the PCs to move somewhere else.

Ideally, when you prepare your encounters with those breakable, twistable, warpable elements, you also assign them a moment ("crossing the bridge" or "after the lava tunnel fight"). Combine your combat elements with story

elements and your game levels up. The combat shifts feed your story, and your story is richer because the fights are more fluid and sometimes mixed with story elements.

## Not a Simple Switch

Just because I'd run an encounter set on a cliff without minis doesn't mean I don't ask for a marching order, or wouldn't use a regional map to show campsites, or even a whiteboard to show character elevations while climbing through a dangerous section. You can mix in as little visual information as you want, or draw tons of sketches to show roughly relative positions for everyone. You can turn off the grid markings in many digital maps, and just use that great map as a starting point to talk about the player's actions and decisions. Soon they'll try leaping across a river on moving ice floes or stay "just one more round" in an active volcano about to explode.

As long as the resulting mix of your description, player actions, and monster twists keeps your group moving and entertaining, you'll have escaped the tyranny of the grid, and moved into a play style with a sharp focus on the heroes and their triumphs—as it should be!

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# GETTING THINGS GOING AGAIN

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*Steve Winter*

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Your campaign has stalled, players are bored, the adventure is slow, and no one's paying attention. You're asking yourself "how can I get things going again?" You're in a tough spot.

All campaign "repairs" must begin with an accurate assessment of where the "machine" is failing. With that in mind, we'll look at six common reasons why campaigns stall, nosedive, or crash and burn, and ways you and your players can get back on a smooth gliding path.

Some of these problems are caused by bad table habits; those are the easiest to solve. Others are systemic and baked into either your group's internal interactions or your GMing style; those are harder to solve. We'll start with the easy cases and work our way up to the tough ones.

## **Distracted Players**

Here in the 21st century, we're all adrift on a sea of distractions. Players will turn away from even an exciting, challenging scene to check email, post to social media, log a turn of a networked smart phone game, and see whether anyone has liked their Facebook post from five minutes ago.

If the distraction isn't a phone, then it might be teasing the cat with a laser pointer or a side conversation about the latest episode of a favorite TV show. It's likely that at some point during every game, someone in your group (probably including you) gets distracted and does something that's distracting to others. That's normal.

Everyone has a different tolerance level for this. You need to figure out the point where it becomes too much for the group as a whole and strive to keep the distractions on the acceptable side of that line. When someone habitually crosses that line and obstructs the game's progress to the point where other players are annoyed, then you have a problem that needs to be addressed. More often than not, a simple "let's focus on the game, folks" is enough to bring everyone back to the here and now. If that doesn't do the job, or if it needs to be said too often every session, then more drastic measures are needed.

The solution to this problem is a simple technique that's going to come up over and over throughout this essay. You need to find a time and place where you can talk privately to the offending players, preferably face to face. Immediately before or after a game session is good; if you see your players socially outside of the game, talk to them over coffee, a beer, a cup of coffee, or a meal. Explain calmly and without accusation that you personally would like them to dial down their distracting behavior. Avoid bringing other players into it; you're more likely to get compliance if it seems like you are asking for yourself.

Consider working out a signal between yourself and this player that you can use to remind the distracted player that he or she is lapsing into disruptive behavior. The goal is to bring the player's focus back to the game without chastising or embarrassing anyone in front of friends. For example, you could agree on a verbal signal (such as mentioning an obscure deity or monster) to a signal that the person needs to focus on the game. Another option is to ask them player to fetch you another soda from the refrigerator; this gets the player away from the table momentarily, gives them some time to refocus, and is impossible to miss if this is the agreed-upon signal.

It's tempting to think you can accomplish the same thing without a face-to-face talk, but you can't. Everyone else around the table will pick up on what you're doing before the distracted player does, because those players are paying attention. Then your effort to keep things low-key becomes

a public chastisement, which is exactly what you don't want. (For more on this topic, see "Laughter, Cellphones, and Distractions from Serious Gaming" on page 105.)

## Arguing About Rules

People argue; it's simply human nature. Good friends can have strong disagreements. Players grow attached to not only the lives of their characters but to the direction of the emerging story. When either one is threatened, they fight back.

It's good for players to be passionate about the rules and to explore their nuance, provided those conversations happen outside of roleplaying time. When characters are battling for their lives or struggling against the environment, players should be allowed to express their opinions briefly about how the rules apply. This is especially important if they made decisions based on an interpretation of the rules different from yours. But the final ruling belongs to the GM, and once a decision is declared, it's reality for the campaign and the game moves on. (See also "Knowing the Rules vs. Mastering the Game" on page 93.)

## Wrapped Up in the Metagame

To the well-known categories of roleplayers and roll-players, we can add a third category: rule-players. This isn't limited to people who devote all their energy to squeezing every possible +1 and bonus attack out of the rulebook. It also applies to anyone whose chief interest in the game is reaching the next level, acquiring the next piece of gear on their wish list, or killing a manticores just to harvest the ingredients they need to craft yet another sweet suit of armor.

All sorts of carrot-and-stick solutions to this are possible, and you're certainly welcome to try any of them. The only approach that's likely to work, however, is talking it out. In this case, since the problem probably is group-wide, the discussion should be with the whole group instead of one-on-one. Lay out your concern and how the group's focus on mechanical, secondary, or trivial issues is working against everyone's ability to weave a compelling story.

It's important this is not a lecture but a two-way conversation. You might hear things from players that you didn't expect; things like "we wouldn't do this if our characters found more useful magic items during

adventures” or “leveling up is the most excitement we get.” You need to take players’ comments and criticisms to heart before making any changes to the campaign.

## Too-Challenging Situations

Games that rely on an ever-escalating power scale can run into problems when the power levels of the good guys and the bad guys get out of whack. This can lead to two responses from players: backing away from the main event to pursue easier side treks, and the infamous 15-minute adventuring day (see below). Both of these player-directed solutions are frustrating for everyone.

The solution here is obvious: reduce the challenge level. This isn’t a recommendation for out-and-out cheating in the characters’ favor. You can make things easier for characters in plenty of ways without fudging dice rolls. Reduce the number of foes in combat encounters. Swap in similar but weaker foes in combat. Add some terrain or other features to the battlefield that benefit the characters. Allow dangerous encounters to be overcome through skillful negotiation or with clever plans. Provide the characters with skill- or combat-focused NPC allies. Lower the difficulty of important tasks, or allow automatic success if players ask the right questions or take the right actions. All of these measures can be taken without players having any idea that the GM’s thumb is pressing down on their side of the balance—which is exactly how you want it.

The 15-minute adventuring day is when PCs demolish the opposition by expending all of their most potent, once-per-day powers in the first encounter of the day, then make camp and wait 24 hours before moving to the next encounter and repeating the cycle. This practice may be the result of repeatedly hitting characters with encounters that are too tough for them, which teaches the players two things: survival depends on going all-in every time, and delaying the next encounter doesn’t matter. Of those two lessons, the second one is the real source of the problem; once players learn that delay has benefits but no drawbacks, they’ll rely on it every time. Like any bad habit, this one can be broken. In my experience, these three options have worked the best:

- Include encounters that are easy for characters to defeat with using basic, reusable attacks. This teaches players to differentiate between easy and hard fights.

- Apply time pressure through situations where delaying the next encounter has significant and easily foreseen consequences.
- Talk it out.

If you're patient and clever, you can use the first two options over time to psycho-engineer your players back into being fierce but not reckless. If you'd rather get on with the adventure at hand and fix the problem quickly without a lot of subterfuge, then use the third option and let the players know you think the campaign has a problem and you're implementing a solution.

## Too-Powerful Characters

This used to be called the “Monty Haul” problem, because it tended to arise in campaigns where characters were given too many magic items (making them more powerful in every situation) and excessive loot (allowing them to buy better magic items) as treasure or rewards. This sets off a vicious cycle in which the GM must throw more powerful enemies at characters to keep them challenged, which accelerates the rate at which they gain experience and treasure, demanding more powerful enemies, and so on.

The slow and gentle solution is to stop handing out equipment that make characters stronger in combat. Over time, as characters themselves become more powerful; let their innate power eclipse that of their items and their items will become less important to them. In the meantime, the combat-oriented rewards players have grown accustomed to should be replaced with noncombat-oriented rewards. Exactly what those are depends entirely on your game.

The faster solution is to talk it out. Players are understandably reluctant to voluntarily make their characters weaker. On the other hand, everyone has a direct interest in ensuring that the hours they spend at the roleplaying table are filled with challenge and excitement. The difficult step here is getting players to agree that their characters are steamrolling over all their challenges. Once they admit the problem exists, it's an easy step to agreeing that something should be done to restore life-and-death drama to the game.

## Player Boredom

This is the biggest and most difficult campaign problem. Players will keep showing up for a while—possibly because they’re still looking forward to leveling up or getting one last piece of gear, but probably just out of habit and because they enjoy the company. Sooner or later, they’ll drop out over a scheduling conflict, offer a string of lame excuses, or just stop showing up without any explanation. Before long, the campaign is dead. If you see the signs of this, what can you do?

Recognize that you’re in trouble. Do something right this instant to shake things up. If it’s a quiet scene, have enemies burst through the door with weapons in hand. It doesn’t matter why they burst through the door—you can figure that out later. Right now, the players need to become so involved in saving their characters’ lives that they can’t think about anything else. If you were already in the midst of a fight and the players were still bored, throw in something no one expected: a volcanic eruption, a landslide, an oliphaunt stampede, a herd of zombies. Have all the enemies suddenly look over their shoulders, scream “It’s coming! Run for your lives,” and scatter like gazelles in all directions. Have a deity, demon, or alien arrive on the scene with a special interest in the characters. Or have the fight suddenly transform into a costume ball for no apparent reason, where the characters are asked repeatedly and pointedly, “what are you doing here?”

These first aid measures should get you through the current session. The fact that something weird happened might also revive the players’ flagging enthusiasm and give them a reason to come back for at least one more session. Assume that “one session” is how much time you have to fix this problem.

Now it’s time for agonizing self-appraisal. What went wrong? Why were players bored? The answer can be hard to take, because you are what went wrong. The players wanted and expected something from the game that you didn’t deliver. Your plot might have been too complex, or not complex enough. Maybe they wanted a sandbox and you gave them an adventure path, or vice versa. Maybe they wanted to hew their way across the world like Conan the Barbarian, and you designed cerebral mysteries like Arthur Conan Doyle. Talk it out—ask the players what they were expecting and what can be done to fix it. It might be best to focus on one or two players whose opinion and honesty you respect and contact them

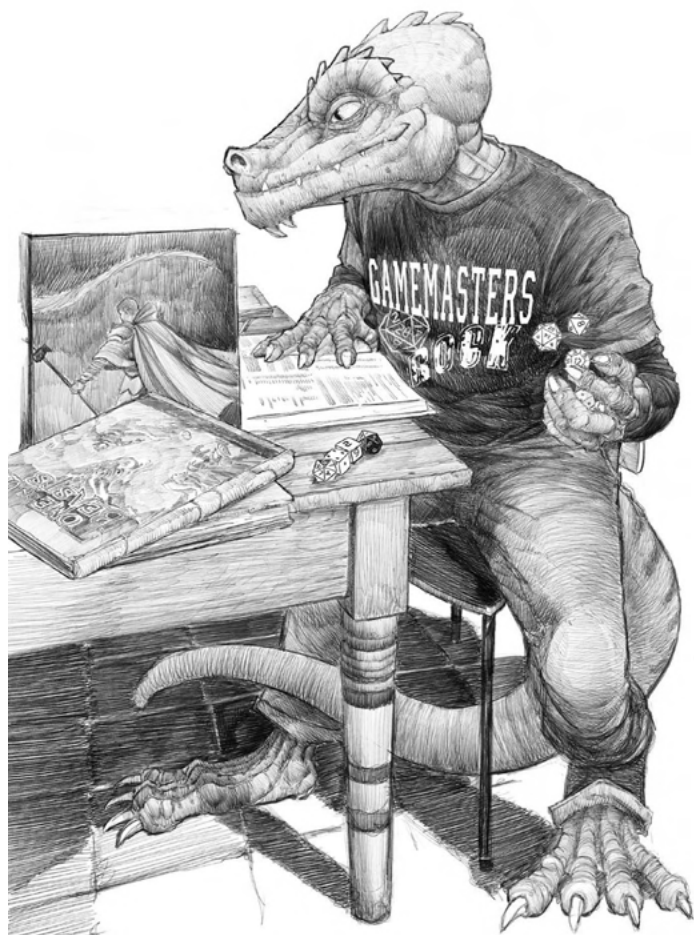
outside the game. This can be a tough conversation. You might need to prod and insist to get explicit answers, but don't let up. Absolutely don't take "No, everything's fine, you're doing a great job" as a reply. You know you're not doing a great job or you wouldn't be here.

If your players are reluctant to offer up any criticism, be prepared to offer some self-criticism of your own. If you hit the nail on the head, they're likely to agree at least half-heartedly: "Yeah, the intrigue stuff is kind of dull." If you miss the mark, they're likely to contradict you: "No, we like the intrigue stuff, but sometimes it leads to too many duels." Once this conversation is opened, there's no telling what you might hear in the way of criticism. This is a learning opportunity for you, and it's vital that you leave your ego out of it. Players aren't expressing facts that can be refuted or argued with, they're voicing their opinions. Keep an open mind, listen to everything the players say, and don't dismiss any of it out of hand. This might give you what you need to revamp the campaign into something the players will be excited about. Or you might need to ask the entire group the next time you meet, or offline in an email or phone call (as some people are uncomfortable with this sort of talk in person). Once you've listened openly and uncritically to the players' opinions, your job is putting their feedback to constructive use. With a fair amount of effort and a bit of luck, combined with honest communication, most campaigns won't just be salvaged but will come out stronger and better than before. The key to that success, as usual, is talking it out.

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# IN BETWEEN SESSIONS





# DEALING WITH A TPK

## How to Save Your Players, Your Campaign, and Your Reputation

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*Zeb Cook*

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TPK—total party kill. Three dreaded letters for any group of players. That catastrophic moment when the spells are gone, the potions drained, and the weapons shattered. The villains have triumphed and the player characters are all dead at their feet.

Around the gaming table, the players' eyes are filled with disbelief, despair, frustration, even anger. It can be hard enough when one player loses character, but at least the rest of the team can get them revived. But when all the PCs are dead, what hope do they have of coming back? If something doesn't give them hope, the players will look to place blame... and who better to blame than the GM? So what can a GM do to recover from a total party kill? Before looking for answers, however, some hindsight. The best way to solve the problems a TPK creates is to not let it happen. It is not that it will never happen, but there are certain circumstances the GM should avoid at all costs.

### Things to Avoid

Foremost of these is the desire to “teach the players a lesson.” *Do not do this!* It's a desire that most often coincides with an ill-run campaign. You may decide the players are taking advantage of you, stomping all over your carefully-prepared campaign. If you kill their characters, it will teach them a lesson! However, the lesson taught is not likely to be the lesson they learn; they are more likely to decide you're being mean and spiteful.

The second circumstance to avoid is revenge. Anger or even annoyance at a player or a group of players can sometimes lead the GM to punish the whole group. Again, *don't do it*. Just don't even think about doing it. A TPK in this circumstance will just confirm the worst fears about their GM and most likely splinter the campaign.

Sometimes you may decide you want a reset button for your campaign. What better way to do it than to kill all the characters and wipe the slate clean? A mulligan for the campaign, as it were. For GM's considering this option, remember that the goal is for the players to *want* to play in the next game. Ending a game with a bitter loss is not going to encourage them to try the next offering.

But now it's too late for hindsight. Despite all the warnings and good efforts, the PCs are dead, en masse, on the floor. The unfortunate truth is that in almost every long-running campaign, this happens at least once; things go wrong and bad things happen. Whether the game session, the campaign, or even the GM's reputation can survive depends on what happens next and that comes down to following three basic steps: support, evaluate, and adventure

## Support

After a TPK, for many GM's the question is, "What do I do now?" Be supportive. Don't tell the players the obvious warnings they overlooked, how foolish they were, or what poor tactics they used. Above all, don't mock them for bad decisions. Remember that you're on their side. After all, there is a good chance some players are already upset with themselves, each other, and the GM. Players get attached to their characters, so when facing the prospect that their favorite hero is lost forever, they can't automatically be expected to take it well. Giving support is not about promising to make everything better, it is about acknowledging the situation is bad but there might be a way through all this.

## Evaluate

The second step is to evaluate what happened. What caused the TPK? Knowing the cause (or causes) will guide which remedies are best. Every TPK is a combination of four causes: malicious intent, GM error, player error, or bad luck. Since **malicious intent** has already been discussed (don't do it!), your introspection should focus on the other three.

**GM error** happens. Every GM, no matter how good, makes a mistake from time to time. Nobody never screws up. It is easy to underestimate the difficulty of an encounter. Numbers and statistics that look balanced on paper can prove to be wickedly vicious in action. Vital rules can be misinterpreted or forgotten in the heat of play, and can make all the difference toward survival.

So if you misread the rules and tripled the strength of the fireball that wiped out the party, forgot that the PCs did have weapons that could actually harm the main boss monster, gave the monster resistances it wasn't supposed to have, or made some other game-unbalancing mistake, then it is time to own up to the error. Stop the game, face players and say, "Hey, I made a mistake with the rules that was unfair to you; let's fight that battle over." It is the same as reloading from a save point in a videogame. The characters are alive with all the hit points, spells, potions, charges, and whatever else they used during the fight restored to them. The enemies are also reset (sans mistakes) and the fight can be replayed. Of course, the players have the benefit of knowing what they're facing this time, making them better prepared for the fight, but that's only fair.

Sometimes a clean reset isn't possible—it's too hard to figure out what spells were used, how many hit points characters had at the start, or replaying the battle will take too long. If the players really want to play out the battle, give them the benefit of the doubt about their hit points and abilities. If the players don't want to refight the battle, then the only solution is for you to be brave and just give the encounter to the players. Say, "I made a mistake, so I'm giving this one to you." However, be aware that this might feel unsatisfying if it was meant to be the final battle of a long adventure.

In the end, fixing a GM error is both easy and hard. The solutions are fairly straightforward and uncomplicated. What is hard is owning up to the mistake in the first place—but admitting to the error is the most important part of the solution. It builds trust and tells players the GM wants the game to be fair. Knowing that, it is easier for them to accept mistakes and continue to play through them.

A TPK by **bad luck** is a trickier thing to recover from. Since the GM didn't do anything wrong, standing up and saying "oops" isn't really an option. Every session is ruled by some amount of chance and the math of random die rolls dictates that sooner or later the dice will just run cold at a critical moment—and then, suddenly everybody is dead. If the dice were just

horribly unfair, you could say, “Oh, that’s ridiculous, let’s do that over,” but that misses the point. The players stake their characters against chance, and sometimes chance wins. To give them a do-over robs the game of meaning. In the end, the players have risked nothing and gained all the rewards.

In the case of **player error**, there’s even less recourse for the GM. What could be said to justify a second chance? “You all made stupid decisions so I’m going to let you try again”? No. If anything is to be learned here, it is that the players are responsible for their choices. And if those choices are bad choices, then they—and not the GM—own the results.

For the continuing campaign to have meaning, the players must have some fear for the consequences of fate and their own decisions. Giving them a do-over, a reset, or even a miraculous escape breaks the reality of the campaign—unless there’s a story reason, something that gives all the bad luck and bad decisions a connecting thread. Thus, the best way to recover is to offer the players the promise of Adventure.

## Adventure

TPK’s are more common with low-level characters, and they can even be an opportunity. Some players may be happy to create new characters and keep playing. Others may want to keep their current, albeit dead, characters. In this case, the solution is simple—the new player characters become a recovery party out to recover the bodies of the fallen so they can be raised to fight again. You can even use the situation to give the new characters instant backgrounds; they are the brothers, sisters, distant cousins, or henchmen of the departed, armed with some knowledge of past events and maybe a little inherited gear. Just remember to keep the rescue adventure short and certain to succeed. There’s little point for the rescuers to fail at this task when the reason for their group is to keep the campaign going.

So what do you do if all the players want their old characters back? The real challenge is when players don’t want to give up on their PCs, and a replacement simply won’t do. That’s when you have to get creative and devise a compelling reason to get the PCs back on their feet. The TPK is a crisis, but it is important to remember that in every crisis there is the opportunity for a good story.

But how elaborate should the story be? This depends on the willingness of the players to trust the GM. If the players think the GM treated them unfairly—whether right or wrong—then it is best to keep the story short.

On the other hand, if the players have confidence the GM is working with them and not against them, the story of getting their characters revived may prove to be a memorable moment in the campaign. For simple stories, the goal is to get the PCs revived as quickly as possible—without resorting to *deus ex machina* plots. This means no mysterious uber-priests who just suddenly appear to raise the party with an equally uber-spell, no divinity descending from the heavens to raise them with a wave of their hand; such events provide no story and really come across as cheats. There needs to be some effort by the new PCs to achieve their goal; without at least a little struggle, the players won't value the lives of the fallen characters as much.

## The Replacement Heroes

One good simple story is a variation of the rescue mission: Each player gets to play a loyal henchman, ideally an NPC already in their employ or, failing that, an NPC their character has dealt with many times. Armed with a sense of duty, the henchmen set out to steal the corpses of their masters. What the henchmen know about where and how their masters died depends on what has already happened in the campaign. On this basic structure you can add all sorts of plot twists. For example, the rescue party can be weaker than the regular group; there's nothing to inspire mad heroics in the new PCs like knowing they're outmatched from the start. The heroes may be working under a time limit. The departed may have risen as undead. Their bodies may have been dismembered and scattered, so it's not just a matter of finding the bodies, it's also an issue of reassembling them. The imagination to create a good adventure is the only limit.

## Tools of Villainy

If there are no convenient henchmen available, another possibility is that the villains themselves raise one or more members of the party. There are many reasons an enemy might do this. It's easier to ask questions of a living person than a dead one. Or, because they are villains, it may amuse them to raise their enemies and toy with them. And, as long as at least one party member is alive, there is always the possibility for a daring escape, a perilous rescue of their companions, and a satisfying revenge on the foe who brought them all down. Not that this will be easy; those raised will be weakened, bereft of their favorite gear, and under watch. Fortunately, the villains are likely to let their guard down since the PCs, having already lost once, are clearly no match for them. Escaping the villains will require cunning and bold action, the stuff of every good adventure.

If the players are willing to entertain a more epic story for how their characters return to the world, larger opportunities arise. The simple stories above can be expanded in major quests. The henchmen, spurred by a vision or instinct that their masters have suffered some horrible fate, must search out where they went and what befell them, tracing the path of the fallen party's previous adventures. They revisit old foes trying to discover who may have been behind their employer's mysterious disappearance. They might even face the villain or monster who killed the party as the final challenge before they can rescue and revive their slain PCs.

## A Planar Opportunity

Of course, for the ultimate adventure, death doesn't have to be the end. The flesh may be broken but the spirit can live on—just not here. On their defeat, players may discover themselves in an otherworldly realm—Hell, Hades, the Path to the Immortal West, the Chinvat Bridge, or whatever grim afterlife is appropriate. In practice, the players keep their characters, perhaps minus much of their gear. Now the adventure is not about finding a way to raise their characters, it is about finding a way to escape Hell (or wherever). The players must discover the means for their spirits to pass back into the mortal world and reenter their dead bodies still laying where they were defeated. Escape, however, is not something the lords of the afterlife condone, and they will use their minions and their powers to stop it. Suddenly a TPK has opened up an entire new chapter in the player characters' stories.

If the GM remembers and applies the three basic rules (support, evaluate, and adventure), tragedy can be turned on its head. Presented and done right, death becomes the beginning of an even greater story for the players, with more heroics for them to recall. Just imagine when the story of game campaign starts with, "So we all got killed by the lich... and that's when we woke up in Hell!"

*Contrary to his childhood life plans, David "Zeb" Cook did not become a paleontologist and somehow stumbled into the career of game design. Over the decades he has designed such works as AD&D 2nd Edition, Planescape, Oriental Adventures, and more. These days he works for Zenimax Online Studios, designing for The Elder Scrolls Online videogame. If you see him at a convention, buy him a beer and he'll tell you stories.*

# MOVING THE PERSPECTIVE

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*Kevin Kulp*

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Sooner or later it will happen: your heroes are five levels deep in a dungeon, there are fascinating plot-related events happening back on the surface of your game world that you really want the heroes to know about, and there's just no good way to let the heroes know. They're happily tromping downwards into deep caverns, hip-deep in shredded orc, and although you know the game would be much more exciting if they knew their enemy's plans, for two sessions now the heroes haven't spoken to anyone who they haven't then killed. What to do?

Fiction handles this seamlessly because it's simple for an author to change the story's point of view, moving to an omniscient third-person narrator for a scene before returning to the main character's viewpoint. The book's protagonists may not know what the villain is up to, but the reader does, and tension rises as a result.

Well, steal from the best: if it works for novels, you can make it work for your RPG campaign. Here's a variety of ways to use cutaway scenes and visions to keep players informed, entertained, and involved when not all the action and events happen in one location.

## Why Do This?

When writing, the mantra is “show, don’t tell.” The same hold true for GMing. While you could communicate exciting out-of-game events to the heroes by less memorable means—a messenger spell, a divination (assuming they think to cast one), or word of mouth from a NPC—that seldom has the impact that seeing an event first-hand would carry. That suggests some sort of cutaway scene makes the most sense when you’re trying to establish dramatic tension, whether you use a vision, a dream, or have the players briefly play NPCs.

There are any number of ways to involve your players in a scene when their main heroes wouldn’t be present. Here are a few.

### Cutaway

A cutaway is a scene that the players know about but their characters don’t. The cutaway scene offers players a chance to see what is happening elsewhere in the world; this can focus on allies, villains, or both. Use a cutaway scene when your players are good at differentiating player knowledge from character knowledge, when you have a relatively short scene, and when you want little or no chance that the scene affects the players’ plans or actions. It’s used most effectively to increase dramatic tension and make your players nervous.

You can either describe the action, or—preferably—have each of the players take the role of a minor NPC in the scene. If you assign each player a NPC, don’t worry about game stats; give them inconsequential bystanders who aren’t necessarily heroic, and ask each player for a one-sentence personality summary. Then play out the scene. This gives the players the chance to roleplay, and there’s no consequences if every single NPC gets slaughtered during the action.

When possible, bring the minor characters back for cameos later in the campaign. Whether foe, ally or bystander, it’s fun for players to briefly revisit their old roles, and you can always give players the opportunity to roleplay both their normal characters and the NPCs for the duration of the scene.

### Dream

There are a number of ways to handle dreams in a game. They’re certainly the easiest (and most traditional) way to present heroes with information

that they might otherwise lack, and there's a long history in mythology and fantasy of heroes being given hidden information through cryptic or clear dreams. Gods might speak to their followers in dreams, the dead may revisit the living and guide them to hidden wisdom, and sorcerous patrons may reveal secrets to their proxies. Note that dreams may not always be true, often deal with symbolism instead of real people or events, and it's not uncommon for an oracular dream to be entirely false—a trap laid by a clever and resourceful villain. Plan accordingly. Use dreams when there's a divine component to the vision, or when you want there to be some uncertainty as to what the group actually just saw.

## Possession

If you want to instantly transport the heroes' personalities into an event happening hundreds or thousands of miles away, consider possession. Triggered by powerful psionic or magical power, or even by a curse, possession lets you slide the heroes' brains into other (often weaker) creatures for a time. Ideal for spying and for foreshadowing an upcoming adventure, there's some really wonderful humor in taking high-level adventurers and turning them into 1 hit die goblins for an hour or two.

For these events, it's easiest if none of the characters' special abilities travel with their soul when possessing another body. The heroes will find themselves with a new (and possibly weak) body, their own brains, and that's about it. The information they gather before their time runs out may help them plan for the adventure to come.

## Prophecy

There are always written and spoken prophecies, usually obscurely worded and open to misinterpretation until it's almost too late, but that's not what we mean here. For our purposes, think of a prophecy as a vision experienced by a hero or a NPC—a future event that may or may not come true.

Usually in such cases, either the hero sees a glimpse of the future, or a NPC explains and describes their vision to the heroes (perhaps in great detail). The main difference with this sort of cutaway is that the prophetic vision has not yet occurred, so (at least in theory) it can be changed. When the heroes are hearing about the prophecy second-hand, that leaves room for any number of misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

## Vision

A vision can be of a current (or recent) event, of the distant past, or even of the future. One or more heroes experience the vision directly, either looking on as a character in the scene or (most commonly) as an invisible detached third party observer. There is no narrative control in a vision, and no way for the hero to change what they are seeing; they can simply observe. This is an effective and straightforward method when you want the heroes to know what is happening (or what happened), so that it raises tension or informs their actions.

It's a good rule of thumb to involve as many heroes in a vision as possible. If a vision only is seen by a single hero, make sure to describe it to that player while the entire group is present. That saves a huge amount of time and burden on the poor player who would otherwise have to remember and describe what they saw. It's inevitable that important facts get missed when this happens, leading to red herrings later.

You can also deliver a vision via email or written printout, handing it to the player to read to the group. This is best when you want a written record of the vision, and when you want the player to have a few moments to understand and interpret it for themselves before they share it with the group.

Never attempt a written vision when the player has any narrative control over what is happening. If a player reads "the dais is empty except for the high priest," and you allow the hero to attack the priest mid-vision, the rest of the written text suddenly isn't going to make any sense. It's usually best to save written scenes for cases when the hero can't affect the events they're observing.

## Can the Players Affect the Cutaway?

This is a tremendously important thing to decide. Most of the time the answer is no; whatever method you choose to communicate new information to the players or their heroes, that information is set, and the heroes have no agency in the scene and no way to alter the results. In this case, think of it as seeing a recorded video of an event from the past, present or future. You can't change that recording as you watch it, you can only learn from it.

Sometime, however, the answer is yes. Perhaps the heroes can possess other people in their vision; perhaps the villain senses their presence as

they watch and adjusts his or her plans accordingly. Perhaps the heroes are briefly time traveling into the past, and their actions in the scene change the future. Giving heroes the ability to change the scene adds complexity, but makes for a more memorable plot hook.

## Is the Cutaway the Truth?

Your players will generally assume that if you're going to all the trouble to do a cutaway scene, they can trust what their heroes are seeing. Should that always be the case, however? Perhaps the vision is a dream sent by an opponent or a mischievous deity, meant to mislead or lure the heroes into a trap; perhaps it is true up to a point, but cuts off before a revelation occurs or the balance of power in a fight shifts.

Use this knowledge responsibly and for maximum mayhem or effect within the campaign. Think about the source of the cutaway. A prophetic vision granted by a godling may suffer from an unreliable narrator, while scrying or a vision granted by an ally may always be true—if often confusing and mysterious. Keep in mind that visions of the future foreshadowing coming events are not automatically true because the actions of the heroes can change the results.

## False Memories

There are times when instead of jumping narrative point of view, you want to bring a new point of view to a single character, and you need the help of the other players to do so.

When a character experiences false memories, there are two ways to handle the scene. The easiest but least fun simply has you telling the player “here's what your character believes is true.” That's fast, but it's not particularly interesting and can strain suspension of disbelief.

A more interesting way to communicate false memories may have you giving one player a different narrative than the rest of the group experiences. In this sort of situation, usually best undertaken in close-knit groups where players trust each other, the GM takes the other players aside (either in person or by email) before the game and explains that they want to try something special.

Picture a magical trap where a person caught in it finds what they believe to be paradise, and they starve to death in complete happiness. The GM may take aside every player except for the bard's and explain that she's

going to offer the bard's player a horrible bargain, and to play along. When the bard passes through the trap, the GM describes how they black out then wake up safely in their own bed, surrounded by prosperity and the fruits of their victory—and instead of seeming incredulous, the other players support this fiction, roleplaying their heroes in the scene as if this sudden perfect utopia is the most natural thing in the world. Does the bard's player push back against the vision, even with their friends assuring them that everything is just fine? Scenes like this lead to tremendous roleplaying and character-defining moments, and are easiest when most of the players step in to help the GM create the scene.

Dream sequences and prophecies also fit neatly into false memories. By telling all but one player that a certain scene takes place only in dreams, and then playing out a brutally climactic encounter with high stakes, you'll foreshadow the consequences if the group makes similar choices during a real, upcoming encounter.

Never use this technique to be cruel to a player, and be sensitive to personal concerns before using it at all. Some players understandably prefer not to fight a false reality, even amongst trusted friends.

## One and a Crowd

You may find situations where one player is isolated from the rest of the group, and you're faced with deciding how she adventures or roleplays while the rest of the players sit around trying to look interested. For instance, a courtroom where one hero is on trial, or a meeting that only one can attend. When this happens, recruit every other player to briefly stand in as NPCs. The hero still has to face the challenge alone, but the other players are helping and roleplaying, and can add great depth that the GM alone might not be able to provide.

This technique is really effective if you have one player who loves to split the party and head out on their own. Many GMs subtly discourage this by paying less attention to the solo hero. You may make the game more fun for everyone if you occasionally focus solely on the one player and give all the other players at the table individual monsters or interesting NPCs to play during the solo hero's scene. You'll have the most success if you make this low-prep or zero-prep by simply giving players a quick sentence of description for their NPC, with no unique stats. Telling a player, "you're playing a boastful kobold who has always dreamed of being a chieftain,

but you'll never accomplish that unless you can make a crown out of a human skull" gives that player all the roleplaying hooks they need during a quick fight with the solo hero. Just don't set the solo player up to fail, killed in an unfair fight by powerful monsters run by the other players; that seldom ends well.

## Making the Scene Sing

At their best, non-traditional storytelling techniques brought into a regular RPG can make a story vastly more exciting by raising the stakes. If your heroes know what forces are allied against them, if a vision has made them aware of a murderous spy that no one else knows exist, they will remain focused and excited to exploit the secret vision they've experienced. Don't be afraid to push the normal boundaries on how your heroes gain information; you'll find it pays off in post-game stories long after the campaign concludes.

*Kevin Kulp is a Boston-based shiftwork consultant, writer, game designer & BBQ guy. Luckily, most of those tie together. His games include TimeWatch, an investigative time travel game about time cops fixing sabotaged history, and the fantasy western game Owl Hoot Trail.*

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