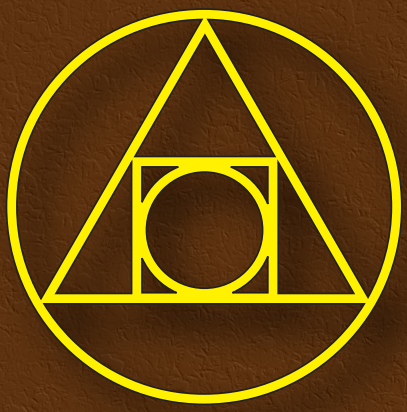
The Game Master

A Guide to the Art and Theory of Roleplaying

by

Tobiah Q. Panshin



—with illustrations by A.M. Thompson—

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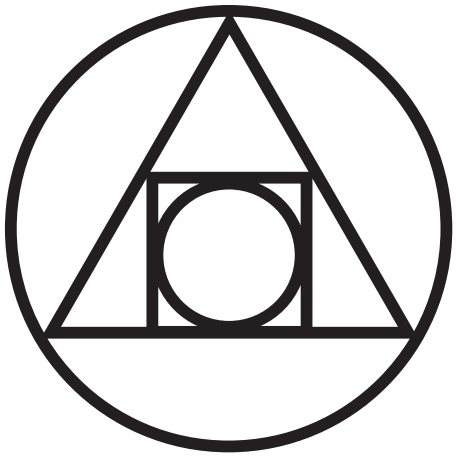

—with illustrations by A.M. Thompson—

Second Edition

Illustrations by A.M. Thompson

Special Thanks to:

Alexei Panshin
Cory Panshin
Benjamin Wallis
Brant Gillihan-Eddy

Contents

Author's Notes

Over the course of this book I use a number of acronyms, technical terms, and common gaming expressions. I also reference a number of specific games, campaign settings, and other roleplaying products. If you are reading this book it is my expectation that you already have at least a passing knowledge of roleplaying games, and are at least passingly familiar with these references.

However, for the sake of completeness I try to define some of the more obscure terms, and I have provided an index of the games referenced at the back of the book which you may find helpful. Failing that, the internet is your friend.

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The Game Master was written and published independently by a gamer, for gamers. It is provided on a "Pay What You Want" basis, and is free to distribute. If you find this book to be of value to you, please visit my website, `http://tobiah.panshin.net`, and make a contribution.

This book was a lot of work to produce, and your payment will help support my future work. And I'd really appreciate it.

Chapter I

Master of the Game

There are no real words to express the feelings you experience at the conclusion of a successful campaign. There's joy certainly. A sense of catharsis, perhaps, along with a certain level of accomplishment. But there's something more. An indescribable feeling you and the other players share when you look back over the events of a campaign with the knowledge that this was one you will never forget. The battles won in spite of—or perhaps because of—a plan so insane it should never have worked in a million years. The moments of triumph and failure both epic and tragic that live so vividly in your imagination that you can picture them as clearly as if you'd watched it happen with your own eyes. The one liners so ridiculous that they send the entire group into peals of laughter, even years later. The moments when the fate of *all the universe* rested with a small group of adventurers, and salvation or damnation looked back at you from the other side of a single roll of the dice.

It's moments like these—and so many others like them—that make the games so memorable. NPCs we have loved, and those we have lost. The moment when you dig a brand new +3 Longsword out of some ancient treasure vault. The satisfaction of gaining that one level where you get the really cool power. The exhilaration we all feel when everything is on the line and that die comes up "Nat-20."

We are constantly seeking out moments like these, yet not every game is that memorable. Many end up being exercises in frustration. Adventures where the group gets to sit around listening to the game master read long speeches and show off with his NPCs. Campaigns that seem to be nothing but endless strings of combat encounters ever so loosely tied around some plot that doesn't actually make much sense when you get right down to it. Groups that fall apart due to infighting, because the thief stole from the paladin, and the cleric's player is never happy because you don't fight enough undead.

With so many ways a campaign can go wrong, we have to ask whether there is a rhyme or reason to how campaigns collapse. Certainly any longtime gamer could point out examples like

the ones above and more. But those are only the symptoms of a bad campaign. What are the causes?

Is it the players' fault? The game master's? Some players game with the same group for years or even decades, and any one of them can recite stories about games that have gone poorly or well. Almost any veteran roleplayer will have experienced a time when they played two games consisting of the same group, the same game master, even the same game system, but which have diverged wildly in quality.

You could chalk some of it up to happenstance. The right characters, the active interest of the players, and even dumb chance can combine to produce the proper mix of elements for a memorable campaign. But if certain factors tend to lead towards better games, why are they not known and applied by every game master?

To begin to answer that question, we have to look at roleplaying games as both a hobby and a community. Ours is not a hobby for spectators, nor does it request or reward expertise in the way some hobbies do. There is no Roleplaying Professional League. There are no tenured professors of roleplaying theory. There are no wise old men sitting around fireplaces sipping brandy and discussing the finer merits of d20-based systems versus d6.

Roleplaying games take place in out of the way locations—basements and dorm rooms, garages and dining room tables. The typical roleplaying group is by nature an ad hoc, do-it-yourself, and "whatever works" affair. The ideal game offers its players unlimited freedom, with no predetermined limits to what they can do or where they can go, and many gamers subscribe to a personal ethos of unfettered self-determination.

The combination of these elements results in a community which often values individualism over consensus, and eschews any standards of performance. In other group hobbies, such as soccer clubs, there is an expectation that the participants will practice and employ teamwork, up to and including following the dictates of a team captain. This is simply not the case in the overwhelming majority of roleplaying groups. The idea of imposing that level of structure or hierarchy onto a roleplaying group is widely considered laughable.

As a result there is little pressure for games or gamers to improve, and a strong cultural disincentive to ask more from a player, or exert any sort of authority over them. Because there is no drive for betterment, no wide-scale philosophies of roleplaying have been developed. Every game master and group of players start each campaign essentially from scratch, rediscovering the

wheel over and over again.

This can work for good or ill. Like the inhabitants of some lonely Pacific island, each gaming group exists in its own ecosystem, evolving in isolation. In some instances this can create amazing lifeforms like those found nowhere else on Earth. In others, it can create lumbering brutes so ill-adapted to anything but their own tiny island that the smallest intrusion is enough to wipe the group out.

In all the years I've been playing and running roleplaying games, I've enjoyed games so awe-inspiring that the players will recite the story and reference those characters until the day they die. I've also been in games so bad that I wish I could scour every trace of their memory from my brain with an industrial-grade brain-scourer. Moreover, I've run my fair share of both.

While it's a given that every game is different and every group has their own way of doing things, after so many campaigns—both good and bad—I have seen patterns emerge. Things which always lead to trouble, things that usually work well, shortcuts a game master can take, and tools that make a game master's job that much easier.

If we assume that roleplaying games as a medium must share some common elements (and how else could you call them all roleplaying games?), why should there not be a shared theory of

roleplaying games? If there is enough in common between poets for there to be poet laureates, why can there not be roleplaying laureates?

Assuming for a moment that such a philosophy of roleplaying could exist, what would it look like? We can say with some degree of certainty that when it comes to roleplaying games, there is no one right way to play. There are after all as many styles of gaming as there are styles of writing, drawing, or acting. One gamer cannot look down their nose at any other and say that they are having wrong-fun without a degree of hypocrisy. Everybody does it a little differently. So long as the group is having fun, no one way can be said to be more right than any other.

The second thing we can say about roleplaying games is that there are plenty of *wrong* ways to play. The critical distinction is the difference between wrong-*fun* and wrong-*play*. Any sort of play which makes the game less fun—if not actively *un*fun—can be considered "doing it wrong". I call this The Axiom of Roleplaying:

The purpose of gaming is to have fun.

All other considerations should be regarded as secondary to this one indisputable fact. Fun is the supreme law of the game and can never be superseded.

However, vague statements about fun aren't particularly useful as a guideline for running a good game. We need to establish both a set of laws to operate by, and a catalog of tools we can use in support of those laws.

Defining a Roleplaying Game

At their heart, all true RPGs possess three qualities. The first quality is that they are games, both in the sense that they contain challenges which participants must overcome, and in that they are designed with enjoyment in mind.

The second quality of RPGs is that they are a social exercise. The weekly game session is a time to kick back with friends, swap old war stories, tell jokes, and share a rare bit of quality time. It is natural for RPGs to be the nexus of both a community and a culture. Any game you can play exclusively by yourself isn't an RPG.

The third—and in my opinion most critical—quality of RPGs is that they are a story-telling medium. Any seasoned roleplayer will have dozens of stories of characters they've played and

adventures they've had, which they will be more than glad to share with you at great length. The story element is essential in separating RPGs from simple board or tabletop games.

As a storytelling medium, RPGs are similar to movies, books, theater, and video games. Each medium tells a story in a different way. To run a really good campaign, you have to understand both how roleplaying games are similar to those other mediums and how they are different.

Role Playing

Whenever a story is told, there are three roles being enacted: the Author, the Actor, and the Audience. Depending on the medium, these roles are distributed in different ways. In films and theater, each role is held by a different person, and this is how we most commonly think about them. A writer and director conceive of a story, which is then taken over by actors who interpret the characters, adding detail and inflection to their performance. Last, the audience receive the actors' performance, adding their own interpretation to the events being portrayed.

This is not the only arrangement, however. In literature, the writer both conceives of the story and narrates it, while the reader reconstructs the writer's narration in their own mind. The Author and Audience roles remain the same, while the Actor role is split between the two. In a video game the player takes on both the roles of Actor and Audience, directing the action of the player's avatar through the story conceived by the developers.

But all of these are essentially static mediums for storytelling. The story is set down by the author, and proceeds from start to finish in the same way every single time. Every time you read *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is going to win the riddling contest with Gollum. The reader can't decide that one time Bilbo will lose, and have to escape without the ring.

Even within the medium of video games the content is created by game developers months or years before the player sits down, controller in hand. You might interact with the game non-linearly, as in the case of sandbox games such as *The Elder Scrolls* or *Grand Theft Auto* series, but the content itself is ultimately static and unchanging. You only have those tools to craft your story which the Authors have provided you with.

In an RPG, however, everyone in the game performs all three roles: actors, audience and authors. Each person contributes to the story, acts out one or many characters, and adds their own interpretation to events. As long as the game is ongoing, the outcome of the story is unknown. In this way the roleplaying game is unique as a *dynamic* storytelling medium. The

story, dialog, and even the rules of the game change in response to the actions and desires of the players.

This dynamism is, in my opinion, what truly defines a roleplaying game, independent of any specific mechanism by which the game portion is arbitrated. Understanding this fact is one of the most critical elements of running a great campaign.

Disassembling the Pieces

Recognizing the unique nature of RPGs is a first step, but to understand what causes a game to be good or bad we have to further break the game down into its component parts, and understand how each of them operates and contributes to the game. Beyond that, we also have to understand how all of those components work together as a whole.

Generally, the various elements of an RPG campaign can be broken down into three significant categories:

- The Plot
- The Group
- The Game

A campaign can survive any one of these categories operating poorly and still be fun. It's when two major elements[1] are performing badly that games start to fall apart. But when all three elements are working well—both individually and with each other—that is when the best games happen; the ones we recall for years after.

Your overall goal should be to create a game which includes a strong, engaging plot; a group of characters who interact well with both the other members of the party and the game world as a whole; and a game master who both cooperates and collaborates with the other players of the game. To achieve each of these goals you will need to learn how to avoid the perils and pitfalls that lead toward bad games, as well as make use of tools which will guide your group down the path to a great game.

Many campaigns start off with the game master announcing a game system, after which the players immediately start making characters, while the GM thinks up adventures to put them

[1] or—shudder—all three.

through. This immediate lack of coordination is often the first seed of discord which leads many games to either fall apart or drag on without clear focus.

The first step for a game master should be to establish a clear campaign concept, including such crucial aspects of the game as the genre, tone, and setting. These aspects collectively form a campaign outline, which can be used to bring the players together to create characters who will be suitable to the world and the story and will be compatible with one another.

However, talking about what to put into the campaign outline doesn't make a whole lot of sense without the context of understanding *why* and *how* the outline will be used. For that reason I'm going to start Part 1 by discussing the assembling of the group and the writing of a group contract. In Part 2 I'll go back to the more technical process that the game master will go through to determine the plot, the setting, and the game mechanics which underlie the campaign.

Part 1

Assembling the Group

Chapter II

The Group Contract

The question of what makes an adventuring party work is a difficult one to answer. It's safe to say that some parties work well together and others don't, even with the same group of players behind them.

Sometimes it's an issue of players clashing for one reason or another. Two characters with similar abilities, fighting over who gets to do what. Two thieves, for example, can't both pick the same lock, just as two techs can't both hack the same computer system. It can result from players having conflicting goals, conflicting strategies, or just roleplaying their characters to the hilt, even unto death. I've seen absolutely wonderful characters who were excellently played, but simply did not fit in with the group because of incompatible methods, goals, or abilities.

It can also be an issue of a single player whose character simply does not fit into the campaign on either a technical or narrative level and the conflict that results from that. A salient example would be a Sherlock Holmes-esque detective I once witnessed in a *Werewolf* game. The other PCs were powerful enough that they could bully or fight their way through any problem faster than the detective could detect. He was a great character that had nothing to offer the group with which he was paired.

While it's impossible to guarantee that any given group is going to work well together, there are steps you can take to help things along. Let's start out by taking a look at a stereotypical example of party construction and then see how we can improve on things. Most players will probably have had more than one experience like this:

> The GM announces he will run a Dungeons & Dragons game. He intends for the major antagonists to be the Drow, and accordingly much of the action will take place in the Underdark. But he does not mention this to the rest of the players. It's a surprise!
>
> Each player goes off by themself and creates their character.

> We cut to the first session. The group assembles, and they share their characters. First up we have the guy who watched *Pirates of the Caribbean* last night and has accordingly rolled up a pirate captain.
>
> The next player has made a ninja, because there's always a ninja. The ninja has an insanely high stealth skill, and the kind of cavalier attitude towards dispatching those who cross him that just screams Chaotic Neutral.
>
> Last we have the paladin, wearing full platemail. He is equipped with a warhorse, squire, squire's donkey, a wagon, 3 servants, a cook, 11 men-at-arms, and a jester.
>
> The pirate captain, the ninja, and the paladin meet in a bar. They have adventures.

Here we have three characters from three different genres. The paladin and his entourage basically ruin the ninja's ability to be stealthy, negating his major skill. Because this game will be taking place entirely in the narrow passageways of the Underdark, the pirate can't use his sailing. The party will never get anywhere near the ocean. Neither can the paladin ride his horse through most of the winding corridors.

These three yahoos probably shouldn't even be in the same story, let alone traveling together. A group like this will be crippled before the game even starts, mostly by a few poor—but easily correctable—choices during character creation. The good news is, none of these characters are bad by themselves. There are plenty of really cool stories involving pirates, ninjas, and knights out there (although typically not all three at once), and there's no reason why your game can't be one of them. With a little bit of tweaking to your group's creation process, you can produce characters that are both interesting to the players and mechanically suited to work well with each other and the campaign as a whole.

Before we talk about character *creation*, however, let's take a little sideroad and talk about creation *conception*.

The Protagonist Versus the Ensemble

In order for a group of PCs to work well together they need to be mutually dependent on each other. If one player is held above the others as "the main character", with the rest of the party filling the role of supporting cast, it will only breed anger, frustration, and resentment

within the group. A good party is one that only succeeds when everyone works cooperatively to complete goals.

In stories with a single main protagonist, that character frequently has abilities or resources that are objectively better than the other characters. They often go it alone against insurmountable odds, are masters of multiple disciplines, and generally find themselves the center of attention everywhere they go. In a story with many protagonists, the characters typically work together as a group to overcome obstacles and achieve goals. Each has their own strengths and weaknesses, and no one is more critical to the story than another.

The difference is subtle, but critical. Contrast, for example, the Harry Potter series with something like *A Song of Ice and Fire*, by George R.R. Martin. While the various other characters in Harry Potter play a significant role in the series, and do things Harry himself cannot, they are ultimately supporting cast. Only Harry can defeat the primary antagonist, and the story justifiably centers around him. He is *the* protagonist.

In *A Song of Ice and Fire* there is no one main protagonist. The focus of the story jumps from character to character, giving each of them equal narrative weight. It is, in many ways, the very definition of an ensemble cast. A character—any character—could die for any reason and on any page, and the story would continue. Each one is *a* protagonist.

In most narratives, the audience collectively shares the perspective of the protagonists. Reading Harry Potter, we identify with Harry when the story follows Harry. When the narrative switches to Ron Weasley, we identify with Ron. No matter how many people read that book, the entire audience always shares the same perspective.

In a roleplaying game, however, each person at the table takes two roles: audience *and* actor. Each person observes the narrative from a different perspective: that of their specific character. Only one person can play Harry, and thus only one person can identify with Harry. The other players must identify with their own character, be it Ron, Hermione, or whomever; and they are stuck in that perspective for the entire game.

Therefore, an RPG with multiple players *must* be a narrative with an ensemble cast, not one with a single main character and supporting cast. Each player needs to design their character to be *a* protagonist, rather than *the* protagonist.

Drawing Inspiration from Popular Fiction

Players often look to popular fiction for inspiration when making a character, and the distinction between a main character and an ensemble is often missed. This can be a major source of conflict among players.

On the one hand, allowing one PC to be better than the others isn't fair to the rest of the group. It also begs the question, "if this character can do pretty much anything they want without help, why are they traveling with this group of dweebs?"

On the other hand, it's also frustrating for a player when their character fails to live up to what they imagine in their head. If the player is drawing the idea for their character from the Lone Unstoppable Badass model, you enter a no-win situation: Either that PC is better than the rest, or they will consistently under-perform compared to "what they are supposed to be able to do." Either that player is pissed off, or the rest of the group is.

Put simply, it's important that players draw the inspiration for their characters from the right *kind* of archetypes. In many cases, it may be better to extract the *elements* of a character a player likes, rather than trying to adapt the whole character into a PC. I'll go into this further in the next chapter, but for now tuck into the back of your head that certain characters work better as inspiration for PCs than others.

Defining Goals

The first step in creating a great adventuring party is to define what your real goals are in the character creation process. From the player's perspective, the goal of character creation is simply to generate a character with an identity and game stats. Easy enough. From the GM's perspective, however, there are several other objectives that need to be met before we can consider the character creation process to be successful.

We don't want characters that just feel dropped into the game. We want characters that appear as part of a cohesive narrative, and who are capable and effective at confronting and overcoming the challenges they face. Many players have been in a situation at one time or another where they realize their character has nothing to do with the game, their powers are useless, and they are constantly fighting with the other PCs. It just plain stinks.

In order to avoid that situation arising, you want to make sure all of the characters the players are creating meet certain objectives. In general, we can break these down into four major points. They are:

- The characters should fit *the game*.
- The characters should fit *the setting*.
- The characters should fit *the campaign*.
- The characters should fit *the group*.

Let's look at each of these points individually:

Fitting the Game

The first major goal is for each character to be mechanically suited to the campaign. As a general rule, most RPGs reward specialization with power. The more specific your special abilities are, the more powerful they can be. Many characters have powers which give them bonuses when they use a certain weapon or item, like the Ace Pilot, or the Spiked-Chain Fighter. Others may receive bonuses in certain areas, such as forests or gladiatorial arenas. Often characters will become very effective in certain types of situations at the expense of others, such as martial combat, magic, or social situations.

In the above example of the Paladin, the Pirate, and the Ninja, each of the characters was unsuitable for the game in some way. The pirate captain would not have either crew or ship to command, nor could the paladin use his horse in the primary setting of the game. Meanwhile, the ninja could not use his stealth abilities and remain with his cohorts.

The GM must take steps to make the players aware of what kinds of threats they will be encountering over the course of the campaign, and warn players away from characters whose powers will be of no use. No pirate captains in the mountains, no lance-specialist knights on the open sea. A cat burglar will not have much to do if the primary method of entry for the party is kicking the door in, just as a barbarian would be ill at ease in a campaign of courtly politics and intrigue.

It is also possible in certain cases to make a character which is simply bad. Perhaps a player spread their character points too thin, or they didn't spend enough points in a necessary ability. It's not uncommon for players to fundamentally misunderstand the importance of certain key

abilities, particularly when they are new to a system. Nor for an experienced GM to have at least one story about accidentally killing the entire party because no one realized that the Dodge skill was a necessity, not an option.

Fitting the Setting

The second goal is for each character to conform to the trappings of the setting, as well as its themes. On one level, this is fairly simple and straight-forward: medieval European fantasy characters in medieval European fantasy, science fiction characters in science fiction, wuxia characters in wuxia, and so forth.

A player can make very long and entirely rational explanations about just how their particular ninja made it all the way from medieval Japan to France (or their generic fantasy world equivalents), but that does not change the fact that from a narrative perspective a ninja does not belong, any more than if someone decided they wanted to play a modern day superhero in a D&D game.

However, just because there were no ninjas does not mean fantasy Europe was bereft of stealthy assassins, nor does the lack of samurai necessitate the absence of knights. Settings are usually designed to be as inclusive as possible, and there is a high likelihood that—regardless of the game—you will be able to find an equivalent character type that fits the setting and fulfills the spirit of the character the player wants to create.

It is also important to address a second aspect of the setting: the themes. For example, one of the common themes of zombie horror is that the protagonists are ordinary people cast into a world where gruesome death lies waiting at every turn, forced to survive by any means necessary. While it is possible to create a character whose core concept is that he is a zombie fiction fanatic who has memorized zombie survival tactics, stockpiled anti-zombie weaponry, and generally turned himself into a one-man zombie slaying machine, this is not in keeping with the traditional themes of zombie horror.

Another example would be the perennially popular "Gray Jedi" archetype. One of the central conceits of *Star Wars* is the good/evil dualism between the Jedi and the Sith, in keeping with the general pulp fiction qualities of the setting as a whole. Despite this, many players (and unfortunately many authors of Expanded Universe novels) attempt to craft a "Gray Jedi" path which enjoys the benefits of both good and evil powers with none of the associated flaws of Jedi

or Sith. Accusations of munchkinism[2] aside, a neutral Jedi does not fit within the themes of the Star Wars universe as established in the films.

Fitting the Campaign

It's often the case that the PCs find themselves carried along the plot through no proactive action of their own, and with nothing to prevent them from simply walking away from an adventure except they have nothing else to do. The third goal is therefore for each character to have some sort of personal attachment to the major plot of the campaign. Something important enough that they can't simply walk away.

The most immediate form of connection is to have a direct personal investment in the main plot. Let's say, for example, you are running a campaign whose main antagonist is an evil wizard who is planning to summon a demon to conquer the world. Wanting to stop the wizard and save the world is the most immediate connection to the plot that a PC could have, but it's not the only one.

Perhaps the wife of a PC is ill with a mysterious sickness, and the wizard's chief lieutenant is the only person who knows the secret cure. While not *directly* connected to the main plot of the game, that PC's goals coincide with those of the other characters enough for them to be interested in the main plot, while having their own personal sub-focus on a particular minor villain.

Another possibility is that the PC's personal goals may be actively aided or hindered by the plot of the campaign. Perhaps they are out for revenge against the wizard entirely aside from the demon-summoning, or they want to steal some valuable magical artifact from him for their own purposes. Maybe they've heard the wizard has a vast fortune they wish to plunder. Whatever reason a player might devise, there should be *something* which binds that character to the over-arching campaign.

Along with having a connection to the events of the campaign, the character should fit in with the mood and tone of the campaign, just as they should fit in with the themes of the setting as a whole. If, for example, one of the driving themes of the campaign is the fallibility of mankind, along with the possibility for redemption, each of the characters should be in some sense fallible and have mistakes in their past they feel the need to atone for. If one of the themes

[2] A pejorative term for a player who min/maxes to an extreme degree, often with a connotation of immaturity.

of the campaign is that the world is ultimately indifferent to our own ideas of justice, and all ideals will ultimately be compromised, a character whose concept involves the triumph of ideals in the face of insurmountable odds is inappropriate.

Fitting the Group

The final goal is for the PCs to fit with each other. In order to fit the group, each of the characters should fulfill a couple of criteria. First, they should not be inherently incompatible with any of the other characters, whether for mechanical or story reasons. The ninja and the paladin, for example, or a demon-hunter and a demon-summoning wizard. Stealthy characters often run into problems here, as it's fairly common for there to be relatively few sneaky PCs in the group, and a party is only as quiet as the lowest stealth check. However, it is possible to make a character that benefits from being sneaky (or whatever their particular focus ability may be) without being entirely reliant on using it to its maximum benefit every time.

Second, you often end up with groups which are united only by the fact that they are all in the group together. The old "We just met five minutes ago, and I have no reason to trust you, but let's be best friends" dodge is simply lazy roleplaying. Each of the characters should have some sort of tie to the rest of the group on a story level, in the same way they are tied to the campaign as a whole. These ties can take many forms, from old friendships to common goals to an enmity for a common foe, but it is important that they be present in some way.

Assembling the Pieces

When you put together all of these elements, you should have a group of PCs that fit the tone of the campaign, are intimately connected to both the plot and each other, are mechanically suited to the system both individually and as a group, and make sense within the context of the world at large. And you haven't even started playing yet!

It's not hard to imagine that characters which meet all four of these goals are going to inherently be more fun to play than ones that don't, and the players will find these characters to be more rewarding over the course of the campaign. So now that we've established what our goals are, we can start to talk about how you accomplish them in terms of your specific campaign.

The Group Contract

By the time you sit down to create characters with the rest of the group, you as the GM should already have certain information about the game planned out in a campaign outline[3]. Using that information, you can create what I call the group contract. The group contract is essentially the thesis of the party: It describes in rough terms who the party are, what they are about, and the sorts of threats they will be facing.

Depending on how your group is structured you may want a lot of input from the players, or only a little. In some campaigns I have dictated the group contract to the players—as in a recent game in which I had dictated that all of the party members were former members of the same elite commando unit—while in others I have left it more open to the players to develop the contract for themselves.

Regardless of how involved the rest of the group is, the first step in drafting the group contract is to go over the points you have already set down in your campaign outline. Get a feeling for the genre and mood of your game, as well as the focus of the campaign. What kind of challenges will the party face? Will the game have lots of undead? Where is the action going to take place? Would a starship captain be of any use?

Second, you want to establish in one or two sentences what common factors link the group. This could be a group affiliation, such as sympathizers with the Rebel Alliance, students at Hogwarts, or members of the Knights Templar. It could also be some common experience, such as students of the same mentor, veterans of the big war, or alien abductees. Whatever it is, it's a link between all the PCs. A reason that they are together above and beyond their individual goals.

Last, try to describe in rough terms what your intentions are for the campaign as a whole. Imagine you're trying to sell your friends on a really cool TV show or book series, without spoiling the plot. If your campaign outline includes a list of works of fiction that you are using for inspiration, you can share that with the other players as well.

Armed with this draft contract, you should sit down with your players for a game session devoted specifically to working on character creation as a group. During this session you should

[3]I'll go into detail about the campaign outline in Chapter V. For now, all you need to understand is that it's an outline of the campaign.

briefly go over the relevant information from the group contract with your players. Once they have a general idea of what the game is and where the party will fit into it, allow them some time to brainstorm. They can throw around character ideas, get input from you, and ask clarifying questions. Encourage them to think about how their characters might have met or interacted previously.

Although it's not necessary for everyone to know every detail about their characters at this stage, the one critical element is a strong sense of why the group exists, and why it consists of these particular people. Everybody carrying around big signs that say "I am a PC" is not a valid reason. Optimally each character should have some level of connection with at least two other characters. It could be as simple as "We both hate the same antagonist" or "we both post on the same conspiracy theory message board." Imagine these characters are real people. Why are they friends? What do they have in common?

The goal of the brainstorming session isn't to come out with completed characters, but rather for each player to have a rough concept that they can take away and use to generate their character. The players should have a party in mind that works together thematically, has a meaningful connection to the plot of your game, and each member of which works synergistically with the others.

Rather than being an adventuring party consisting of Gandalf, Wolverine, and Optimus Prime, your group will be more like the X-Men, The Fellowship of the Ring, or the Autobots: a team, not a motley assortment of strangers. They will also have a fundamental connection to the main plot and be able to participate meaningfully in each other's subplots.

Together, the mutual ties between the individual characters and the party's shared overall goal within the campaign form the final group contract. If it helps your group, you might consider writing a mission statement or something similar. A paragraph or so stating who the group is and what their goals are. This knowledge will give the players a basis on which to generate characters that mesh organically with your campaign and with each other.

Bad-Wrong Fun

While the group contract can be very helpful in composing a better adventuring party, there are still many ways that a campaign can go awry during character creation. So there are a few

follow up points that need to be made regarding the process of building the party.

The Chosen One

Do not, and I cannot stress this enough, make any one character either the focus of, or integral to, the plot. There will come a day when the player of the character either cannot make a game or, heaven forfend, quits. Suddenly you're short a ring-bearer, half the group has no reason to hang around the other half, and your game is falling to pieces. Also consider that while the player who gets to be the chosen one might be having a good time, the rest of the group may not feel the same way about playing second, third, and fourth fiddle. This is especially true if chosen-one-hood comes with a nifty artifact weapon or other bonus powers the other players simply don't have access to.

An adventuring party is an ensemble. While the annals of fiction are replete with Chosen Ones, Destined Heroes, and miscellaneous pre-ordained Persons of Particular Fate, an RPG is still at heart a game. Characters die. Things don't go as planned. In any given episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, you could kill any one of the main cast without crippling the Enterprise (or the show). If Tasha Yar should happen to die, or Captain Picard is kidnapped by the Borg, the ship is not lost. In your game, on the other hand, an ill-timed critical hit against an overly significant PC may be all it takes to sour an entire campaign.

When to say "No"

Compromise is a virtue and in general you want to say "Yes" to your players as much as possible. However, at this one specific moment—character creation—it's better to disappoint a player now by rejecting their character concept than it is to add a concept to your game that you don't want. If one player *really* wants to play a psionicist—an idea you are dead set against—you will only disappoint them when you kill or otherwise take away their character three months from now on the grounds that it's derailing the game.

If a character is min/maxed[4], completely out of step, or obviously going to be disruptive to the group, say so. Don't let a player bring a character into the game that you are certain is going

[4] A PC who has been strongly optimized, usually for combat. The practice of min/maxing is sometimes looked down upon, and can be considered not playing in the spirit of the game.

to cause problems. By the same measure, if you see a player is making a character that you know is going to be ineffective in your game—for example, a demon hunter in a game that's only about fighting orcs—just tell them so and suggest they play a different character. There are few things worse at the game table than sitting through session after session of waiting for it to be your character's turn to be awesome, only for it to *never happen*.

If a player has their heart set on a particular character that you are certain is wrong for the campaign, you need to tell them straight out, "I'm sorry, it's a nice idea, but that character is not right for this game."

A disappointed player will eventually get over their disappointment; a disruptive or ineffective character will always be disruptive or ineffective. If the player is determined to bring that idea to the table, they can always save it for a more appropriate campaign later on.

Strangers in a Strange Land, or *Don't Pull the Rug Out*

There is an all too common trick some GMs play in which the players walk in expecting one sort of game, only to quickly discover they are playing an entirely different campaign—one which the characters they've created are unsuited for. I'll give two examples, and then explain just why this sort of opening doesn't work.

In the first example, a fellow player once told me the story of a sci-fi game they had played which was to take place on Earth. All of the PCs were members of Spacefleet, with skills and backgrounds and contacts related to the Earth Defense Force. The game was pitched as revolving around their lives on Earth and being enlisted in the spacefleet, and the characters were built around that premise. Five minutes into the first game session the Earth is destroyed by aliens, the spacefleet is scattered, and the players are limping across the galaxy in a couple of busted up carrier ships filled with refugees.

In another campaign—this time D&D—the first fight of the first game session was against an ancient Lich who dispatched the entire party almost without effort. The group then "woke up" a century or so later and far more powerful. They soon discovered that after their deaths the Lich used their bodies as his four generals, and they had spent the last century kicking the hell out of the world until the Lich was finally killed by a different group of heroes. This freed the PCs from his control, but left them in a world where they are widely known as the blackest of villains.

Now both of these sound like the introductions to pretty kick-ass games, and they could be with a little work. The problem is that the players were walking into those games expecting one campaign and getting a completely different one. In the former case, the players enter the game thinking they are playing *Star Trek*, but it turns out they're actually playing *Battlestar Galactica*. Large portions of the characters' backgrounds—including piles of build points for everything from higher ranks to powerful friends in government to plot hooks based around the Earth—have now been flushed down the toilet.

In the latter case you have an interesting setup, but only if the PCs have been designed to take advantage of it. Let's say, for example, one of the PCs is a deposed prince who has been betrayed by his uncle. His entire character is based around his quest to regain the throne and bring his uncle to justice. The player has gone to great lengths laying out the complex political network of his home kingdom, his contacts in the resistance, his rich family history, and so forth. A century of undead conquest later that country probably doesn't exist anymore, and the PC's uncle is certainly long dead by now.

In both cases the GM was more concerned with his narrative twist surprising the players than with providing a fun game. While the element of surprise is a laudable goal, there are times when the integrity of the narrative must give way to the players' enjoyment of the game. In order for a character to work, they need to be grounded in the setting, either in terms of background and connections or in terms of skills and abilities. It's fine to send your modern day PCs back in time to the Middle Ages if they're all members of the SCA; not so much if they're a group of accountants.

Either of the above examples would make for a good campaign, provided that the GM informs the players of what's coming and includes it in the group contract. While that may mean ruining the surprise of the first session, it will vastly improve the game over the long term. By the time the players get to the end of the last session, they are hardly going to care that they knew ahead of time what was going to happen at the beginning of the first session.

One of the benefits of the group contract is that this sort of open communication allows you to build a better and more specific kind of party. If we look at the example of the sci-fi game again, part of the set up is intended to be that the *characters* are not prepared for the destruction of Earth. The GM's mistake was expanding this to include the *players* as being unprepared as well.

In order for a game of this type to work, as part of the group contract the players should understand that the game will begin with the destruction of the Earth. Their characters are unaware that this will be happening and they should build their PCs such that they will A) be mechanically suitable for a Battlestar Galactica type of game, and B) have personal stories that will be interesting within that setting.

Chapter III

Character Creation

At this point, you should have your own campaign outline in hand, which tells what the campaign is going to be about, and the group contract, which describes who the group are, what their goals are, and why they are together. These two things will provide all the tools you need to make a group of characters that are going to both be interesting and have strong ties to the plot and world of the campaign.

For the game master, this is the least involved portion of the design process. It's a time to step back and let the players shine. For the most part, your role here is to answer mechanics questions, clarify some of the things you've shared with the players from the campaign outline, and in general act as a sounding board for the players. There are, however, a few points that will help you streamline this process and avoid some of the most common character creation mistakes.

But before we get into the details, I need to make a declaration. In this chapter, I'm going to present a heretical claim. A lot of people reading it are going to call me crazy, or a jerk, or think I'm just plain wrong. So I ask that you hear me out before making up your mind. The claim is this:

Players should not always be the ultimate authority on their own characters.

It pains me to say that, because it flies in the face of decades of roleplaying wisdom and tradition. One of the core tenets of the RPG is the player's ultimate authority over their own character. The thoughts and actions of a PC are sacred ground and the one place a game master is absolutely forbidden to meddle.

On the whole, I agree with this philosophy. It's very easy for an undisciplined game master to fall into the habit of railroading the players. I've stumbled down that dark path myself more than once, and I'll spend a good portion of Part 3 of this book discussing how to avoid making

that mistake. However, I think there is something to be said for the GM stepping in to add direction to the character creation process.

In fact, there have been a number of instances already where I have suggested telling the players "No, that doesn't fit my pre-conceived notions of what this game is about". So I want to make this explicit. The rules that apply in the design phase of a campaign and after play has begun are fundamentally different. In the name of a coherent narrative, I feel it is legitimate for a GM to set boundaries around what type of PCs are to be included in the game. However, once the game starts the GM needs to keep his or her dirty mitts off the PCs.

This is not to say that a GM should ever tell a player, "You must." Referring back to the Axiom of Roleplaying, fun always comes first; a GM can't just tell the players what to do. On the other hand, I don't feel that it's acceptable for a player to say, "This is my character, I'm going to make whatever I want and you can't do anything about it," either.

Within that context, I feel there is a specific window where it's acceptable for a GM to put specific limitations on what is allowable in terms of characters. To that end, there are four rules that I recommend employing in the character creation process, regardless of the system or setting.

The 4 Golden Rules

There are a number of ways in which a player can make a character that—while not actively in violation of the rules of the game—is either expressly disruptive or generally not in the spirit of good sportsmanship. A classic example is the Sith Lord in the party of Jedi. The character in the group who is secretly plotting to undermine and ultimately betray the rest of the party.

While the "spy who is slowly redeemed by the innate goodness of the protagonists" is a trope with a long history in literature, it never seems to work as well in a roleplaying game as the player might intend. This is not to say that a player who is making a problem character is intentionally trying to be disruptive. Many such characters are made without the player recognizing that it will cause problems down the road. Still, given enough time such a character will nearly always lead to problems.

Another type of character that will almost definitely be disruptive is the mysterious loner: a character with no family, no connections, and who may or may not even remember their

own past. Wolverine, for example. With no explicitly defined past, the player doesn't need to take responsibility for defining the character's identity or history in any way. Any action (or reaction) can be taken on the basis of "a feeling" without justifying or explaining it. With no personal connections, there are no hooks for the GM to entice the character into doing anything. The mysterious loner is basically the story equivalent of min/maxing.

While the traitor and the mysterious loner are two of the most stand-out examples, there are plenty of other character archetypes that are inherently disruptive to a campaign. However, we can lump all of them into two general categories: characters designed to legitimize bad player behavior[5], and characters designed to circumvent bad GM behavior.

Bad GM behavior is a problem, and one that will be covered in another chapter. For right now, we want to head off the problem of bad characters, regardless of the players' intentions in making them. The 4 Golden Rules are designed to act as a general buffer against all these sorts of PCs.

I recommend giving these rules to your players before character creation begins with a simple instruction: Any character that violates any of these rules will not be accepted for play. If it breaks one of them, don't even bother asking.

1) The Legion of Superheroes Rule

> *"No two players may fill the exact same role in the party."*
>
> The name of this rule is a call-back to the bylaws of the original Legion of Superheroes of DC Comics, although you could also call it the "too many cooks in the kitchen" rule. In the original Legion, no two members could have the same superpower. In game terms we call this "niche protection." Each player has a role in the group, a thing their character can do that makes them important. You should never have two players fighting over which one gets to pick the lock, or quibbling over who can snipe better.
>
> This is not necessarily to say that two players can't both have the same class or power. If both want to play wizards, each wizard could fulfill a different party need. One might specialize in combat magic while the other focuses on utility powers, or

[5] "I'm not an asshole, really. I'm just *roleplaying* as an asshole."

summoning. Regardless of what game you're playing there are lots of different roles available, so there's no reason why two players should be stepping on each other's niches, in or out of combat.

2) The Scooby Doo Rule

"Your character is a person who exists in society on some level."

They have lots of unnamed family members, old friends, or pen pals. People who they know and care about on some level. Weird things will sometimes happen to these people, and it's up to the character to go solve their groovy mystery.

The Scooby Doo rule is a hedge against the loner orphan character who has no family, no friends, no connections, and no purpose in existing. Unless you're a hermit living on a mountain top somewhere, subsisting on berries and small game, you have to know *somebody*, and hermits living exclusively on remote mountain tops typically do not make good PCs.

My apologies go out to those people who insist on playing The Man with No Name in every single game, but that simply isn't going to fly. Loners, by definition, do not hang out in groups. PCs on the other hand, do.

3) The "You are an Adventurer" Rule

"You are an adventurer. You go on adventures. You do not avoid *going on adventures."*

I once GMed a game in which the party arrived at the compound of a bunch of dream cultists, armed with a letter of introduction, a gift, and an appointment. However, when no one answered the front door, half the party decided that it would be trespassing to check things out. They instead drove across town to get pancakes, while the rest of the party actually investigated the scene and fought psychic dinosaurs. After the adventure, the pancake-eaters complained that nothing interesting happened at the pancake house.

It should be pretty obvious that whatever else you put on your character sheet, somewhere on there it should say that your character is the kind of person who

goes on adventures. You are not the kind of person who says, "Let the cops handle this." You are not the captain of the town guard who refuses to go save the world because someone has to guard the fifty peasants who live in your tiny hamlet. You are, by definition, the kind of person who sticks your nose where it doesn't belong. You are an *adventurer*.

This is not to say that your character is magically compelled to fly headlong into every situation that confronts them, but the GM should not have to fight to get the PCs to actually go on the adventure. NPCs live the quiet life. PCs save the world, make the money, win the tournament, and win the heart of the love interest.

4) The "No Dark Secrets" Rule

"Your character is not out to betray the party. Period."

He isn't the Sith Lord in a party of Jedi, a cultist to a dark god secretly working for the villain, or in any way trying to sabotage the efforts of the rest of the party. You can have your own agenda and motivations, and you can be as evil as you want to be. But at the end of the day you will side with the rest of the group, even if your preferred methods may vary. In other words, Play Nice.

In a perfect world I would never need to write that paragraph, nor expect that it should need to be used; yet here we are. Any character that violates Rule 4 should get stamped with a big old red "NO" in 72 point font. I really can't stress how many games I've participated in, in which one of the players eventually sides with the villain. Trust me, it ends badly. Every. Single. Time.

With liberal application of these four rules you will easily avoid a large percentage of the most common problems that plague character creation. It can be difficult to say "No" to players, especially ones who are your friends. Therefore it may be easier on an inter-personal level to point to a stated rule than to try and talk a player down when they've set their heart on a character you know will be disruptive to the game.

Ripping Off Media to Make Interesting Characters

Once you get over the initial hump of blockading the really disruptive character concepts, you can start to look at how to help the players come up with really interesting and fun concepts

that mesh well with your intended campaign. One way you can do that is by ripping off cool concepts that already exist[6].

Pretty much everyone, everywhere, has at one time or another read or watched something and imagined themself as the protagonist. Schoolyards are full of children pretending to be Superman or the Ninja Turtles, or whatever. Identification with the protagonist is, after all, one of the significant qualities of strong writing. Those schoolyard games of make-believe form the foundation of our later forays into the realms of the imagination, so it's natural that we would want to extend this self-identification to the game table.

If our games already ape the trappings of popular media, at least in spirit if not in name, why then not go a step further and appropriate the characters as well as the setting? If you're playing *Star Wars*, it stands to reason that you might want to play as Luke, Han, and Leia. If you're playing superheroes, why be Platypus-Man when you can straight up be Batman? Hell, your group might very well do exactly that, and have a great time.

For various reasons, however, playing as specific popular characters is not always viable. It may be that your campaign necessarily excludes the protagonists of the original work from participating. Or you and your group might feel that a certain character cannot be done justice at the game table, or could not be balanced against other characters. Perhaps a player very much wants to play as Han Solo, but the campaign is going to be set in the Star Trek Universe.

Whatever the case, one of the players has just watched *Batman* or *The Matrix* or *The Lord of the Rings*, and they totally want to play as the hot character de jour. But for whatever reason, you don't feel that simply dropping the character in wholesale is feasible. Maybe you aren't anxious to see the cyborg from the new Terminator movie showing up in your Dungeons and Dragons game.

Anyone who has spent more than a few hours at a game table has witnessed the parade of store-brand knock-offs and color palette swaps that commonly infest game tables. I think we can do better than that. So we need to figure out a way to adapt a given popular character into an original one, in such as way that it captures what interests the player while at the same time appeasing the GM's tender sensibilities as to what is and is not appropriate to the game setting.

The first thing we want to do is to break down exactly what it is about the character that

[6]And before you jump in with, "but my group wants to be *original*," let me say this: Everything is a rip-off of something else. The only question is how good a job you do obfuscating your sources.

attracts the player. It could be a cool suite of powers, a set of attitudes, or certain background attributes. In superheroes, these qualities are surprisingly easy to identify, often becoming catch-phrases or titles. Peter Parker is "Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man." Wolverine has said, "I'm the best there is at what I do, and what I do isn't very nice" about five thousand times. But these aren't just cool lines; they are informing us about the nature of the character.

Most characters can be broken down into 3 or 4 such key attributes. For example, Mr. Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is intelligent, naïve, seeks to understand the nature of humanity, and is slightly physically inhuman. Now, if we forget about Mr. Data himself and just focus on those four attributes, what other characters can we make that possess those qualities? If we are playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, those qualities would make the basis for a really interesting Elf character (possibly raised by humans) that contains the essence of Data, but is a distinct and original character.

By peeling away the layers of characterization, design motif, and other dressings you will slowly reveal the more archetypal underpinnings of the character that make him or her appealing. You can then extract those elements without feeling like you are just making a knock-off, and the player will end up with a richer, more personal, more interesting character who is also dramatically tied to the story of your campaign.

As a side note, you can use the same technique to create original characters that aren't direct adaptations of specific figures from popular fiction. Simply write out a list of 3-5 characters the player is interested in, and break them down in the way described above. From there you can proceed in one of two ways. You could look for common factors between the characters to better define what kind of character they are interested in, creating a composite figure. Alternatively, you could mix and match elements to create something inspired by—but wholly distinct from—the source characters.

Funny Hat Gaming

The last element of character creation I want to discuss is less of an instruction and more a general comment. Funny Hat Gaming is something which has been discussed on and off among gamers for years. It refers to the tendency to reduce non-human races to what are essentially stereotypes or caricatures. Dwarves as Scottish humans with beards and drinking

problems. Elves as really smug hippies with pointy ears. Halflings as hyperactive kleptomaniacs with constant munchies. However this habit may manifest, it basically boils down to players roleplaying their character as humans in funny hats.

For some groups this problem may be no problem. Perhaps all of your players are excellent roleplayers, or maybe that's just how you like to play. In a general sense, any intelligent non-human that comes from the imagination of a human being is always going to be a human in a funny hat on some level. There are, however, a couple of arguments to be made for avoiding non-human PCs.

Generally, playing a character of an alien race[7] accomplishes two things. First, it provides a short set of mechanical bonuses and commensurate flaws which separate that race from humans. Second, it opens up a variety of interesting roleplaying situations.

Mr. Worf from *Star Trek: TNG* is an example of an alien being played well. He has some nice stat bonuses, but his biological heritage also makes it difficult for him to live with his physically frailer compatriots, causing him to be sullen and reserved. He also has a rich Klingon culture to draw upon for roleplaying opportunities, from their rich operatic traditions to their…let's call it "interesting" cuisine. The contradiction between his biological heritage and his human upbringing—coupled with his exploration of what it means to be truly Klingon—results in a potentially deep and nuanced character.

Unfortunately, explorations of race and culture at the game table rarely work so well. Setting aside any question of power-gaming for stat bonuses for the moment, there remains the issue of the races being represented as one-dimensional stereotypes. *All* Elves are aloof prissy hippies. *All* Dwarves are alcoholic Scotsmen with a fetish for stonework. *All* Halflings are kleptomaniac 4-year olds with ADD. *All* Klingons are gruff assholes who shout "HONOR!!" a lot and then hit things. Nowhere will you find a swishy Klingon fashion designer or a scruffy smelly Elf.

The problem is exacerbated when single examples of a species are expanded into archetypes for their entire race. Greedo was a bounty hunter, so *all* Rodians are bounty hunters. (*Star Wars* is especially bad in this respect. See: Bothans, Hutts, and Gamorreans.) Bilbo Baggins' player got railroaded into being a burglar by his GM, so all Halflings get racial bonuses to thievery.

Matters continue to degenerate once the players becomes involved. As much as we may think

[7] I'm going to use the blanket term *alien* here to refer to all sapient non-humans, be they Gnome, Romulan, or a 6' tall hamster with blue fur.

we are good roleplayers, stepping into the shoes of a creature which is by definition not human is a difficult proposition. Let's look at an ever popular choice, Elves. Consider for a moment that Elves never sleep, and they live for hundreds of years. From Elvish perspective, a human city would appear to be a civilization composed entirely of slow-witted narcoleptic klutzes with poor impulse control, bad hygiene, and a biological inability to use an appropriate indoor voice.

Your average Elf, in contrast, would appear mentally deranged by Human standards: unable to come to a decision on any matter without thinking about it for a length of several weeks, dispassionate to the point of cruelty, and possessing a disquieting level of mental and physical dexterity. Quite simply, an actual Elf or Dwarf would hit you right in the Uncanny Valley[8].

Our experience and intuition are, after all, based on an exclusively human perspective. We have a great deal of experience judging what other people are thinking and feeling. As social animals, huge amounts of our brains are hard-wired specifically for that task. This is how we're able to do things like read body language or facial expressions, recognize innuendo, and so forth.

But an elf isn't any more human than a bear is. To a bear, the act of walking upright is a signal of aggression. Trying to adopt the role of a sapient creature whose personality has no basis in the human experience is a difficult task at best. There's no reason to believe that an elf is wired at all like a human, either rationally or emotionally. What might be a perfectly rational reaction for a human might be incomprehensibly barbaric by elven standards, or vice versa.

In a work of fiction, an author may take months or years perfecting the plot and prose. They have the time and level of story control to properly explore inhuman characters. At the game table, however, we lack that same luxury of time for introspection. So we go with our human instinct—tinted through the lens of what is, in essence, a racial stereotype. What should be an alien, other-worldly creature instead ends up becoming a guy in a funny hat.

Rather than reducing these fantastic creatures to human caricatures, consider dropping the pretense and simply limit players to playing humans. There exists, after all, enough variation in both culture and personal demeanor to provide for as many different kinds of people as any alien race, and as much in the physical realm to justify whatever mechanical bonuses might be appropriate.

In the vast majority of games, racial modifiers are kept fairly minor for the sake of play

[8] A theory, originally related to robots, that suggests that things which appear similar to humans but subtly different cause a feeling of revulsion, appearing to be broken or wrong to the observer.

balance. Usually the character's race makes them about one step better in a couple of areas. Elves, for example, typical possess a bonus to intelligence and penalty to strength. Instead of picking a race, players could select two attributes (such as Smart and Puny) that produce the same mechanical effect. This would also have the side effect of removing the sort of racial homogeneity common among the alien races, as these attributes are being applied on a individual level, rather than a racial one.

Alternatively, the GM could stipulate that a given nation has universal education, resulting in an intelligence bonus for all characters from that region. The same process can be applied to racial abilities, by replacing them with cultural upbringing. Perhaps our example nation considers basic archery training a compulsory skill (as it was during periods of the Middle Ages). Although you should be careful to apply these modifiers on a national basis, rather than an ethnic one; lest you accidentally replace imaginary racism with actual racism.

In the short run this may make the GM's job more difficult. You are after all jettisoning a well established shorthand for certain abilities and personality. However, having employed it at my own table, I have found that the human-only restriction embiggens the players' roleplaying, if only by altering the players' expectations.

Moreover, my experience has been that reserving those other races for the GM restores them from stereotyped human stand-ins to fantastic creatures of other-worldly mystery—inscrutable in nature and possessing abilities beyond those of mortal men. No mean feat by itself, and perhaps alone worth the price of admission.

Chapter IV

Backgrounds

The third and final component to the character creation process is the background. Like any fictional character, a PC doesn't simply spring into existence from the ether as a fully formed person[9]. They obviously had a past that in some way led them to the life of an adventurer. It probably involved training of some sort, or perhaps some unlikely sequence of events that granted them amazing powers beyond the ken of mortal men.

Technically speaking, a background isn't required to play an PC. At best you can always just make it up as you go along, or at worst you can play Holy von Healsalot, the Cleric (his name tells you everything you need to know). Nevertheless, while the degree to which a character's origin or back story is necessary or important may vary[10] from system to system, it's become the case that a character background is seen as a required aspect of the RPG experience.

This raises several questions:

- What is the purpose of a character background?
- What does a good background look like?
- What does a bad background look like?
- What kind of problems can a bad background create?

What is the Purpose of a Character Background?

I'm going to lay down another bit of truth here, so I hope you're prepared: The true purpose of the character background has almost nothing to do with telling the origin story

[9] Ok, technically they do. But *narratively* speaking, they don't. Just go with it.

[10] Notable in this regard is the game Traveller, in which it is possible for a character to die during the background creation mini-game, before play has even begun; marking it as the second most lethal RPG ever[11].

[11] The most lethal RPG ever being *Wraith: the Oblivion*, in which the PCs die before character creation begins. Good times.

of the character. In all honesty, the only two people who are ever going to read a character's background are the GM and the player who wrote it; and neither of them is reading it to find out that so-and-so the fighter defended some village from goblins when he was 14 and decided it was worth pursuing as a career.

The character background really serves two purposes. For the player, it's a platform to explore their character's persona and motivations before play begins. In this regard, the background is not unlike what many professional actors do to prepare for playing a character: inventing background stories to give motivation and context to their on-screen or on-stage actions and lend authenticity to their dialog. For the game master, the background is an opportunity to mine for story hooks, draft old friends and foes as NPCs, and note down wants and desires that can be used to push or pull the characters this way or that. At least that's the optimal situation.

Unfortunately, the character backstory is often perceived as a chore for the player, and occasionally as an opening for abuse of the rules by introducing character elements which would not ordinarily be allowed by mechanics. But we'll come back to that shortly. Before we talk about doing it wrong, let's look at ways to do it right.

What does a good background look like?

From a player perspective, most characters only need to be defined in broad strokes before play begins. At this point the player doesn't *need* to know the name of the village the character grew up in, the names of all of her best friends from age six and up, or what her favorite color is. While some of these details may be important to the character—and may or may not be explored during the course of the game—they don't really tell us anything about who she is as a person, nor are they likely to be immediately relevant to the game at hand.

The best backgrounds give a few facts about the character that the player can use as a go-to reference in times of need and give the GM some hooks for future plots. What we're looking for are iconic moments from the character's past that reflect the place they are starting from. In rough terms, we want the background to tell us a few key facts about the character, give a couple of motivations, and possibly introduce an NPC or two that the GM can use.

We can generally categorize these facts into five points that every good background should try to cover. They are:

1. One Ally
2. One Enemy
3. One Short Term Goal (or A Source of Internal Conflict)
4. One Long Term Goal (or A Source of External Conflict)
5. A Brief Character History

A perfect example of this sort of background is Han Solo from *Star Wars*. From his introduction in *A New Hope* we learn several facts about Han: He's a smuggler, he did the Kessel Run in under 6 parsecs (whatever that means), he owes money to Jabba the Hutt, and he's got both a wookie co-pilot and a beat up looking (but fast) ship. That's it. We don't need more detail than that, because it isn't important to the story that's happening—or in your case the game you're playing.

So let's talk about each of those points in more detail, keeping Han as our example.

Allies and Enemies

The first two elements to consider in a good character background are the ally and enemy. These are people (specifically NPCs) whom the character has interacted with in the past, both positively or negatively. The ally could be a friend, relative, mentor—anyone whom the character cares about enough to help when needed, and vice versa. The general rule of thumb should be that if this ally were a real person, they would be willing to loan you money. In the Han Solo example Chewbacca is ineligible—he's a fellow PC—so Han's player would pick Lando Calrissian as his background ally.

The enemy should also be someone the PC cares about greatly, although obviously for very different reasons. The enemy fills two roles: they provide a meaningful threat when they appear, and even when they are off-stage their influence can affect the decisions the player makes. In Han Solo's background, his enemy is Jabba the Hutt.

The inclusion of these two figures is helpful in the early stages of a game. Instead of NPC #34023 asking the PCs to do something, they can be approached by one of their oldest and dearest friends in need of a favor. Alternatively, putting a letter signed by the enemy of one of the PCs on a dead NPC will immediately engage that player, who will gladly drag the rest of the party along with him. Combined, the ally and enemy create the air that these characters didn't

just pop into existence five seconds before the game began and that they actually had ongoing lives before the players sat down to play the game.

Character Goals

The next two elements can vary depending on what kind of game you're running. RPG campaigns are often plot-oriented, in so far as the focus of the game is on the players accomplishing some goal external to themselves. For these games asking each player to provide one short-term and one long-term goal works well. There are some games, however, which are character-oriented, where the focus of the game is on how the characters deal with their internal reactions to events. For example, romance movies and many character dramas don't feature a lot of things actually *happening*. Most of the action is devoted to the characters interacting with each other and dealing with how they feel about their situation. For games which are character-oriented, it may work better for characters to select sources of conflict rather than goals.

First, let's look at the goals. For the short term goal, we want something the character could reasonably be able to complete within a few months of game time, or about four to eight game sessions. Examples might include getting a promotion at work, finding the location of a rare item, or making a contact within an organization. The short term goal is like the plot version of going up in level. It's not something the players should complete every session, but it should be obtainable with a few sessions of devoted effort.

Declaring a short term goal is useful for the players at the start of the game, because they are usually lacking in immediate motivation. Many GMs can probably relate a case where they started a game intending for the PCs to begin by going about their everyday lives, only to have the players stare blankly back at them, unsure what to do with themselves. I once played in a game where the entire first session involved the PCs aimlessly going for walks in the park and sitting around watching TV waiting for the plot to start happening, while the GM sat there waiting for the PCs to start doing things so that he could kick off the plot.

Any time a PC has a few hours to kill, or hits town and doesn't know what to do with themself, or you need something for an unoccupied PC to be doing other than sitting in a bar getting drunk, the short term goal can be called upon. Once the campaign has gotten moving, the PCs will have motivations more connected to the ongoing plot, so it's not necessary for the players to declare new short term goals once the initial ones are completed. However, you may

find that your players enjoy continuing to have stated objectives. If so, consider offering a small reward each time a player completes their stated goal. It should be small enough that it doesn't unbalance the game if one player routinely completes their goals ahead of the rest, but large enough to be an enticement.

For Han Solo, his short term goal is to pay back Jabba the Hutt. If we consider *A New Hope* as a campaign, the whole movie could reasonably have been played over the course of about five or six sessions. In fact, we see Han getting the money and leaving to go pay Jabba late in the film—that he decides to blow that goal off and come back is an entirely separate matter. The point is that his player chose a reasonably attainable goal which successfully acted as motivation for Han to get involved in the main plot of the campaign.

The long term goal, meanwhile, is something that a character will typically only have one of (or at most two) during the course of an entire campaign. A long term goal is something that should be developed over the course of many game sessions, and its resolution marks the end of a major arc in that character's life. Batman discovering the identity of the thug who shot his parents and bringing him to justice would be a good example of a long term goal.[12]

Whatever a player selects as their long term goal, it should be something personal to the character, and something which is separate from the main plot of the campaign, although the two might be related. An example might be a character whose long term goal is obtaining a magic wish for some noble cause to which they have dedicated their life. Joining an adventuring party is a good way to advance that goal.

While a long term goal should ultimately be something attainable, it doesn't necessarily have to be something the character ever *actually* attains. Sometimes just having a purpose in life is enough, even if that goal is never met. This is, of course, something that you should discuss with the player ahead of time. It's entirely possible that a player might select a long term goal with the intention that it is something the character will forever strive for and always fall short, only for the GM to turn around and hand it to them.

An example of this would be one of the times as a GM that I majorly messed up a character. During a D&D game set in the *Eberron* campaign setting I was GMing, one of the PCs was a Warforged (essentially a magic robot with a soul) who aspired to become a living creature of

[12]This is the one case in which Han Solo falls down on the job, since his player doesn't seem to know whether his long term goal is to woo the princess, make a bunch of money, or defeat The Empire.

flesh and blood. Unfortunately, I didn't realize that—much like Mr. Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*—this was intended to be a journey, not a destination. The character's sudden transformation into a human after a year of gaming completely killed that player's interest in both the character and the game.

That particular case notwithstanding, as with short term goals it may be appropriate for the GM to offer some kind of reward for completing a long term goal, although in many cases simply completing the goal is its own reward.

At that point the player might decide to select a new goal; however, the completion of the long term goal is also an excellent moment to consider retiring the character and creating a new one. Much like a campaign that has outlived its intended purpose, sometimes a PC has to consider that they've done all the adventuring they set out to do and pass the torch on to the next generation.

Given how many characters' lives end at the point of a sword or with the collapse of the campaign as a whole, it can be inordinately satisfying for a player to "win" a game and have a character embrace his or her "happily ever after." Ultimately, this is something that the player and game master should work out well ahead of time in order to avoid the mistake that I made.

Sources of Conflict

Of course, having plot-based goals may not be appropriate for every type of game. If your game focuses more on character development than plot, including goals in the character background may not serve a useful purpose. The same could be true if your game focuses very specifically on a certain goal which is expected to be the over-arcing focus of the entire campaign. Instead of having the players declare goals, you might prefer to ask each of them for two sources of conflict instead: one internal, one external.

Internal conflicts are associated with the thoughts and feelings of the character. These are things which create some form of emotional turmoil. A character could be internally conflicted because they spurned their true love for another, feel responsible for the death of a relative, feel overshadowed by the exploits of a rival, or feel they failed in some necessary obligation.

The conflict that results should be a driving factor in the PC's ongoing story for some time and should frequently weigh on the decisions that character makes. The biggest, most blatant example of a source of internal conflict is the titular mechanic behind the game *Vampire: The*

Masquerade. The action of *Vampire* is predicated on the conceit that the players are formerly-living people who kill and consume other people on a semi-weekly basis in order to survive.

The game explicitly poses the question, "What are you willing to do to survive to see the next sunset, and how much of your humanity are you willing to sacrifice in the process?" How you and the rest of your party choose to answer that question forms the basis of a *Vampire* campaign, especially as the GM throws more and more obstacles in your path.

Another example of internal conflict would be Spider-Man's struggle to deal with the guilt over his uncle's death, as epitomized by his motto, "With great power, comes great responsibility." Peter Parker hates the problems that being Spider-Man constantly introduces into his life. People are always trying to kill him; doing things as Spider-Man often means Peter Parker stands up his girlfriend for a date; and his primary source of income is taking pictures of himself to sell to a guy who's only going to use them as ammunition against him. Being Spider-Man kind of sucks, but he can't stop because he feels the obligation to use the power he's been given to help people. Talk about internal conflict!

In addition to an internal conflict, you should also ask your players to identify a source of external conflict. External conflicts are in many ways similar to the earlier cited goals, with the caveat that a goal is something that a character seeks out. An external conflict is something that seeks out the character. Unlike a goal, an external conflict isn't something you can just drop. At best you can hope to avoid it for a little while.

Some examples of external conflicts include an enemy seeking the character out in order to take their revenge; a prophesy or other fate that the character wants to avoid, but can't; or a social obligation hanging over the character. Just as with the internal conflict, this is something which should drive the actions of the character even outside of the conflict source's direct influence. A character with a bounty on his head, for example, may spend a great deal of time and effort trying to go unnoticed, altering his appearance, checking over his shoulder, and in general being paranoid about everything.

As with the goals, confronting and dealing with a source of conflict is something that should eventually come as the culmination of multiple sessions worth of work and involve serious risk on the part of the PC. It is also possible to tie the internal and external conflict together, although the two don't necessarily have to go hand in hand.

A Brief History of the Character

The last element to include in the background is the character's history. I have found the best length for a history to be about two paragraphs to one page. This is sufficient to include a physical description, highlight a few notable events from their past, and express some basic thoughts on the character's personality. Remember, the goal is not to tell the story of the character's life, but rather to establish a broad outline of who the character is without demanding an onerous amount of work from the player. As either GM or player, you don't want so little that the background doesn't tell you anything meaningful, nor so much that it gets in the way of roleplaying the character.

Putting It Together

The players should feel free to either roll all five elements into a cohesive whole or simply write out a bullet point list. In all likelihood, no one except you and the player writing the background are going to read the thing, so presentation is largely a moot point. Combined, these five elements will produce a backstory between one and two pages long that gives a few clear points which attach the character to the game without being burdensome to either you or the players. These simple backgrounds should be helpful for the players to meditate on at points in the game where they are unsure what to do or how to react to a situation. In a pinch, they can consult their history for motivation, their goals for direction, or their ally for assistance.

The real secret, however, is not what the backgrounds do for the players, but what they do for you as the GM[13]. What the players have provided you with is first and foremost a stable of somewhere between six and twelve NPCs who are—by design—of importance to the PCs, either positively or negatively.

With a little work, you should be able to slot these NPCs into some of the roles within the over-arcing plot of the game you've already thought up. That way, the party will be running afoul of these characters with reasonable frequency. A random evil lieutenant, for example, can easily be replaced with Johnny Badguy, one of the players' personal enemies. The players may also throw you an NPC or two that don't fit into your plot, but that's part of the joy of RPGs.

[13] [insert evil GM laugh here]

Spend some time figuring out how they relate to the story you want to tell. You may find yourself going in interesting directions you hadn't expected.

Such an occurrence can be a fortunate turn of events for the GM. One of the most difficult things to do in writing—regardless of the medium—is to not think like yourself. Especially in long running groups, the other players will typically learn how the GM's mind tends to work and be able to anticipate plot twists. If the players' enemies and allies inspire you to go in a direction you didn't expect, it's likely that the players won't be able to expect it either. Say, for example, one PC's ally is working for the villain. Does the NPC know their boss is bad? Is the PC willing to fight their friend to accomplish a goal?

The same goes for the short and long term goals that the players have given you. Sit down with them for a while and think of ways to incorporate those storylines into your game. The more these sub-plots overlap with the main plot, the more interesting the game will be. Perhaps a player has a goal of finding out their parents' true identities, and a scroll detailing their lineage is in a heavily defended castle ruled by an antagonist. It would be a risky mission, but it would be both a blow against the PC's enemies *and* a step towards their current goal in life. What party could resist a pot that sweet?

What Does a Bad Background Look Like?

While the above formula is a good guideline to give the players for writing their backgrounds, in practice you aren't necessarily going to get back something that conforms to your expectations as well as you'd like. So now that we have a picture of what a good background looks like, we can discuss some of the things to watch out for in a bad background.

There are many ways that a character background can be "bad"—and to be clear, by bad I don't mean badly written (although it's entirely possible for it to be that as well). What I mean is the background either fails to add anything meaningful to the game or actively impedes the ordinary progression of the game. We can generally group "bad" backgrounds into two categories: The Non-existent/Minimal, and the Novella.

The Nonexistent to Minimal

It's often the case that a player simply doesn't write a backstory for their character. There are various reasons this might happen, both good and bad. Some players prefer to make up details of their character's past as they go along, allowing the PC to grow organically as the game proceeds. Others may not have had the time, felt too lazy to write one, felt self-conscious about their writing abilities, or been unable to think of a good story.

Perhaps they managed to produce a paragraph with a rough account of childhood, including the PC's hometown, some general statement of their regard in the community, and something vague about how they got started down the path that ultimately led them to the point at which the game begins. Something to the effect of, "I was orphaned at a young age, and spent my childhood on the streets. Then I was taken in by a guy who trained me to be an adventurer. Then he died too, and now I'm an adventurer."

While it is certainly a step up from nothing at all, a minimal biography of this type doesn't provide the player with any deeper understanding of who the character is and why they do what they do, nor does it present any openings for adding to the game later on.

A lack of a character background in a more roleplaying heavy or dramatic game can have a significant negative impact. The player may feel unconnected to their character, seeing them as just a block of statistics. Without the grounding that a background provides, a player may thrash about with the PC's characterization: roleplaying them as a happy-go-lucky maniac in one scene, then deciding they are brooding and morose the next. Imagine Adam West and Christian Bale trading off scenes as Batman and you can see why this could be a problem.

A flustered or aggravated player may declare that their character has amnesia as a last ditch effort to come up with *something*. It almost goes without saying that this is a cop-out and should be avoided if at all possible. While amnesia is a potentially viable story element, it's far easier to do it badly than well, and if employed it should be done intentionally, not as a option of last resort.

Not having a background isn't necessarily bad for every game; some games don't necessarily require them. This could be either because the game is not heavily dramatic or because by the nature of the game the characters' history is left unexplored. *Paranoia* is a good example of both cases, especially considering *Paranoia* games don't tend to last beyond two or three sessions.

The Nonexistent background is the less troublesome bad background, as it's usually a simple matter to sit down with the player for half an hour, and explain some of the points I've made in this chapter. Offer to go over the bullet points with them and get at least the bare minimum information. Once the player has made a few explicit statements about their character, it's usually very easy to rationalize them into a coherent background.

The Novella

The other type of bad background is by far the more frightening for a GM. A novella-type background can range from a dozen or so up to thirty pages; sometimes even more. Sounds great, yeah? Unfortunately a background of this length opens the door for several problems.

First and foremost, the purpose of the background is to introduce the character at the beginning of the story. Anything that happened before that time is by definition less interesting than the actual story, or otherwise it would be part of the plot itself. At that length, the player is either adding far more adventures than are appropriate for a starting character or including hugely unnecessary levels of detail.

Imagine, for example, if the first book in the *Harry Potter* series covered nothing but the events of Harry's life from the time he was about two until he was ten, when the series actually begins. Rowling does include a chapter or so of this material at the beginning of the story, which is all that it really deserves. While a good background provides an initial sketch of the character, writing too much over-defines them.

An additional problem is that the rules of the game do not necessarily apply to a background written away from the table. The player may describe amazing feats of daring and heroism far beyond the realms of fair play, balance, or any narrative sense. When the character inevitably does not measure up at the game table, it may cause the player disappointment and lead to friction in the group.

It's also possible that unscrupulous players may attempt to slip events into their background to justify a host of balance-distorting elements, including power-level inappropriate equipment and ridiculous combinations of flaws and merits. The player may also identify NPCs who are far above the group's power-level and devoted to the PC in question, hoping that the GM will not examine the lengthy document closely.


...and that's how he got the Deathbringer on his 8th birthday.
MY OTHER SHIRT IS MITHRAL

For this reason, it's important for the GM to moderate the length—and to a certain extent, the content—of PC backgrounds. Using the list provided earlier addresses both concerns, but it's by no means the only format.

In Summary

There are a lot of different ways you can handle character creation, based on the needs of your group, the system you're using, and the sort of campaign that you're running. I feel strongly that the length is very important. If at all possible, stick to a hard length requirement of no more than two or at the *very* most three pages.

However, feel free to add or remove elements that you think may be important to your particular campaign. Perhaps there is a running theme throughout the game that relates to all of the characters that you want the players to address. You might say, for example, that all of the PCs are people trying to rebel against their destinies. Or you could ask all of the players to identify their character's greatest fear.

The point, ultimately, is to inform both player and GM about who this person is, in a way that is relevant to the campaign.

The Game Master's First Law

In Part 1, I've talked a lot about different tricks and techniques you can use to design a better campaign, some of which you may find more useful than others. There is, however, one over-arching principle that I hope for you to remember from this section. Following from the Roleplaying Axiom I defined in Chapter I—the purpose of gaming is to have fun—I'm going to name this The First Law of Game Mastery:

Communicate with the Other Players.

This applies to more than just character creation. One of the biggest mistakes a GM can make is to withhold necessary information from the rest of the group. An RPG campaign is not a book, and the players are as much authors and actors as they are audience. There is information that they need to have in order to successfully navigate the shared imaginative space of the game-world, on both a narrative and mechanical level. Beyond that, the more the players know about the game the more meaningfully they will be able to contribute.

Sometimes this means giving away a small surprise now to set up something cooler later. Sometimes it means stepping away from the game for a moment and addressing an issue out of character, even if you end up breaking the fourth wall[14]. Sometimes it means giving the players out of character knowledge, with the understanding that they are not to abuse it.

Whatever the reason du jour—and there are many—better communication with the rest of the group always makes for a better game in the long run.

It should also be noted that this communication is a two way street. The other players should be communicating with the GM as much as possible, discussing how they feel about their characters, the events of the plot, what they liked about adventures, what they didn't, and where they see things going in the future. A GM should always be seeking out this sort of feedback.

[14] A theater term referring to the invisible wall of a room through which the audience views the play. "Breaking the fourth wall" references the characters acknowledging that they are characters in a work of fiction.

Part 2

Designing the Campaign

Chapter V

The Campaign Outline

Now that you have an understanding of how you will be using the information, we can start to look at the process of designing a great campaign. What can we say about a campaign that defines it as "great"? Well, a roleplaying game tells a story, so we can include all of the things that make up a great story: memorable characters, gripping dramatic sequences, and unexpected twists.

But an RPG isn't exactly like a book; it's interactive. So there needs to be room for the player characters to improvise and contribute to the story, and it should challenge them to make choices that matter. It should also address the important conflicts in each of the characters' lives, but not focus on any one so much that it becomes tedious or boring for the other players. Last, over the course of the campaign the group should accomplish goals that have a meaningful impact on the world.

That's a lot to ask for!

When I first started out as a game master, I usually didn't have more in mind for the campaign than which game system system I wanted to use, and maybe a rough idea of who the bad guy was going to be. It's pretty common, after all, to just roll up a handful of characters, run through a dungeon, and let the campaign grow naturally on its own. Sometimes you get a good game, right?

Technically, yeah. Like a garden left to its own devices, a campaign will continue to grow over time, but the result may not be what you intended when you started out. It's about as hard to get a wild campaign under control and back on track as it is to tame a garden which has been left to nature. However, if you tend to your campaign like you would a garden, you can produce something equally beautiful.

Nurturing a campaign means starting fresh: tilling the field, planting your adventure hooks in nice clean rows, watering and fertilizing your players, and plucking out the weeds that crop

up everywhere you aren't looking. If you begin your campaign with a plan, like you would a garden, it really isn't that hard to grow the kind of memorable game that you are striving for.

Let's call this plan a Campaign Outline. Not so much a step by step guide, but more like a list of attributes, guiding principles, and other qualities that you want your campaign to have. The kind of document you can use to help figure out what the game is going to look like, and even pull out later when you're running the game and aren't sure what to do.

Before starting a game, you want to know what kind of game it is, what sorts of people, places, and stories are found in it, and ultimately what the *point* of the game is—even if the point is as simple as just fighting monsters and collecting treasure. By defining what your game is and what it isn't beforehand, you can set the parameters of the game both in your own mind and in the minds of the other players.

Outlining the Outline

"So, what do we want to play?"

The vast majority of campaigns I've played or run have started with this simple question. The group picks a game, then the players go off to make characters while the GM dreams up a series of adventures appropriate to the setting. The players fumble their way through the adventures, gaining levels and gear, until the game eventually falls apart for some reason or other.

While I personally followed this system for years, there was always something that bothered me about it and I could just never quite figure out what. Understanding finally dawned on me after the collapse of a D&D game I ran set in *Forgotten Realms*, which tore the entire setting apart, jumped 500 years into the future, and played around in the post-apocalyptic ruins.

The campaign didn't work, and we stopped playing after only a few sessions. After the game fell apart, I sat down and tried to figure out where things had gone wrong. There was party in-fighting, and a pushy GM trying to keep the players on his plot, and all of the other problems that tend to plague campaigns. But I couldn't lay the blame for the game ending on any of those things in particular.

I'd encountered all of those problems before, both individually and together, and still had fun games. Rather, I came to two clear conclusions:

1. I hadn't wanted to run a high fantasy game, which *Forgotten Realms* is designed to be. I wanted to run a post-apocalyptic wasteland game. I had tried to shoe-horn my campaign idea into the *Forgotten Realms* setting because that was the first thing one of the players yelled out when I asked, "So what do we want to play?"

2. In order to make my campaign concept work with a setting that didn't support it, I had broken both concepts apart and tried to weld them together into a single piece. In the process, I fundamentally robbed both of them of what makes each one cool and/or interesting.

This was the "ah hah!" moment where I realized the problem wasn't any one thing, it was everything. The problem wasn't that one thing went wrong, but rather it was a systemic error inherent in how the game was being created. If I wanted to run a really good game, I needed to radically restructure how I designed my campaigns.

Over the next several years I began to implement a series of changes, slowly refining the fundamental way I designed my campaigns. I started with what seemed like a couple of fairly simple ideas. Instead of starting with a game and making a campaign, I would start with a campaign and then pick a game system that did that game well. I would also stop trying to write a campaign as a series of plot points, and instead try to outline the campaign as if I was pitching a TV show or a business plan.

As several campaigns went by, my outline gradually evolved. Some elements were added, while others were changed or removed. I stopped looking at a campaign as a story told to the players by the GM, and started to embrace the idea of a campaign as a story the players and the GM tell to each other.

In this context, the campaign outline is like a proposal, but you could also think of it as a charter or a constitution for the campaign. It defines what the tone of the game is going to be, and the genre. It establishes the basic story elements: who the good guys are, who the bad guys are, and why are they fighting. It sets the stakes and the end-game conditions. It pitches the game to the players, and acts as a reference guide to the game master.

As a GM, it helps to focus your mind on exactly what you're trying to accomplish in the game, both in terms of story and tone. Additionally, by taking the time to write your thoughts out as a concrete document, you have go through the process of mentally converting your

concept from a tangle of disorganized thoughts into something more approaching a coherent narrative—a critical and often missed step.

It also serves to cut out some of the things GMs often obsess over that you specifically *don't* want to get tangled up with at this stage in the campaign. A great campaign is one that's a collaboration between the GM and the other players, so you don't want to just make a bullet-pointed list of everything that's going to happen over the course of the game.

However, before we get too wrapped up in *do's* and *don'ts* let's take a look at each of the elements of the outline.

Brainstorming

While it's not part of the actual document, I consider taking input from the other players to be the very first step. It's the attitude of some GMs that everything that happens behind the game master's screen is their exclusive domain, inviolate and above the influence of the other players. As in Chapter III, when I suggested that players should not have exclusive domain over creating their characters, I believe the same applies to GMs and their campaigns. The players deserve some role in defining what goes into the campaign.

Consider brainstorming with the other players while creating the campaign outline. While the game master is ultimately responsible for designing the campaign, and you want to run a campaign that you will enjoy week after week, that doesn't mean that you can't take suggestions. As much as the game needs to be something you will enjoy running, it also needs to be something the other players enjoy playing.

Sit down with the group as a whole, and talk about what sorts of games people are interested in playing. Work on finding ideas that complement the ideas you already have. Even feel free to use specific story ideas that the players throw out. If one of the players mentions that she always wanted to attack a flying city from dragonback, write it down. You don't have to go out of your way to include it, but if it just so happens later on that storming a flying city with dragons makes sense in the plot, you can be certain at least one of the players will really enjoy it.

You can also ask people to name works of fiction that they'd like the game to emulate, and discuss what aspects of those works they like. Try to break down those aspects into their most basic elements, and make a list. Elements like gritty, optimistic, over the top, serious, and so

forth. You may find a pattern emerges which you can use to help inform your choices further down the line.

Of course, you are never required to include any of the things your players are suggesting. Player interest may wax and wane over the course of a campaign, but the game goes on. When the GM burns out on a campaign, the game is over.

A brainstorming session can help you get an idea of what your players are looking for, and if it meshes with your own interests all the better. However, the needs of the GM have to take priority over those of the other players, simply to ensure the long-term sustainability of the game. This brainstorming activity is purely for the sake of information, and you should never feel constrained to follow the ideas the players give you.

Genre

A good place to start thinking about the nature of your campaign is with the genre. For the most part, people think of genre as synonymous with "the setting". *This is set in outer space, so it's sci-fi*, or *this game is all about wizards and dragons, so it's fantasy*. When we are talking about setting in this sense, we're talking not just about the *where*, but the *who* and *what* as well.

However, while the setting is a significant part of what defines genre, it is not the entire definition. There is a more complex definition of genre which you need to consider when designing your campaign. If we can summarize the first aspect of genre as "the setting", the second aspect could be defined as "narrative conventions." That is, elements of a story which are held in common among examples of a particular genre.

Horror films, for example, often have a convention of "the black guy dies first." Fantasy stories often feature prophesies, but science fiction stories almost never do. Superhero stories traditionally contain the convention that heroes never harm an innocent, even by accident. Any innocent bystanders will conveniently be thrown clear of explosions, or evacuate collapsing buildings "just in time."

Narrative conventions often—but not always—go hand-in-hand with a particular setting. When we think about hard-boiled detective stories, for example, certain conventions come to mind: femme fatales with a revolver in their garter-band, mooks lurking in the shadows waiting to rough up the hero, stool pigeons in need of being leaned on. We also think of certain settings—in the case of detective stories, traditionally 1930s Los Angeles. However, we could write a hard-

boiled detective story using all of the usual story conventions, but set anywhere from Mars in the 2130s to Constantinople in the 1030s, and it would still be a hard-boiled detective story.

So while the setting does influence the perceived genre, the narrative conventions are really what define the genre of a story—or a campaign. This makes it possible to mix and match the conventions of one genre with the setting of another. For example, it's popular these days to mix horror conventions with science fiction settings, giving us movies like *Event Horizon* or video games like *Dead Space*. You can also mix fantasy conventions with science fiction to make *Star Wars*.

Even in cases where the setting and conventions line up as we expect, within each genre there exists a spectrum of sub-genres. Within the fantasy genre, for example, we have High Fantasy, Low Fantasy, Dark Fantasy, Romantic Fantasy, Magical Realism, Sword and Sorcery, and more. While there is a level of overlap between the conventions of a High Fantasy story and Sword and Sorcery—insofar as they are both fantasy—there is a level of distinction between the two as well.

One could reasonably imagine a cross-over between, say, C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series and *Harry Potter*. But to combine *Conan* with either would be somewhat silly, to say the least. By the same measure, a plot which works for an episode of *Star Trek* might be entirely ridiculous for *Battlestar Galactica*. One of the most common vectors through which strife enters a campaign is a party composed of characters from radically different sub-genres.

Tone

Another way to think of these sorts of sub-genres is in terms of the *Tone* of the setting. In order to better understand tone, let's examine a favorite example of mine: *Batman*. Batman as a character has existed for over 70 years and has changed tone repeatedly over that time. So much so that it's hard to say that there is any one definitive interpretation of the character. Heck, there are easily half a dozen different incarnations of Batman that could be considered iconic, leaving aside all of the minor ones that litter the decades. For our immediate purposes however, there are two particular incarnations of Batman I'd like to focus on.

The first is the Silver Age Batman, as typified by the 60s TV show starring Adam West. Let's call this version of Batman *The Caped Crusader*. This Batman is campy, and a little bit corny. He's a light-hearted adventurer and undoubtedly a hero. He's always sure to put money in the

parking meter since, as he puts it, "This money goes to building better roads. We all must do our part."

On the other end of the spectrum is the Batman we can call *The Dark Knight*. This second Batman is the one from the recent movie of the same name, or Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, a series which is often seen as representative of the death of the Silver Age of Comics. Unlike the Caped Crusader, the Dark Knight is, well, dark. He's brooding, ruthless, and no friend to the police. He stalks the night, striking fear into the hearts of the wicked.

While both are unequivocally Batman, they are nonetheless very different characters who occupy very different worlds. The Caped Crusader lives in a world of black and white morality where good is Good and evil is Evil. He's able to walk up to the Mayor in broad daylight and ask for pretty much anything he wants, and the mayor will say, "Well, okay Batman. If you say so I'll trust you."

The Dark Knight's world is morally far more grey. He's a renegade vigilante wanted by the police, and at the best of times it's difficult to draw a firm moral line between him and the people he fights. The Caped Crusader always saves the day, with no innocents harmed. For the Dark Knight, casualties—both criminal and innocent—are a fact of life.

In terms of designing your campaign, having a clear understanding of the tone is incredibly helpful both for planning adventures and for helping the other players make their characters. It's all too common for a player to show up to a game with a character that seems viable on paper but has little function in that particular game.

For example, say you're going to be running a World War II game. Is it going to be more like *Schindler's List* or *Inglourious Basterds*? If one of the conventions of the game is Evil Faceless Nazi Soldiers™, a highly social character is going to have a very hard time using their abilities, something which is not clear simply from the genre. By the same measure, if one of the characteristics of the game is moral shades of grey, a zealous character who refuses to compromise or negotiate with the enemy based on their being "evil" may present problems.

Beyond that, there is a larger question of which sort of tactics will generally tend to work and which won't. If, for example, the party is captured: Is this a campy two-fisted action game or one that is serious and realistic? Should they attempt to escape, assuming that their prison is laid out in a traditionally careless manner and stocked with guards that endlessly patrol up and down the same hallways—perceiving in a 90° cone in front of them? Or should they assume that

as prisoners of war they will be given certain rights—but, should they attempt to escape, they will be immediately noticed and shot dead on the spot?

All of these elements influence the overall tone of the campaign at least as much as whether the party is wandering the countryside killing goblins or rocketing through the depths of space killing space goblins.

Collecting Your Thoughts

Coming at the question of genre and tone raw can be intimidating. Without strict boundaries or a clear defining goal it can be easy to get lost in the possibilities. Obviously it helps to have a

specific idea in mind before you start. Lacking that focus, however, there are steps that you can take to carve out a strong campaign concept.

One method you can use is triangulating from existing works of fiction. If you write out a list of movies, books, games, or whatever else interests you, a pattern may emerge that you can use as a starting point. Perhaps a majority of your list focuses on morally-compromised realism, like *The Dark Knight*. That's a pretty significant clue that moral grays are something you're interested in. Alternatively, your list might be filled with examples of the cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil for the fate of all existence. Whatever the common qualities may be, you can use the list as a reference point to start thinking about what sort of campaign would capture those qualities.

Tuning the Dials

There are a number of aspects of the game system itself which contribute to the overall tone. These include Combat, Morality, Social Interaction, Scale, Power Level, and Theme. These system elements can have as much influence on the game as the narrative tone you set with your adventure notes.

Combat

> *The masked figure leapt into action, a manic grin on his face. With a heave he threw himself into the air, bullets whizzing by like mosquitoes as he performed a triple backflip over the villains' heads, his dual machine guns blazing.*

If we think about combat—both from a game perspective and a narrative one—there's a spectrum that flows from gritty/realistic to high flying/dramatic. Superhero games, as in the example above, often fall into the latter category. Two-fisted men of action taking down armies of enemies in dramatic style, while seldom receiving more than superficial injuries. Games of this style strongly encourage the PCs to leap into action, trusting that the nature of the narrative ensures they will come out ahead, or at worst in need of a few moments to recover.

In contrast, grittier games expect PCs to strongly consider any threat of violence before taking action:

> *The goon pulled a knife from his belt, brandishing it wildly. The masked vigilante lunged forward, grabbing for his opponent's arm. The goon dodged his grasp, sinking the blade into the vigilante's side. The would-be hero howled in pain, falling to the ground in agony.*

Ouch. Looks like that guy didn't roll well on his brawling skill.

While the examples here are on the extreme ends of the spectrum, having a clear definition of how realistic or dramatic your campaign world is strongly affects the feel of the campaign as a whole. It's useful to explicitly define whether an encounter with a knife-wielding maniac is likely to end with a d4 off hit points, or a trip to the hospital.

Without such a definition, it's easy to jump between different points on the spectrum[15], giving your game a wildly inconsistent tone and confusing the players.

Morality

Morality is an important element to delineate, because if left undefined it is likely to create confusion among the players. This is because there is not just one level of morality in an RPG, but at least three:

1. On the first level you have the PCs. The moral system of these fictional characters depends greatly on the genre of the game. It may exist as shades of grey, or it may be stark black and white. If the campaign is set in a fantasy world with gods and magic (particularly gods of Good and Evil), morality may even be a quantifiable force.

2. On the second level you have the GM. Regardless of the moral system of the characters in game, as game masters we apply our own subjective conception of right and wrong, and make moral judgments on that basis. The GM in particular dictates the objective morality of the game, through his or her determination of success or failure of actions. Actions which the GM approves of are more likely to succeed than ones they don't.

[15] If you need an example as to why this is bad, just look at the years of fan rage which resulted from the one instance in Final Fantasy VII when a character's death isn't easily overcome by dropping a resurrection use-item. An entire generation of gamers was scarred forever.

3. On the third level are the real subjective moral standards of the other players, as they would apply them to our own world. Many arguments within groups arise because players cannot reach a consensus about what is right or wrong.

I'll give two examples of how conflict can arise between players due to confusion over the moral system of the game.

In the first example, I once participated in a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign which featured a particularly holy paladin who felt that he needed to represent the cosmic ideal of Good. He met his end in a duel with a representative of his patron deity's evil counterpart. After the fight his evil—but lawful—opponent offered to resurrect him on the grounds that he had fought honorably. The paladin turned him down.

The player's reasoning was that his character would not have offered the blackguard the same courtesy, and if an evil knight possessed more mercy than he did, he had obviously failed to uphold his own ideals and did not deserve to return to the world of the living. A somewhat strange chain of logic from the perspective of our own subjective morality, but understandable within the objective, divinely enforced morality of D&D.

The game master was somewhat baffled, as he had had intended for the campaign world to be one without built-in moral absolutes, where "evil" people can still have mercy and paladins are as morally fallible as anyone else. The paladin's player, however, assumed that if paladins exist, they must be paragons of absolute and objective goodness and honor by their very nature. The conflict between these two interpretations ended up taking the character out of the game.

The other example I want to cite comes from a very long web forum discussion on the question of whether it was right to kill baby Gnolls. The party in question had stumbled upon a village of Gnolls, who predictably attacked the PCs and were summarily wiped out. Searching the village for valuables, the adventurers found a creche of infant Gnoll pups. They had to decide what to do with them.

If they left them alone, the pups would undoubtedly suffer an agonizing death by either starvation or predation. If the party contrived to keep them alive, they would inevitably grow up to become horrible, ravenous, man-eating monsters. Finally, they could kill the babies, murdering innocent (if naturally evil) creatures in cold blood.

In our own world the subjective nature of morality suggests both that it would both be wrong to murder innocent children and that it might be possible to nurture the naturally aggressive and

carnivorous Gnolls into upstanding citizens. Once you accept the concept of objective principles of good and evil, however—as with gods of good and evil, or cosmically ordained alignments—you have to accept that a creature which is *always evil* as a racial trait is never innocent, even as a baby. In that case, a mercy killing might be the most morally upstanding action.

Within the context of the discussion, no resolution was ever found, and it is for that reason that it is a good idea to explicitly define what the moral underpinnings of your campaign are, even if it's just as a footnote somewhere. Otherwise the conflict between the players' morality, the GM's morality, and the inherent morality of the game world may accidentally cause major strife within the group.

Social Interaction

Every RPG contains some form of social interaction[16]. The degree to which talking, intrigue, and investigation factor into your game, however, is variable. Some games are straight-line smash in the door hack-and-slashers, while others reward tact and diplomacy, and there is a wide spectrum in between. The question you should ask yourself is to what extent social interaction is a necessary or desirable tactic for the players to employ.

To answer that, let's start by breaking the social interaction question down a bit more, into two parts. The first part is what role—if any—a socially oriented character will have in a party. The vast majority of RPGs require some sort of trade-off between areas of competence during character creation, which places each PC within a certain niche. For example, characters may excel in physical combat, stealth and agility, magic or tech, or social skills. When a player chooses one, they do so at the expense of the others. If a player chooses to focus on social interaction and that doesn't factor heavily into your game, that player has made an ineffectual character.

The second part is what I call The Decker Dilemma. The name comes from the Decker class in the game *Shadowrun*. The decker is a sort of cyborg who jacks into cyberspace to hack computer systems using a portable "cyberdeck". Basically the 1980s sci-fi version of a laptop.

In theory it's a cool concept. But it also creates a problem, in that the decker by definition can never act in concert with the other players. Whenever the decker is doing his thing in cyberspace, all other action stops while the GM focuses on that player. Conversely, when everyone else is

[16]Technically speaking, kicking in doors and planting axes into the faces of those things you find inside does count as a limited form of high stakes negotiation.

doing their thing, the decker must sit around, unable to act, while waiting for an opportunity to jack in somewhere[17]. As a result, many GMs simply cut that aspect of the game out entirely, leaving any decker PCs with very little to do.

While particularly acute in the decker character, this problem exists to a degree in many other character types, and particularly among social characters, who typically give up the ability to fight well in exchange for their social skills. Players of social characters often find themselves sidelined, going into dungeon after dungeon full of monsters who lack the intelligence to be affected by their powers.

It is therefore a good idea to have an explicit understanding of what role—if any—social interaction is going to have in your campaign, so that when the players sit down to make characters they can make effective ones.

Scale

Will the adventures span galaxies, or take place within a single small village? Are the PCs everyday folk in over their heads, or epic heroes? What is just too much for the party to handle?

When your limitations are "anything", it can be very easy to get lost in the possibilities. As the GM, setting boundaries for yourself regarding the size of the campaign is helpful in both focusing your adventures narratively and preventing you from getting side-tracked. It will also be a helpful guideline for the players when they go to construct their characters.

The question of scale is really the intersection of three different questions, although it tends to be the case that all three go together:

- The scope of area in which the game takes place.
- The power level of the characters.
- The number of fantastic elements in the game.

I'll use superheroes as an example, since it is the genre in which the differences in scale are most obvious. At the bottom you have street-level heroes, who operate within a specific city and handle unpowered criminals and street thugs. Examples include Daredevil, Green Arrow, and The Punisher: nominally normal humans with perhaps a single minor power.

[17] Shadowrun of course dating back to long before it occurred to anyone that connecting wirelessly was a thing that could happen.

Above these you have the world-level heroes. These usually have more super superpowers, fight powered super-villains, and may go anywhere in the world. These are your A-list characters, such as The Flash or Iron-Man.

Last are the cosmic level heroes, who deal with threats to entire galaxies or even universes. They often fight gods, anthropomorphized concepts like Death or Eternity, or galactic empires. Sometimes they are gods themselves. Examples include The Silver Surfer, or The Spectre.

On each level, the power, scope, and fantastic elements increase. While often not as well defined, such distinctions exist in other genres of fiction as well. In science fiction you have Planetary SF, which is usually concerned with events on a specific planet, such as the movie *Avatar*. Above that you have galaxy spanning SF like *Star Trek*, *Stargate*, *Babylon 5*, or any number of others. Finally, at the highest levels you have SF stories which may span all of time and space.

Fantasy of course varies from quasi-historical medieval stories, through pulp sword & sorcery such as Conan where you might have a wizard or a monster, up to High Fantasy series that might include flights of dragons, fights with gods, and reality warping magics.

Within the context of an RPG, scale can be hard to judge. In many cases the scale changes over time as the PCs increase in level, handling ever greater challenges. While there is less you need to do proactively than with the other elements I've mentioned, being explicitly aware and mindful of the scale of your campaign will help you when you're running the game.

Theme

Establishing the themes of a campaign is one of the best individual things you can do when writing a campaign outline. It is also among the more difficult things to enforce and be consistent about. But I should start by defining what I mean by "theme."

The simplest definition is "a message the story is trying to convey." For example, *Love Conquers All* is a common theme in romance stories. Heroic fiction often contains a theme of *A Noble Heart Will Always Triumph*. Many horror stories have an underlying theme that *Evil Can Never Be Defeated, Only Survived for a Time*.

These messages are typically only conveyed to the audience indirectly, and if they are directly expressed at all it is usually near the end of the story. More commonly, it is left to the audience to pick up on these themes over the course of the story.

RPGs, however, tend not to develop these sorts of underlying themes. This is in large part because of the inherent differences between a traditional narrative and an RPG. A character in a book does not have hit points, nor do they need to make a skill check to daringly leap across a yawning chasm. In a book these things happen according to the will of the author.

An RPG, however, is both a game with rules and a simulated interactive environment. Events happen according to the rules of the game as much as by the designs of the players at the table. This is inherently disruptive to the idea of an underlying theme to events. The dice don't know that your PC is nobly sacrificing herself in the name of love, and you therefore still need to roll well in order to miraculously survive against all odds and turn the tables on the villain.

This is, of course, not to say the rules cannot be adjusted to favor a particular theme. Although the rules of an RPG are, in a sense, a simulation of a reality, they are equally a simulation of a story. So while these themes tend not to evolve naturally, it is perfectly possible for the GM to enforce them intentionally. In fact, doing so can measurably improve a campaign.

I'll take the example of *Love Conquers All*, because it's fairly straight-forward. If you use this as a theme of the campaign you can design scenarios with it in mind. You could do things like granting the PCs bonuses when they act in accordance with the theme of the campaign, such as granting a bonus to a valiant knight who bears a token from his beloved princess. You could even go so far as to introduce a Love stat, with special bonuses or other perks associated with it.

Even aside from any mechanical elements, declaring a specific theme will help the players make characters that fit better with the campaign. As with Genre and Tone, characters should fit in with the Theme of their story. A game can be heavily disrupted by a character who operates according to a different theme than the campaign as a whole.

A *Love Conquers All* character in an *Evil Can Never Be Defeated* game is going to get their face punched in over and over again, much to the dismay of the player. By the same measure, an *Evil Can Never Be Defeated* character in a *A Noble Heart Will Always Triumph* world is going to come off as hopelessly morose, while never seriously engaging with the adventure.

Identifying and enforcing a specific theme in your campaign can be difficult, but incredibly rewarding. Having a strong understanding of the narrative underpinnings of the story you want to tell and being able to communicate them to the players is the first step in bringing those elements out in the story.

If, for example, you can say to your players, "In this campaign, the underlying theme is that

these characters are not good people. They are simply the best people available," the players can then turn around and make characters that fit that description. They then play these flawed characters, trying to make a difference in an uncaring world, ultimately producing a campaign which contains that theme.

Writing the Outline

While the above topics are a good starting point for thinking about your campaign, they are by no means an exhaustive list. Any element of the campaign that you can define for yourself and your players ahead of time is going to make your campaign better.

Once you have some ideas regarding the narrative qualities of your campaign, you can organize your thoughts into a document. It doesn't have to be pages and pages of notes with thousand year histories, biographies of entire divine pantheons, and the name of every inn from the capitol to the sea. Actually, that's probably the exact opposite of what you need.

At this point in the campaign design process, I've found that two major obstacles seem to crop up again and again: getting bogged down in details and committing to plot elements that straitjacket the game down the line. So you should avoid putting either of these things into your conceptual map of the campaign. You're going more for the broad strokes, building the general framework that your game is going to be built around.

I have found the most useful campaign outlines include three specific sections. The first section is composed of the various narrative elements I've discussed so far: genre, tone, sources of inspiration, and general notes on style. I usually start my designing process by scribbling out my thoughts along the lines I've detailed, and eventually condense those down into a few mission statement-like declarative sentences. These will provide a rough set of guideposts down the line when you're writing adventures. You can also share these with the players when they make characters.

In section two of the outline, I take those general thoughts and start to develop the major actors of the campaign. In writing this section I typically ask four very specific questions: Who are the Good Guys, Who are the Bad Guys, What are they doing, and How does it end?

1. Who are the PCs?

You don't want to make the players' characters for them, but you should have a general idea of where the characters fit in the world. They could be part of an organization like The Rebel Alliance or The Fellowship of the Ring, or they could be members of a social group such as pirates or samurai. Perhaps they were all betrayed by the same villain, or they all need the same McGuffin for different reasons. Maybe they're just all from the same village. Regardless of what form it takes, there should be some common element that links the characters to the plot and to each other.

2. Who are the antagonists?

Plot is what happens in the presence of conflict. So who or what is the primary source of conflict for the PCs? It could be a rival political faction, the dread wizard X'ykth'lzok, or even their own hubris[18]. If you are into the more old school style of play you could identify the world itself as the conflicting force and the PCs as fighting against a hostile world for the right to adventure another day. Whatever the case, identifying the primary source of conflict will permit greater narrative cohesion.

3. What is the major goal of the game?

The goal might be a specific objective that needs to be completed, or just a general objective. Examples include Defeat the Galactic Empire, Destroy the Ring of Sauron, or Make a Butt-Ton of Cash. Whatever the goal is, you want to be able to express in one sentence what the major thrust of the campaign is going to be. Being able to label the driving force of the game will give your campaign focus, and if you ever get stuck on what to do next you can look at your major goal and do whatever will advance it in some way.

[18] I'm sure many readers will be able to recall a time when the planned adventure was superseded by dealing with the fallout from one of the PCs "showing those mouthy NPCs who's boss."

4. How does the story end?

> Again, this is not something you need to figure out in a lot of detail, nor something you should actively push towards. The less detail you have the better. In fact, you should never be afraid to deviate from your plans if the game wants to go in another direction.
>
> However, you should have a place in mind towards which the plot is heading. An "end game scenario." Be prepared to end the game if and when it reaches a point of natural conclusion. Sometimes heroes accomplish everything they set out to do, and it can be very satisfying to finish on that moment of crowning glory.

By answering those four questions, you can write the back of the box version of the campaign in one or two paragraphs. Nothing binding, or that you can't change down the line if a better idea comes along, but enough to get started.

The last section of the outline which I typically include consists of what I call "climax events." If you think of your campaign as a TV show, these would be ideas for the season finales and two-part episodes. The BIG IDEAS, so to speak. Stuff like "time traveling Nazis sack London" or "the Death Star blows up a planet." You don't need to flesh out everything that's going to happen in the game, but it can be incredibly handy to have a few big ideas squirreled away for a rainy day.

Just scribble down some random plot ideas and sit on them. Once the game starts you can work them in organically. You might even do a little simple foreshadowing ahead of time, and figure out the details later.

The trick is to pick things that are big and vague, and be ready to use them when an opportunity arises. If, for example, one of your climax events is "an ancient dragon destroys a city," you could foreshadow that for months. Just drop a random mention of this bad-ass dragon here and there, maybe once every few sessions, until the right moment for the dragon to emerge presents itself. You may not use every idea you write down, or even any of them. But they'll be there for you if you want them.

With all three sections completed, you should have a document which is about one to two pages long, and gives you a picture of the narrative structure of the game. You understand fairly explicitly what the style and theme of the game are, you've defined the major actors are and their

objectives, and you have a list of several cool ideas for down the road. Now you're ready to start looking at the nuts and bolts.

Chapter VI

The Setting

Choosing a setting for your campaign may seem at first to be an obvious or unnecessary decision. If you're going to play Star Wars, for example, you're going to play in the Star Wars universe, right? Well... not necessarily.

What if you really love a TV series but there's no game based on it? Or perhaps you love hardboiled detective novels and you want to bring that gritty pulp/noir attitude into a classic D&D setting. Really shake up all those stuffy old elves and noble families. Or perhaps you've been dreaming up your own fantasy world since you were twelve and you're just itching to run a game in it.

As the game master, you can place your game in whatever setting you like, whether or not it's the one the system designers intended. Indeed, mixing and matching setting with style can bring new life to your game in a way which might otherwise be missing.

But crafting or adjusting your own setting also takes more work and requires you to make decisions that would have already been made for you were you just using an out-of-the-box system and setting. One of the reasons I suggest starting with an outline of the campaign is that you want the game to serve the needs of the campaign, not the other way around. That means you can take your campaign outline and know straight out of the gate what sort of setting is going to best serve you.

There are, however, several different kinds of campaign setting. So let's take a look at the possibilities—and the particular challenges and resources that go with each. In general, game settings fall into one of three categories: official settings, adaptations, and homebrew, each with their own benefits and flaws.

Official Settings

Many games include the setting they are intended to be played in. *Dungeons & Dragons* is the preeminent example, since it has featured multiple settings which can be purchased independently of the main rulebook, including *Forgotten Realms*, *Eberron*, *Dragonlance*, *Greyhawk*, *Dark Sun*, *Spelljammer*, *Al-Qadim*, *Mystara*, *Planescape*, *Ravenloft*, and more.

An official setting can be a huge time saver, and it has the advantage that the other players may already be familiar with it—while those who are not can quickly read through the setting book and familiarize themselves with the world. Such settings can also be helpful by offering greater variety within the overall tone of the game. While D&D is generically fantasy, groups can opt to play in the high fantasy *Forgotten Realms*, the romantic fantasy *Dragonlance*, or the gothic horror of *Ravenloft*.

There are, however, downsides to playing in an official setting. It may not have the right tone for your campaign, or it might feature people, places, or other elements which would be disruptive to the plot you've devised for your campaign. Making significant (or even minor)

changes to an established game world can also throw off the internal dynamic of the setting or confuse the players.

It's also possible—especially with experienced groups—that your players are *too* familiar with the setting. They might make undue assumptions about the setting based on their experiences with other GMs, or utilize information their character shouldn't have access to.

Finally, it can be said that familiarity breeds contempt. If the setting is one your group has used in previous campaigns, your players may feel blasé when confronted with what was intended to be a dramatic reveal. The first time the players encounter the Ancient and Terrible Red Dragon Smaug may be a thrilling and dynamic encounter fraught with tension. The fifth or sixth time, it's yet another monster with a 26 armor class, 213 hit points, and a challenge rating of 15.

In general, official campaign settings are a shortcut, trading freedom and mystery for familiarity and certainty (and saving more than a little time). While this is innately neither good nor bad, it is important to consider this trade-off when designing a campaign.

Adaptations

The realms of popular fiction provide incredibly fertile ground for RPGs. It is rare to discover a gamer who has never come away from a book or movie desperately wishing to be able to play a game based on it, as evidenced by the sheer number of games which are licensed adaptations of popular fiction. Examples include *Conan*, *Star Wars*, *Babylon 5*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Doctor Who*, superhero games of both the DC and Marvel variety, *Call of Cthulhu*, *The Wheel of Time*, *Dragonball Z*, *Lord of the Rings*... the list goes on, and on (and on). Even *Watchmen* had an RPG circa 1987.

On a technical level, an adaptation offers many of the same advantages as an official setting, in that the creators have already done much of the work of establishing locations, important factions, and other concepts from the source material. Being able to simply pull up a map rather than creating one yourself, for example, is a huge time-saver.

However, not every work of fiction has been adapted to RPG form, nor does simply having the original property's trademark on the cover denote quality. This presents an opportunity for the enterprising game master to adapt a work of fiction on their own. It must be noted, of course, that not all works of fiction are equally suitable for adaptation into an RPG setting.

In general, we can divide works of fiction two types: those which are interesting because of the characters, and those which are interesting because of the setting. While character-centric stories are incredibly popular, they don't necessarily make for particularly interesting game settings. A character-centric story is usually interesting because of the protagonists, their unique abilities or circumstances, and the interplay between the protagonists and antagonists.

One example of this type of story would be *Indiana Jones*. Indy is a cool character, but remove him from the equation and there's nothing remaining to distinguish an Indiana Jones RPG from any generic pulp game set in the 1930s. Even if you decide to play as the characters from the movies, that leaves one player as Indiana Jones, and everyone else gets to fight over who plays Sallah and Marcus Brody. Does anyone really want to play as Brody?

Another example would be the sci-fi TV show *Firefly*. What made the show compelling was not the setting, it was that specific group of characters having that specific series of adventures. You could choose to play your game as a continuation of the series, with your players in the roles of the cast. But removing that ship and crew from the story doesn't leave you a lot to work with, setting-wise.

As a thought experiment, try removing the main characters of any given story. Just look at the setting itself and ask yourself what elements of the source material remain to distinguish it from any generic setting within that genre. Without the "chosen one" de jour of the story, you are often left with a fairly flat setting without much to recommend it.

Setting-driven stories, however, are interesting either by virtue of the amazing things which inhabit the setting in general or because the larger backdrop of events is interesting regardless of the protagonists. Examples of this sort of setting include *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, or *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Even removing the protagonists, you still have vivid settings filled with interesting people, places, and things for PCs to interact with.

Stories which fall into this latter category typically make far more interesting roleplaying games than those in the former, although like most things related to RPGs, this is not a hard and fast rule. It may be the case that your players would prefer to play as the stars of the source material rather than their own creations.

In such circumstances a series such as *Firefly* would be ideal, although there are risks in a campaign of this type. One of the sacred tenets of the RPG is that the player is the ultimate authority on their own character. The player has wide latitude to determine their character's

history, ideals, and attitude. When you're playing as established characters there is a high level of temptation to fall into the "you're doing it wrong" mindset. Especially when it comes to long running fiction with an an esoteric canon—such as *Doctor Who*, whose adventures span TV, books, comics, and radio plays produced piecemeal over the course of five decades—players may become frustrated if they feel someone at the table is not doing justice to a character.

You can also run into problems if the established protagonists are of wildly disparate power levels. Especially in fantasy, there is often one character who is selected to wield special or unique powers unavailable to the people of the setting at large. In stories which involve more formal social structures, it may also be the case that one character wields substantially more political power than the others—being a king or a general, for example.

While many narratives center around a group with a distinct leader, giving one player the authority to boss the rest of the group around may lead to conflict—especially if the player in question is inclined to fall back to the position of "My character is in charge, so we're going to play my way." An RPG is ultimately a collaboration between equals, and giving one player power or authority above the others can be asking for trouble.

There are, however, many advantages to running in adapted settings. For example, the players are more likely to be familiar with the world and any special concepts put forth by the story before the campaign begins. You rarely need to explain to anyone what a Jedi is, for example. It also means that you have ready access to locations, NPCs, groups, and other material that you don't need to spend time generating or explaining to the players.

Additionally, the nature of a work of fiction is that there is always a great deal about the world the audience does not know—unlike a campaign setting, which is produced with the intention of being a game. This can work for or against a game master, depending on their desire and ability to fill in the gaps.

On the downside, you should consider that adjusting the backdrop of a specific work of fiction into a setting for serial adventures may create problems of its own. One reason sequels are often poorly received is the difficulty in adapting the story from one with a discrete beginning, middle, and end into one that is ongoing. To get from here to there, you may need to crowbar off the implicit (or explicit) Happily Ever After and alter the setting to accommodate a status quo of never-ending peril.

These problems can often be solved by looking at the work you're adapting from a different

angle. The next time your group gets revved up on the hot new thing, instead of trying to adapt it whole cloth try examining what elements make it attractive to you. *Star Wars* might be awesome, but if all that your players really want is to play Jedi, you might be better served by adding Jedi (or their generic equivalents) to your own setting rather than taking on the entire *Star Wars* canon. By the same measure, playing "honest smugglers" may be easier in a homebrewed universe than undertaking the task of adapting *Firefly* to an RPG.

Whatever the case, remember that not all stories work equally well in the RPG format. They need to be conducive to an ensemble cast of protagonists and supportive of ongoing adventures. Providing a fun and entertaining game is more important than sticking to the storyline presented in the source material. Ideally the two will go together, but if one disrupts the other you may need to either make changes to the story or—if that proves unacceptable to the players—hold off playing that setting entirely.

Introducing your Campaign to the World

If you decide to use a pre-existing setting for your campaign—which is to say, you're using either an official setting or an adaptation—you'll need to do some work to bring your campaign into line with that setting, and vice versa. It's generally preferable to connect the campaign elements you wrote in the campaign outline with something which already exists within the setting, rather than to create something new.

Introducing a new element into an existing setting when a very similar one already exists strains the suspension of disbelief for the game as a whole, and the players' familiarity with the setting is one of the major advantages to using a pre-generated setting in the first place. So your goal in selecting a campaign setting is to pick one which will work synergistically with your campaign. The fewer new things you have to introduce, the better.

Let's say the campaign calls for a secret order of assassins with a certain belief structure. In the setting that you've selected, a secret order of assassins already exists, but with a different structure of beliefs. In this case, it would make sense to either change the campaign outline slightly to accommodate the existing setting element or change the assassins slightly—emphasis on the word *slightly*—to fit the campaign. You might explicitly note that the group appearing in this campaign is a heretical splinter group.

The thing you *shouldn't* do is say that secret order of assassins doesn't exist or isn't involved, but here's this very similar group of assassins that's totally involved. To put it another way, if you were running a campaign set in the present day, in the Middle East, and involving religious extremists, why would you create a fictional group of Zoroastrian militants when there are already real extremist groups that can serve the same narrative purpose? Only if no person, creature, group, or what-have-you currently exists in the setting which conforms with your campaign outline should you introduce one.

On the other hand, in certain cases a GM may be tempted to take an existing element of a setting and *alter* it in some substantial way in order to fit some role in the campaign. This should be avoided if at all possible. As likely as not, at least one of the players in the group will be familiar with that element and be totally thrown for a loop when it turns out to be radically different from expectations. It is better to create a wholly new character or group than to alter an existing one to the point that it becomes unrecognizable.

Conversely, it might be necessary to remove or avoid an existing setting element which would disrupt the campaign. In this case, it's far simpler to remove an element entirely than to alter or replace it. It's perfectly reasonable to drop a setting element entirely, although it may become necessary at some point to create a hand-waving explanation as to why it/they aren't present or involved.

Perhaps the ultimate example of a disruptive element is the character of Elminster from *Forgotten Realms*. Elminster is less a person than a walking deus ex machina—an epic-level wizard and the boyfriend of the setting's Goddess of Magic. He usually shows up for one of two reasons: to present the plot hook to the party or to pull their tails out of the fire when they get in over their heads. Sometimes he'll even do both.

In either case, we are presented with a simple question: *If he's so damn powerful, why doesn't he just resolve whatever the issue is himself?* This is, after all, a trivial task for his epic-leveled butt, but perilous to the extreme for the PCs who are risking life and limb to complete it. While it's not difficult to come up with a reason, it is still necessary for that reason to be stated—for the players' peace of mind, if nothing else. The answer could be as simple as "he's not around, you don't know why"; "he's been mystically barred from completing this task by divine forces"; or even "he's totally involved, but on another level. Even Elminster can't be everywhere at once." The reason itself is relatively unimportant, so long as some reason is given.

This might sound like a bunch of complex *if-then else-not rules*, but it's really pretty simple:

Setting as written > Slight change to setting (or campaign) > Remove element entirely > Greatly alter element

←*Better — Worse* →

Homebrew

The alternative to both official campaign settings and adaptations is the homebrew world. Like home-brewed beer, a homebrew setting is one that the GM creates themself. Creating your own setting from scratch offers the greatest degree of flexibility and deepest level of integration with your campaign. However, it also requires the most work on the part of the GM and carries the additional burden that there is no chance the players will be familiar with the setting.

At first glance, players being unfamiliar with the world may not sound like a serious issue. But while not having a deep understanding of the specifics of a world—the history of a given nation, the geography of a certain area, or other specific details—isn't a critical issue in and of itself, the players need to have a certain level of grounding in the setting in order for it to make sense.

Experienced players often take grounding within a setting for granted, having played for years in campaign settings that are familiar to them, such as *Star Wars*, *Forgotten Realms*, or the World of Darkness games. Many become intimately familiar with such settings over the course of many campaigns, or through supplementary material like novels, TV or movie adaptations, and other tie-in works. They become immersed in the culture and tropes of RPG worlds, so much so that they are able to make implicit assumptions about the worlds they play in.

Any experienced *Vampire* player knows what to do when a pack of werewolves shows up, just as anyone who's played enough video games knows that the part of a boss that flashes red is where you need to shoot. Everyone who's played enough D&D knows to burn a troll's corpse, that shiny dragons are good and matte ones are evil, or that owlbear eggs are valuable to wizards. These are long-standing elements of D&D lore that all players pick up through cultural osmosis.

In contrast, players in a homebrewed setting have no reference material or previous exposure from which they can determine what is reasonable—or even possible—within the setting. Hopping on a carpet and expecting it to pick up and fly away would be ridiculous in one setting but entirely reasonable in another. Because the GM is not necessarily constrained to follow the

common tropes of a genre, nearly anything is possible. You could create a setting in which vampires sparkle in daylight instead of bursting into flames (as ridiculous as that would be) and the players would have no way of knowing beforehand.

Beyond the issue of player knowledge, there's also the question of what knowledge the *characters* can reasonably be assumed to possess about their own world. While you and your friends might spend four hours a week at the game table, those characters are experiencing days, weeks, or even months of time getting to know each other and the world around them.

All of those hours walking through wilderness, sitting around campfires, hanging out in taverns, doing all those mundane things that happen between adventures adds up to a lot of living that just doesn't come up at the table. During this time, the PCs are picking up information that the players aren't, simply by virtue of living through all those nagging periods of downtime most games just skip over.

Thus, it may be that a character is firmly grounded in the setting, but the person directing their actions has no idea what simple everyday action might merit a trip to the gulag. The characters may all be fully aware of the long history of enmity between Hereistan and Theresylvania, but the players have no idea unless you the GM have told them.

In order for the players to successfully navigate the setting, they need to be grounded in its basic operating parameters. They need to understand their characters' place in the universe and what tools are available to them, as well as the types of challenges they can expect to encounter, even when the characters don't necessarily have access to that information.

Choosing a Setting

Once you have a clear sense of what types of settings are available you can make an informed decision about which one to use in your game.

You can use an official setting, which will save you the most work—at the expense of some flexibility—with the downside that the players may not have the same sense of wonder and mystery they might have with an unfamiliar setting.

You could adapt an existing setting from a work of fiction, although care must be taken in choosing which stories are suitable for adaptation. This involves some extra work filling in unexplored details and deriving game statistics for things from the source material, although on

the plus side you can often find websites where like-minded gamers have already done some of this work for you.

Finally, you can choose to hunker down and do a lot of work to make your own setting. This allows the greatest level of connection between your campaign and the game world as a whole, but it will take more of your time than the other options, and you will have to explain much of the setting to your players before play begins.

If you do choose to make your own homebrew setting, you should read the remainder of this chapter, where I examine some of the important aspects of world-building to consider. Otherwise you can skip ahead to the next chapter.

Building a Homebrew Setting

The very first thing you should do before you start creating your world is answer one single question: *What can you do in your own campaign setting that you can't do in an existing one?*

Depending on the extent to which you are inventing your world from scratch—and how much of it you expect the players to explore—creating your own campaign setting can be a long and complex undertaking. A sci-fi game can span entire galaxies, each containing thousands of inhabited worlds, alien races, and organizations—each with histories stretching back thousands of years. A fantasy game could involve hundreds of kingdoms spanning multiple continents, each with dozens of cities, towns, and villages; pantheons of gods; oodles of magical races and beasts; and who-knows-how-many planes of existence.

Barring a compelling reason to do otherwise, if your game can work in an existing campaign setting, I recommend that you spare yourself the headache of making your own (particularly if you are a novice GM). Giving yourself the extra burden of creating an original, compelling, and balanced campaign setting on top of creating and running the campaign itself is probably more than you want to bite off your first time in the hot-seat. It might not be "that one campaign you've always wanted to run," but wouldn't you rather wait to run that game until you know for a fact you can do it justice? Get a few games under your belt before you try to perform your magnum opus.

But let's set all of these objections aside and assume that you are an experienced GM with a campaign idea that begs for its own original setting. You're looking at dozens of hours of work

generating material that may never see the game table. Just go over to your book shelf and take a look at the campaign settings you already own. I'd lay odds that the vast majority of them are 200 pages or longer. Heck, the *Ptolus* campaign setting is over 500 pages long, and that covers only a single city.

Better yet, let's look at the most extreme example: real life. There isn't a campaign setting book for our own world, but there is something close: Wikipedia. An artist named Rob Matthews printed out around 400 featured articles from Wikipedia, and bound them into a book. That tome topped out at a staggering 5000+ pages, and that was with less than 0.0002% of the over 3,000,000 English language articles Wikipedia contains.

You could devote every waking hour to detailing your fictional world, and never come close to the level of detail contained in your average wikipedia write-up. Fortunately, you don't need to. Just as the rules of the game are a simplified abstraction of the natural laws that govern our own world, your campaign setting can be greatly simplified as well.

The trick is to detail the right type of information, which will help you establish whatever details you need simply and effectively. To this end, there are a few categories of information about your setting you will want to consider.

Scope

The first thing to determine when creating your setting is the scope of the campaign. That is, where do you expect the party to go over the course of the game? A game designer has no idea which areas in the setting a group is going to explore and thus needs to detail every area in roughly equal detail. But as the GM, you have a relatively good idea of where your game is going to take place, so you really only need to develop those specific areas.

If, for example, your post-apocalyptic campaign takes place entirely within the continental United States, you don't need to know what the ruins of Paris look like, nor the names of the warlords who rule Shanghai. If you're running a fantasy game that is restricted to the confines of a single isolated valley off in the hinterlands, there's very little work you'll need to do in terms of map-making. The PCs might be from far off lands, but if the players never go to those places, you don't need to write them out in detail.

In short, the work you need to do in detailing your campaign setting involves only those things which you expect the PCs to interact with directly. Anything which doesn't actually

appear in-game can be reduced to at most a single line of descriptive text. If you were GM-George Lucas homebrewing *Star Wars*, you wouldn't need to make any maps of Alderaan, since it will be blown up without any of the PCs ever setting foot on the planet[19]. If you restrict your planning in this way to only those things which you can reasonably predict will feature in the campaign itself, you can save yourself a lot of unnecessary work.

Regardless of the scope, however, there are two categories of information that *every* setting needs: the Universal Scale information and the World Scale information.

Universal Scale

The universal scale information consists primarily of your setting's cosmology: the underlying operating principles—or meta-physics—of your universe.

In general, people will assume that everything works just like it does in real life unless it's specifically stated otherwise. So there are some bases you need to cover, depending on the genre of the game. First and foremost should be whatever the local version of super-stuff is. You could call it super powers, super-science, magic, psychic powers, chi, ju-ju, or just The Force. Regardless of the words you use to describe it, super-stuff is all of the things that can't exist in our own reality. Whatever form it takes, however, it's critical that you set some sort of boundaries for what is and is not possible.

Second, you should have some idea of who the power players are. By power players, I mean those entities or organizations that have wide agency in the world and on some level are directly responsible for setting and maintaining the status quo. In fantasy games, this is often a combination of kings, gods, dragons, and/or wizards. In sci-fi, it may be an ancient race of aliens, 5th dimensional creatures from beyond our plane of existence, or the great space empires. For more modern or Earth-centric games, it could be a cabal of vampire lords, mega-corporations, secret government agencies, or slumbering elder gods.

Usually the power players don't interact directly with the PCs or take a hand in the particular adventures of the campaign. But they do have a strong level of influence over the setting as a whole, and it's a good idea to know who they are and what objectives they are pursuing.

You also need to decide who and what the "people" are in your setting; particularly those races available for player characters. Most fantasy games assume a general list of non-human

[19] "A planet gets blown up" would be an excellent example of a climax moment in George's campaign outline.

races, which usually includes some subset of Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes, Halflings, and Orcs. Most sci-fi games include a standard selection of alien species: the wise, emotionally detached elder race; the hot-blooded warrior culture; and the physically diminutive tech-heads[20].

However, you are not under any obligation to follow the traditional forms. Even small tweaks to the standard lists can give your setting a feeling of individuality: a fantasy and magic game with Klingons, for example, or a sci-fi game in which all of the "alien" races are descendants of human colonists who are genetically human but have been physiologically altered by the local conditions of their new home-worlds.

You do need to be careful in making your list, however, because if the players see a race with the same name as one they already know, they will assume that it works according to the traditional rules. You could have elves that are seven and a half feet tall, live for 7 months, and eat humans, but your players will see the word "elf" and jump straight to the immortal, tree-hugging, magic-loving, pointy-eared hippies, no matter how often you remind them *these elves are different*.

World Scale

Once you've nailed down the cosmology of your setting, you can move on to the more practical world scale. Maps of the setting (be it town, kingdom, world, or galaxy), lists of the important groups and factions, unusual or magical creatures, powerful items (magical, super-science, or otherwise), important history, and so forth.

This is where the majority of the work lies when making a homebrew setting (particularly the maps). The simple act of figuring out where everything is and how all of the various people and places relate to each other—in a way that makes sense—can be incredibly time-consuming. As I suggested above, while limiting your focus to those areas you expect the players to explore can be a huge time saver, you should at the very least have some short notes on what is in each area.

Remember, your players don't know what isn't there. They can only "know" what they have personally observed. This gives you a degree of latitude when it comes to deciding what's

[20]It is, of course, no coincidence that the standard sci-fi races and standard fantasy races are fairly similar, even though sci-fi usually changes up the names.

where. Anything you don't explicitly define can be changed later, as long as the players haven't personally observed it.

If, for example, your campaign takes place in a single city, you don't need to do more than briefly outline what each district of the city is, perhaps a few major landmarks, and the name of the mayor. If your campaign takes place in a specific country, you only have to prepare the basic terrain and a few prominent locations. Whatever the scale of the game, you should have at least a vague notion of what's in each area, whether that area is a few city blocks or an entire star system. As long as you can fill in the details before the players get there, they won't know the difference.

What to Do with Your Setting Once You've Made It

Once you've put the finishing touches on your campaign setting, there's one final step you need to take: introducing it to your players. Depending on the genre, your players are going to make certain assumptions about the world based on their previous experiences. Players naturally expect a fantasy world will include Elves and Dwarves and a sci-fi world will include faster than light travel. Furthermore, they will expect that those Elves and Dwarves will exactly correspond to the stereotypical versions of those races.

You need to identify places where your world differs from expectations. If, for example, you are running you own homebrew zombie apocalypse game, do zombies have to be shot in the head? Do they eat brains or any flesh? Are they viral-outbreak zombies or magically animated zombies? Much of this is knowledge that the characters will possess, but of which the players are unaware. They need to be filled in on this information or they are going to feel both lost and jerked around.

There is also the much rarer instance where information exists that the characters don't know, but the players *need* to be aware of. To pull an example out of the air, let's say that in a given campaign setting, all magic is inherently corrupting. No matter what, anyone who uses magic long enough will ultimately be twisted by it.

While the PCs in the game may have no idea that's the case, it's an important fact for the players to know, as in the long run a player may not want their character to be corrupted. If the player decides to go that route it should be a conscious choice, not a gotcha from the Game Master ten sessions into a campaign when it's already too late.

Generally this sort of information comes from the universal scale, although there are occasionally tidbits of knowledge about the world that the players need to have in order for the story to make sense, but that for whatever reason their characters wouldn't have access to. Obscure bits of historical information, for example, which provide important context for the campaign.

While it may seem counter-intuitive to tell players things they then have to pretend they don't know, it's important for them to be grounded in the setting. In the ordinary course of events they would derive this knowledge from having read the campaign setting book, but since in effect you are the book for your campaign setting, it's on you to tell them.

Chapter VII

The System

As I mentioned in the last chapter, while settings and systems are often sold as a package there is nothing that compels a GM to use one with the other. Perhaps you want to play a medieval fantasy version of *Call of Cthulhu* set in a version of the Forgotten Realms where orcs and dragons are actually gibbering horrors from beyond the veil of mundane reality. Maybe you want to explore a version of the Star Wars universe adapted to be an epic steampunk adventure. It may just be that you have elected to create your own homebrew setting and have no attachment to any particular rule system.

Whatever the case, most GMs will instinctively choose whichever game system best fulfills two criteria:

- Are my players already familiar with it?
- Do I own a copy of the book?

While pragmatic, this method does not necessarily produce the best games. Having players who are already comfortable with a rules system can be a bonus; however, this is the same kind of thinking that leads us to the overly familiar "you meet in an inn" opening[21].

As with the setting, you want your choice of rules system to support a style of gameplay in keeping with the tone of your campaign. You also want to choose a system that you and your players will enjoy playing. There have been literally hundreds of different game systems published since the invention of the roleplaying game, and selecting among them can be a daunting task. There are, however, some general questions we can ask to cut down the number of options.

This is another point at which your campaign outline can help. Refer back to the notes you made about tone and the list of works of fiction, and also consider searching on the internet

[21] Bonus points if the inn's name is an alliteration consisting of an adjective and an animal.

to see what systems other people are already using to play games in the same spirit. Certain movies—such as *The Matrix*—tend to stand out as targets for adaptation to RPGs. Web forums can also be useful resources for gathering opinions from the gaming community on what systems work well for certain genres or for adapting specific works of fiction.

Genre vs. Toolkit

RPG systems can be broken down into two general types: Genre games and Toolkit games. Genre games usually have rules that support a specific genre of fiction—or even a specific work of fiction—while toolkit games have a generic rule set that can be applied to any kind of game you like.

Genre games include titles such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Cyberpunk 2020*, *Vampire*, and *Star Wars*. *Vampire*, for example, includes a Humanity statistic and rules based off of it which require a player to consider how their character's actions impact his or her dwindling connection to human morality, a common trope in modern vampire fiction. *Star Wars*, of course, is built around having adventures within the Star Wars universe, and thus has rules designed specifically for elements of the setting, such as Jedi, and the corruptive power of the Dark Side.

The value of this sort of specialization can be seen when looking at two notable games within the same genre: D&D and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*. If your campaign is in the genre of high or epic fantasy with lots of dramatic combat and magic, you might very well select D&D. If, however, you want your game to be grimmer and more perilous, you might pick *Warhammer*.

In contrast, toolkit games like *Savage Worlds*, *GURPS*, *Fudge*, *The Basic Roleplaying System* and *Mutants and Masterminds* use systems which don't distinguish between different kinds of super-stuff. A wizard's fireball and a rocket-propelled grenade might be represented the exact same way in the rules, with the only difference being the GM's narration.

Let's look at the *Mutants and Masterminds* system for an example. While billed as a superhero roleplaying game, it would be more accurate to call it a Comic Book RPG. M&M handles high fantasy or space opera just as well as superheroes. Its generic power system can be used for wizards, jedi, gangsters, aliens, ninjas, robots, psychics, or anything else you might desire.

Under the M&M point-buy system, powers are built based only on their in-game effect. For example, all ranged powers which deal damage are a "Blast". There's no difference between an

Ice Blast and a Fire Blast, nor does the system care whether that Fire Blast is a flamethrower, a dragon's breath, or a plasma rifle.

While this provides an even platform to mix and match elements from various genres, toolkit systems often suffer from a lack of flavor when compared with genre systems. If we go back to the example of *Star Wars*, a system explicitly designed to handle Jedi is going to have a more Jedi-like feel to it than a system which treats Jedi as one among a host of sword-and-magic type characters.

If your game is going to feature elements from many different genres, a toolkit system may work best. It will be able to handle oddities such as a dogfight between jets and dragons better than a genre game, which is unlikely to have rules that make sense for both. On the other hand, if you are playing a highly genre-specific game—and especially if you are playing in an adaptation of a specific work of fiction—a genre game system is usually better, as it embeds some of the source genre's flair into the rules themselves.

Weighing the Factors

In deciding what game system is best going to provide the experience you want, keep one central thought in mind: "Does this game support the campaign that I want to run?"

In considering this question it may be helpful to have your campaign outline at hand, so you can reference the notes you made about the tone of the campaign and consider whether the game rules will help or hinder in establishing the tone you're seeking. You might also consider some of the following factors:

1. Combat

Combat does not have to be an aspect of every campaign. However, it is the nature of players to utilize every tool available to them. If combat rules are available, even the meekest person will arm themselves to the teeth with whatever weapons they can get ahold of. If you don't believe it, ponder this: When you get together with your friends, how many of you are carrying a concealed weapon? Now, when was the last time you played in a campaign in which *any* of the PCs didn't carry at least one weapon around with them as a matter of course? For that matter,

how often have PCs in your game opted for sleeping in full plate armor rather than risk being attacked while unprepared?

If you don't want combat in your game—or at least not as the centerpiece of the game—you may want to choose a system that discourages it. If players find combat to be a lethal exercise that quickly leaves their characters maimed or dead, they are more likely to find alternate means of conflict resolution than if they are playing a game which offers easy rewards for acts of violence.

Conversely, if combat is something you want to feature heavily, you will likely want a system that not only supports player violence, but the specific *kind* of violence appropriate for your campaign. All actions in an RPG are abstractions of what we would expect to see in real life. However, the way in which a game system handles those abstractions can vary greatly.

In some genres, such as Kung-fu or Epic Fantasy, the combat is high flying and dramatic. In other genres, like Wild West or Horror, the action is brutal and to the point. In one game a knife could be a joke, while in another it's a very real threat. This can actually have a large impact on the narrative elements of the game.

As an example, a group that I played with typically used the d20-system, which emphasizes PC power on a individual level. The PCs have their own distinct powers, and while they may coordinate tactically to an extent, each player really just does their own thing every turn. An average group of mid-level PCs has enough magic and special abilities to wipe out entire battalions of enemy soldiers, not to mention cut down dragons, devastate cities, and in general wreck havoc on a massive scale.

For one campaign, we decided to change to another system, *Savage Worlds*. In that system, the individual is actually fairly weak and squishy, but teamwork and coordination yield major bonuses. In the first combat of the campaign the group encountered a single enemy: a werewolf. The result was a near TPK. As a group they should have been a match for it, but no one of them was able to consistently roll well enough to hurt him. In the post-fight evaluation, the group concluded the root of the problem had been that they tried to use D&D combat tactics under *Savage Worlds*' combat system.

For the next fight, each of the players got a group of NPCs to fight alongside them in order to gain the maximum coordination bonus. Rather than being a small group of four or five elite heroes, they were the leaders of a band of about thirty warriors. In the next combat they were able to cut down a dozen werewolves with (relative) ease.

But in addition to having these NPCs around for combat, the players also had to keep them supplied, which influenced their actions, and they were able to interact with them as the group traveled around. Followers that the players liked took on larger roles, and eventually became important to the campaign as characters in their own right.

While the setting was still a D&D-style fantasy world, the change in the combat system had completely altered the dynamic of the campaign.

2. PC Power

As an adjunct to combat, it is important to consider how much general power the PCs have as individuals. Some games portray the PCs as mere humans: weak, fragile, and highly dependent on having the right equipment for the job. Others make the PCs into gods among men[22], routinely achieving feats of strength and dexterity that put the greatest Olympic athletes to shame.

D&D is particularly noted for having superhuman PCs. Take the commonly cited example of the humble dagger and its 1d4 points of damage. While a normal real-life person can be grievously injured or die from a single stab wound, a mid-level D&D character can easily withstand a dozen wounds from a dagger without batting an eye. They are routinely shot, stabbed, gored, electrocuted, set on fire, and eaten whole, all without developing so much as a limp.

Beyond that, there are non-combat related forms of power to consider. Political and/or social power, for example, which players may be able to buy as part of their character creation. While RPGs often focus on direct action as the primary form of player power, it's also important to consider the extent to which PCs can call on NPC allies or organizations to achieve their objectives. If the PCs are members of an organization with political clout, they can potentially accomplish their goals far more easily than if they are operating independently.

For many adventurers, simply not having the cops on their ass makes all the difference in the world. A given PC may have little personal strength, but more than make up for it by having maximum ranks in Wealth or Contacts attributes. Such a character could have a dozen or more hired goons flanking them at all times, making their personal strength a minor issue.

[22] And sometimes into actual gods.

Gear can also make all the difference in deciding whether a given obstacle is a challenge or a speed bump. In such cases, any resource that the PCs can call upon gives them power. When I first started playing RPGs, mobile communication was practically unheard of. If your character was out in the wilderness—or even on a city street—getting in touch with contacts could be a difficult process, and the GM could plan on the party regularly being out of the loop for a period of time. Today, that's no longer a safe assumption, as almost anyone can reasonably be assumed to have a cell or satellite phone with them at all times.

The game *Vampire* presents an interesting case, because the PCs are simultaneously very powerful and extremely vulnerable. On one level, even a newly turned vampire can easily tear a human being in half or shrug off machine-gun fire. On another level, however, there are dozens

of other supernatural creatures present in the setting which pose a major threat.

Even vampire society itself is a source of constant danger, as PCs typically start out on the very bottom rungs of vampire society. They are eternally surrounded by elder vampires who will cheerfully consign the PCs to certain death rather than expose themselves to even minimal risk. PC vampires walk a fine line, caught between the powerful and merciless supernatural world and the largely insignificant human masses.

The dimensions of how much power the PCs possess—both individually and as a group—set significant boundaries to how the players will react in a given situation, whether that power comes from personal abilities, social influence, or physical/social resources available to them. How the players relate to the game will depend in large part on how confident they are that they will be able to prevail over whatever opposition they encounter.

3. Crunchy or Fluffy?

A quick definition for those who are unfamiliar with the terms: "Crunch" and "Fluff" are frequently used to refer to the mechanical and non-mechanical elements of a game, respectively. As one example, the sections of a game book describing special rules or bonuses for elves would be the Crunch, while those describing elven appearance and society would be the Fluff.

Systems which are Crunchy tend to have lots of detailed rules for specific situations, and rely on dice-rolling to resolve situations. A Crunchy system, for example, would have an Attractiveness attribute which gives PCs a +10 bonus to their Seduction skill when speaking with NPCs of the opposite gender.

Fluffy game systems, on the other hand, have little or no mechanical definition. A rule similar to the example above would be "a character who is Attractive is generally liked by members of the opposite (or same) sex," without assigning any numeric bonus or other specific effect. Game systems which are Fluffy often leave a great deal to the discretion of the GM or other players and emphasize roleplaying over the use of dice to resolve situations.

Different players have different preferences as to the level of Fluff or Crunch they prefer and there is no right or wrong. However, it's important to match the game system to your group's preference. If you have been playing with the same people for some time, you may already be aware of how they feel about this question. On the other hand, it might be good to discuss with your players how they feel about various game systems before making a decision. Many gamers

enjoy the sort of optimization that's possible in crunchier systems such as *GURPS*, whereas others prefer the unrestrictive nature of a mechanically light system such as *Fudge*.

4. Structured or Flexible?

Game systems also differ in the degree to which they allow for player input, including that of the GM. This is particularly true when it comes to character generation and advancement. Highly structured games have the advantage of being mechanically balanced, but sacrifice the ability of the GM or other players to change or add to the system on the fly. More flexible games are easier to adapt to do what you want, but are also easier to unbalance.

In many cases, this division falls along Genre/Toolkit lines. Genre games tend to favor structured classes which simulate character archetypes commonly found within the genre in question, but only allow limited options as the characters advance over the course of the game. Enforcing these archetypes serves the genre focus of a game, preventing the creation of characters who would be out of place, as well as allowing for class-specific rules. Magic, for example, might use an entirely different sub-system than martial combat.

The downside to structured systems is that they often make certain character concepts unplayable—even those which are conceivably within the purview of the game's genre. If a certain player wants to play one class but include an element from another, it often involves a complex multi-classing process which leaves the character burdened with abilities they don't want or having to sacrifice progressing in their primary class. The Bard from D&D is a classic example. Although introduced as a core class in the subsequent editions of the game, originally the bard class could only be accessed by triple-classing as a fighter, a thief, and a spellcaster; a terrible kludge of a process.

Toolkit systems are more flexible mechanically, and also tend to be point-buy systems. This makes it easy for the GM or players to introduce new concepts, including ones that are radically unbalanced. Games such as *Mutants and Masterminds* or *HERO System*—notably both superhero games—have incredibly flexible (and complex) point-based systems. In these systems powers are constructed from basic components, and a given power might be constructed in a dozen different ways, each of which may have different advantages and flaws and wildly divergent point costs.

This level of precise control can be liberating for some players—allowing them to make exactly the character they want, rather than the closest approximation the game designers allow—

while others may dislike this lack of structure, finding it difficult to create a focused character. It's not uncommon for players who haven't used a point-buy system extensively to find themselves lost in the options, building unfocused and ineffectual characters who are at a severe disadvantage compared to those constructed by more experienced players.

Of course, there are also systems which are a hybrid of point-buy and class-based, falling in the middle between structure and flexibility. A notable example is the system used in the World of Darkness games. In these games the player is given points and also selects an archetype which determines the cost of various abilities. So a wizard could buy magic cheaply, while a warrior would do so at a higher cost.

Choosing between structure and flexibility is a case where group preference is the exclusive criterion on which to base your decision. A more structured game tends to have stronger genre support—which is a benefit *if* it supports the genre you're striving for. A more flexible game will make it easier for you to mix concepts and create characters that don't fit into a specific mold, but it does so at the price of complexity.

5. Extra-normality

One thing the vast majority of RPGs have in common is that the players will be making characters who are human[23]. All such games contain rules defining human attributes: strength, intelligence, learned skills, the ability to avoid or inflict harm, and so forth. They tend to feature the sort of tools humans commonly use, such as screwdrivers, pistols, long sticks, boats, computers, bits of rope, domesticated animals, pneumatic grommet machines, and so on.

Because they share a basis in our own reality, the rules for these normal things are typically very similar from one system to the next. For example, any rule for human strength is going to allow a character to lift, push, drag, or hit things within the general range of a normal person. A swimming skill generally allows a character to swim faster, overcome rougher conditions, and hold their breath longer.

It's not uncommon, however, for a roleplaying game to also feature elements of fantasy (be it the magical kind or the scientific kind), such as ray-guns, wizards, zombies, dragons, faster-than-light travel, vampires, robots, or psychic powers. Basically, all of those things which exist in our imagination but not in real life; whether we label them as supernatural, paranormal, or

[23] Or at the very least, human-like entities.

metaphysical. For the purposes of this book, I'm going to group them all under the common heading *extra-normal*.

Unlike normal things—the rules for which attempt to reflect real life—extra-normal things can operate according to any arbitrary set of rules. The extra-normal has no basis in reality other than what is required to maintain our suspension of disbelief, and thus can vary radically from system to system. Therefore, the things a wizard (or anyone who does "magic") can do depend enormously on the mechanics of the system.

Mechanics aside, however, all systems for extra-normality still perform the same basic function, insofar as they define the rules for things which violate the laws by which our own reality operates. On this level, a Jedi lifting an X-Wing with The Force and a superhero lifting a car with telekinesis are both doing the same extra-normal thing. The *only* difference is the rule mechanic by which they do it.

Presuming that your game features some level of extra-normality—as most do—you want to select a system which has rules that model the specific sort of extra-normality you want, rather than trying to alter a system to fit your needs. Because rule systems are usually tightly woven together, altering or removing rules can significantly impair the system's balance. The fewer changes you make to a system the better, and none is best of all.

Choosing a System

While different systems offer varying benefits, there are two criteria above all others that should influence your choice of a system. First: does your group enjoy it? Most players prefer certain systems over others, just because. If your group really likes Fuzion or d20 or FUDGE, and just wants to play that, there is no reason to deny them that joy.

Second, do you know/own the system? There may be a game system out there that's pitch perfect for the game that you want to run, but it can be difficult to get players to run in a system they don't understand. Doubly so if everyone needs to go out and buy new books in order to play it. Sometimes the best system is the one that everybody is prepared to play.

In either case, a given system may not be optimal right out of the box, but you can always make it work, somehow. Remember, there's no such thing as wrong-fun. While you want to use the system that is most supportive of the type of campaign you have planned, running a

game that is enjoyable is more important than running a game that is mechanically optimal. It is always possible to run a game according to "what seems fair," developing a more stringent system over time, assuming that you have a group that is prepared to be flexible.

The Game Master's Second Law

In Part 2, I've talked a lot about different tricks and techniques you can use to design a better campaign, some of which you may find more useful than others. There is, however, one overarching thing that I hope for you to remember from this section. This is The Second Law of Game Mastery:

Have a Plan.

A plan is not the same thing as a script. You don't need to have every detail of the game plotted out months ahead of time. In fact, that's the opposite of what you want. The goal is to have thought enough about the game that you understand on a very general level what it's *about*.

To put it in concrete terms, there are certain well known authors, musicians, and directors whose style is so well defined that someone could, off the top of their heads, produce a short piece following that style. A two-minute film in the style of Quentin Tarantino or Wes Anderson, or a jazz riff that is reminiscent of Miles Davis. Your goal as a GM is to understand the style of your campaign well enough that you can come up with material on the fly that all fits together as a coherent whole.

Know where the game begins and ends. Have a list of the kinds of things that you expect to happen throughout the middle of the game, ready to be pulled out when needed, or used as an example when you have to think of something off the cuff. Make sure that the system and the setting match the tone and the genre. Build an infrastructure into the campaign. Have a Plan.

Corollary

There is, however, a corollary to this law: *Never be afraid to deviate from one plan if a better one presents itself*. From time to time an idea comes along that is just way better than what you had planned. If this happens, by all means go with the better idea! That's why you have a plan, instead of a recipe or a script. Most of the time, plans change.

Part 3

The Game

Chapter VIII

The First Session

You've brainstormed, deconstructed, planned, outlined, analyzed, consulted the group, planned some more, built characters, and written backgrounds. You have your campaign outline and group contract at the ready. The players have character sheets in one hand and dice in the other. At long last it's time to play. You can hardly contain yourself, so awesome is this campaign. So... how do you kick this shindig off?

Openings are difficult for the audience, regardless of the medium. You don't have any idea of where you are, who any of the characters are, or what's going on. Even as you get up to speed on who's who, there's an ongoing lack of context. You aren't quite sure what's normal and what's suspicious or unusual, and you don't have any sense of attachment to the characters.

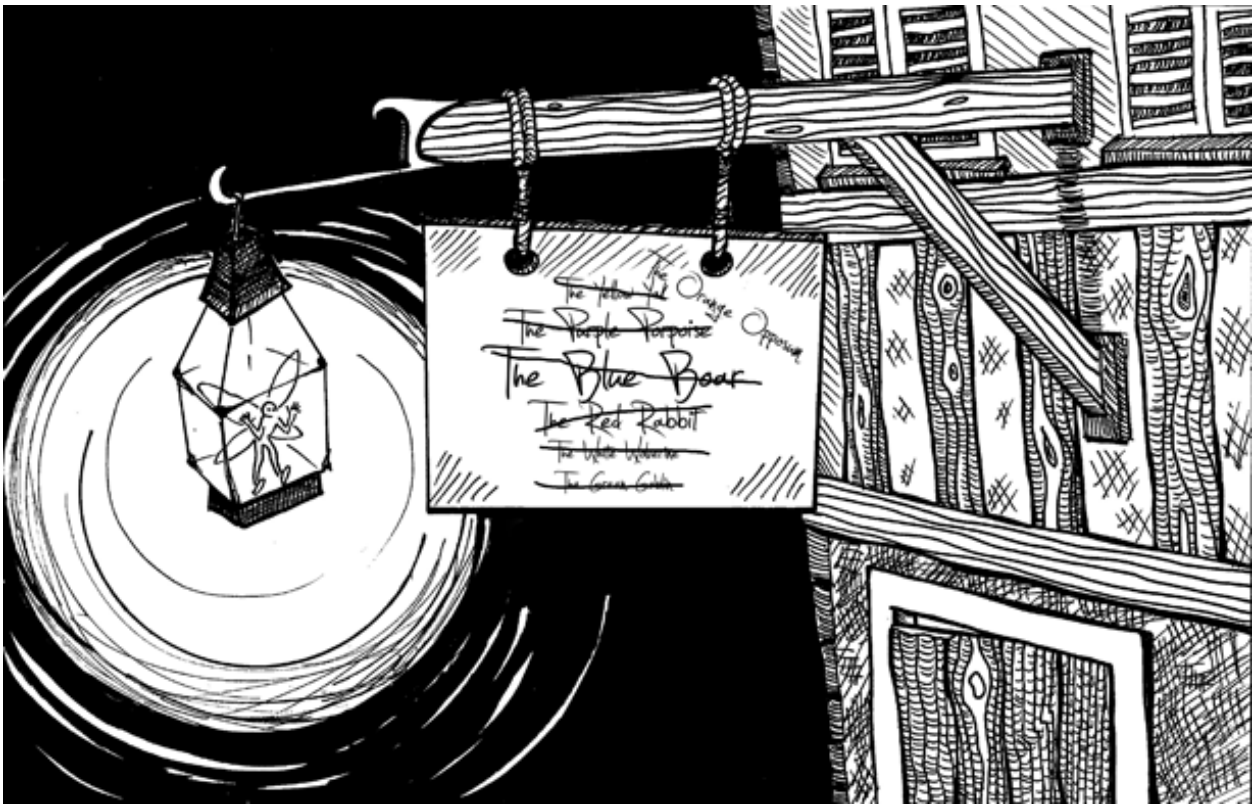
RPGs are no exception to this problem, and in fact the players generally have it worse than the average audience. In a movie or a book, the protagonists have the benefit of access to information about the world and their own lives to fall back on, even when the audience is wholly unaware of it.

The PCs in your game, however, don't have that luxury. Backstories aside, these people were—in a very real sense—born yesterday. Depending on their previous exposure to the setting, the players may know far less about the world than even the least educated bumpkin knows about our own. Still, it's easy to take the first session for granted. You just blow through it as quickly as possible to get the game rolling, and the players can figure things out as they go.

Everybody and their dog has played the traditional "we meet at the inn" opening: The PCs drift into town in ones and twos, gradually work their way to the inn, and notice that all of them are holding up their "I'm a PC" signs. Deciding to form an adventuring party for fun and profit, they are approached by an old man with a mysterious plot hook, and the game is off!

I mean, it works... right?

Not so much, actually. This scenario is an easy short cut to getting the game underway, but it's not the best way to start. In fact, it may be the worst. It might be convenient to just throw



your players into a situation, have them learn as they go, and pray that everything goes for the best. And you may expect the players won't even remember the first session by the time they get to the last, and once your game gets a few sessions in, it will have a momentum of its own. But a bad first session also has a good chance of causing serious and systemic damage to the campaign, crippling the game before it ever really gets started.

What if the players don't care about the plot hook? What if they get into a fight with the NPC you've sent to help them? What if you give the players a mysterious item where they don't know what it does, so they totally forget about it because they didn't really care in the first place, and when the time comes for them to dramatically use it to foil the evil villain's plot they've completely forgotten that they even have it, let alone what it does or where they got it?[24]

While it is possible to skirt by with a haphazard opening in order to quickly move on to the meat of the game, the first session is going to set many of the players' expectations for how the rest of the game is going to proceed. Rather than seeing the first session as something to muddle

[24] And if you're thinking to yourself, "Gee, that's oddly specific," yes, this happened to me, as a player and a GM. I'd wager it's happened to most GMs at one time or another.

through as best you can, and recover from down the line, starting that first session off well sets a standard for the entire campaign, propelling the game forward on the right course.

The Four Points of the First Session

The first step is to identify what your goals are for a good first session. In this case there are four major goals you should be seeking to accomplish. You need to establish the background that has led up to this point, the main plot, each character's primary motivation, and the group dynamic. We can reduce these to four simple questions that the first session needs to answer:

- Where?
- What?
- Who?
- How?

Where

Let's start by looking at the background, or the *where* question. This isn't just a geographic location, but a cultural, political, and metaphysical one as well. It is especially important in the first session to establish the narrative conventions of your game, so this is another point where all of those decisions about tone, dramatic flair, and morality that went into the campaign outline come into play. The first session is where you really want to show these elements off and drive home for the players exactly what kind of game this is going to be.

If this is a grim world where the good guys only break even at best, then you need to have some bad things happen right off the bat. Maybe murder a few children, let a corrupt politician get away with crimes, or have a bunch of innocent people be horribly eaten by zombies. You need to show the players through *in-game events* that this is a world where bad things happen to good people.

If this is a game about the power of magic, you need to display the impotence of mundane power. If it's a game about 4-color superheroes, you need to have a colorful criminal rob a bank in a blimp with his face painted on it. In short, you need to strongly establish in the minds of the players what kind of world it is and what kind of things happen in that world.

If you've ever studied creative writing, you may have heard the phrase "Show, Don't Tell." It's the same deal in a roleplaying game. You can't just tell the players "this is how it is." You have to show off the narrative conventions of your world in unambiguous detail in order to impress upon them what those conventions are.

In addition to establishing the tone of the game, this is also the moment to include background story information. Just dumping information on the players is a good way to get them to tune out. However, players are very good at sniffing out the Chekov's Guns[25] the GM leaves laying around. Usually it only takes a little bit of seeding to get the players interested enough to start asking questions.

Everyone has probably seen a movie that starts with an establishing shot in which there is a television on in the background with a news report that just so happens to be highly relevant to the plot. There's a reason they call those "establishing shots." They hand out background information that will be important later. You should be doing this too.

While you're planning out the first session, have a list of critical pieces of information about the world. Think of ways that information can be slipped into the background of the adventure. If there's a warlord causing trouble to the north who's going to be an antagonist, have some people talk about how odd it is so many people are coming south, bringing their foreign ways with them. Perhaps there's a holiday going on commemorating some important historical person or event. Maybe a criminal organization has just pulled off a major heist, and *everybody* is talking about it.

Using NPCs as mouthpieces is a good starting point and easy to do. But if you can, try to incorporate the information into the background itself as much as possible. Maybe the local village is having a festival to honor an ancient king whose acts will play some future part in the story of your campaign.

Letting the players do the leg work of investigating this information instead of just dumping it on them will make the players feel immediately more engaged in the story.

[25] A literary technique of introducing things early on which become relevant later in the story. The classic example is a casual reference in the first act to a gun hanging over the mantle. Since the author has explicitly established that the gun is there, it can be assumed that the gun will be fired by the end of the third act, or else it wouldn't be important enough to mention in the first place.

What

The next goal is to introduce the plot. This doesn't have to be a blatant exposition dump, particularly since much of the plot will only develop as the game moves along. Depending on what kind of pace you want your game to have, it could be very subtle. The beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* is a great example. (I'm thinking specifically of the novel, which lacks the opening sequence with Sauron and the armies of elves and men; so just edit that part of the movie out of your mind for a moment.)

It's the first session. Your players have rolled up Frodo, Merry, Sam, and Pippen. It's Bilbo's birthday. There's some talk about his old ring. Gandalf is acting like it's very important, but you don't know why. There's whispers of dark riders in the Shire. It's not until session two, when Gandalf comes back to visit, that you start to get a picture of the greater plot, and the players won't get the whole picture until several sessions later, when they arrive at Rivendell. However, the GM subtly introduced the major plot device of the campaign, the Ring, in the first session.

Whatever your plot is about, you want to include at least one thing which references that plot in the first session. Something which the players will be sufficiently interested in, which they will remember well enough for it to be a dramatic reveal later on.

Keep this next bit in mind, because it's especially important: *Knowledge which is earned is always more interesting than that which is given*. By foreshadowing the plot in this way you make the players more interested than they would be if you just dropped it in their lap. The goal is for them to feel as though they actively took part in discovering something.

Who

The third goal is to define who the game is about. "The party" is the obvious answer, but we are talking about identity on a deeper level: the PCs' personal motivations, both as individuals and as a group. Thanks to your group contract, this part is easier than it might otherwise be. You already know what the group's motivation is, and the players each know what their individual motivations are. Most of the work for this step is already done. What needs to happen in the first session is to establish *within the context of the game* how those individual motivations form a group dynamic.

Let's pause for a moment and explore that last statement in greater detail. The phrase "within the context of the game" is critical here. There exists a significant gap between how things are stated in a character background or on a character sheet and the way they actually play out on the table. You can talk the talk about this character or that event all day long, but it's what happens at the table that really truly matters (and what the players will remember). Like I said at the **Where** step, "Show, Don't Tell."

It's important that you back up the statements you made in the campaign outline and the group contract about who these characters are with actual in-game events. You therefore want to include something within the first session that strongly establishes who these characters are, both as individuals and as a group. Since all of the players should have generated characters that fit the group contract, you can begin the game with the assumption that the players have assembled into a party. You don't need to waste time with the "everybody meets at the inn" scene, because that work is already done. It's a foregone conclusion anyway, so why bother going over it again?

Instead, you should be focusing on giving the players a task that allows each of them to show off (and try out) their particular abilities while learning to work together as a team, and that drives home who these people are. Which brings us to the last bullet point...

How

Specifically "how the group operates." Their dynamic as a team. The players need opportunities to interact with each other in a safe(ish) environment, both on a character level and on a game-rule level. There's a learning curve for both the players and the GM in understanding how a game system works, and how your specific party works together, both in and out of combat. So you want to include a number of simple conflicts for the players to resolve.

These are situations that may need at most 3 or 4 rolls. A quick social situation, like talking your way past a doorman, or a combat that includes a distraction and punching out a thug in an alleyway. You want to give the players a chance to stretch their muscles and work together in different circumstances, so that when they start confronting real danger they already have some idea of how their characters work together as a group.

Putting It All Together

To begin with, it's important to start off your game with a situation that strongly establishes the tone of your game. You don't want to throw your players off balance or violate the status quo right off the bat. Start off with an adventure that typifies your game. Something a little simple, but which perhaps mirrors the greater conflict they will encounter later on.

Whatever your game is about, have the PCs start by facing a straightforward, watered-down version of that. Drop some hints about things which are to come. Give them the opportunity to test-drive their characters in some easy conflicts and make some decisions. Remember, your goal here is to establish as much as possible about the game as a whole: the world, the plot, and the PCs both as individuals and as a group.

You don't want the players to get bored or start wandering down paths they shouldn't be going down. A common tactic is to begin the game *in media res*: literally, in the middle of things. You've probably read a book or seen a movie that begins with something dramatic happening. A gun being fired or someone getting punched in the face. You're dropped right into the middle of the action and left to pick up the pieces as you go.

That's a fine method for the kind of story where the audience can just follow along for a while without knowing what's going on. In a novel or a film, the audience is allowed to be confused because the author and actors know what's going on. But with a roleplaying game, you can't do that because of the author/actor/audience dynamic. If the players are confused as to what's going on, they won't know what to do. This will probably immediately frustrate them. It's also pretty likely to be frustrating for you, because chances are they aren't going to telepathically pick up what direction you want to jump in and will go veering off in some direction you didn't intend.

I recommend instead starting the players off not-quite-in-the-middle of the action. You could call it "one paragraph removed from the action." Start them off just as they are about to do something and let them declare their actions. Give them a clear idea of where they should be going but the freedom to do it themselves.

A good example would be "about to pick the lock on a safe in the middle of a bank heist." You inform them they've gotten into the bank, shut down the cameras, and turned off the alarms. One PC is ready to begin picking the locks on the vault, while another watches out for cops. The

third player empties the tills, and the last is keeping watch on the bank employees. This is the scene as the game begins. Each player has a clear role and objective, they are working together as a group, and it gives them a chance to take control and test out their skills right away. The critical point, however, is that nothing is happening *right now*. They have a moment to consider what they're doing and take in the scene.

This will spare you the problem of dropping them into the world and have them wander around for 30 minutes looking for the plot, but will instead give them the feeling that they are in control of the situation. In the process of resolving the immediate conflict they should get an idea of their next course of action: perhaps making a delivery, checking in with somebody, or investigating something. This next scene should be lower stakes, giving them a little time to breathe, walk around, and get used to the setting and their characters while still having a specific objective to consider.

Optimally, aim for a twist to hit them just at the moment that you're ready to end the session. A good old fashioned cliffhanger. This will leave the players anxious to come back for the next session—and if you attach a plot hook to the twist, they'll be able to come to the next session, resolve the cliffhanger, and move straight into the main plot.

Ultimately, a first session is going to be difficult any way that you cut it. Being well prepared can help, and if you can get the entire group together and on message right out of the gate, you'll be nine tenths of the way there. The rest is striking the right balance between feeding the plot to the players and getting them involved with their own characters.

Players' interest in their characters—above and beyond the action of the story—will always bring more energy to a game than anything else. Players are ultimately self-centered; no matter how cool your plot is, if the players don't feel like they are achieving things and getting to be cool, the campaign with wither and die.

It is the absence of that investment in their characters that makes the first session so difficult, and developing it will keep the game going far longer than any plot you could ever write. The quicker you can get the players identifying with their characters and feeling the awesome, the better your game will go.

Chapter IX

Writing Adventures

Once you've both laid down a proper foundation in the campaign construction phase and assembled the party, you are ready to begin the campaign proper. With all the elements of the game (the rules, setting, campaign, characters, players, and game master) working with—rather than against—each other, much of the stress is removed from the game.

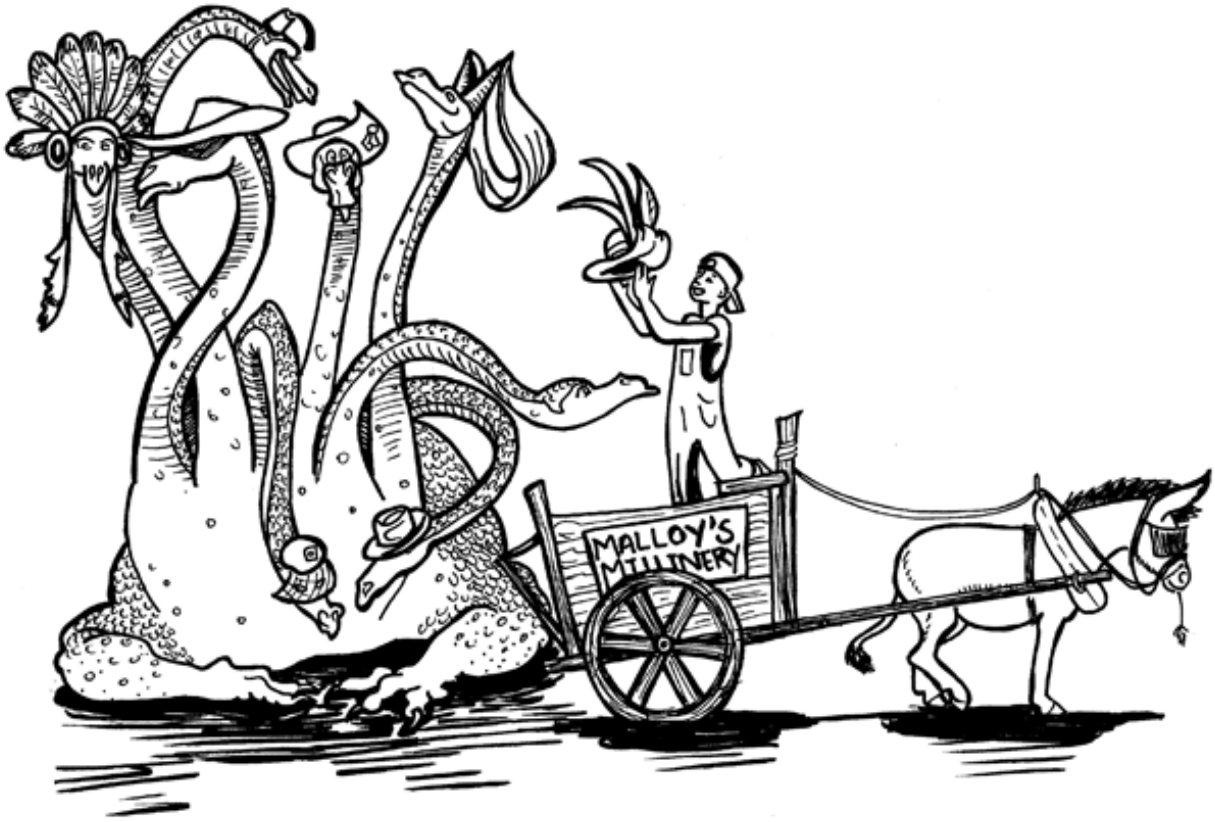
Through careful planning and forethought, you have hewn order from chaos. You have weeded, tilled the earth, and seeded your crop. Everything is now in order for the campaign to grow into the fantastic garden you always wanted it to be.

However, there is still work to be done. Many opportunities exist for weeds to grow and for pests to infest your campaign. To put it simply, now that you've set everything up, you actually need to run the game.

More Hats than a Hydra's Haberdasher

Being a game master involves a number of different jobs, including writing the adventures, running combats, narrating exposition, acting out NPCs, and arbitrating rules. Players often look to the GM as a director or conductor: enticing them with plot hooks and providing cues for ways they might overcome obstacles. The GM is also responsible for setting up opportunities for character development in a way that doesn't railroad the players down a single unerring track, engage certain players at the expense of boring others, or involve players standing around idle while NPCs do everything for them.

Some players prefer a lot of combat while others want to talk or sneak their way through every situation. One member of the group may want to roleplay through situations while another just wants to make a skill check. If you run with a strong hand, players may become bored and disengaged, deducing that their decisions are ultimately meaningless. Run with a light



touch, however, and players may become lost, not knowing where to go or what to do next. Even when players are on the right track they may misinterpret your cues, assuming potential allies are enemies or missing crucial information intended to establish upcoming plot advances.

The art of game mastering is subtle and frequently frustrating. Scripting and running an RPG combines elements of creative writing, improv theater, and street magic with the math and systems management necessary to create fun and balanced encounters. With so much going on at once, even experienced game masters can make errors either in adventure composition or in dealing with the players.

A large part of being a good game master is simply having a solid understanding of your group. Sometimes keeping your players happy is as simple as being sure to include at least one scene in every adventure where they get to shoot some big freaking guns. However, knowing what each of your players is looking for and being able to give it to them are two distinct things. Often two players will want different—and at times, mutually exclusive—things. Each player and group is unique and needs to be approached in their own way. In short, it can be staggeringly

difficult to balance every factor.

Still, there are a few tricks you can use to craft adventures that are generally going to be enjoyable for everyone involved. The first step is to identify what kind of game you're running.

Plot-Based Games vs. Character-Based Games

As I touched on briefly while discussing character creation, there are two basic types of narratives: those which are plot-based and those which are character-based. The difference lies in the source of the conflicts the protagonists deal with. Plot-based games tend to focus on external conflicts. Defeating the bad guys, saving the world from peril, restoring the balance of nature, finding the secret McGuffin, and so forth. The protagonists have to go out and deal with something external to themselves.

Character-based games, on the other hand, focus more on internal conflicts. The protagonists need to find true love, regain their honor, and make up for their dark past. The story revolves primarily around how the protagonists *feel* about the things that are happening in their lives and how they relate to each other and the world around them.

It's likely that you and each of your players are going to prefer to emphasize either plot or character over the other, and it's important that everyone involved understands and agrees upon what the focus of the game is.

Having three players ready to get on with the adventure while the fourth wants to hang around in the town for another couple of hours roleplaying about how he needs to regain his family honor so he can marry his true love and how he feels really conflicted about this can be a big monkey-wrench in the game. By the same measure, having one player who just really wants to get to the dungeon already while everyone else is happily roleplaying a torrid love-triangle is going to cause similar friction.

Neither type of narrative is better than the other, nor are they mutually exclusive. Plot-based games should still have character development, and character-based games should still have some sort of plot happening. However, while most players will have at least a slight preference for one over the other, games which feature a mix of the two within a certain ratio are usually best.

A game which consists wholly of action scene after action scene with no development of the characters boils down to little more than an overly complex board-game. Put simply, it's just

hack and slash. By the same token, a game which is focused entirely on the characters emoting at each other with nothing ever happening turns into little more than melodramatic soap opera.

Neither hack and slash nor soap operas are strictly bad, but the majority of players are not going to enjoy a campaign which exists too far towards either extreme. You may find that your particular group needs to have at least two plot-intensive scenes for every one combat per session, or that you can afford roughly one session with no combat every other month, or that you only want combat to happen on rare instances. Each group has different tastes. But whatever the case may be for your specific group, you want to find that mix of the two that is fun for both you and your players and write adventures with that specific ratio in mind.

A-plot, B-plot

Once you have a good idea as to the focus of the campaign, there is a simple story structure which is commonly used on TV series, and which can be very handy for incorporating both plot and character development into an adventure: the A/B plot.

There is a great deal of overlap between the structure of a TV series and an RPG campaign. Both are serialized, featuring discrete plot arcs (or adventures) that may span a single episode (or game session), or last for several episodes. TV series also tend to have similar character/plot dynamics to an RPG campaign.

It makes a lot of sense, therefore, to imitate structure of an episode of a TV show to plot out an adventure. In an A/B-plot structure, there are two plots which develop separately over the course of the episode, eventually coming together at the end in a way such that they can be mutually resolved. The A-plot is the primary focus of the episode, while the B-plot is a secondary, or background, plot. The various *Star Trek* programs are a good example of this structure, although you can see it at work in many other shows.

First let's look at the A-plot. The A-plot is the major focus of the adventure, and it should involve the main goals of the campaign in some way. Even if a given adventure isn't directly focused on the major campaign goals, it should touch on the meta-plot. It should also involve all of the PCs equally.

The B-plot is something that's kind of happening in the background, unconnected to the A-plot events, and is more character-oriented. This B-plot should focus on a specific PC and their related issues, although the other PCs will probably also participate. If you followed the break-

down in Chapter V on character backgrounds, each player will have given you a short-term goal and a long-term goal for their character (or internal/external conflicts). These goals or conflicts are easy to use as the basis of a B-plot.

Optimally the B-plot will focus on a different PC each adventure, so as not to devote too much attention to any one character. It will also allow a cooling-off time between episodes of special character development for each PC, giving the character time to absorb the ramifications of new developments and figure out what steps they want to take next.

For an example, let's look at a hypothetical episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which features a spatial anomaly in The Neutral Zone. The Romulans have been poking around, and the Enterprise has been ordered to investigate. That's the A-plot. In addition, we have a B-plot. Let's say this week Mr. Data is exhibiting strange behaviors which he can't explain.

The two plots develop separately at first. All of the players are involved in dealing with the Romulan/Neutral Zone situation. Data hypothesizes on the nature of the anomaly, Worf grouses about Romulans, Geordi reroutes something through the main deflector, and Picard says "Make it so" a bunch. Meanwhile, Mr. Data is acting odder and odder. Both Geordi and Counselor Troi can participate in the B-plot, trying to figure out what's wrong with Data, but really any of the other characters could get involved if they want to. Finally, in the third act we discover that Data's odd behavior is connected to the spatial anomaly the crew is investigating. At the climax of the episode the Romulans are defeated, the anomaly closed, and Data's behavior returns to normal. The day is saved and Data has learned some lesson about human behavior.

That may not be an actual episode of *Star Trek*, but it's close enough that it could be, and it should give you a good idea of what an A/B-plot structure looks like. For comparison, let's also look at a D&D adventure using the same general structure. Let's say the A-plot involves the party going to investigate the ruins of an ancient castle in order to find some plot device. In addition to this, years ago the castle was home to a group of cultists who killed one of the PC's parents. The "explore the dungeon and get the treasure from the endboss" A-plot and the "explore my heartbreaking past" B-plot develop separately, until towards the end of the adventure. Then the two combine in some way so as to be resolved together. Perhaps the ruins are haunted by the spirits of the PC's dead parents, who need to be defeated in order to be laid to rest. Alternatively, you could have the repentant leader of the cult living in the ruins, seeking redemption for past sins. There's really any number of ways that you could tie the two plots together.

From time to time you can even flip things around, and have the A-plot be character-focused while the B-plot is plot-focused. Perhaps the group arrives in a city in order to meet with a wizard who may know the secret spell to break the ancestral curse on a PC's family, and while they are there the party discovers one of their nemeses has infiltrated the city guard and is planning a coup against the ruler of the city. This can occasionally be a fun change-up, although it's important to be cautious of overdoing it by excluding much of the group to focus on a single player.

Of course, for those sorts of games which are ultimately more character-based than plot-based you can still use the A/B-plot structure. In a more character-oriented game the A-plot would present an external conflict which affects the group as a whole, while the B-plot would focus on an internal conflict affecting one member of the group, which mirrors or in some way provides a solution to the external conflict.

For example, you might have a game in which one of the characters is noted for being headstrong and resolving all of his problems through direct force. In an adventure with this character as the focus, the A-plot could involve a monster who is physically invulnerable, while the B-plot focuses on the head-strong character learning to think through their problems. The resolution to the PC's internal conflict (learning to think things through) provides the solution to the party's external conflict (monster that can't be defeated through direct force).

Character Development

While the A/B plot format is a useful formula for planning an adventure, the real heart of every good adventure is providing the players with a platform for character development. It's important to note that a PC is—despite appearances—not actually a person. He or she doesn't have an existence beyond what is perceived at the game table, despite everyone pretending they do. A PC has no independent will. They don't get hungry or sleepy, feel actual pain, or get bored. They will never suddenly have to go to the bathroom.

A real person has personal interests to explore, interesting stories they want to hear or tell, little tasks they need to complete, or any of the thousands of other things real people fill their days with. A PC has none of those things, save what his player gives him. If a player declares their character is going to watch paint dry for the next 200 hours, that's exactly what the character will do.

This means that—absent input from the GM—a PC has no desire beyond what it occurs to a player to give them. It's like putting an actor on a stage and telling them "Okay…ACT!" with no greater context or motivation. In an RPG, this typically leads to one of two situations: the "I get drunk and hit on the barmaid" scenario or the "I sit in my apartment waiting for the phone to ring" scenario. Absent a compelling direction to move, most players will either do something silly or pointless, or wait for something to appear in front of them.

By having stated goals or conflicts and tying them directly into the adventure, you give the players a direction and a motivation for roleplaying their characters, even in the absence of direct input from the GM. You are baking character development right into the cake, so to speak. This also has the benefit of binding each character's personal story arc to that of the overall plot-line.

Because of the players' dual roles as both actors and audience, there is always a degree of tension between the individual characters' stories and the plot of the campaign as a whole. Each player's self-interest means they are going to be more interested in the character they are acting and its perspective on the story than those of the other characters. The more closely each character's individual plot-lines are woven into the overall plot of the game, the more interested the players are going to be in both that meta-plot, and the other characters' role in the story. The more the other characters and the game as a whole relate back to their own personal stories, the more invested the players will be.

In the ordinary run of things, I as a player might not give two squats about this other PC's murdered family or her quest to bring the culprit to justice. If, on the other hand, I discover that the murderer is also a lieutenant in the evil organization that ruined my life and kicked my dog, I'm suddenly really interested in what this other PC might know.

To put it succinctly, tying character development directly to the plot both ensures that said development actually happens, and transforms it from an individual exercise into something that the entire group can participate in together. As the PCs learn about each other and the various links that bind them, they will grow both as individuals and as a group. Eventually, the lines between a personal nemesis and a group nemesis may become blurred, which is only a good thing. Nothing brings a group together like mutual hatred for an NPC[26].

If your players make it to the level of really hating an NPC, it's a strong indication that they

[26]Except perhaps mutual hatred of the GM. Nothing gets a group working together like trying to wreck a GM's plot.

are emotionally invested in the game. Conversely, introducing a really hatable NPC is a good way to get your players invested in the first place. The most memorable games I've played usually involved plotting revenge on those NPCs who have done us wrong.

The Power of Authorship

Since we're now talking about the influence of player input on a campaign, let's look at the authorial role of the players in some greater detail. As the GM, you have the prerogative to set out the basic plot, and wide latitude over the world and people in it. However, GMing is equally about reacting to the players' interests and actions. The lack of control over the protagonists' actions by a central authority is both significant and practically unique to RPGs.

Because of this, the outcome of each adventure is unknown—both to the players and the GM—until it has happened. You can guess, and you may be right the vast majority of the time. But you don't *know* what the players will do ahead of time, or what the result of those actions will be.

This presents something of a conundrum for a GM trying to write an adventure. During the course of a given game session, the GM is expected to present the framework on which the story will be built, as well as running numerous NPCs complete with personalities, desires, important dialog, and abilities. The GM will also describe maps of the areas being explored, present obstacles that will challenges the other players, and dictate the events to which the players must respond.

Optimally the GM would be doing all of this on the fly, reacting to the players' actions and generating material as the game progresses. Unfortunately, very few GMs are capable of producing challenging and balanced locations (be they dungeon, alien world, or office complex), sophisticated dialog, and intriguing plot twists off the top of their head. Preparing all of that information can take many more hours than are spent at the table actually playing. A GM may be planning out elements of adventures and foreshadowing events weeks ahead of time, anticipating the players' actions as best they can.

This guessing game results in a level of tension between the need of the players to have the freedom to play their characters and the need of the GM to be able to generate content in advance. If the players are not free to follow their own course of action the game will suffer

or perhaps even break down entirely. On the other hand, if the players decide to go in a totally unexpected direction a GM can hardly be expected to come up with a totally different adventure, on the spot, which will be of the same quality as what he or she just spent the past week preparing. Every GM will eventually arrive at a point where they need to resolve that tension, typically by placing some limit on the freedom of the players to make choices.

It's widely accepted that limiting player freedom is bad. The *reason* removing player control is so bad is that it steals their authorial power. It kicks the leg out from under one of the foundational pillars of what makes a roleplaying game. It transforms the game from what is fundamentally a collaboration between partners into a one-sided relationship in which the GM dictates the story to the players. It robs the game of its power, and the players *hate* it.

Resolving this tension in a positive way can be difficult, and many GMs miss the mark. I'm going to suggest some ways to deal with this problem in a collaboration-friendly manner; but first I want to point out some of the most prevalent ways in which GMs steal the players' authorial power.

Railroading

When confronted with a situation where they are losing control of the plot, the most common GM tactic is to bully, cajole, or trick the players into following the preordained course that has been laid out for them. These methods are collectively known as Railroading.

Railroading is to the tabletop RPG what the Rail Shooter is to video games. The players are essentially on a track that leads inexorably along the path the GM has devised. All wrong paths are blocked, all wrong actions are punished, all wrong objectives are impossible to achieve. Only actions which advance towards the destination the GM has predetermined can possibly succeed.

By far, the *worst* campaign I was ever involved in fell apart because of this sort of railroading. After several near riots—and a nearly successful hijacking of the plot—the game ended with the players sitting there for an hour while the GM simply gave a monologue explaining the climactic final battle. We were not even permitted the illusion of participating by being allowed to roll dice.

That is, however, a particularly egregious example. You rarely run into railroading quite that severe. Rather, railroading is often a subtle and insidious problem, committed in small doses by a GM with the best of intentions and accepted by players who don't want to fight over minor

details. As a game master it can be tempting to simply kill every player idea which strays away from the path you had intended. While on a certain level it's alright to "dead-end" ideas that are completely off the mark, in the long run it's better to adapt the story around what the players are trying to do.

Years ago, I ran a D&D game in which the party was negotiating to gain access to a nobleman's private library. Soon after arriving in the city where the nobleman lived, they were visited by a messenger—a gnome, as I recall—who gave them a letter from the nobleman asking them to meet him at a specific time. For reasons that have never been clear to me, the players decided that the gnome was suspicious and decided to follow him.

In my mind, the gnome was a nobody. He didn't even have a name. I didn't have anything planned for him, so I tried to kill this plot divergence. I had the gnome perform some incredibly mundane actions, hoping the players would get bored and move on. Instead, they followed him across the entire length of the city, until he finally went home.

Now, at this point nobody had really done anything wrong; either myself or the players. Perhaps they should have given up a little sooner, but for whatever reason, they were interested. So once the gnome went into his home, the party decided—again, I have *no* idea why—that they would break into his home, take him captive, and search the building.

At this point, I had two good options. The first would have been to simply pause the game for a moment and tell the players flat out, "Hey guys, this guy is really honestly a nobody. Maybe you should move on to something else."

Not the best option, but sometimes you have to give in to the nature of the game as a game and do whatever is going to get things moving again, regardless of how you rationalize it in-character.

Option number two would have been for me to make up something interesting for this guy to be. It wouldn't have had to be terribly complex, but I should have at least given them some kind of reward for pursuing the guy. This was potentially the best option, assuming I could have come up with something good on the spot.

Option three—which was, sadly, the direction I went—was to try to shut the players down however I could. Note that I said there were two *good* options, because this was where the railroading really starts. I basically turned this guy's house into a fortress. I stated that the door was locked and un-pickable and all of the windows had bars. After several unsuccessful attempts

to break their way in, the players attempted to *scale the building* in order to get access from the roof. So I informed them the walls were flat surfaces, too slick for them to climb. They pulled out a rope and grappling hook, so the gnome responded by cutting their rope from a second story window and overturning a chamber-pot on their heads.

By this point the "mysterious gnome" sub-plot had been going on for over an hour, and the game had devolved into a narrative shoving match between the players trying to get into this random nobody's house and me trying to come up with reasons they can't. Having reached this point, *everyone* was way too frustrated with each other to continue, and we had no other choice than to completely stop the game for the night and come back to it fresh the next week.

Now, while not every instance of railroading is quite so…mun-dane, there is a common thought process on the part of the GM: an idea that there is a "right" thing and a "wrong" thing for the players to be doing, and if they don't do what you were expecting then they are *wrong*, and that wrongness needs to be corrected, by force if necessary.

The GMPC

Another common form of authorial theft is the Game Master PC: a character who so entirely transcends the ordinary level of NPCs that they act more as a personal avatar of the game master. This is the guy who is stronger than the entire party put together, has impossibly good equipment, always knows just what to do, and conveniently shows up to save the day right after the party has gotten its butt kicked by enemies they had no chance of defeating in the first place. Often the GMPC was the GM's favorite character when he or she was a player.

Where railroading is a case of the entire world conspiring against the party to push them inexorably down a specific path, the GMPC presents the problem of simply rendering any choices the party makes completely irrelevant. When the GMPC shows up, they immediately overshadow the supposed heroes of the story, handily countering threats which overwhelm the PCs. They also often take away leadership roles from the PCs, simply picking the party up and dumping them wherever the GM decides he wants them. The GMPC makes the PCs redundant by their very presence in the story.

To put an example to it, imagine for a moment that your party consists of a bunch of street level superheroes. Let's say Daredevil, Batgirl, The Punisher, and Green Arrow are going on an

adventure. Then the GM decides you aren't strong enough to take on this adventure and sends NPC-Superman along with you. What then, is the point of your characters even being there?

There are typically three specific reasons a GM will utilize an GMPC:

- Because "the party isn't powerful enough on their own."
- Because the GM wants to get the party from one location or status quo to another quickly.
- Because the GM really likes a certain character, and wants to include them in the story.

The first excuse usually comes about because the GM is trying to "be realistic". He or she is applying the pragmatic logic of an objective observer, and thinking about what they would do in the position of the antagonists. Any evil overlord powerful enough to actually pose a credible threat to the world would obviously have an entire corps of high-level wizards creating a series of impenetrable magical defenses, so *of course* a half-dozen mid-level adventurers would get their asses kicked. They totally need someone really powerful to go with them.

This chain of logic, however, neatly ignores a couple of points. The most critical is that for all of its storytelling qualities, an RPG is still a game. Playing second fiddles to some NPC simply isn't a fun game. While occasionally the players may meet a challenge they aren't up to, this should be the exception, not the rule. Making your antagonists "realistic" conflates the GM's ability to conjure up anything they want with an NPC's ability to do the same. Just because such powers exist doesn't mean everyone (or anyone) has access to them. There are plenty of entirely legitimate reasons why a group of antagonists might have some weakness the party can exploit.

If for some reason the antagonists *have* to be of a certain power-level, than just make the PCs that much more powerful to be able to reasonably oppose them. If the power scale of the campaign is so out of whack that there's no way for the PCs to deal with the antagonists, you either need to tune the PCs up or the NPCs down.

The second excuse—using a specific NPC as the hand of god to come in and make unilateral changes—is simply lazy GMing. It's saying, "I don't want to put the time or effort into getting the party from point A to point F, so I'm just going to pick them up and put them where I want them, to hell with points B, C, D, and E."

If things have gotten so far off track in the campaign that you feel that there needs to be a sudden and significant shift in the location or status quo, simply picking the PCs up and dropping

them where you want them to be is not a reasonable solution. Better to sit the players down and say explicitly, "Hey guys, I feel like this game has gotten off in the wrong direction, and I'd like to move things another way. Do you think you could work with me so we can turn things around without too much wrangling?"

Without going that far, however, there are many better ways to change course in a campaign than having some NPC show up to boss the PCs around. Given the ability of the GM to control the world, there is absolutely no need to ever employ such a character in a game.

The final excuse I feel barely merits elaboration or a suggested solution. Taking on the role of GM means controlling the bad guys and supporting characters. It's the PCs that are the protagonists of the story, which means that by definition they should also be the most interesting characters in the story. This hooks back into the various storytelling roles, and the players as both Actors and Audience[27]. It's possible for you to have NPCs that are both interesting and memorable, but you don't get there just by making them impossible badasses.

The Jail Scene

A Jail Scene can be seen as a specific variant of railroading. It is essentially the GM saying, "I will be taking control of your characters for the next few hours." While it's not strictly necessary for the scene to take place in an actual jail, that's the most frequent and obvious case.

Commonly, a jail scene begins with the players being captured without roll or recourse, regardless of whatever counter-measures or defenses they may have erected. The GM might, for example, declare that the party fell victim to a sleep spell, despite the Elvish PC's immunity to precisely that effect. Alternatively, it may begin with a fight sequence against NPCs who are mysteriously immune to *all* of the PC's abilities. If the GM is being clumsy, the players may find themselves subjected to an extended fight sequence as the GM attempts ever more elaborate methods of capture within the rules.[28]

[27] As the GM, you also have an Audience role. However, your point of view is not from any of the characters, but rather from the stage itself. You're not just running the NPCs, you're also setting the scenes. The area where the GM gets to be cool is in setting up really amazing scenarios.

[28] Another example of a mistake made by yours truly was a game of *Star Wars* in which I spent about three hours trying to capture the party as they ran around a Star Destroyer, murdering Storm Troopers with abandon and using their lightsabers to carve through any unfortunate bulkheads that happened to get in the way.

However the capture is achieved, the result is the same: The PCs find themselves at the mercy of the villains, stripped of all of their equipment and placed in an inescapable cell. If necessary, the cell will include an anti-magic field or other method of suppressing extra-normality. While imprisoned, the PCs will be subjected to humiliating activities and/or repeatedly beaten within an inch of their lives.

No player action, no matter how reasonable, will allow escape. Rather, escape will only become possible (and frequently trivial) after some pre-ordained moment, usually by GM fiat (or by GMPC). As the price for freedom, the GM may additionally either strip the players of power or force them to accept a mission they would otherwise have no desire to complete.

The Jail Scene is typically employed by a GM as a method of enforced character development, to hastily move the players from one point in the story to another, to alter the status quo in some way, or in a poorly thought out attempt to challenge the players by removing their usual abilities. A particularly malicious GM might even use a Jail Scene as a power-trip over the other players in the group, using their characters as proxies.

While it is possible to play an imprisonment sequence without it being a "Jail Scene," the common aspect of all proper Jail Scenes is that they rob the players of the ability to make meaningful choices. The players have no alternative but to sit and wait for the GM to allow them to proceed.

Personal issues aside, a Jail Scene often results from a GM wanting to make a change in the campaign, in much the same way as the GMPC. Whatever the reasoning behind it, Jail Scenes are problematic for three main reasons:

- They rob the players of their authorial right to self-determination.
- They take away the powers and abilities of the PCs, emasculating the players.
- They are difficult to pull off naturally, and usually employ some degree of GM fiat.

Quite simply, while its possible to have an adventure which involves the party being taken prisoner, it's hard to do well, easy to do badly, and should be avoided entirely unless supported by a great deal of forethought, planning, and the explicit approval of the group as a whole.

NPC Theater

Last on the list of methods of authorial theft is the NPC Theater. Again, there is some level of overlap with the previous examples—in this case both Railroading and the GMPC. NPC Theater occurs when the players are forced to stand around watching the GM enact what amounts to a one-man play or a cutscene. The PCs are simply left to kick back, relax, and wait for the NPCs to make all of the important decisions for them. To the extent that there is any player involvement, it's typically on the level of selecting between "Yes, I understand" and "Could you repeat that?"

There are three main chains of logic that lead a GM to employ the NPC Theater. The first is simply not understanding how to properly script an adventure. This can often be a problem for inexperienced GMs, especially if they've written in other mediums before. Understanding how to present the story to the players in a way that's interactive and doesn't just force the story down their throats takes time and practice.

The second thought process that leads towards NPC Theater actually comes from the best of intentions. Many GMs reach a point in their evolution where they realize that the campaign world should be a living, breathing place, where things happen regardless of what—if anything—the players do. In reality, the universe does not revolve around a hand full of people. The GM tries to reflect this in the game, resulting in a world where the PCs are simply faces in a crowd, edged out by all of the really important NPCs out there.

While this is true to how the real world works, an RPG campaign isn't the real world; it's a story, and stories revolve around their protagonists. While this doesn't mean that the PCs should be the most powerful people in every room they enter, they should always be the most important. This is half a conceit of the game—because it's *boring* to sit around watching the GM have a conversation with themself—and half a conceit of the story. Because while reality might be entirely arbitrary, arbitrariness makes for bad stories.

The third and final path to NPC Theater is a case of the GM simply being more interested in *their* characters and *their* story than anything the other players could contribute. I'm going to speak clearly and unambiguously here, because this is important: This is just plain bad GMing. An RPG campaign is a collaboration among *all* of the players, not just the GM telling their story and everybody else nodding along and occasionally rolling a die or two. If you want to write a novel, write a damn novel; don't inflict your novel on your friends by making them sit through you narrating it to them.

Assembling the Pieces

These four examples are some of the more common ways in which the GM can rob the players of both agency and authority. But whatever form it may take—and the examples I've given are not the only ones—any authorial theft by the GM is always rooted in at least one of three causes: Overshadowing NPCs, Lack of Meaningful Choices, and Lack of Meaningful Goals. Any time the players encounter these obstacles, it drags the entire game down, making things less fun for everyone involved.

To prevent this from happening, there are three simple rules to keep in mind, both in crafting your adventures and when you are at the table:

1. *The Players are Powerful*. This doesn't mean they need to be impossible badasses or the most powerful people in the world. However, consider the three strongest NPCs in the D&D campaign setting *Eberron*: Oalian, an 18th level druid tree that can't move, Tira Moran, the 18th level cleric that loses 15 levels if she leaves her hometown, and the Undying Court, a bunch of high level undead elves that can't leave their home island. Notice a pattern there?

   They're all stuck in one place, and thus need other people to go do things *for* them, and that's where the PCs come in. The PCs are there because there's a job that needs doing, and they are strong enough, smart enough, and crazy enough to get it done. They don't need Elminster or Superman tagging along doing everything for them.

2. *The Players Make Choices that Matter*. The players should always feel like their decisions matter. As a GM, you need to be flexible enough to go with the flow. If the PCs kill your primary villain twenty game sessions sooner than you expected and have thus wrecked your story, that's too damn bad. Deal with it. An RPG is not a novel, and you are not in absolute control here. This is a collaboration among everyone involved, and if you are constantly undercutting the player's actions, they will not have fun.

3. *The Players are the Stars of the Show*. This goes hand in hand with making important choices. The PC's accomplishments need to matter. A perfect example of this is the Lord of the Rings. NPC-Frodo and NPC-Sam may have been the ones with the Ring who ultimately saved the world, but PC-Aragorn and company mobilized Rohan, saved

> Gondor, and killed the Wraith-Lord, drawing the eye of Sauron away from the hobbits at a critical moment. Their actions had meaning and consequences within the scope of their story. In the same way, even if the players are peons in the grand scheme of the campaign, they are the stars of their adventures. Churchill and Patton might be the movers and shakers in WWII, but your group of PC jarheads can still be the heroes of D-Day.

A game should ultimately be a collaboration between the GM and players. The best solution is to make the game as player-driven as your group feels comfortable with. The more the players contribute, the most invested in the game they will be, and the more fun they will have.

If you find your game is a constant struggle between your players and your plot, it may be time to sit down and have a discussion about what each person's goals and expectations are with the game.

Verisimilitude and Player Freedom

Now that we've gone over what *not* to do, let's take a look at some of the right ways to craft an adventure. As I touched upon earlier, there is always a tension between giving your players the freedom to be self-directed and needing them to engage with the adventure you've prepared. Railroading—that is, simply throwing roadblocks in the players' path—is the bad way to relieve this tension. However, you still need some method of herding the players down a vague narrative path. So how do you balance the freedom of the players with the GM's need to plan the adventure?

The problem is not that the GM has a final destination for the players in mind, so much as the methods she is employing to get them from point A to point B. So let's look an example of another kind of story-teller who creates shared narratives with audience participation: magicians.

Magicians often employ audience members as part of their act in order to reinforce the impression of reality. By introducing seemingly independent actors into the production, the magician tricks us into accepting the premise that they are not in complete control. That they could *only* accomplish their feats of wonder through magic. However, while a magician may present the illusion of free choice, you can be certain that none truly exists.

As a GM, you need to learn to create the same effect, making your players think they are making their own choices, even though you know what they'll pick ahead of time. In other words, you need to cheat. There are a number of ways this can be accomplished, but the ultimate goal is always the same: to make the players feel that they are the ones in control of the game, not you. After all, it's never, "Pick the Three of Diamonds." It's, "Pick a card, any card!"

To pull off this con, you will need to use a number of tricks. Some are employed by magicians or illusionists, while others are more literary in their origins. The through-line to remember is that you aren't trying to take away the players' ability to choose. You're just making it as easy as possible for them to choose to do what you want them to do. There is a subtle—but critical—distinction. So let's look at three of the most common tricks you can use, and then we'll talk about how they all fit together.

1. Quantum Narrative Uncertainty

Although they share a common imaginative space, the GM and the Player are really looking at two different worlds. To the player, the game world has an objective reality where everything is *real*. A sword is a sword, a spell is a spell, and a skeleton is a skeleton. The GM, however, observes a subjective reality where what is "real" changes from moment to moment. *Does the skeleton have 9 hit points or 10? How many monsters are behind this door? Is the evil wizard's staff +2 or +3?* To the GM, the only things which are real are what the players are observing *right now*. The future is indeterminate, the past is subject to interpretation.

In literature this is known as *Verisimilitude*: Something which is false but which has the appearance of reality. It is essentially the art of making something fake appear real. A work of fiction is not believable because it's literally true, but because it follows an internally consistent logic which makes it feel like it *could* be true. Concepts which are blatantly impossible in our current world, such as magic, time travel, and superpowers, have the air of reality because they act according to both an internally consistent set of rules and our natural expectations of the universe.

Let's say Superman is shot with a kryptonite bullet. We can suspend our disbelief and feel concern because, even though Superman and kryptonite are both imaginary, within the fictional reality of a comic book we know that kryptonite kills Superman. If Superman were

suddenly and inexplicably immune to kryptonite, it would destroy the appearance of reality—the verisimilitude—of the story.

As the GM, you need to give the players the illusion of a continuous and on-going world. In reality, however, you don't need to create that entire world; just the parts that the players personally observe. Everything outside of their field of vision is in a state of flux; a Schrödinger's Universe, if you will. By staging that nebulous reality in a certain way, you can give players the feeling that anything can happen without having to literally plan for every possible circumstance.

2. The Communist Choice, or "All Roads Lead to Rome"

This is a tool often used in stage magic, especially card tricks: You hold up two cards and ask a player to pick one. If they pick the left card, you announce they've picked their card and put down the right. If they pick the right card, you announce they've chosen which to discard, and still put down the right card. In either case the player was allowed to make a choice, and the fact that both choices result in the same outcome is irrelevant.

To put this into the terms of an RPG, let's look at a very simple dungeon: A single room with two doors. One door leads to a nigh-unkillable demon. The other leads to a treasure trove containing the demon's one weakness. The PCs need to go to the treasure room first in order to complete the adventure, but what if they pick wrong? The trick is that they don't know which door is which. No matter which door they go through first, it leads to the treasure vault.

Now, as I stated earlier, you never want to invalidate the players' choices by contradicting them. But so long as they don't know the result of those choices beforehand, that outcome is essentially arbitrary. In a grander sense, this means you want to focus your preparation on results, rather than causes. You don't want to tie essential plot points to specific people, places, or things. Rather, plot points should exist is a rough haze, ready to snap into place with the events of the game.

If your next adventure takes place in a lost valley, it doesn't matter how the PCs get there, just that they do. It might not even need to be a valley. It could be an island lost in fog, a city in the clouds, or a parallel dimension at a right angle to our own. Because the GM acts as a gatekeeper for the game world, he or she has the ability to alter the universe more or less at whim, so long as the verisimilitude is preserved and the players believe they are acting freely.

To put it simply: don't move the PCs around the board, move the board around the PCs.

3. Guiding

Human beings are remarkably susceptible to being led down certain paths of thought. Because the players rely on your subjective description of events, you can subtly direct their thought processes. The way in which you describe scenes can have a remarkable effect on how they regard NPCs, what they do and do not pay attention to, and to what extent they act cautiously or recklessly. Simply having players roll perception tests or asking "Are you sure you want to do that?" is enough to send many players into fits of paranoia. Describing one thing with unnecessary detail will make them certain it's of critical importance[29] and have them scouring it for any scrap of information.

Books on acting, writing, and stage magic are all going to be full of great tips on methods to draw people down the paths you want them to follow without them realizing you're doing it. The important thing to remember is not to use brute force to shove the players around. You need to be subtle when guiding them.

For example, you could give them an item which is potentially powerful but will only work once a subsequent task is completed. The players will be champing at the bit to complete any task you lay before them so long as they perceive it as being in their own interest.

The Big Picture

If we were to graph out a sample adventure, optimally it would look like an inbred flow chart which constantly runs back into itself. Point A is the beginning of the adventure, point F is the end, and all of the points in between can be hit in any order. The goal is to give the players enough freedom to be self-directed, while keeping them bouncing between the plot-nodes. Tackling the nodes in one order may be more optimal than another, but it's not going to derail the plot if the players do things in a way you didn't expect.

While playing mix-and-match with predetermined plot points isn't quite the same as true improvisation, your players shouldn't be able to tell the difference. It's also a lot easier for the GM to write and manage. Soon you should reach a point where the players are making every zig and zag to your design and thinking it's their own idea.

[29] Call it the Inverted-Chekov's Gun.

Also, don't be afraid to throw the players hooks you know they can't resist. Everyone knows the one player in their group that can't skip a chance to kill some zombies, pick up the loot, or examine the book. Their weakness is your advantage. Exploit this ruthlessly.

Walking the Line

You may have noticed that I started out this chapter talking about not restricting player freedom and ended up talking about how to subvert it. There is a very fine line between guiding and railroading, and it's important to apply these methods with the just right amount of force. Too much, and the players will feel like their choices don't matter. Too little, and you may find yourself with your main villain dead in the middle of the first adventure and nowhere to go. The idea is to subtly lead the players and adjust yourself to match what they are doing, not shove them down the one and only path you've prepared. A good adventure is like a highway system, rather than a train-track. It's okay for the players to take the scenic route now and then (or occasionally go off-road), as long as you keep them heading in the right direction. You may find yourself going down paths you never expected—which is why you should never be afraid to ditch your own plans to take a good idea from a player and run with it.

If the players kill your villain, you can't invalidate their action by resurrecting him. If the players hate an NPC you wanted to be their ally, you can't make them like him. You need to be flexible and ready to adapt. Retcon[30] the dead guy into a flunky of the real villain. Cast the potential ally as a double agent.

Anything not specifically established in-game can be altered to fit your needs. As the GM, you can create a fantasy as real as the most gripping novel or movie; but like any good magician, you can never let the audience see how the trick is done.

[30]Short for "retroactive continuity": altering already established facts (hopefully subtly) to conform with present reality.

The Game Master's Third Law

This brings me to The Third Law of Game Mastery:

Collaborate with the Other Players

Like the first law, the third law is about the game of give and take the GM is always playing with the rest of the group. An RPG cannot be a one way street where the GM feeds material to the players while they follow along mutely. It's a constant back-and-forth act, picking up the hooks you give each other and running with them. The best game is always going to be one in which the players feel empowered to make choices which have a meaningful impact on the campaign.

Corollary

There is a corollary to the collaboration rule, and it's the same as with *every* successful collaboration: *The Other Players are Your Equals*. The mistake that so many GMs make is to believe that the additional power and responsibility they wield above the other players gives them the authority to dictate to the rest of the group. While it's a necessary fact of GMing that you are not playing according to the same rules as the others, you need to always act square with them.

You can guide them, you can lean on them, you can even try to trick them (up to a point). But you can't invalidate, override, or marginalize their actions and choices, nor can you strip them of their authorial power. You cannot unilaterally say, "No that's not what happens," just because you don't like the way things turned out.

While balancing the necessity of the GM to plan ahead with the players' authorial rights is perhaps the most difficult aspect of running a game, it is one of the the most critical.

Part 4

Advanced Game Mastery

Chapter X

Behind the Screen

Thus far I've focused on the more universal aspects of running an RPG, from conceiving a campaign and planning your adventures to building a group and introducing them to the campaign. However, while the initial setup of a campaign is fairly universal, once play begins every game is different.

Because of the dynamic and collaborative nature of RPGs, you can never tell where a game is going to go once the campaign starts. Every GM works in their own way, emphasizing different elements. Different groups of players may take drastically different paths through the same adventure module. Any given encounter can radically change the goals of PCs and NPCs alike.

For this reason, there is no equivalent to the campaign outline → Group Contract → First Adventure step-by-step guide I've presented. There are, however, certain commonalities that exist across the RPG community: problem areas that arise regardless of the group or system. Some are issues inherent in the structure of roleplaying games as they are generally run. Others are the result of a GM trying to solve one problem, and creating another in the process.

Resolving these issues isn't a matter of following an A-B-C guide. Rather, it requires you to understand and appreciate all of the various aspects of the GM role, and to be able to recognize and address potential issues *before* they become real problems.

What is a Game Master?

It's not uncommon for a GM to think of themself as a director, and their campaign a highly choreographed play. While there is an element of the director in a game master, that is an incredibly limited view of what a GM is.

As a GM you have to know how to engage the players and narrate events in exciting ways. You need to know when to stick to your notes and when to toss them aside and wing it. Most of

all, you have to know when to say Yes to the players (hint: almost always) and when to say No (only when you have a very good reason).

If we break down the game master role into its constituent parts, there are three main aspects:

- Act as an interface between the players and the game-world.
- Referee the mechanical laws of the game.
- Narrate the story and voice the NPCs.

Each of these jobs requires a different skill set, and most game masters I've met are good at some, but bad at others. I've played campaigns with GMs that had every rule, special item, and magic spell memorized and had such perfect command of every aspect of the game system that they could build an epic level of tension around a single roll of the dice. But at the same time, their plots were hackneyed and predictable, their NPCs barely had any character to speak of, and any time a PC wandered off in some strange direction, they hemmed and hawed up a storm until they got everyone back onto the plot-path.

I've also played campaigns with GMs who were brilliant in every other regard, but who barely knew a single game rule, nor did they particularly care to. As far as they were concerned, the rules were something that served at the pleasure of the story, not the other way around.

We are all people, and not every*one* is good at every*thing*. Everybody has their strengths and weaknesses. However, the better you can make yourself at each of these three tasks, the better a GM you will be. To that end, there are some things to be aware of and some tricks you can use to help improve your skills in the areas where you are weaker.

Between the Players and the Game World

A little recognized fact about roleplaying games is that players, on their own, are incapable of examining or interacting with the game world. They can only declare their actions and wait for the GM to provide feedback, possibly with the assistance of a die roll. Everything that the players experience within the game passes through the game master, and this role as gatekeeper makes the GM the ultimate authority within the game world.

The gatekeeper role is the source of many of the GM's powers, and carries with it several responsibilities. It gives the GM broad latitude over what is and is not possible within the game.

If something doesn't make sense, doesn't seem fair, or would severely disrupt the game, they can simply wish it away, and thus make the game more fun for everyone involved. It also allows them to add things on the fly, or allow players to succeed where they might have otherwise failed.

This fiat power gives the GM broad latitude over what is and is not possible within the game, and allows the GM to be unilateral and override the authorial powers of the other players. In many ways this is a good thing. It allows the GM to use their discretion in determining the outcome of events, and allows the game to be flexible and dynamic when circumstances change beyond what they anticipated or when the rules as written produce an unreasonable outcome.

But it also has a downside, in that a tyrannical GM can abuse their fiat powers, railroading the players and making the game *less* fun. There is typically no way to override GM fiat, and it is therefore incumbent on the GM themself to be responsible when using the gatekeeper role to influence the game.

There are also several areas where GM fiat and the gatekeeper role come into play that I want to address in further detail.

Yes and No

Many players sit down in the GM chair for the first time because they want to tell a story. You spend a lot of time as a GM making lots of little notes. Bits of dialog, foreshadowing, dropping clues for the players like a trail of bread crumbs. Because of all of that hard work, and because an RPG campaign looks like other sorts of stories, it can be easy to fall into the trap of believing that a campaign also acts like these other stories. Many GMs fall prey to the fallacy that you are presenting a story for the players to wander through like a carnival fun house, passing linearly from room to room.

However, a roleplaying game isn't a static medium of storytelling. It's a dynamic, collaborative experience. The other players are going to have ideas of their own and want to do things in their own way, and they may ultimately not want to play through the story you want to give them.

In the general mish-mash of play, there are frequently going to be times when the players try to do something that you were not expecting. Sometimes this can be dreadful, as in the story I cited in the last chapter with the Gnomish messenger. Other times, however, PCs can magically open up entire plot-lines that you as the GM never intended, but which are so brilliant you can't

not use them. Many a GM has introduced some throwaway NPC without thought, imagining that they would vanish back into the ether at session's end, only to have the PCs take a shine to the character. I have had such nameless NPCs elevated to recurring characters, and even PCs[31], because the other players took such a liking to them.

Never be afraid to ditch what you had prepared if a better idea comes along. Perhaps one of the players sets his heart on wooing the princess they just rescued from the dragon. Maybe it's just a really funny scene, like the thief trying to steal a pie from an old lady's windowsill. Perhaps one of the players has just thrown out some half-baked idea about a future event of the campaign which happens to fit in with what you were planning. Maybe it's even way better than what you were planning.

If it seems like a cool or fun idea, don't try to kill it and hustle the players along just because you had something else planned. Work it. Take it a step further. The thief stole the old lady's pie? Maybe she's a bit senile, and baked a key into the pie! Run with it. There's a rule in improv acting that says you should never directly contradict something another actor has already established. Modify it, add to it, but never kill it. This is usually summarized as "Don't say, 'No, but…'. Rather say 'Yes, and…' "

Now an RPG is not quite the same as an improv, because the GM exists as a separate class of player from the others, tasked with arbitrating the game and given the powers to do so. A GM can't *always* say yes. But as a rule of thumb you should always say yes unless you have a *good* reason to say no. If you can't think of a specific, compelling reason to veto a player action, let them do it.

Never directly contradict your players, unless it's a matter of absolute necessity. Say *yes* to your players. Validate their ideas.

Let them be cool.

[31] In one case, a random, pointless, malfunctioning robot was captured and reprogrammed by the party to serve them. Eventually, a new player joining the game took control of him, and in time he became a major focal point of the game, completely changing the entire overarching meta-plot of the campaign from what I had in my original outline.

Training Your Players

With rare exceptions, no player is coming into a campaign as a blank slate. They are coming in with expectations based in part on their own perception of what the campaign is, but also on their experiences in every previous campaign they've played. This may have been a few games under a single GM or many campaigns under dozens of different GMs.

Each player has different expectations of how to play, based on both their expectations and previous experiences. Some prefer to roleplay entirely from a first-person perspective, speaking their dialog in character and declaring actions with "I do this–," while others use a third person perspective: "My character does this–"

Some players prefer to have conversations with NPCs, while others make it more abstract. "Hello shopkeeper, I'm looking for a new magic ring," versus "My character is going to go to the market to look for magic rings."

These sorts of variations apply to non-social situations as well. Some GMs play by the rule that PCs don't do anything not specifically declared, while others take the attitude that PCs are automatically taking any reasonable action, such as looking for traps, listening for enemies, and generally being aware of their surroundings. Players who have gamed with GMs who kill PCs if "that's what would happen" are going to be a lot more paranoid than those who play with GMs of the attitude that PCs should only die for dramatic reasons and not just because of a bad roll.

None of these play styles is inherently better or worse than the others, but they do tend to clash when used simultaneously. It would be nice if you could simply instruct all of the players to act in a certain way, but things are seldom that simple. Unless it is their very first game, players have histories—they have been trained to react to certain situations in specific ways. If you want to change them to your preferred way of doing things, you can't just beat them over the head, or punish them for doing things you don't like. You need to acclimatize them slowly.

This can be accomplished using two methods: setting the tone you want using your narration and NPC actions, and rewarding and giving positive feedback for appropriate behavior. If you want the players to do all kinds of crazy stunts and tricked out kung-fu action, display that by having NPCs flip out and go crazy. Then reward players who try the same thing with bonuses for narrating their actions in a crazy kung-fu way.

Conversely, if you want a game of gritty realism, dispose of a few throw-away NPCs who were hot-dogging it in the first session to prove to the players that it's substance over style.

Falling 10 feet and spraining an ankle is a good object lesson. You can also discourage improper actions by not granting a bonus. (But be careful not to actively punish players for committing "bad" actions. Remember the Axiom: fun first.)

Also, keep in mind that players will naturally assume that they are able to accomplish any objective that is set before them, no matter how far-fetched. Until they establish a basis for comparison, they have no sense of scale to judge what is and is not possible. I can't count how many times I've seen parties rush head long into certain death because they assumed they were up to whatever challenges came their way. Establishing the power scale early on is an important step.

While the real world operates according to the laws of physics with which we are all familiar, your game operates according to the laws of dramatic convention, which are ultimately up to you. The players can only judge what is reasonable based on what they've experienced. You need to impress upon them whether a frying pan to the head will create a lump with birds circling it or a concussion. They won't guess it on their own.

This same principle can—and does—work in reverse as well, with the players influencing the GM. It's often been the case that I've gone into a game expecting it to be one thing, and through the evolution of the story, the influence of the characters, and the general unpredictability of events at the table, I've ended up with a game of radically different flavor than I had anticipated. This is only a good thing.

If the players are taking the game in a different direction tonally than you'd intended, I heartily encourage you to go with it. One of the great things about an RPG is the quality of not knowing where you're going to end up until you get there. If you're running a dark, serious, gritty game and all of the players are just making wisecracks, don't get mad; run with it. Take it over the top. Let the game be a wacky, overblown, so grim-dark it hurts satire.

Hack and Slash and Consequences

The last aspect of the GM-as-gatekeeper I want to talk about is a more extreme example of training your players. I've spent a lot of time talking about story and drama, and very little talking about how to handle a game mechanically, especially in terms of combat. Combat can be a tricky subject, and there's very little consensus as to what the right amount is. Some groups

can go several sessions without any kind of combat happening, while others may be nothing *but* combat.

Now, there is nothing inherently *wrong* with the group that hacks its way through every encounter, loots all the bodies, and moves onto the next challenge. If that's your group's preferred play style and it's what you're all happy with, there is no reason you should change. However, there are many gamers who find hack and slash gaming to be ultimately unfulfilling, but nevertheless find themselves constrained to whiling away the hours in one combat after another. If this is the case with your group, there are ways to transition away from hack and slash, or at the very least make it more exciting for the players who aren't as interested in combat.

As the GM, the first thing you should do is sit down with yourself and seriously assess what you're trying to accomplish. In a long-standing group, it may be difficult or even impossible to transition to a more character-driven style of play. Your players will likely be—consciously or not—resistant to change. They may not even *want* to change play styles. Adding more depth to your game is not something that can happen without the cooperation of the other players, so it's important to gauge the attitude of the group as a whole.

If your group has been hacking and slashing their merry way through life, it could be because that's the play style they like. In this case, consider what your goals are and whether the campaign you want to run is something these players are going to enjoy. It may be that you need to find a different group. If, as is often the case, the players in your RPG group are your friends away from the table as well, you might be happier turning RPG night into board game night or video game night and doing your roleplaying with other people who share your preferred play-style.

The next step is to have a discussion with your group outside the game itself. For a number of people, hack and slash is simply how they learned to play. Players get trained very early on to react to certain situations in certain ways, and it might be the only play style they know. It's a bad idea to spring a major shift in gameplay on people unannounced, so sit your players down and have a group discussion.

Talk about the problems you're having with the game and the kind of changes you'd like to see. Ask the players what they want out of the game. Hack and slash as a style of play has a connotation of *meaningless* combat. The side-scrolling beat-em-up video game in pen-and-paper form. However, not every game that has lots of combat and action is necessarily a hack and


+3 XP

slash. Combat with *motivation* behind it can involve a lot of interesting roleplaying.

The out-of-character conversation is an important first step, but it's far from the only step. Moving away from hack and slash is like saying you're going to quit smoking. The words only go so far before you need to take real action. Often you need to make many smaller changes to support the big change. Quitting smoking is often reinforced by taking up replacement activities, and avoiding behaviors which the person associates with smoking.

In the case of quitting hack and slash, you need to avoid or replace the behaviors which lead the party to killing their problems away. This starts with establishing the difference between *combat* and *conflict*. Conflict occurs in a game any time that there is an obstacle between the PCs and their objective. The objective could be anything from stopping a villain to recovering an item or even just finding out a piece of information. Combat—that is to say, violence—is just one of many methods of resolving that conflict.

Hack and slash behavior arises when combat becomes the best, quickest way to resolve any conflict. A prominent element in many hack and slash games is NPCs who are utterly ruthless and uncompromising, and will exploit any emotional attachments the characters have. Another common element is an emphasis on action sequences to the near total exclusion of social interaction or any deeper PC motivations beyond "win and survive."

Essentially, you create a situation where there is no reward for the players avoiding violence, nor any consequence for the characters in committing violent acts. At worst, a character is eliminated and a new one quickly introduced. With no meaningful consequence, players have no real reason *not* to hack anything in arm's reach. The GM, confronted with PCs who kill everything in their path, may then resort to a simple escalation of force, hoping to scare the players into line. Faced with more vicious opponents, the players are in turn even more willing to employ violence. You enter into an ever escalating spiral of violence.

In order to dissuade players from engaging in hack and slash behavior, there first needs to be real, meaningful consequence for the *player*, not just the character. You need to affect the person sitting at the table, both by preempting the first strike mentality and by encouraging nonviolent conflict resolution.

Start by instituting a real, lasting consequence for hack and slash behavior: negative reputation. When the PCs walk into a bar, everybody gets up to leave, afraid for their lives. They start appearing on no-fly lists. Paladins shun them, evil wizards try to hire them. The

players may begin to realize their lives are more difficult because the world sees them as bad people.

Remember, your goal is not simply to stop the players from getting into fights. Superman is a good guy, but he still throws a few punches now and then. It's alright for the players to get into fights when there's a good reason.

Combat can be especially effective when getting into a fight means the party must choose between two equally desirable—but mutually exclusive—goals. Start hitting them with situations where combat might be a good idea, but would conflict with their other goals. Up the ante by giving them some good reasons to get into fights *despite* the negative consequences.

For example, you might find an NPC that the players really like and put them on the opposite side of a conflict. Make the players wrestle with having to fighting their friend. Intra-political or religious conflicts are great in this context because there usually isn't any one right side. You might also use fewer monsters and more humanoids, and run them more like real people. Have them offer terms, surrender, run when losing, or even attempt to bribe the PCs.

The important distinction here is that you are trying to break out of the *Diablo* school of wading through hordes of nameless bad guys. The more you can humanize your antagonists, the harder it will be for the players to slip into kick-the-door-down habits. Having PCs that are well grounded in the world helps with this immensely. Any time that a player has to agonize over what path to take, you're doing it right.

As an example, I was once GMing a game in which a player (and a fan of hack and slash) was running a paladin in a knightly order who specialized in smiting the impure. He was ordered by his superior to execute a prisoner legally tried and condemned for murder, but who the paladin *knew* was innocent—although he had no proof. In this case, doing what was lawful and doing what was good were in direct contradiction; there was no one right answer. The player later named it as his favorite moment of roleplaying ever.

Breaking out of hack and slash can be one of the hardest things for a gaming group to do, because it requires a fundamental shift in how you and your players approach the game. However, given time and effort it can be immensely rewarding. Don't expect a 180 degree turn-around overnight, and do be generous with the players. Make it very obvious to the players when NPCs are willing to make a deal. If they still go in guns-a-blazin', don't be afraid to pause the action. It may seem a little disruptive at first, but old habits die hard. Breaking players out

of their established paradigm takes time, so some gentle reminders may help.

The two key words to always remember are *conflict* and *context*. The more context you can give for a conflict, the more interesting it will be for everyone. I recall a particularly tense game session in which the players were attempting to stop both a war and a political coup. It was only several hours after the game session ended that one of the players realized they hadn't actually fought their enemies. They had engaged in a lot of conflict resolution, there had been a hell of a lot of threats made and dice rolled, but nobody actually drew a single weapon.

Playing the Referee

The second aspect of the GM role is to referee the game. Of all the tasks a GM has, this would seem to be the most straightforward. In theory, you have a rule book, you read the book, you enforce the rules. But if it was actually that cut and dried, the GM would be more of a traffic light than a referee. In reality, that's only half the case.

The cut and dried half is the mechanical part of the rules, by which I mean the numbers. A 5th level warrior gets a +5 to hit. 9mm handguns do 1d8+3 damage. A zombie has 12 hit points. Among all of the elements of an RPG, the numbers are the one thing that is essentially fixed. Which is not to say that you won't be messing with them. Just that it's hard to argue with the number seven. A seven is a seven.

But there's also the half of the rules which are essentially a how-to for creating a shared imaginative space, and which are in no way either cut or dried. The rules of an RPG are both a model for a universe and a set of conventions for how one interacts with that universe.

Things like combat rounds, skill points, and special abilities are abstractions, simplified stand-ins for the physics of our own reality. Through these rules we can create a fictional model of reality that will act in a realistic and consistent manner.

Unfortunately, our universe is not nearly so simple that a person could be represented in their entirety on a single sheet of paper. Even on a vastly simplified scale, one could never hope to cover every possible contingency within a thousand rule-books, let alone just one. It is a simple fact of life that any RPG rulebook is necessarily imperfect. Eventually you *will* run into a situation with your game that isn't covered in the rules, isn't covered completely, or is irreducibly complex.

It could be something small, like what to do when a player misses a session, a piece of equipment that destabilizes the game, or the question of whether to fudge a dice roll. It could be more complicated, like whether swinging from a rope and jumping on a giant's head is one action or two and what kind of bonus you get, or whether this special ability stacks with that one, and if so does that unbalance the game?

Most games acknowledge these inevitable conundrums by including Rule 0, or its equivalent. Regardless of what the rule is called, it states that the GM—and by extension the group as a whole—may change, ignore, or add any rules they choose. And change they do. Very few groups (if any) play the game exactly by the rules as written. Every group has its own house rules, or at the very least house rule-interpretations.

While these house rules are important—perhaps critical—to any good game, Rule 0 and its ilk essentially raise the issue of inevitable gaps in the rules without resolving it. Basically, the game developers have told us, "Solve it yourself," while handily ignoring the question of how we go about doing that.

So…how *do* you do that? The rulebooks are, after all, written by people experienced in designing roleplaying games and are extensively (or at least passably) play-tested, while a game master has only their own judgment. How do you know which rules can be ignored or amended and which are critical to the structural integrity of the game as a whole? Many a bad house rule has been handed down over the years, and all too often players have been subjected to the capricious whim of an inept GM. This is the most complex part of the GM's job as referee.

There are, however, certain guidelines you can use for dealing with this sort of Rule 0 situation.

The Three Fs

The first thing you should consider when developing house rules is whether you actually need a rule. It can be easy to edit anything you don't like, add and remove rules, and generally change the game around to suit your whims. Before you do that, however, you need to consider the impact of what you're changing. There may already be a rule which covers a given situation that you're unaware of or have misinterpreted. By ignoring a certain rule, you might radically unbalance the game. So before changing anything, read the rules closely, consider what possible

ramifications there could be, and discuss the change with your players. Often a problem can be handled in another way. The fewer changes you make to the rules themselves, the better.

Once you have concluded that a house rule is needed, you have to determine what to change. Again, the fewer changes you make, the better. A good house rule needs to fit three criteria, which I call the three Fs. This is a simple checklist for verifying or rejecting any proposed amendment to the rules by which your group plays. It covers everything from how to handle a cocked die to how to fairly interpret game rules. The three Fs are, in order of precedence: FUN, FAIR, and FAST.

In keeping with the First Axiom, our foremost consideration is FUN. Life is simply too short to play a game that isn't fun, and any ruling you might make that reduces a game's fun is a bad ruling. This might sound like a pretty obvious statement, but far too often game masters will make a call based on either an appeal to realism or on a strict interpretation of the rules, while ignoring whether or not that ruling is any fun. In all cases, the fun thing is the right thing.

This applies to everything from fudging dice rolls, to giving the monster an extra 20 hit points, to player death. If the rules aren't fun, or if you can have more fun by breaking them, then break them. Fudge the dice. Otherwise, stick to the rules as written as much as possible and enforce them as consistently as possible. If there is a question regarding a particular rule, write down how the group interprets that rule and stick with that. If breaking a rule either doesn't increase the fun—or actively decreases it—then don't do it. I don't care if it's "more balanced," or "makes sense." If it's less fun, it's a bad rule.

Once you've established that your rule is in fact fun, you can move on to FAIR. While life may not be fair, your game should be. Note that doing what the rules say is not *necessarily* the most fair thing. While you want to follow the rules as much as possible, occasionally you have to supersede what's written. Additionally, while the GM has the final say, the question of fairness is one that should be answered by the group as a whole as much as possible.

Last, you want your rules to be FAST. They should be simple, easy to remember, and to the point. No extra hit location charts, no home-brew subsystems that take 10 minutes to resolve. Any time you need to stop the action to look up a rule, you're messing with the flow of the game. The game clock should never pause for more than 30 real-world seconds while you roll series of dice, consult tables, or look up a rule.

The FAST criterion also has a second part. When at the table, you want to spend as little

time as possible coming up with rules. If a situation arises that needs more than 30 seconds of discussion, then by all means have that discussion, *after* the game. Right here, right now, you just need to keep the game going, because otherwise you're going to kill all of the momentum and dramatic tension. Use your GM fiat powers, make the best call you can, and keep going. Later on you can cross-reference 12 different rulebooks, discuss the action with your group, and make an official *from now on* ruling.

The exception to this, of course, is if your potential call is either unfun or unfair. Then by all means stop and look it up. Fun and Fair both trump Fast. But otherwise don't do it there in the middle of the game.

Considering the roleplaying game as a simulation, there is never going to be a codified set of rules that deals with every possible circumstance. However, by using a general guideline such as the three Fs, you can keep your game running without getting sidelined by rules arguments. The most important thing to keep in mind is that a game should be fun. That is the core axiom of RPGs, and everything else must bow in deference to it. It's only after you've accomplished that goal that you can begin looking at such niggling details as game balance or the flow of play.

Chapter XI

The Illusion of Reality

In the last chapter I outlined the three aspects of the GM role, but only spoke about two of them. The third aspect, the narrator, is the simplest on the surface—you say what happens, or you act out a piece of dialog, and the players respond in kind—but there is a deeper power in the narrator role as well, and far greater complexity if you look for it.

Thrill, drama, and emotion are all elements of an excellent game. But none of those things will make the *best* game in and of themselves. At their best, RPGs are more than just a thrilling action scene or a moment of nerve-racking drama. The true pinnacle of a roleplaying game is when the players become fully immersed within the consensus reality that you create together as a group.

It is at those moments that an RPG campaign proves itself the equal of the great literary or cinematic works of history. Just as one might lose oneself in a truly gripping book or film, it is possible for the players to lose themselves in the game. Unlike a book or a film, however, the players have the ability to influence or control the game as you would a lucid dream.

In this sense, the narrator role is the most critical element of what the GM does. Everything I've spoken about previously has, in one way or another, been preparing for this aspect of the game. Having prepared your tools and tailored the game and the characters to work with seamless clarity, you now have the freedom and the agency to run the game to your greatest ability.

Narrating the Game

Much of how the players approach the game world is a reaction to how you set the stage: the way you describe things, how you act out the various characters the party encounters, and what you choose to emphasize.

This is true of any narrative medium, although how it is expressed varies. Movies can perform tricks with time, for example. A scene with many quick cuts between camera angles feels very fast. Conversely, long steady shots without cuts feel very slow. Imagine a scene in a movie which consists of two characters sitting at a table talking. In one version the camera is jumping back and forth between them rapidly, with tight shots of their faces. In the other, you have a single continuous shot of both characters, with no cuts or movement. The latter version of this scene is going to feel much calmer and slower than the former.

Comic books can perform a similar trick. In a comic, time is represented spatially, moving forward as the reader's eyes travel from the top left corner of the page down to the bottom right. A page with many small panels feels faster than a page which consists of one single large image. The reader can also control the pace of the story by lingering on specific panels. This adds emphasis just as with a held shot in a film.

An RPG can't do either of these things. It's not a visual medium. All of the action comes from spoken words and takes place inside the players' heads. Neither can an RPG easily handle split narratives, dramatic interludes, or long internal monologues the way a novel does. These methods of storytelling simply don't work with the multiple perspectives of a gaming group or the narrative format in which play is conducted. As the GM, you must come up with other ways of telling the story.

Additionally, you must deal with the problem of having to hand out two different sorts of information which often conflict with each other. The PCs are receiving subjective, in-character information, both from their own observations and through dialog with NPCs. Meanwhile, the players are also receiving objective, out of character information directly from the GM. This can lead to conflicts between what players know and what their characters believe.

Understanding how a story is told in a roleplaying game and constructing your adventures accordingly is of equal importance to the other laws that I have presented, and just as commonly overlooked. This leads me to the Fourth Law of Game Mastery:

An RPG is an RPG; Approach It on Those Terms.

Trying to write a campaign as though you were scripting a movie or a book will only cause unnecessary problems. Understanding how to properly structure the story to the form of an RPG will make your game more dramatically satisfying and draw the players deeper into the

mindset that they are participating in an unfolding adventure which they mold and shape with their actions, rather than merely walking passively through a predetermined scenario.

To a certain extent, narrating an RPG well is a matter of practice and learning to color your personal voice. Skills such as providing commentary in action scenes, voicing NPCs, or even just describing a room improve through use. Over time, you will discover the small touches that add the most to your own game.

In contrast, dull or overly mechanical descriptions quickly pull the players out of the game, reminding them that their characters are nothing more than a set of numbers on a sheet of paper. Flat, colorless narration is a quick and easy way to make an otherwise thrilling game suck.

Behind the Green Door

While making your descriptions fun and engaging is the surface of the Narrator Role, there are also those deeper elements I mentioned earlier. Once you accept the idea that an RPG is conceptually different from other narratives, you can begin to examine, understand, and even play with the storytelling elements unique to the RPG medium.

A GM's narration is in some ways like the stage-dressing in a play. Nothing is there which does not have a purpose, and a savvy player can deduce that anything which a GM specifically mentions is in some way significant. If, for example, the GM mentions specifically that a room has a large heavy rug in the center of it, there's a good chance it's concealing a secret passage. Why else would the GM point out in particular something so ordinary?

Of course, a savvy *GM* can use this to influence the players. An example I often reference is from an issue of the long-running comic *Knights of the Dinner Table*. In that issue, the eponymous knights are exploring a dungeon when they come upon a "green door." Being gamers, they are immediately concerned because the GM has specifically noted the door being green, rather than just "a door."

They proceed to spend numerous pages arguing over the significance of the door being green, discussing instances both historical and religious in which green was significant, searching for traps (which don't exist), and generally working themselves up to insane levels of paranoia over what is to all appearances is a perfectly ordinary green door. Every protestation from the GM

only reinforces their belief that this door is concealing some deadly peril so powerful they cannot even perceive it.

While it was being played for laughs in that instance, the GM can use this tendency for players to over-analyze everything to particular effect, either by playing into the assumption that anything specifically mentioned is important, or by subverting it.

For example, let's say the PCs are being led into a trap by an NPC. Ordinarily you might have the players roll to notice that the NPC is acting suspiciously. However, even if they fail the roll, the players will immediately be suspicious of him, just because you made them roll.

The same is true of random checks to perceive or notice things which turn up nothing. Just rolling the dice for no reason behind your screen can be enough to make the players uneasy.

However, that's using meta-gaming thinking. The players are seeing the GM do something out of character, and translating it into their PCs being suspicious in-character. If the goal is for the PCs to be suspicious, it's better for it to be for in-character reasons.

One way the GM might provoke this sort of reaction is to provide a random, specific detail about an otherwise ordinary place or object. Something out of place, but innocuous. This is likely to make the players uneasy, and they may request to make those skill checks themselves. The end effect is the same, but it changes an overt, GM-initiated action into a subtle, player-initiated one. This in turns makes the game smoother, and less likely to pull the players out of their characters.

In a larger sense, however, this sort of meta-awareness on the part of the players is something that GMs often struggle with, and requires some greater thought.

Predictive Players and Meta-gaming

In the course of a campaign there are a lot of surprises: dramatic reveals, shocking twists, spooky mysteries, unforeseen betrayals. But along with these, there is often a fair amount of foreshadowing, which adds a risk of the players guessing ahead of time what the surprise will be.

In a work of fiction, the audience anticipating plot twists isn't a problem. The author is in control, and even if the audience knows what's going to happen next, the characters don't. We encounter examples of this all the time in horror movies, when the audience sees the killer stalking one of the protagonists, who is unaware of their impending demise. More generally,

the audience commonly receives dramatic interludes to check in on the villains for a little foreshadowing of what's to come, thereby heightening the dramatic tension.

The problem is that this simply doesn't work in a roleplaying game. In an RPG, the players possess aspects of all three roles; authors, actors, and audience. Where a narrator in a novel might turn the spotlight away from the protagonists for a moment to highlight something important they are currently unaware of, a GM cannot foreshadow to the players anything they do not want the characters to know as well.

Literary characters are also controllable from an authorial level, while PCs are the one element of an RPG that are truly *not* under the GM's control. Unlike the NPCs you control, the players are not obliged to follow the dictates of narrative logic. They are free to ignore or sabotage the plot as they like, and they are capable of metagame thinking.

"Called It!"

No matter how well roleplayed, a PC is on some level aware that the universe they inhabit does not operate by the laws of cause and effect that rule our own universe, but rather according to the dictates of narrative logic. Logic such as "all viziers are beard-twirling villains," for example. Or "if two characters on a TV show have an inexplicable heart-felt scene in the middle of the episode, one of them is about to die."

Any knowledge that you provide to the players—no matter how obliquely—will be churned over, analyzed, and used against you at the worst possible time. For example, where a detective is required not to puzzle together the identity of the killer until the last thirty pages of the book, a PC in a noir game (like the person actually reading a detective novel) may very well deduce it within the first couple of game sessions.

I once ran a game in which the PCs' kindly old mentor was in secret the Big Bad Evil Guy of the campaign, pulling strings from behind the scenes for nearly a year of real time, while the players were none the wiser. None the wiser, of course, until one player idly wondered aloud if the two might be one and the same, mere moments before we were to sit down for the session at the end of which this was to be dramatically revealed.

Once the thought had been aired, the players had only to ponder the events of the game through this new lens for a moment before the conclusion became inescapable. It was designed to be so, through months of ever so carefully laid foreshadowing and hints. Except the conclusion

was meant to be reached at the *end* of the session we were about to sit down to, after the players had placed the game's McGuffin right into the hands of the one person they needed to keep it away from, thus setting up the climatic finale.

This is the reason why GMs often grow increasingly paranoid about the players guessing beforehand any aspect of the story to come, and why they begin to develop tactics to avoid that situation—which unfortunately tend to be a terrible drag on the game as a whole. The most common GM reaction to players divining future plot points is to either try to convince them they are wrong or just completely change that plot point. However, both of these courses of action are ultimately counter-productive.

In the former case, you are robbing the players of an achievement, and when that plot point finally rolls around they will remember that you tried to trick them away from it and resent you for it. In the latter case, you're likely making a last minute change to something which has already been foreshadowed, and that never works well.

A salient example of this is the DC Comics story-line *Armageddon 2001*, from the early 90s. In that story[32], it was revealed that sometime in the future a well known hero would go insane, become a villain named The Monarch, and take over the world. The true identity of The Monarch was a secret throughout most of the series. However, his true identity (Captain Atom) leaked out about halfway through the series. Upset that the surprise had been spoiled, the editors at DC quickly changed the final issues, revealing the Monarch instead to be another character, Hawk.

The change was very poorly received, and was widely decried as making no sense either in terms of the story as presented so far or the character of Hawk. It is exceedingly likely that any last minute change you make to your own plot will be received just as poorly by your players. Regardless of how you try to protect your dramatic reveal, you aren't doing yourself or the game any favors, and in fact you may end up harming your game even more than if you had simply let things stand.

Arbitrary changes to the game aside, predictive players do pose a risk to the integrity of a campaign. Fundamental elements of storytelling, such as foreshadowing or the dramatic twist, become torturously difficult to pull off when the protagonists—that is to say, the players—are not bound by the same constraints of genre convention as the rest of the story.

[32]Spoilers, if you haven't read it!

So then how do you present the plot in a way that makes sense? Give your players too little information and your game will seem disjointed and random. Give them too much information and they'll short-circuit you.

The solution is two-fold. First, recognize that while the audience may speculate as to the ending of a story, and while they may guess correctly, that does not necessarily diminish the story in-and-of itself. Lots of people guess the ends of movies, and it doesn't necessarily make them any less good as stories. The journey, after all, is often important more than the destination. We naturally assume that the hero of the story will win out in the end. That doesn't make the hair-raising escape from the villain's death trap any less hair-raising.

Don't change your plot simply on the basis of the players guessing what it's going to be. All you're doing is diluting it, and if your players are paying enough attention to pick out the plot points, they're going to smell bullshit a mile away. If anything, the fact that your players are interested enough in your story to be paying attention is a sign that you're running a good game.

Second, it's a given that your players are going to turn anything they know to their advantage. You can't avoid that. But you can plan your adventures in such a way that your plots don't depend on the players following a specific course of action—especially if that course of action is predicated on them not making logical conclusions about the plot.

Instead, you have to budget for the players seeing through your clever schemes. Keep in mind the popular mantra of the computer world: "There is no such thing as security through obscurity."

In the example I gave earlier, I was wrong to hinge the outcome of the campaign on the players not figuring out a major plot point that had been heavily foreshadowed. If anything, I was lucky they didn't guess it weeks earlier. It would have been a great climax for a novel, but it was not a good RPG plot. What I should have done was give the villain himself a back-up plan, in case the party uncovered his wicked schemes.

Dealing with the players' power of prediction ultimately boils down to not relying on player ignorance and being prepared for the inevitable moment when they get a jump ahead of you, instead of the usual jump behind. The ability of the players to meta-game makes scripting an RPG enormously different than writing a novel, play, movie, or video game. As the GM, this is something you need to anticipate and be ready for. In short, always have a Plan B.

Making Hard Choices

In addition to guessing plot developments ahead of times, players also often find themselves being offered a simple choice between two courses of action, one explicitly good and the other bad. For example: help the orphan child or kick her in the teeth. When presented with black and white choices, players are not making a moral choice. Rather they are guessing which button they need to press to dispense the reward they want.

This is the inherent problem with meta-gaming players. From a meta-game perspective, the players are the good guys, and the antagonists are the bad guys. The players' goal is to kill the bad guys and receive their reward of XP and treasure in the most expedient manner possible.

Questions of who the villains are and what they are doing are meaningless decoration in this context. If the party should happen to deduce the primary villain's secret identity before he has put his plan in motion, there is no incentive not to simply kill him and chuck his body in a sewer.

In order to get the players out of this meta-gaming mind-set, you need to avoid providing them with binary right-choice/wrong-choice challenges, and give them incentives not to disrupt the NPCs' evil machinations. In order for a choice to have real meaning, it must have consequences.

Consequence is all too often a missing component from campaigns. There is, after all, a critical difference between *knowing* something, and being able to *do* anything about it. A worthy villain will be more than capable of giving the heroes a reason not to do away with her, at least for long enough for her to put her wicked plan into action. A truly *great* villain will not only have a contingency plan for when the heroes foil her latest evil scheme, but will have a set of secondary or even tertiary goals which are actively furthered by the heroes "defeating" her.[33]

Let's say the party is in a certain kingdom, trying to solve the mystery of vanishing peasant girls. The girls are secretly being abducted by the queen, who is killing them and using their blood to give herself magic powers. A meta-gaming player might be able to guess at this before you intended it to be revealed.

Ordinarily the party would have little reason not to immediately try to off the queen. In order to prevent this, you need some added level of consequence to make the party consider

[33]This is popularly known as The Xanatos Gambit, a term which I heartily recommend plugging into your internet search engine of preference.

the full ramifications. Perhaps the queen is *also* keeping the orcs who dwell on the edges of the kingdom in check with her magic. If the queen is killed, the orcs will quickly rally and wash over the kingdom in an orgy of destruction.

The more morally complex you can make the game, the more difficult it will be for the players to simply guess the most narratively logical sequence of events and run roughshod through your adventures.

The Player Sphere of Perception

There is one final element of the GM-narrator role I want to discuss. One of the most critical resources at a game table is time. Whether your group meets every week, bi-weekly, once a month, or once every six months, you have a limited supply of minutes in which to play. No matter how much in-game time may pass during those minutes, this places a limit on how much can be done at the table during a single session, and therefore how much plot can occur.

In addition to this basic time constraint, the pace of the game is further limited because the game master can only pay attention to one thing at a time, and the game moves at the pace of the GM's attention. The GM's focus acts as a bottleneck on the game because his or her authorization is needed to make things "real" within the game-world.

As I mentioned previously, an RPG world is like a Schrödinger's Universe. It exists in an ephemeral and shifting state, where things may be simultaneously true and untrue. A thing only becomes fixed in a single state when the players observe it. The players can only observe things through the lens of the GM's narration.

The GM granting narrative focus to a scene is, in effect, not unlike a scientist collapsing the wave function by observing a sub-atomic particle. I like to think of it as shining a "spotlight of attention" on different parts of the game world. Anything under the spotlight is real, fixed, and solid. Anything outside of the light is in a state of superposition; every possible condition is simultaneously true.

An NPC in the room with the PCs is in a fixed state. As soon as he leaves the room—that is, leaves the spotlight of attention—anything is possible. He may be downstairs, he may be kidnapped by a wizard, he may be plotting with the villain. For the GM's purposes, every case can be assumed to be potentially true until the NPC re-enters the spotlight of attention.

The way this connects to the issue of time is that as long as the PCs are together under the light, they're all real and able to act, sharing the GM's attention-minutes. When the party splits, however, so does the GM's attention. The action for one group is completely halted while the other group acts.

The narrative of a book or movie can get away with this because it's essentially pre-rendered. The author has already determined what happens, and so the characters can move and act even while the plot-light isn't on them, showing up in a totally different situation whenever they next appear on-screen.

An RPG, however, is rendered in realtime. Any PC not under the plot-light is in that same state of quantum superposition. They may be taking actions, or they may not; it's impossible to tell until the GM turns their attention back to the character. What we *can* be certain of is that as long as a character is kicking their heels backstage, that character's player isn't getting to do anything either; and we all know an action-less player quickly becomes a bored player, and then all too frequently a disruptive player. That's bad for the game, and no fun for the players.

The situation becomes even worse when *none* of the players is in the plot-light. It is traditional for a work of fiction to include dramatic interludes that cut away from the protagonists to examine either the antagonists or perhaps just some random bit characters with a small piece to add to the story. However, as I discussed before, when this happens in an RPG it is *NPC Theater*, where the players sit around and do nothing while the GM gives long soliloquies about characters that aren't the PCs. Anything not about the PCs is tedious and boring, by definition.

I once ran a campaign in which the players chose to release a captive enemy NPC. Following that session, I charted the actions of that NPC traveling back to base and coordinating with her faction. This set actions into motion which resulted in other NPCs being at certain locations and events transpiring which directly and dramatically influenced the future events of the game, but which the players had no knowledge of—because nobody told them and they never asked. That one action had a measurable effect over the entire course of the campaign, but when that NPC finally showed up again six months later and half a world away, the players' response was roughly, "Oh yeah, her. How the hell did she get here?"

While this happens to illustrate the unnecessarily obsessive level to which I have taken my plotting at times, it also shows how the storytelling format necessarily limits the ability to foreshadow or use other forms of dramatic interlude. The reality of the game exists only within a little circle cast by the plot-light—which itself must necessarily contain as many of the PCs as possible and whatever thing they are directly confronting *right now*. Anything outside of this player sphere of perception might as well not exist—because the players have no way of observing it—and any attempt to move away from the PCs to explore other areas of the game-world de facto shuts down all of the game's momentum.

To put it another way, the TV show *LOST* is largely defined by frequent flashbacks and quick cuts between various groups acting simultaneously in different locations. In the traditional RPG format you would need to ditch the flashbacks entirely and focus on the perspective of a single group of the castaways which never splits up. It would make absolutely *no* sense (well, less sense than *LOST* already doesn't make).

Without significant effort, any narrative that consists of a single camera that follows one group of people and never cuts away is necessarily going to be both limited and disjointed. For examples, you need look no further than movies like *Cloverfield* or *The Blair Witch Project*—each

panned in its time for precisely those flaws.

Breaking out of this limited zone of perception is a difficult task, because it requires reexamining and revising fundamental aspects of the traditional roleplaying game experience. But it can also dramatically improve a campaign, and open up new avenues for storytelling and new ways for the players to experience the game.

All of the GMs I've played with have tried to break out of the sphere at one point or another—whether they consciously recognized that as their goal or not. In each case the GM proposed one of two solutions to the problem: some arrangement of multiple GMs running a single group in tandem, or a single GM running multiple groups in sequence. In my experience neither method produces satisfactory results.

In the former case you run the risk of overlapping yet mutually exclusive stories, GMs making conflicting rulings and/or mischaracterizing NPCs, and general miscommunication between game masters as the players move from one to the other.

In the latter case you risk that same overlap, should two characters arrive in the same place at the same time, but the players of those characters are in different game sessions when one or the other is not at the table. But there's also questions about what to do if the groups fall out of synchronization.

For example, in the same real-life week one group might spend several in-game weeks traveling to another location, while the other covers only a few hours of game-time. Then the next week that second group uses some sort of fast travel (such as a teleport) to arrive at the same destination as the first group, except several weeks in the past. They would then be able to retroactively alter the situation which the first group encountered in the previous session. While not impossible to pull off, it's a likely recipe for difficulty, if not disaster.

Breaking out of the sphere of perception *is* a worthy goal, but you need to take care not to damage the narrative clarity of the campaign in the process. I have experimented with several other methods, each with their own merits and flaws.

Dramatic Interludes

The easiest—if least engaging—solution is to write dramatic interludes between game sessions. Either the GM or the players can write short scenes which highlight events occurring elsewhere in the world. These can illustrate greater detail of NPCs' characters than you are able to convey

at the table, communicate information which isn't critical to the plot (but gives valuable context), or foreshadow future events.

For example, say the players defeat the primary antagonist's evil lieutenant but he manages to escape their grasp. Either you or a player you nominate could then write a one-page dramatic interlude involving the lieutenant returning to his master, with some indication that the master intends to send more forces against the party.

This gives the players insight into the character and motivations of their antagonists, and foreshadows that they will be attacked again at some point in the future (although not when, where, or how).

You could also write an interlude about characters the players have never met, setting up a future plot. Perhaps the party is heading towards a certain city; you could write an interlude where the mayor and sheriff discuss some of the problems the city is having.

Or you could write the personal experience of an NPC in trouble, such as a first-person narrative of an orphan child being stalked and captured by monsters. Then when the PCs arrive in the city they might hear rumors of disappearances. They "know" there is a monster of some sort, and thus it will give the plot hook some additional narrative weight.

This solution requires some additional effort on the part of the GM and/or players, because it involves generating material outside of the game proper. It is also predicated on the players buying into the concept and taking the time to *read* the interludes. However, my experience has been that it works well and serves as a simple way for a group to flesh out the campaign world.

Character Stables

If, for whatever reason, adding away-from-the-table elements to the game does not work for your group, a similar method is to give the players limited control over a certain number of NPCs whose actions they control, but whom they do not directly play.

Say, for example, Player-Bob has a PC named Fighty the Fighter. In addition to Fighty, Bob also has limited control over an NPC, Wizzy the Wizard. Wizzy is a retired alchemist living in a city near where the party is adventuring. Before or after a given session, Bob might tell the GM, "Wizzy is curious about [Plot Device]. I want him to ask around the wizard's guild, and pass the information along to Fighty."

Effectively the players are getting the same information they would if the GM was directing Wizzy's actions, but it gives them an added level of agency in directing the course of the game, and another instrument through which they can examine the game world. In essence they are setting "background actions" that are taking place simultaneously with the rest of the game. By placing nominal control into the hands of the players, however, it makes them feel more invested in what's going on in the game beyond the realm of their singular character.

Beyond information gathering, it also opens up possibilities for players having influence over organizations or affecting events outside of the direct influence of their PC. Perhaps one of the players has control over an NPC nobleman. The player could set a "background action" for the NPC to talk up the exploits of the party at court, recruit soldiers for the party's private army, or handle the party's finances.

Anything which is useful to the party but isn't something adventurers normally have time to do could fall under the providence of these sorts of NPCs.

Many PCs

Another way of achieving a similar result to the stables of NPCs is to give each player control over multiple PCs, with the caveat that they must be in different locations. This allows the focus of the narrative to jump around or lets the group split up and go in multiple directions, but still ensures all of the players are able to act.

So, for example, one party could consist of a group of street level superheroes trying to track down a group of evil cultists. Meanwhile, a team of FBI agents is trying to stop the cultists using their own methods. The same group of players controls both parties, and each player has one PC per group. The focus of the game is then free to move between the two.

Beyond breaking out of the sphere of perception, this has some added benefits. Increasing the number of active PCs in the game gives the players some leeway to decide how they want to tackle challenges. One party may be focused on social abilities or have contacts in government, while the other is focused on stealth and tactical operations. Players can also do two things "simultaneously," such as have one party attack an enemy on the ground, while the other provides air support.

This method poses a similar risk of discontinuity as I mentioned before with running multiple groups. However, I have found it to be less of a problem, so long as all of the players are

the same and the group works to keep both parties in temporal sync. While this may slow the story down somewhat, it typically doesn't slow down the *game*. Since each of the players have a character they control in every scene, no one is left sitting idle as they would if the party were to split up.

Broken Spheres

The sphere of perception isn't necessarily something that you need to get out of. It is a limitation on what is and is not possible within an RPG narrative, but just because the boundary exists does not imply that it necessarily must be crossed. It is, however, important to recognize where the line is, and not blunder over it unintentionally.

With forethought, breaking out of the sphere isn't difficult. It requires the GM to put some effort into providing the players with channels for information and, more importantly, being willing to give the players tools to gather information outside of their own little realm of awareness.

For some GMs this may create difficulties, because adventure planning is often predicated on the idea that the players don't know what's going on. Emancipating the players to the extent that they are able to act proactively without the game master's consent cuts off a number of avenues for the GM in terms of maneuvering the players into going where you want them to go. However, I've found that doing so makes for a stronger game and a stronger game master.

All of the schemes I have suggested depend on taking some of the power that is normally vested solely in the GM and sharing it with the other players. The more you divide that power up, the more freedom the players will have to move and explore their world, but the less your game will reflect the traditional format of an RPG.

Chapter XII

Too Long; Didn't Read

Roleplaying Games as a medium have reached a transitional stage in their evolution. Game system design is going through a period of significant advancement, as influence from computer games feeds back into their pen-and-paper progenitors. Simultaneously, digital publishing has opened the floodgates for individual game designers to create, publish, and market games online, providing an outlet for experimental new types of RPGs that would previously have languished in obscurity.

On the player end of things, however, there has been far less advancement. There is precious little in the way of concrete schools of thought on GMing, nor are there compendiums of rules and methods for composing and running a good campaign. You can easily find classes on writing, film direction, acting, or any number of similar creative mediums. But there are no classes on being a game master.

This is one of the key elements of the RPG community that needs to change in order for the hobby as a whole to grow and evolve. Already we can see the first seeds of this transition taking place as players of all kinds compare notes online in web-forums, podcasts, and blogs dedicated to the subject.

The Game Master's Laws

I've tried to present my particular take on game mastering in all of its aspects in as much detail as possible throughout the course of this book. Not everything I've said will be applicable to all players, but at the core of my advice are a few key rules which I feel are universally true for all roleplaying games, and all RPG groups. I've talked about them over the course of the book as they've been relevant, but I'd like to go over them together, taken as a whole: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***The Axiom of Roleplaying*: The purpose of gaming is to have fun. All other rules are mutable.**

This is at the very heart of all RPGs. Like any other game, the ultimate point is to have fun. A game can't be all climax moments all the time. It has an ebb and a flow. But a game should always be "fun" on some level. Life is simply too short to spend playing a game that isn't fun. Where a designer has to worry about whether a rule is clear, or balanced with the rest of the game material, a GM does not. You have the freedom to wave your hands and simply declare a result. But this power comes with the responsibility to always ask the question: Is this fun?

***1st Law of Game Mastery*: Communicate with the other players.** The other players are not simply a mute audience, there to observe your creation. They are also actors, interpreting and contributing to the on-going story of the game. Give them the tools they need to be able to do their job. Don't lie to them or withhold necessary information about the game.

***2nd Law of Game Mastery*: Have a plan.** Don't let yourself fall into the mistaken belief that a game is about you leading the players from Step A to Step G while they follow along. You don't want a recipe or a script for the game, but a plan. If fact, have two or three plans. Keep a folder full of ideas, if/then propositions, and potential scenarios. Know as much about your game as possible, and be ready to pull out the appropriate pieces at the right time.

Never be afraid to deviate from one plan if a better idea presents itself. Any plan the GM may have becomes obsolete the moment the dice hit the table. This ability to change dynamically in response to new conditions is one of the core elements of an RPG.

***3rd Law of Game Mastery*: Collaborate with the other players.** The other players are more than just actors, mouthing your lines and prancing up and down the stage according to the whims of the game master. They are equal authors in the shared imaginative space of the game world. Treat them as such. Don't tear down their ideas and contributions just because they don't exactly match your preconceived notions of what the game *is*. Work with them to build a truly collaborative game experience.

***4th Law of Game Mastery*: An RPG is an RPG; approach it on those terms.**

> A roleplaying game is not quite a novel, not quite a piece of improv theater, and not quite a board game. It includes elements of all of these mediums but does not quite fit into any of them. As such, you cannot treat an RPG campaign as though it were a novel or a movie. Adventures must be planned and run according to the needs of an RPG. This sometimes means that a scene that would be amazing in another medium cannot reasonably be done in an RPG. Trying to force an RPG to be some other medium will only diminish the game as a whole. Deal with it, move on.

Railroad Conductors Need Not Apply

Taken as a whole, these laws paint a picture of the iconic "bad GM" as someone who sees themself as a creative island. The campaign is their narrative oeuvre—a work that begins and ends with them, in which the players are at best a captive audience and at worst a necessary inconvenience, there to play the parts assigned to them.

From this perspective, much of what we consider bad GMing can be blamed on this egoist school of game mastery. Each element that drags the game down can be seen as a method by which the GM steals authorial control from the other players.

In some cases this theft occurs inadvertently, since the GM believes they are helping the players or contributing to the dramatic tension of the game. In others, they feel they are defending themself against difficult players that are wrecking "my story". There are also cases where the GM feels they are adding to the realism of the campaign, not realizing that "realism" does not necessarily benefit either the narrative or the game.

Good GMing, on the other hand, typically occurs when the GM shares his or her own authorial control with the other players, who are themselves invested in the game and in a position to meaningfully contribute to the campaign on a narrative level. Bringing about the conditions for this to happen requires the GM to communicate clearly and be willing to trust the group to go in interesting directions.

The End

There are a lot of elements that contribute to a roleplaying game being good or bad. Because the GM is responsible for providing the plot and running the game, he or she is necessarily a major component of that equation—but not the *only* component. The other players matter as well, both in how much they are willing to add to the game and in the way they interact with both the GM and each other. A campaign can just as easily be sunk by a problem player or interpersonal conflict as by anything the game master does or does not do.

Games can fall apart for many reasons: because there isn't a good place to play, because other obligations come along, or even just because other interests divert energy away from the game. Like any system, a campaign needs a constant influx of energy and enthusiasm to keep it going, lest it be brought down by simple entropy.

A GM who understands those contributing factors and reacts to them appropriately can turn a bad game into a decent one and a decent game into a great one. The best campaigns are those where you have a confluence of all the right elements: the GM and other players working cooperatively, with all involved parties having the time and interest to devote to keeping the game going.

That, in short, is the secret to a great campaign: communicate, collaborate, and have fun.

Appendix

Games Referenced

Al-Qadim — A campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons*, themed in an Arabian or Persian style.

Basic Roleplaying System — A roleplaying system published by Chaosism Games, notably used in the *Call of Cthulhu* series of RPGs.

Call of Cthulhu — A horror RPG based on the Cthulhu Mythos fictional universe.

Cyberpunk 2020 — An RPG set in the near-future, in the style of the Cyberpunk genre of fiction which includes titles such as Bladerunner, Snow Crash, and Cryptonomicon.

Dark Sun — A post-apocalyptic styled campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Dragonlance — A romantic fantasy campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons*, based on the Dragonlance novels.

Dungeons & Dragons — A medieval fantasy RPG currently published by Wizards of the Coast. D&D was created in the mid-70s, and is widely considered the first modern roleplaying game.

Eberron — A campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons* which includes pulp and "magic punk" elements.

Forgotten Realms — A high fantasy campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Fudge — A generic roleplaying system, notable for its extremely simple gameplay mechanics.

Greyhawk — One of the first campaign settings for *Dungeons & Dragons*, sometimes considered the default D&D setting.

GURPS — The Generic Universal Roleplaying System, an RPG published by Steve Jackson Games which features non-setting specific rules and many, many setting books.

HERO System — A superhero roleplaying game notorious for its complex and detailed power system.

Mutants and Masterminds — A superhero roleplaying game published by Green Ronin Press, based on the d20 system rules.

Mystara — A campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons* which featured in several of the early modules released for D&D.

Paranoia — A somewhat slapstick game noted for its incredible lethality. PCs are not expected to live out the entirety of a single session, to the extent that at the beginning of a campaign each player is provided with back-up clones of their character.

Planescape — A campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons* which features inter-dimensional travel as a prominent component.

Ptolus — A d20 system campaign setting which focuses in extreme detail on a single city.

Ravenloft — A gothic horror campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Savage Worlds — A popular generic roleplaying system, a descendant of the *Deadlands* western RPG.

Shadowrun — A cyberpunk RPG which includes elements of magic and fantasy.

Spelljammer — A campaign setting for *Dungeons & Dragons* which mixes elements of science fiction and fantasy. Adventuring parties in Spelljammer frequently travel between planes of existence in magical ships.

Star Wars — An RPG adaptation of the Star Wars universe, officially licensed from Lucasfilm and currently published by Wizards of the Coast.

Vampire — A supernatural roleplaying game published by Whitewolf Publishing, in which the players take on the roles of vampires. Part of the larger World of Darkness setting.

Warhammer FRP — A medieval fantasy RPG which shares a setting with the Warhammer tabletop strategy game, published by Games Workshop.

Wraith — A supernatural roleplaying game published by Whitewolf Publishing, in which the players take on the roles of ghosts. Part of the larger World of Darkness setting.