

# LUN FRAMED

The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters



Edited by Martin Ralya • Featuring Essays by:

John Arcadian  
D. Vincent Baker  
Meguey Baker  
Wolfgang Baur  
Emily Care Boss  
Walt Ciechanowski

Stacy Dellorfano  
Jess Hartley  
Kenneth Hite  
Jennell Jaquays  
Eloy Lasanta  
Robin D. Laws

Michelle Lyons-  
McFarland  
Don Mappin  
Scott Martin  
Alex Mayo  
Jason Morningstar

Martin Ralya  
Kurt Schneider  
Ken St. Andre  
Monica Valentinelli  
Phil Vecchione  
Filamena Young



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# Credits

**Authors:** John Arcadian, D. Vincent Baker, Meguey Baker, Wolfgang Baur, Emily Care Boss, Walt Ciechanowski, Stacy Dellorfano, Jess Hartley, Kenneth Hite, Jennell Jaquays, Eloy Lasanta, Robin D. Laws, Michelle Lyons-McFarland, Don Mappin, Scott Martin, Alex Mayo, Jason Morningstar, Martin Ralya, Kurt Schneider, Ken St. Andre, Monica Valentinelli, Phil Vecchione, Filamena Young

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**Art Director:** Martin Ralya

**Graphic Designer:** Darren Hardy

**Layout:** Darren Hardy

**Cover Artist:** Christopher Reach

**Cover Designer:** Darren Hardy

**Interior Artist:** Christopher Reach

**Indexer:** Martin Ralya

**Proofreaders:** Robert M. Everson, Daniel Milne

**Capitalist Tool:** Kurt Schneider

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[enginepublishing.com](http://enginepublishing.com)

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Murray, UT 84157

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## Dedication

This one's for Jonathan Jacobs and Fred Hicks, without whose inspiration there probably wouldn't be an Engine Publishing. Sláinte! —Martin Ralya

# Introduction

Improvisation is at the heart of roleplaying. No matter what roleplaying game (RPG) you're playing, and no matter whether you're the game master (GM) or a player, you're improvising constantly during the game. Even if you plan out all of your adventures in advance, down to the last detail . . . you'll still find yourself improvising, in little ways and big ways, all the time.

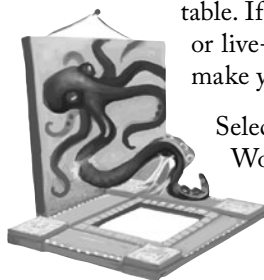
There are a few good gaming books out there that address improvisation; my favorite, other than this one, is Graham Walmsley's *Play Unsafe*, which changed the way I look at gaming. (It's seriously good; you should buy it.) But none approach improvisation from many different angles, and I wanted there to be a book that did; *UNFRAMED: The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters* is the result.

The title refers to two things about improvisation that I love. First, that ideas you come up with on the spur of the moment are sometimes rough and unfinished, but brimming with potential and wonderful in their own right—like an unframed canvas. And second, that what you improvise during play is often less constrained—less polished, less “framed”—than what you prepare in advance, and like a painting coming to life and bursting free of its frame those ideas tend to be surprising.

In *Unframed*, Engine Publishing's fifth system-neutral book for GMs, you get the collected wisdom of 23 GMs on improvisation—a core skill for every gamer. And not just any 23 GMs, but a diverse group of people with unique GMing styles, varied gaming backgrounds, and a wealth of knowledge and hard-won experience to share.

There's no One True Way to play RPGs, and there's no one way to improvise; by presenting different perspectives on the many aspects of improvisation for GMs, *Unframed* aims to be a toolkit you can draw from for the rest of your GMing career. Each essay packs a hell of a wallop into just a few pages. There's a flow to the book (a lot of thought went into *Unframed's* topics and reading order), but every essay stands on its own and you can read them in any order.

*Unframed* is also a tool for players: It's full of tips you can use to better portray player characters (PCs) as well as non-player characters (NPCs), advice on putting forth ideas that are easy for other players to embrace, and tricks for quickly embracing—and running with—the improvisation your fellow players are doing at the table. If you play more often than you GM, or love GM-less games or live-action games (LARPs), you'll find plenty in this book to make your gaming more enjoyable.



Selecting “just” 23 authors for *Unframed* was insanely difficult. Working with them was not—it was a pleasure and a privilege. Thanks for buying *Unframed*, and happy improv!

Martin Ralya • Salt Lake City, UT • April 2014

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# Improvising Dialogue Sequences

Robin D. Laws

Robin D. Laws' newest roleplaying game is *Hillfolk*, in which you weave an epic of dramatic interaction in an age of hungry empires. Previous RPG designs include *The Esoterrorists*, *Ashen Stars*, *Feng Shui*, and *HeroQuest*. His fiction projects include eight novels and the short story collection *New Tales of the Yellow Sign*. He comprises one-half of the Golden Geek Award-winning podcast [Ken and Robin Talk About Stuff](#), and can be found online at [robindlaws.com](http://robindlaws.com).

As a GM your most extended exercises in off-the-cuff invention occur during dialogue sequences. Internalizing the simple structure behind character interaction in fiction, scripted and improvised, allows you to sharpen these scenes, making them fun, memorable, and rich in story opportunity.

## Petitioner and Granter: Understanding the Scene

A simple structure powers scenes of any character interaction in drama, fiction, cinema, or TV. One character wants something from another character.

- Wash wants Zoë to show that she cares more about him than she does about Mal.
- Cersei wants to reestablish her position of superiority over Tyrion.
- Loki wants Thor to let him out of his cell.

The first character makes a petition of the second character, hoping to get that thing. That makes the first character the *petitioner*. The character hearing the petitioner has the power to grant this request. That makes the character the *granter*—although granters refuse requests as often as they grant them. In the above examples, Wash, Cersei, and Loki take the roles of petitioner, while Zoë, Tyrion, and Thor are the granters.

(If this all sounds familiar to you, you perhaps recognize it as the heart of my game *Hillfolk* and its DramaSystem rules engine. The terms petitioner and granter come from *The Conversations*, a book-length interview of the legendary film editor Walter Murch by novelist Michael Ondaatje.)



Roleplaying dialogue scenes work the same way. The only difference is standard to RPGs, in that they frequently feature an ensemble of protagonists. Often they'll make joint petitions of a single character, speaking en masse. Slightly more rarely, they'll be petitioned as a group, acting as a granter together. Often, you as GM will make a petition in a two-hander scene (one featuring two characters), your NPC and one PC. The PC may then take the petition back to the rest of the group and they'll debate what to do about it.

The first step, then, in sharpening your improvised dialogue scenes is to identify the petitioner and granter. Thankfully this is a simple call—if an NPC proposes something to the PCs, the NPC is the petitioner and one or more PCs acts as the granter.

- The March Warden (an NPC) asks the PCs to clear the great swamp of encroaching orcs.
- Euston Chau (an NPC) asks Dominic (a PC and his wannabe son-in-law) to have Mr. Bright (another PC) committed to a mental institution.
- The Mugwump (an NPC supervillain) tells Redblade (a PC vigilante) to lay off, or he'll reveal Redblade's secret identity.

Petitioning is active; it seeks to overcome the granter's resistance to put a new story point in motion. Assuming you're letting the PCs drive the story, they'll be making more petitions of your NPCs than vice versa.

- The PCs ask the old hermit they encounter out in the great swamp if he's seen any orc activity.
- Dominic asks Euston's chief security officer why he cares so much about Mr. Bright being sent to an institution.
- Redblade pressures the gatekeeper of a criminal dark data network for access to the Mugwump's file cache.

Identifying the petitioner helps by requiring you to pin down what the scene is about. When you're playing the petitioner, you usually know that from the outset. (Sometimes you'll shift your NPC's goal in response to what the player says, which is good. But you still know in the first place what the character seeks, and you still know even if that changes in mid-scene.)

When you're playing the granter, you find out what the scene is about partway through, when the players make clear their requests. You know your NPC is being petitioned, and immediately or gradually come to understand what the petition is about. When you figure it out partway through, it's often because the players are also trying to work out what they want from the character. Expect this to happen when you introduce a new NPC without establishing right away what her role in the storyline might be.

When a roleplaying scene seems shapeless, it's usually because neither you nor the players know what its purpose is, and are muddling around trying to find it. With the petitioner's goal identified, you see how it can proceed to a resolution.

## Tactics: Playing the Scene

We've got the *who*—petitioner and granter—and the *what*—the petitioner's goal. Now, by playing the scene you find the *how*. How the petitioner gets what he wants is a matter of tactics.

When actors study scripts as they figure out how to bring them to life, they ask themselves what the character's tactic is.

- Wash's tactic with Zoë is to *plead* for her understanding.
- Cersei's tactic with Tyrion is to *needle* him.
- Loki's tactic with Thor is to *logically argue* that he needs Loki's help to defeat the frost giants, despite the risks that come from letting him loose.

Granters also use tactics to resist the question put in front of them.

- Zoë *downplays* Wash's complaint.
- Tyrion meets needling with *needling*.
- Thor *lists* all the previous times Loki has burned him.

Characters employ multiple tactics throughout a scene, each in response to the other. This is the verbal parrying, the cut-and-thrust, that gives a dialogue scene crackle. That's also where the need for improv comes in. If you're playing the petitioner, you can know from the outset what he wants and what his first approach to getting it will be. You can't predict, though, how the granter will respond. When the granter responds, you must spontaneously come up with a response that moves the scene forward and registers as plausible for the character you're playing.

Just as in real life, the character who has only one tactic and is forced to keep repeating it tends to lose the exchange.

To find your next tactic, listen to the response of the players, and find in it the springboard to a new tactic. Once you start thinking about the petition and an initial tactic, the rest will likely come naturally to you, without having to stop and think your way through it. If you find yourself getting stuck, that shows you that you've wrung all the juice this situation contains. It's time bring the scene to a conclusion.

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**When a roleplaying scene seems shapeless, it's usually because neither you nor the players know what its purpose is, and are muddling around trying to find it.**

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## Leverage: Where Tactics Come From

When groping for a tactic, ask yourself: "What leverage does my character have over the other?" The petitioner wants the granter to give him what he wants. The granter wants him to stop asking. Each looks for ways to make that happen, bringing them out like a series of sword strikes and shield parries.

Common forms of leverage include:

- **Bargaining:** I have something to trade for the thing I want.
- **Bribe:** Like the above, but underhanded.
- **Threat:** I'll make something bad happen to you if you don't go along.
- **Love:** You care about me, so you'll do this to make me happy.
- **Emotional Blackmail:** You're stuck with me, and I'll make your life miserable if you don't give in.
- **Obligation:** You promised you'd help me, and now I'm calling in that debt.
- **Duty:** You vowed to help people like me in this situation.
- **Identity:** If you do this, you'll prove you're the sort of person you think you are.
- **Appearances:** If you do this, you'll seem like the sort of person you profess to be.
- **Approval:** If you do this, people will really like you.
- **Respect:** I have followed the rules of your social code in asking you this, and those rules say you must grant what I ask.
- **Pleading:** I have no other way of persuading you, but I really need this, please, please, please. (The ever-popular and invariably doomed, "But I really need this" is a form of pleading.)

When prepping to improvise dialogue scenes, you might note which tactic an NPC goes to as a first resort, or a bottom line. You can just jot down the one-word reminder or expand to a note encompassing the character's specific personality and situation.

## Resolution: Ending the Scene

Scenes end in one of two ways: the petition is either granted or refused.

Granters give in to petitions when the petitioner finds a tactic, usually after trying a number of unsuccessful ones, that works. Exhausting the granter can also be a successful tactic.

Granters refuse petitions when it becomes clear that the petitioner has no viable tactic. In many cases this is because the petition is doomed—no argument or emotional pressure can sway the granter to accede; the request goes completely against her desires and interests. The scene resolves by showing conclusively that this is the case. At some point the scene loses the snap of repeated tactic switches and starts to repeat itself—the way real-life arguments, which unlike those in fiction aren't edited to cut out the sidetracks and loop-arounds, usually do. Sometimes the player will end the scene by storming off, laying down an ultimatum, or declaring the matter settled. Always let players do your pacing work for you.

On the other hand, if the players seem engaged and only you feel a sense of frustration or repetition, let them have at it. They'll wind down soon enough.

Often one player wants to keep going while the others have slumped in their chairs, eyes glazing, bored hands drifting inexorably to check Twitter on their phones. That's when you have your petitioner give up asking, or your granter declare that they'll get no further with her.

## **Dovetailed Petitions**

When a granter gives in to a petition in return for some benefit, tangible or emotional, you can say that it dovetailed in on itself—both participants asked for something (petitioned) and then got something (granted). You can also sometimes argue that this happens when negotiations occur but break down—both parties petitioned, but each wound up rebuffing the other.

Although this will often happen spontaneously, it's probably confusing to spend too much time analyzing it. The point of thinking about this stuff is to find the clarity in a scene that allows you to play it well.

## **What Happens Without Resistance?**

When a dialogue scene goes nowhere, nine times out of 10 it's because it had nowhere to go in the first place. It would have been better if reduced to a quick exchange.

Dialogue scenes don't take flight without conflict. That doesn't mean that every interaction the PCs get into has to present them with resistance. Sometimes you just want to get on with it. Sometimes they've decided to talk to characters you have to invent on the spot, and you can't think of a way to make them interesting or integral to the story. When this happens, give them what they want as quickly as you can.

They want to stop someone on the way out of town and check on the March Warden's trustworthiness? You've got to let them, or it will seem like a big deal when you intend to establish the opposite. So have a walk-on NPC give them the answer they want right away, rather than tossing extra static at them for no clear reason.

Dispatching inessential exchanges quickly lets you move on to the next actually promising scene.

## **Putting It All Together**

Clip 'n' save the following bullet points to sharpen your improvised dialogue scenes:

- When a dialogue scene starts, decide if a conflict is actually warranted.
- Find the petitioner and granter.
- Find what the petitioner wants—that's what the scene is about.
- For an NPC petitioner, pick a starting tactic.

- For an NPC granter, respond to the PC's starting tactic with a deflecting tactic appropriate to the character and situation.
- Keep trading tactics until:
  - The petitioner finds one that works
    - End scene with victory for petitioner
  - It becomes clear that no tactic will work
    - End scene with loss for petitioner
- As in any RPG scene, both failure and success then lead to a new scene that moves the story toward a conclusion.

# Yes, and: A Recipe for Collaborative Gaming

Emily Care Boss

Emily Boss is an independent roleplaying game designer. Through her game company, Black & Green Games, she has published tabletop and live action RPGs including *Breaking the Ice*, *Shooting the Moon*, and *Under my Skin*. Emily founded the JiffyCon gaming conventions in Massachusetts. Editor of the *RPG = Role Playing Girl* zine, she is also a contributor to the [Gaming as Women](#) blog. Emily's fiction has recently been included in the *New Hero* Volume 2 anthology and *The Lion and the Aardvark*, and her work appears in the *Hillfolk* supplement *Blood on the Snow* and the *Heroine* supplement *Girls Elsewhere*.

Mastering the art of listening makes for a good GM. In games that have a GM, the players depend on you to keep them on track and to provide needed information about the world and rules they'll be using, but also to give each person a crack at the spotlight that each of us craves—a moment for one's character to make a difference. As GM you have many jobs, but some of your most essential roles are to be the coach, chief adversary, and cheering section for your players. You help them get spotlight time so that the other players can enjoy and appreciate their contributions as well, and help each contribution dovetail with and add to the others.

A roleplaying game is a shared vision. Each person brings their own unique view of what the game world and characters in it could be. Bringing these disparate images together is an essential task of playing the game. In games with no GM, the rules have to help the players accomplish this. In games where there is a GM, it's the GM's duty and privilege to harmonize the players' creative contributions.

This is actually a lot easier than it seems, but to make it easy there is a trick: letting go. Instead of trying to become an impresario—juggling in-depth world creation, masterful portrayals of endless NPCs, and the devising of inscrutable riddles and impenetrable puzzles—become an attentive fan of what the players create. Focus on making opportunities for them to make decisions that allow them to add to the plot and world. Say “yes, and . . .” to your players' ideas and never look back.

The GM is like a chef: Finding a menu suited to the players' tastes, choosing a system, and facilitating the players being able to indulge their creative appetites. However, a roleplaying game is a collaborative endeavor. Each person plays their own role in the game, bringing their bunch of carrots or turnips that transforms a stone into soup that will feed everyone. The group becomes a team of chefs, working together to satisfy.

Your team needs good tools to reach this goal. Affirming one another is a breath of fresh air that inspires creative spirits. Learning to savor each other's contributions opens doors.

In improvisational theatre, the rule of “yes, and . . .” creates an ethic of listening to one another. It has two parts: *accepting an offer* (saying “yes”) and *building* on the offer accepted (adding “and . . .”). So what is an offer? When you are playing improv—or roleplaying—you are making up things about characters who exist in an imaginary world. What you say as the character, and describe about the world and the things in it: these are all *offers*. They populate this imaginary world that you create together.

If I describe my scarred fencer raising her saber high in salute to her enemy, I may have offered you an adversary to defeat, a mother to love and fear for, an ally to race to help, or perhaps a lover to cheer on. Your acceptance and what you *build* on my offer is what gives us a shared world to play in. It also creates momentum that keeps the game driving forward.

Acceptance means you mirror what I have said. Following up on the example above, you might describe the lover tensely watching the light glint off the raised blades. This accepts the situation and adds emotional resonance. Describing the opposing duelist nodding his respect and eyeing up her stance for weaknesses accepts the contest and shows that the opponent takes her seriously. Details are added, and more is revealed about what has already been described.

Building on an offer happens when you add a new element—something that creates different opportunities for the characters in the scene, or perhaps throws in a new challenge to overcome. For example, the child of the scarred fencer struggles against his bonds, trying to relieve his parent of the need to rescue him. A veiled ally speeds across the plain, tumbling off her lathered steed, but is intercepted from interfering by stern-faced guards with blades bared. Each of these pieces of information changes our understanding of the context of the battle. A youth’s life is at stake; needed help is impeded.

If you make an offer that reveals something new about my character, you *endow* me with something to accept and build on. Endowing can be tricky. Unexpected endowments can feel like a trap. When solicited and expected, they are a gift—an offer that gives you material for your character to be built upon.

But imagine for a moment that no one builds on an offer I make. The duelist stalks forward, her eye half obscured by the seam of the scar crossing her brow and cheek. But then the GM cuts the scene and we move across the bay to a group of miscreants plotting to blow up the capitol, and we never return to the threatened fight. Or we are back on the sands, saber lifted, and another player describes their character offering my fencer a sweet drink and talking about the weather.

What happened? How can I feel but ignored? My fellow players rejected my offer, cutting off what I brought into play.

Saying “yes, and . . .” means acknowledging what has been offered, and adding something to the fictional play that fits with it. Doing so helps someone else make another offer, and the chain continues. When we ignore someone else’s offer we effectively *block* them. When I block you, I stop listening to you. And why then should I build on what you create if you ignored what I brought to the table? It’s a cycle that can go south quickly.

This is complicated by the fact that it's not easy to know what others feel is important. An offer by one may feel like a block to another. Another tool from improvisational theatre can help here, the *circle of expectations*, and its familiar guise in roleplaying games: the character sheet.

The circle of expectations is a concept discussed by Keith Johnstone in his influential book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. As players make offers to one another and build using “yes, and . . .”, the offers suggest responses and a scenario takes shape from what each person injects into play. As in my example, the duelist calls forth the image of an opponent, a lover watching, the fear of loss. Anyone could think of this, and something else can be added to enlarge on what's already been offered: the captured loved one, help on the way.

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**Instead of trying to become an impresario—juggling in-depth world creation, masterful portrayals of endless NPCs, and the devising of inscrutable riddles and impenetrable puzzles—become an attentive fan of what the players create.**

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But add something that is out of place: a gorilla bursts onto the fighting sands, rolling and tumbling. A clown starts juggling and heckling the crowd nearby. Each thing might be able to be incorporated. Yes: the duel is happening at a festival, the clowns are part of general festivities. And: a gorilla has escaped from a nearby menagerie. But how are these things connected? What brings them together in the circle of what can be reasonably expected that makes their introduction satisfying? When the connections are tenuous, our acceptance of the imaginary world is tested, and it becomes more difficult to continue to add to the shared fictional events.

In roleplaying, we use our character sheets and world write-ups to create the circle of expectations that help us navigate creative channels together. In fact, because we write them down, our circle of expectations can be quite broad. Our understanding of the fictional world can be deep and the process of learning about the game world, or creating it collaboratively, puts us all on the same page about what is acceptable to offer and to build. As a player, I gain permission to describe my scarlet-robed fencer by choosing from the options available to me and agreeing to one set of them that I'll use in my play.

If, however, my character sheet describes a legless but crafty beggar, no one would accept my offer as I describe my character deftly slicing down her opponent beneath the noonday sun. The beggar's wits wouldn't allow him to do just that thing, though he could be effective in many other realms. And no one would back my play, or build on it. An argument might ensue, or my offer might be ignored and not returned to.

But instead, if we see the elements of each other's characters and what we each illustrate about the world as an invitation—an offer to work with and build on—we have the right ingredients to enjoy the fruits of our labor together.

**Acceptance**—Acknowledging and incorporating something created by another player into your game descriptions or character actions. “The tiger stalks through the village at night.” “Dogs whimper and cower away; parents check to be sure their children are inside.” *The dogs and villagers respond to the threat of the tiger.*

**Blocking**—Rejecting a detail about the world or your character created by another. Contradicting what has been previously stated. Also may include taking actions that undermine something described by another. “The day is sunny.” “I put up my umbrella to keep from getting soaking wet.” *The second player ignores the description of the weather and implies that it is raining instead.*

**Building**—Adding details or extending action described by another. Reflects what has been said and elaborates on it. “The canoe heads into the white water and rapids.” “The boat shudders from impact with the rocks, tilting wildly and throwing the riders into the river.” *The second player follows up on the offer of the rapids and describes the effect on the boat.*

**Circle of Expectations**—A set of concepts, images, or understandings that can commonly be associated with one another. Creative ideas that fit together. “The unit crept to the edge of cover, peering out at the enemy encampment.” “They checked their ammunition, silently reloading. One said a wordless prayer.” “The commander chose Jones to go on point. She nodded acceptance and headed through the gap.” *The scene is set with a military group approaching the enemy. The unit is described acting with stealth and caution. Unit members take action appropriate to the military milieu and the dangerous situation.*

**Endow**—To provide details about something someone else has created or controls. Making a fresh offer or building on another person’s creations in a way that adds new information, capabilities, or constraints. “My apartment has broad windows looking out over the courtyard.” “In the window, you hang a giant cage filled with finches of blue, green, and gold.” *The detail of the bird cage may imply a love of animals, a caring nature, or a lack of concern with annoying neighbors with their racket.*

**Offer**—A narrative description or character action that provokes and provides material for another player to respond to and build upon. “I walk down the street, carefully balancing my grandmother’s best china in my arms.” “A youth’s skateboard flies out from under him heading right toward you.” *The precarious china is an offer for trouble. The skateboard is an offer for how the china can be dashed to the ground.*

**“Yes, and . . .”**—Taking in the description or narration of another player. Accepting an offer and adding something to it that can add to the scene or world. Building on it. “I lean in for a kiss.” “I kiss you back, but hear the footsteps of my spouse coming up the stairs.” *The offer of a kiss is accepted, and the complicating circumstance of a jealous spouse is added to the situation.*



# Coherence and Contradictions

D. Vincent Baker

D. Vincent Baker is the creator and publisher of several critically acclaimed, award-winning, and controversial RPGs, including *kill puppies for satan*, *Dogs in the Vineyard*, and *Apocalypse World*. He lives in a little town in New England with his wife and co-designer Meguey Baker and their three sons.

*“Prepare a list of images that are purely fantastic, deliberate paradoxes say, that fit within the sort of thing you’re writing. The City of Screaming Statues, things like that. You just write a list of them so you’ve got them there when you need them. Again, they have to cohere, have the right resonances, one with the other.”* —Michael Moorcock, “How to Write a Book in Three Days” (<http://www.ghostwoods.com/2010/05/how-to-write-a-book-in-three-days-1210>)

Improvisational GMing is, in its way, like trying to write a novel in three days. Instead of the blank page, you have the eager and expectant players, hoping that you’ll say something delightful, startling, provocative, and fun, with no editing and no do-overs. Go!

Effective preparation is crucial. Moorcock gives us an easy and powerful way to go about it, a minimum of prep for a maximum of fun.

## The GM’s Raw Materials

For our purposes, the raw materials an improvisational GM has to work with are the game’s setting and scenery—that is, its places and things—and its cast of NPCs. The players’ characters are their own to play, of course, and their belongings are theirs too. The game’s eventual storyline is strictly hands-off: The storyline emerges, develops in play, live at the table, as a result of the players’ characters interacting with the GM’s setting, scenery, and NPCs.

Because the future storyline is unknown, it’s impossible to give the NPCs their narrative roles in advance. The GM can’t know which NPCs will turn out to be antagonists, sidekicks, trusted friends, hidden influences, love interests, or even just forgotten, until the moment that it comes true in play. Before then, it’s just guessing, and the best policy is to give every NPC, even the most casually-invented, the potential to step into a major role.

The right resonances and deliberate contradictions can do it.

## “The Right Resonances”

By coherence and “the right resonances,” we’ll take Moorcock to mean the principles that underlie the game world you’re creating.

Take a few minutes to think about *how the world is*, *how things work*, and *what people are like*, in principle, in the abstract. You’ve probably been doing this already, by gut, as you’ve been imagining the game and getting excited to play. It won’t hurt to make it explicit. Three or four principles should be plenty for a start, and you can always add more as they occur to you. Principles like:

- Nobody really likes their job.
- Every computer has a human face.
- The city is full of people of every culture.
- Religious devotion is usually hypocrisy.
- A person with a sword is dangerous to everyone.
- The sun is scorching, blinding, and unforgiving.
- Spaceships are noisy, close, and smell weird.

When you create a setting element, a piece of scenery, or an NPC, you make it cohere with the rest simply by remembering and following the principles you’ve established. Your principles help you improvise things that fit into the imaginary world as though they have always been there.

## “Deliberate Paradoxes”

It’s the cracks, the seams, the tensions between things that make them interesting. When the players rely on you to improvise things for them to be curious about, to explore and seize upon, you can use inbuilt contradictions, Moorcock’s “deliberate paradoxes,” to provide the appealing texture.

Moorcock’s example, the City of Screaming Statues, is fun and over the top (“Screaming statues? How would a statue *scream*?”), but more modest paradoxes will do just as well. Even utterly down-to-earth features of a place, a thing, or a character can contradict one another.



I like to say it, simply, as “give everything a *but*.” The spaceship is hard-worn *but* lovingly maintained. The island sky is blindingly blue *but* today the clouds race in. The hocus of the desert cult loves his family with all his heart, *but* he knows that in the desert you have to choose who will have water and who will not.

## Using Coherence and Contradiction to Improvise Setting and Scenery

Suppose that you're improv GMing a space opera game and you've decided on the following principle, among others:

- Spaceships are gigantic and elegant, quite Deco.

One of the players' characters owns a small commercial spaceship. The other characters are the ship's pilot, its engineer, and a passenger.

"We go on board. What's the ship like?"

The idea is not to have decided already what the spaceship is like. Possibly, you didn't even know that the spaceship existed until the players decided that their characters own one, not five minutes ago. So it's time to improvise one. Remember: follow your principles, and give everything a *but*.

"Even a small commercial vessel like this one is spacious, with a command deck where you can walk around and converse, *but* this one goes overboard. The command deck has a chandelier, of all things! The hallway to the crew and passenger quarters has little tinkling fountains in sconces in the wall, and the whole thing is lit with lovely golden ambient light."

Or: "Even a small commercial vessel like this one is spacious, and this one would be too, *but* it's been refitted for speed and cargo. The crew and passenger quarters are as cramped as you've ever seen, barely more than closets. What used to be the captain's luxury deck is full of engine, and what used to be the recreational dome is now all cargo space."

Or: "Even a small commercial vessel like this one is spacious, *but* that's all this ship has got going for it. The engine is hiccupy and sloppy. The crew and passenger quarters are big, sure, *but* bare and cold. The command deck used to have a pretty little pond and fountain in the middle of it, *but* now it's just this dry basin you have to remember not to stumble into."

## Using Coherence and Contradiction to Improvise NPCs

Suppose that you're improv GMing a sword and sorcery game and you've decided on the following principles, among others:

- A person with a sword is dangerous to everyone.
- People have to work hard every day to stay ahead of poverty and death.

The players' characters are a desert sorcerer; his student; and his bodyguard, armed, yes, with a sword. They've come into a public wayhouse where the Salt Road crosses a stone bridge from sweeping plains, over a wide river, into the steppelands to the north. The wayhouse is low, smoky, and crookedly built, *but* it has fresh cut flowers in every window and a dovecote in the yard.

## “Housekeeper! Three bowls of your best!”

Again, the idea is not to have already prepared a housekeeper, but to improvise one. Remember your principles—hitting any one of them at a time is good, and hitting more is fine too—and give this person a *but*:

“The housekeeper is a charming, busy woman, *but* when she looks at the bodyguard’s sword you can see that she’s weighing it in her mind. She’s not scared of it, she knows its weight.”

Or: “The housekeeper is terrified of you, *but* she puts on a brave, stoic face and comes forward to serve you.”

Or: “The housekeeper brings you bowls of porridge and fresh bread with a smile, *but* when she walks back into the kitchen she makes a superstitious gesture to prevent evil from following her.”

Do the same to draw individuals out of a crowd. Suppose that these same three characters have crossed the bridge and entered into a village on the steppes. Again, remember your principles and give the villagers a *but*:

“It’s yak-shearing time and the villagers are hard at work. They barely look up at you, *but* one little boy follows you from the village gates. He keeps his distance *but* you can see that he’s utterly mesmerized by you.”

Or: “The village’s custom decrees that they must welcome you with a feast, so that’s what they do. Most of them are glad just for the break from their daily labors, *but* the village headman doesn’t trust you, and doesn’t hide it.”

Or: “The villagers barely let you in the gate. One kid runs shouting when you’re coming near and they greet you with hoes and yak-shears at the ready. *But* one young woman, dressed in more cosmopolitan fashion than the rest, comes out from between them and welcomes you cordially.”

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**It’s the cracks, the seams, the tensions between  
things that make them interesting.**

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## Benefits

When you improvise a place with inbuilt contradictions, you do more than give it character and detail. You give the players something to fix on, hook into, bounce off of, talk about. They can use it to position their characters and set them up for action. Suppose, for example, that you’re playing a game of 18<sup>th</sup> Century intrigue and revolution. The players’ characters have stumbled into a company of redcoats, their enemies, occupying a town’s inn, and the redcoats chase them out into the city at night. “The streets of the city are dark, *but* down one side street, there’s a wealthy townhouse with all lights lit.” The *but* gives the players grounds to make their decision, and simultaneously complicates it: toward the light, or away? Does a lit house represent friends or enemies, how will they find out, and what will they do when they know?

Do the same with objects and scenery: “In the cellar of the house where they hide you, there’s a store of arms. Old fowling pieces, antique rusted sabers, kitchen knives lashed to hoe handles. *But* there’s also a brand new 4-pounder, clean and gleaming, presumably stolen from a ship in the harbor.” Now the characters have something fun and very interesting to discuss with the family upstairs.

And furthermore, when you improvise NPCs who contain contradictions, or NPCs who contradict the people around them, you create NPCs with memorable features, identifiable qualities, mystery and individuality. You create NPCs who can *already* rise to the challenge of a narrative role, whatever narrative role your emerging storyline has in store for them. “While the redcoats search for you, the family does its best to go about its normal business, *but* you can hear the teenage daughter talking cheerfully with the company captain. She’s only 15, *but* she draws him out easily and deftly. You know he’s quite a businesslike and sober officer, *but* you can hear from his voice how much she’s charmed him.” Is she the PCs’ friend, or their enemy? Time will tell. Either way, you’ve created her to be equal to the task.

## “Prepare a List”

Don’t prepare a list.

You may, of course, prepare a list, if you like. Preparing lists is good fun and good practice. But contra Moorcock, what you need as an improvisational GM isn’t a list, but a habit of imagination.

Cultivate principles and contradictions as a way of thinking of things. Find the principles underlying the characters in the books you read, the setting design in the movies you watch, even the real-world physical principles that underlie the weather and the social principles that underlie the communities around you. Find the contradictions that make one character stand out from others, that motivate a character to act against her allies or herself. Notice to yourself the contradictions in your friends and in your own experience: I usually look forward to a stroll to the coffee shop, *but* today my ankle is still sore. My friend may genuinely be the nicest person in the world, *but* it seems like somebody’s done something that’s bothering her.

Developing your skill as an improvisational GM is like developing your skill as a writer. By making “the right resonances” and “deliberate paradoxes” a habitual part of your private, internal storytelling, you ready yourself to create them on demand when you improvise as a GM. You aren’t *guaranteed* to say delightful, startling, provocative, fun things, but you’ve prepared well and you’ve tipped the odds in your favor.

*In addition to Moorcock, I learned the idea of principled setting creation from Joshua A.C. Newman, the creator of Under the Bed, Shock:Social Science Fiction, and Shock:Human Contact.*

# Getting Off the Railroad and Onto the Island

John Arcadian

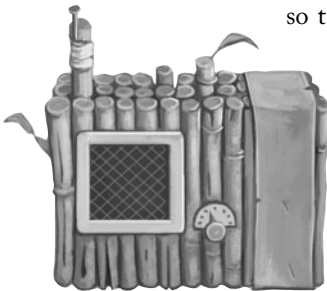
John Arcadian is a freelance author, blogger, and art director in the tabletop gaming industry with many awards under his belt. He writes GMing advice at the multiple ENnie Award-winning site [GnomeStew.com](http://GnomeStew.com), as well as books and gaming content for companies like Engine Publishing, Cubicle 7 Entertainment, Silvervine Games, Savage Insider, Open Game Table, and many others. When not gaming or writing about gaming, John builds websites and creates videos, paints miniatures, builds custom sonic screwdrivers, hikes in the woods, and generally causes havoc in his kilt. You can find a complete list of publications and his personal blog at [JohnArcadian.com](http://JohnArcadian.com).

The least important thing about your game is the plot. That might be a hard pill to swallow, but as the GM, the moment you sit down at the table surrounded by your players, your intricate stories and plots pale in comparison to the moments of excitement that the players generate themselves. Sure, they're completely misinterpreting the clues you carefully laid out and are suspicious of the people you set up to be allies, but they're excited and engaged in a way that you couldn't manufacture if you tried—and it's rewarding for you, too. As GMs, we change our games on the fly and tear our carefully crafted stories to pieces in order to keep up with this excitement; that's just part of what it means to be a GM.

The shared nature of a collaborative story just doesn't work as well with strict and rigid approaches to storytelling. As the person responsible for structuring your game and being prepared to engage your players with a good plot, how do you craft a story that makes sense while being malleable enough to stand up to the rigors of a gaming group, and which doesn't require you to account for every single thing that could possibly happen? The answer is simple: Grab a tropical drink, stretch out on your beach chair, and let your players do it for you—thanks to Island Design Theory.

Island Design Theory is what I call the prep style I've been using at my table for the last few years. It's a way to visualize and design the elements of your game

so that they're flexible, coherent, and easy to adjust based on your players' ideas. Island Design Theory ditches the idea of a rigid, linear path in favor of islands: the plot points, encounters, leads, clues, and other important components of the game, loosely grouped together in a way that lets your players navigate from island to island. It doesn't require much from you except a shift in thinking about how you prepare and group the elements of your games.



## The Basics of Island Design Theory

Get your visual cortex primed, I'm going to ask you to use that brilliant imagination of yours to whip up a mental image. It starts with a piece of paper that represents a vast body of water, like the ocean. At the bottom is the start of your game session; at the very top, the end goal. Everything in between is water, and this is where the islands of your game are going to live in loose, somewhat chronological groupings.

All of the elements that you expect to happen at the start of the game are closer to the bottom third of the paper—things like the hooks that get the PCs involved or the first pieces of your story that lead the PCs on to the next arcs. In the middle go all of the islands that represent the things that you think are going to happen in the middle of the game, and which help enable the big climax at the end. Smaller islands might be grouped around bigger ones, but none are absolutely connected; they all float about on their own. At the top is the final goal, as well as the islands that represent climactic battles and dramatic moments at the end of the game that help the players feel a sense of accomplishment.

With this very loose structure set up, and all the elements of your game floating about, give your players a metaphorical motor boat (with a couple of small sails on it, just in case they run out of gas). They start out at the bottom of the page, investigating the closest islands that are easily visible. Sometimes they tack the sails and move with the winds you provide, sometimes they motor along to whichever plot element looks interesting. From the mountain peak of one island they see another in the distance and head straight there, but then backtrack when they realize that a third island they wanted to explore is closer than they'd imagined. Eventually their self-propelled journey brings them to the end (the top of the page), where they celebrate and then are ready to jump back into the boat at the start of the next session.

To translate that metaphor back to game terms, you break the elements of your game down into simple, independent pieces with multiple ways into and out of each piece. Arranged in a loose order, you provide some hooks, but as the players build up steam and make their own connections, they put together their own story out of the elements you provide. You give them the content, they provide the plot. Sometimes you rearrange islands so that their ideas and actions get them farther along; sometimes they figure out a way to skip ahead.

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**The least important thing  
about your game is the plot.**

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To use an example that we'll flesh out in a moment, maybe your players missed the fact that the cultists were working in the warehouse and instead tracked down that weird statue. It still felt like the right time for some action, so you drag the cultists from their warehouse island and drop them into the antique shop where they try to take the statue by force. The cultists' stats are still valid, their goal the same, but their island changes to fit the leads the players are making, instead of the other way around. By the end of the adventure, the players reach their goal, get the statue, discover the cult working in the city, and feel a sense of achievement because almost every time they pursued their instincts, it led them somewhere important instead of being a dead end.

## Designing and Using Islands

That's the gist of Island Design Theory, and it doesn't require that much of a mental leap. We've all had to adapt on the fly when our players surprise us or come up with a path that seems like more fun to them. Island Design Theory puts that sort of adaptation front and center. Arranging your islands loosely and rearranging them as needed is part of it, but the rest comes from designing your islands to be easily adjustable.

When I design islands for my games, I write them on index cards or print them out and cut them up so that I can easily move them around as I do my prep. Islands can be created and arranged entirely within your head, but I find it useful to write things down so I can jot notes on the index cards and carry islands from session to session, or reuse them with just a little modification. But even the simple act of imagining the elements of your game as islands makes it easier to rearrange things and adapt on the fly.

To make an island, whether physical or mental, I pick one element of the game and make it separate. I name it, and then add some rough, simple notes. If I find myself intertwining that element with something else that should be an island of its own, I separate them.

"Fight with the Cultists at Warehouse" could be the initial idea I have for the game, but each component of that idea works better as its own individual island. I split the idea into "Fight with the Cultists" and "Warehouse" and paperclip them together, metaphorically arranging them near each other on my ocean map. Finding an ancient statue is an important step towards the end goal, so I write "Ancient Statue" on a card and add some notes: the cultists are seeking it, its appearance, and the fact that it affects psychic characters.

I add these to a bunch of other islands I've already made up and pretty soon have a small stack of paper that covers my session for the night—or my entire campaign, if I'm prepping it all at once. I can set these on my table and visually see the general course of the game, or just pull them out as the players reach them during play. If I get stuck for ideas about where to go next, I can flip through them for inspiration or see if an island somewhere else in the rough structure of my overall plan fits better here.

Islands don't need to be complete to function. In fact, you should strive to keep islands as basic as possible when you design them. You want the players to have many ways onto and off of an island, and you want the islands to be easy to move around within your loose plot structure. If the players are looking for the statue but decide to go to the local pub to drum up some information, you can play out that scene and still make use of many of your prepared elements. If they start looking at the bartender suspiciously, you can decide right then that he's a member of the cult or has somehow come into possession of the statue. You can make him a quick mental island, without writing him down, or you can write notes about him on a spare index card for later use. On the "Ancient Statue" card, draw a line through "Currently at Cruxby's Antique Shop" and suddenly the statue is in the pub's basement—without you having to change carefully laid plans to make it work in the new location. With enough islands floating around, none of which took much time to create, you won't feel bad if you have to ditch some of them.

Keeping islands simple also helps you reuse or re-skin them. The fight with the cultists can happen next session if you need it to, or you can change it into a bar fight if the players look like they're going to start one. If the game is running long and the players seem to want some resolution, the bartender's island can be merged with the cult leader's island, and interrogating him can lead the players to the start of the next session, feeling like they achieved their goal without being dragged there.

And that's the beauty of preparing your game as a loose grouping of islands: You still have an end goal and you still have progression through the story using the elements and set pieces you lovingly crafted, but during prep you don't get bogged down worrying about intricate details and connections. You don't even have to sacrifice complex stories to make islands; just develop them as many small elements linked together so that you can break off pieces when you want to reward player ideas and motivation. With the players' hands on the tiller, you get to relax and feel the ocean breeze instead of stoking the boiler to keep them chugging along the railroad.

### Fight with the Cultists

Stats on page 289

Summoned spirit stats on page 306

Seeking statue for ritual

Robes of pale midnight, swirling shadow patterns (+2 to conceal and -1 to ranged attacks)

Gruff, pale, gaunt, some recognized as leaders in community if hoods removed

### Warehouse

Large floor plan, boxes, dark, shadows when lights go out

Rafters (3-D combat options)

secret hatch leading to docks (escape)

signs of ritual—blood, candles, patterns drawn in black paint

### Ancient Statue

The cultists are seeking the ancient statue to awaken a dark god

Statue is small and obsidian. Hard to determine material. It is carved, but very abstract. Only reveals true form under light of a new moon. True form TBD later.

Psychics can hear strange singing from the statue

Currently at Cruxby's Antique Shop

# Gaming Like an Actor

Filamena Young

Filamena Young is a professional writer, freelancer, and independent game publisher. She's written for award-winning games, including *Shelter in Place*, winner of the 2011 Judge's Spotlight ENnie Award. She is a co-founder and contributor to [GamingasWomen.com](http://GamingasWomen.com), an award-winning blog featuring women's voices in gaming. Her credits include *Cortex Plus Dramatic Roleplaying*, books for the *Vampire: The Requiem* and *Mistborn* game lines, and fiction anthologies. She's co-owner of Machine Age Productions, publisher of RPGs such as *Farewell to Fear*, free games, and games for young gamers like *Flatpack: Fix the Future*.

You are already improvising, congratulations! Strictly speaking, unless you script your games and script your players' reactions, your game involves improvisation. Clearly, though, if you picked up this book you're looking for a little more depth and some ways to step up your game.

Maybe what you want is to improv at the table like an actor. Excellent! Do it!

All you need are two things: a basic idea of how this all works and some meta-techniques to teach your players to game like improv actors.

## Always Say “Yes”

... or roll some dice. But we'll get back to that in a moment.

First you need to know how improv works when it's done among actors in a theatre setting. Improv is common in comedy, but it's employed just as often in drama. Improv actors don't have a GM to set the stage, play the roles of extras and antagonists, or nudge the plot along. Instead, they set scenes communally by making “offers.”

A player makes an offer by describing a detail in the scene or by demonstrating something true about her character. In this way, she invites other players and the GM to build off of her details and advance the scene. For example: The characters are bartering with a merchant over rare occult ingredients; it's a pretty standard scene. Mike wants to spice things up and advance the scene, so he says, “Hey, merchant, who's that shady, thuggish guy waiting in the back for you?” The GM could shrug it off, but since the offer has been made, the GM takes the offer and expands the scene to include a run-in with a local organized crime racket that she hadn't planned.



Lots of things can be offers. You can offer elemental details (“Listen to that rain!”) or develop extras and antagonists (“Isn’t that the prince’s steed?” suggests that he might be nearby). Or you might provide personal character details (“What he doesn’t know is that I already have enemies in the martial arts world!”) or even actions that could put your character in an interesting or compromising position (“I’m so dedicated to chasing this bad guy, I’m going to climb up this very shaky ladder to get up to the roof!”).

As a GM trying to bring actor-style improv to your game, it’s your job to say “yes” whenever a player makes an offer, and to encourage the other players to make and accept offers as well. Depending on what game you’re playing, you might have system-based benefits you can hand out to encourage this, like drama points, action points, or fate points. You could also build it into character advancement and give players an experience point reward for making and accepting offers. With some players, you won’t need to reward them; just make it a part of the game and they’ll be happy to do it.

There will be times when you’ll have to say “no” or otherwise not accept an offer. For example, if a player suggests something that happened in a PC’s past and that PC’s player doesn’t agree with it, then he won’t accept the offer. In improv theatre this is called “blocking,” and it isn’t conducive to advancing the story or improving the show. However, you have something that actors don’t have! You have dice. (See, I told you I’d come back to that.) As soon as someone blocks an offer, you have a conflict in the game. Is the prince listening in? Have the characters met in a sinister past life? Does this mean the goblins attack? Pick up the dice and find out.

## Player Agency

Don’t use the dice to determine something for a character that the player really doesn’t want to deal with. If she’s blocked the idea that her orc biker has a wife and kids back home, don’t roll dice to make it true. But try your best to introduce the idea somehow. For example, roll dice to figure out why somebody got the idea that the biker has a wife and kids back home.

If you aren’t sure the dice are the best way to settle a block, use that block as a pacing tool instead. If the block has stopped the story cold, it’s time for a random encounter—or maybe you trigger the next part of the adventure or end the scene and see what happens in the next one. In improv, you should always favor ending a scene sooner rather than later.

Offers, and improv in general, are really like random encounters for the whole table. Every time a player makes an offer the story might change, and everyone gets a chance to follow an unexpected path. No one can really plan for what the players might come up with, even the GM, and so your game ends up full of surprises! Just as long as you do whatever you can to accept those offers, that is.

Okay, you have the basics and you could probably explain them to your players and go from there, but why not introduce some games within your game to help foster this type of improvisation?

## Look to Stanislavski

The Stanislavski Method (sometimes just called Method acting) is ripe for mining for gaming purposes, and well worth researching, but delving into it fully is outside the scope of this essay. That said, one of its main techniques involves something called “sense memory,” which is essentially calling up times when you had powerful feelings and bringing your personal emotional memories to your performance on stage. This might be too intense for a casual game of *Bunnies & Burrows*, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get some mileage out of sense memory.

The next time you see that one of your players is floundering when making an in-character choice (for example, being uncertain whether to go down the left path or through the trapped door), help him out with a question: “How did you feel the last time you felt conflicted about a big choice, and what did you ultimately do?” Without needing to explain anything personal, the player can bring that feeling of frustration to their portrayal of his character and suddenly he’s not just gaming, he’s acting!

You can use this approach any time it feels like the PCs are responding in a flat or unexciting way to the game world. Whether the character is being betrayed by an NPC companion, confronting a bully or enemy, or engaging in a romantic interlude, most people have a similar experience they can draw from to help them figure out how their character can or should react even if that character is very different from them.

## Last Time On . . .

As a player improvising like an actor, in order to make quick decisions on your feet you need to know your character well. “Last time on . . .” is another technique you, the GM, can use to help the players get a better sense of who their characters are.

At the start of a new session in an ongoing game, have the players take turns summarizing what happened the last time you played from their character’s perspective and in their character’s voice. This is an opportunity for players to refresh themselves on what they were doing last session, and to hint at their characters’ motivations and how their characters see the world. This is not a time to be factually accurate as to the events of the game. Instead, you should actively encourage players to describe events with a heavy bias from their character’s point of view, explaining parts of the story only they saw, or even re-describing something to “correct” another player’s description, *Rashomon*-style. Don’t let anyone step in and actually correct anyone else; they’ll have their turn to retell the story in their own favor.

As the GM, your job is to get things started by giving them a lead-in to what the PCs were doing last time, and then, as each player tags in for their turn describing events, to keep them moving and make sure everyone stays light-hearted about it. It’s okay if Ron’s character is totally wrong about the events he witnessed last weekend with Lilly’s character and the elf queen, just promise Lilly’s player there will be a chance to address those issues in-character when they come up. (You’ve just made an offer, as has Ron by being wrong about the encounter!)

## Gossip

Have the characters just completed a big heist? Overcome a huge enemy? Time to break for a meal, snacks, or just a chance to stretch your legs? Whatever the reason, you've all come back to the table to return to the further adventures of the player characters, but everyone needs a little warm-up to get back into it. No problem: Time to play Gossip.

The rules are simple. Starting with the GM, each player makes a statement about the adventure they just had, but from the point of view of a local, or as heard on the rumor mill. This first statement should be pretty mundane and believable, and it's an offer from the GM. The next player should add a statement to the first one that expands on what "really happened" with the characters. There's no need to ground this in what actually did happen: Just like in a game of Telephone or Whisper-Down-the-Lane, the rumor should get further and further from the truth as each player takes their turn. Try to keep these statements short, about a sentence each, and let players change a word or two of the statements that came before if it makes the rumor more interesting.

Once everyone's had a turn, you can start another rumor or you can leave it as it is. This new convoluted offer is now on the table, and any time players want to engage with it, deal with fallout from the rumor, make efforts to squash it, or benefit from it, they've accepted this offer and you should reward them accordingly.

## Be Kind to Mimes (Sort of)

You can add to your scene and make offers without saying a word by doing a little pantomime at the table. Every GM has described a bartender cleaning glasses while giving out local secrets, right? Try taking your hands off the dice and motioning like you yourself are cleaning a glass. Or make an offer by handing imaginary glasses to your players for their characters to clean, just to see what the PCs do when asked to perform this menial task.

Sweep floors. Play with smart phones. Brush horses. Offer scene details with your hands, your eyes, and maybe even by chewing gum or noshing on food. Encourage your players to engage with your pantomime and propose their own. You'll know you've gotten somewhere when the lady playing an elf finds herself idly checking the fletching on her imaginary arrows while everyone discusses what to do next around the campfire, or when a player imitates his hard-hitting thug's intimidation tactics by cleaning his teeth with an imaginary knife.

## But Wait, There's More!

If you like these techniques but crave more, there are literally hundreds of books on the subject of improvisation for actors, and many of them are full of games and exercises you could adapt for your table. Check out your local library, search the web, or look even closer to home: Many Nordic or parlor-style LARPs are based on theatre games. See what you can pull not just from improvisational theatre, but from how other styles of RPG have already tackled improvisation, and you'll be well on your way to improvising like an actor!

# Scaffolding to Support Improv

Scott Martin

Scott Martin was an enthusiastic participant on [TreasureTables.org](http://TreasureTables.org), and he went on to become a founding member of [GnomeStew.com](http://GnomeStew.com). He has contributed to *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game* and *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters*, and his work was featured in *Open Game Table*. When he's not writing, you'll find him designing and reviewing fiendish structures or helping out at Crazy Squirrel Game Store, where he's Chief Squirrel and hauler of Mountain Dew.

I am not native to improvised gaming; for years, I prepared extensive notes and calculated every number the current game system required. My games flourished, but every few sessions the players would *zig* when I'd guessed *zag* and I'd have to scramble. Sometimes the right fork could simply be a longer path to the mountain, but often I was faced with invalidating the players' choice. If they chose to go to Macedonia instead of Troy, stuffing them on a ship that coincidentally wound up in Troy would be blatant railroading. Over time, another consequence developed—I would lose enthusiasm for the game due to the extensive prep burden.

My initial solution was to fumble along, spinning the rest of the session out of whole cloth when they zigged, extrapolating from what I knew of the world. That could be hours of sweat . . . though a good random encounter or two could eat up enough time that we'd reach the end of the evening. Then I'd have a week (or more) to prepare the new path before next game.

I never learned to love the panicky feeling that results from unexpected new directions, but two sets of developments led me to run and enjoy games with wider and wider choices available to the players. More flexible tools help me improvise with less effort, and exposure to different game types showed me the core to flexible stories.

## Different Games

My early roleplaying centered on traditional games, like D&D, *Champions*, and *Shadowrun*. I prepared the plot and had the clues to the mystery in hand. I began the session with a good idea of what adventure options were available to the PCs and prepped a few scenes more than I thought we'd get to, just in case they ran ahead of schedule. This worked great . . . until they zagged away from the encounters I had prepared. Three different types of games helped me improve my improvisation skills in different ways.



The first type was homebrew games and playtests. Inventing games or introducing extensive house rules requires confidence—and often immediate adjustment when an effect turns out to be overpowered or to have a weird interaction with some other element of the rules. Similarly, playing incomplete games with your group has a few big benefits. First, you and your players experience rules in the rough—they're a moving target lacking the respect of normal “game world-like physics.” Second, the game can go horribly awry, but players accept that crazy things happen—it's a playtest. Lastly, it's public knowledge that the rules are incomplete—so improvising solutions and extending from similar cases has great buy-in. The habit of using a quick, close solution instead of hunting for the exact answer trains you to improvise with consistency. Playtesting games is a great method for moving off the map with your group's consent and indulgence.

The second class of games are rules sets with a different level of complexity. Our group had recently played games of *Dungeons & Dragons*® 4th Edition and *Pathfinder*®, and while we enjoyed them each player was frustrated about certain rules that didn't fit their vision of D&D. So we played a retro-clone of the D&D *Basic Set: Labyrinth Lord*. Creating characters was quick, as were encounters and combat. After a few sessions, players had mastery enough to identify the elements of the stripped-down system that we loved—and the developments from later editions that we missed. The same comparison can be illuminating whether the two systems are *Champions* using *Fuzion* vs. *Hero System* or *Fate Accelerated* vs. *Core*. Playing the simpler version of a game can be a great reminder that it's not the detailed crunch that you love—and that having fewer stats and interactions to worry about makes improvising foes easier.

Other simple systems aren't very different from the games that you're already playing—there's just less to them. My first simple system was *Amber Diceless*, a game where most characters had four stats, no skills, and zero to two powers. Most NPCs had the exact same stats. While it was streamlined in resolution (also an eye-opener), *Amber* showed me that a character can be complex because of their personality, with no system required. That lesson carries over into D&D and similar games; barkeepers in four towns can have identical stats but be vividly unique.

Collaborative games are a third great tool for improving improvisation. For these, I'm thinking of both GM-less games (like *Capes*, *Dawn of Worlds*, *Fiasco*, or *A Penny for My Thoughts*) and games with a GM where the GM doesn't have all the elements of their traditional role. These games include *Primetime Adventures*, which features a producer who sets scenes according to requests; *Diaspora*, where the players all build the worlds they'll explore before making characters; and *My Life with Master*, where the GM and players build a village terrorized by a horrific villain. Players in collaborative games have the authority to introduce big changes in the middle of the session, which means that all of the players, including the GM, have to be flexible. To encourage that, each has rules and limits that make setting scenes easier; none of them has an equivalent of an encounter or challenge rating that needs to be calculated (with horrific results for the game if you're off).

Collaborative systems also develop habits of integration. If you use *Dawn of Worlds* to build the world's history together, then it makes sense to ask the player who dumped his points into the gnomish conquest about gnome culture. In *Primetime Adventures*, the series is pitched and developed together by all of the players, but a character might have a set where the character can recover from the world. That character's player is the expert about her character's set.

Playing any of these games away from your group can be great—watching someone improvise a game from pitch through a full episode in a four-hour convention slot reveals how good a game can result from on-the-fly decisions. When you and your group play them together, however, the benefits are even greater; even if the game is a short break from the crunchier rules you all love, the habits of collaboration and respect for quickly improvised rules interpretations often follow you back to your main game.

In the end, simple, collaborative, and incomplete games develop good habits for you and your players. Simple games remind you that complexity has virtues, but that simple approximations can be just as interesting to interact with. Collaborative games encourage everyone at the table to stretch their roleplaying by taking on some story level direction and tasks, which might reinvigorate your players' decision making. Incomplete games force you to create rulings and extend from a limited rules set.

## Lists and Cards

Improvising a session can mean gaming on no notice, but often you have a half-hour or even longer to think and write before your game begins. With good tools, your game can feel thoroughly prepped in no time at all.

The first rule is to produce the supports that *you* need. If you're great at improvising names, don't waste time with name lists—I mention them because creating good NPC names on the fly is a weakness of mine. Be sure that the tools you produce or print cover your weaknesses. It's tempting to build on your strengths . . . but your strengths are often where you're able to effortlessly improvise.

Keep generators and lists bundled together with the matching game. Even when you have no prep time—or when you're away from tools that make prep easier, like a computer or Internet connection—you can easily improvise a great session. Names, locations, and stock NPCs are great to keep on hand.

## When The Game Starts . . . Now

If I don't have a name list printed, it's too obvious which characters are "real." So, whenever possible, I print names from [random-generator.com](http://random-generator.com).

I have a particular weakness for letting the PCs spend too much time on mundane tasks when I haven't carefully prepared the plot. To keep the game on track, I write down the plot and either affix a sticky note to the center of my screen, or keep a bold card in my line of sight.

Quick NPCs—including name, “characteristic” (descriptive elements like “bright red mohawk” or an unconscious habit like “munches gingersnaps”), and broad elements like class and level, “strong,” “snake-like reflexes,” or Protean-4, come next. These NPCs must include a good villain or two, matching the plot. Later I may fill in more stats and detailed information—I try to write quickly and move on to the next character as soon as the flow of information about the current NPC slows.

If I’m improvising in a familiar system, I flip through any stock character cards I’ve got on hand—or write down page references for beat cop, thug, priest, goblin, bounty hunter, etc. so I can flip to them if the PCs get into a conflict.

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## **For a Longer Game**

When improvising is less frantic, longer range tools are helpful. For example, writing down another plot or two gives you a season-long plot, plus primary and secondary plots for the session. (Character sheets and backgrounds are great sources of secondary plots.)

*Name lists* are invaluable; around my table there’s a running joke that all generic NPCs are named Bob. While it gets a smile, “Bob” reinforces the bounded nature of play—that some people are real (because the GM plotted them in advance), while others are throwaway. If you follow your players’ lead and bring popular NPCs back from time to time, you’ll want to avoid the stale joke.

*Location cards* have 3-5 bullet points, such as:

- a crowded street, filled with festively dressed locals
- hillside view of the docks
- overripe fruit smell from roadside stands, with gusts of salt water and fish from below

My location cards always include a weather line—even if it’s wrong, it reminds me to consider the weather in my description. Other location card elements you can include are smells, sounds, encounter table (page reference), map reference, hazards, or a list of exits.

Every setting benefits from *stock NPCs*. Unlike fully developed NPCs, these are roles that frequently come up (like police officers, the watch, or Star Patrol), with stats and maybe a few names/quirks to differentiate your taxi drivers from one another.

Full *NPC cards* vary greatly by system. For *World of Darkness*<sup>®</sup> games, I write my NPCs on 3x5 cards, punch a hole in the upper left corner, and put them on a binder ring. The front includes name, background (a two- or three-word role), nature/demeanor, clan (or similar), description (because I'm terrible with them if I don't plan ahead!), goal/motive, and other notes. The back is a condensed character sheet; attributes, key skills and specialties, and disciplines (or equivalent).

For other games, I follow a similar formula; personality and motivation on one side, with combat stuff on the back. Very simple systems allow me to have single-sided character cards, which I love. If key abilities on the back affect non-combat roleplaying (like "supernaturally attractive"), I repeat the information on the front. A highlighter or penciled circle is great for drawing the eye to unusual elements that might be missed in the heat of gaming.

Social games benefit from *faction cards*. These list the faction name, leader(s), faction goals, and members (for small groups), cliques, or divisions. If named NPCs are in specific cliques, list their membership. On the back, you can jot a quick relationship map to remind you who the faction loves and who it hates, and/or the role of the divisions within the faction.

With the right tools, improvising is less intimidating, less obvious, and makes sessions as fun and complex as fully prepped sessions. Play some fun games in a different mode, and then bring a few lists and cards to your next game, and you'll be ready to run hours of fun at the drop of a hat.

# Just in Time Improvisation: The Procrastinator's Tale

Jennell Jaquays

Jennell Jaquays pioneered premade RPG scenarios in her D&D fanzine *The Dungeoneer* in 1976 and is *still* known for her adventures *Dark Tower* and *Caverns of Thracia*. She assembled one of the first video game art and design studios at Coleco to make ColecoVision games. After working as an RPG artist and designer, she returned to computer games in 1997 as a designer for id Software, an artist for Age of Empires titles, and co-founder of The Guildhall at SMU in Dallas, a leading video game development school. Jennell serves as Chief Creative Officer for Olde Sküül in Seattle, Washington.

I have this fantasy image of myself as someone who prepares everything she needs well in advance of the game events she is expected to run. In my mind, I plan robust, deep, involved adventure settings with moving story lines, fleshed out with detailed maps, encounter charts, and compelling characters. I imagine allowing myself all the time necessary to provide such a memorable game experience.

I apparently live inside a wonderfully rich and imaginative fantasy world.

My reality is that preparing adventures for game sessions (no matter how distant in the future) often slips down and down (and down) my priority stack until . . . it's often just days before I have to leave for the event. When I accept that I can procrastinate no longer, that's when I know it's time for Just in Time Improvisation.

To overcome mental blocks and inspire freshness, I use tools like titillating titles, random combos, stealing stories, and practical pictures. As the final deadline approaches, I put my thoughts into concrete form with flow charting, kit bashing, the dead pool, and quickie quirks. Finally, at the game event itself, I follow through with "it's *their* story, not *yours*."



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## Starters

Improvisation seems to work best when focus can be distilled down to *giving players an enjoyable experience*. My first step is to remind myself of the single most important rule for Just in Time Improvisation, Rule One: *Resist the temptation to overdesign*. From experience, I know I'm likely to use far less than what I prepare, so I go with that from the start.

## That Thing Before the Perspiration Starts . . .

Finding the right inspiration is actually work. Don't let anyone fool you there. I immerse myself in inspiration constantly. But there are some specific things that work well for Just in Time Improvisation.

### Titillating Titles

I like to start by naming my adventures. (This exercise can be especially fun when done with a friend.) Good names can reveal the character of an adventure. I start with a classic brainstorming session. All ideas are good at this point. I don't try for perfect names, but rather a whole bunch of good names. I set a time limit and write out as many short phrases as I can; I aim for wild, extreme, colorful, even melodramatic words. I strive for epic alliteration and vibrant onomatopoeia. If my titles sound like pulp fiction, cheesy fantasy adventures, B-grade horror films, or cheap detective novels, then I'm on the right track. At this point, I don't try to imagine an adventure that goes with these titles.

### Random Combos

My absolute favorite source of inspiration for content design is randomness. In a sense, it's actually quite childlike: Roll dice and see what happens next. I like to put things that appear to have no relationship to one another together on an accidental basis and then creatively solve the problem of how they work together. This might mean a decidedly random assortment of monsters, combining unlikely physical and mental traits in a character, or creating an environment based on elements that have no business being in the same place.

My son and I once devised a conceptual art exercise along these lines. We wrote descriptive words and phrases on slips of paper and put them in a bowl. Individually, each was something that might be interesting to draw. We pulled three words out of the bowl and challenged ourselves to draw a character based on those words. Neither of us solved the challenge the same way.

Any activity that involves randomly selecting descriptive ideas can be a source of random combinations. Consider opening children's books and pointing at pictures, rolling on dice tables you created earlier, or picking random words out of books and using them as keyword searches on the Internet.

## Stealing Stories

Favorite movies, television programs, books, comics, and even current events can serve as inspiration for plots, characters, or encounters. I take the essence of a story, or just a detail that captures my imagination, and mash it up with a totally different bit taken from another source to make something completely unique. It's even better if the genres of the stories involved have nothing to do with the genre of the game I'm setting up.

## Practical Pictures

I love it when friends post photos of exotic locations, intriguing buildings, or unique-looking people in their social media feeds. I download these almost without thinking and file them away for later. When imagining the setting for an encounter, the look of an impressive building, or the face and gear of a distinctive NPC, I browse my image files. Keyword searches on the Internet can produce similar results.

## Putting It All Together

Improvising ideas on the fly and making those ideas gamer-ready can be two separate processes (with the former potentially taking away precious time from the latter). By this point, I have the story I want players to experience. Now I need visuals for settings, character stats, and specific encounters.

Just in Time Improvisation works best when there are resources on hand from which to build. In my case I rely on two primary sources: my old game adventures and source material and other people's game adventures and source material. I grab from both, take just what I need, mash it up with other things, and change names to protect the guilty (which is usually me).<sup>1</sup>

When running an adventure, even one intended to be primarily storytelling, I prefer to have at least some concrete details in place. That often means a map, premade NPCs, and, of course, monsters. GMs with an archive of gaming materials will be at an advantage here. Good things to have on hand include a selection of adventures or sourcebooks for other games, architectural layouts (maps or floor plans) for buildings of the period in which your game is set, and definitely a morgue or "dead pool" of characters or creatures drawn from earlier games in the same rule set.

## Flow Charting

Drawing detailed adventure maps on short notice is a rabbit hole of its own making. The temptation to draw in every detail, define every feature, and list out every encounter can be overwhelming. Resist that temptation (remember Rule One). Outlining is certainly an option, but I think visually: My improvisational cheat is a flow chart or "story arc bar" of what needs to happen in the adventure.

I determine roughly how much time I have for the event. Then I break that down into time blocks: so much for introductions and rules explanation and setup, so much for creating or personalizing player characters (I'm a big fan of players, even at convention events, making characters their own—more on that a bit later), and the rest for adventure exploration and action.

I block in the events that I need to take place regardless of player choices. I usually don't force those events to occur at a specific location in my world, or if it is important that they do, I allow those locations to slide around to be convenient to the flow of the adventure (I do this during play, not during planning). This includes the adventure set-up event, that first "let's have a practice combat together" encounter, the major beats in the adventure that move it along, the climactic encounter(s), and of course the final encounter that resolves it all. Everything else is optional filler.

## **Kit Bashing**

Still, game maps are important, especially when specific details about location are required. The term "kit bashing" comes from model making, and refers to creating a new scale model out of parts from one or more other model kits. I apply the same idea to game maps. When time is short, I borrow bits and pieces of existing game maps and recombine them to fit my needs. For this to work well, supplies and tools are often needed. I use a scanner or a digital art program, or with access to a copier, scissors, glue sticks, and colored pencils. I delve into my collection of game or real world maps (temples, castles, catacombs, city streets, etc.) and look for pieces of maps that work for my settings. I copy them, trim out the parts I don't need, and assemble them to make buildings, ruins, temples, dungeons, cities, or towns. I add color, change details, and attach notes. And I resist the temptation to overdesign.

## **The Dead Pool**

I sometimes run games requiring complicated monsters and even more complicated NPCs. Creating stats and assigning equipment, buffs, and magic takes time. My solution is to visit my dead pool, my morgue of dead (or no-longer-used) player characters. For monsters, I look for similar creatures in older adventures (mine or others'). In the latter case, I only use the stats, not the actual monster. The same trick works for creating "pre-rolled" characters for the players in my game. I remove names, change a few details, and I have a premade player character who has been grown and developed naturally, rather than customized to fit a scenario.

## **Quickie Quirks**

Fun game experiences deserve memorable characters. Players may forget a plot-line, but distinctive characters stick around. I once designed a complicated system of dice tables to create detailed character backgrounds (*Central Casting: Heroes of Legend*), and it could take hours to work through it. Realistically, even the most complicated game NPC likely needs only a few traits to describe her personality. These can often be found by answering questions about the character.

My favorites include: What does she value most? What is her most prized possession? What is her signature behavior trait (something large or small she does over and over again)? Examples could include flipping a coin, a deep cough, a laugh, rubbing part of the body, and so on. Combine a few simple traits and I have a memorable character.

## Whose Story Is This, Really?

There comes a point where all that can be done in advance has been done (or I am out of time). My final Just in Time Improvisation tool is my players themselves, because ultimately the experience I'm creating is about them and for them. Whether I provide premade characters or not, I give my players time to personalize them. I want them to create characters that, for the next few hours, will have relationships with and play off of each other as individuals living out a story, and not simply as dice statistics.

I pay attention to how players define their characters, to what identities they create for them, and include that as meaningful elements in my adventure. I feel that players don't always need epic quests to have great adventures; they simply need to feel involved, that they and their characters are the most important part of our shared story. Ultimately, I want them to feel that this is *not* the GM's story, but *their* story.

## Summing Up

If one can plan ahead, fantastic. But, if everything has to be done at the last minute, then any trick that makes a fun game experience is a good one. I recommend focusing on unusual solutions to usual situations. I try to be extreme in my settings and situations, because anyone can do mundane. I go for weird, wild and silly (if appropriate . . . or humorously macabre if not). In the end, Just in Time Improvisation is not about creating a finely detailed adventure setting. It's about creating a fun gaming experience, one in which players are the most important ingredient.

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<sup>1</sup> **Important endnote:** “Not for publication.” In this essay, I recommend borrowing others' work as an improvisational shortcut towards creating a one-time game experience. If you do borrow, be honest about your sources when someone asks. Do not, and I repeat, *do not* copy other's work for inclusion in material you are creating for publication. That crosses a line. If you are designing for publication, be inspired by the work of others, but don't plagiarize it.

# Improvisation in Horror Games

Kenneth Hite

Multiple Origins, Golden Geek, and ENnie Award-winner Kenneth Hite has designed, written, or coauthored over 80 roleplaying games and supplements, including the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game*, *GURPS Infinite Worlds*, *GURPS Horror*, *The Day After Ragnarok*, *Trail of Cthulhu*, and *Night's Black Agents*. Outside gaming, his works include *Tour de Lovecraft: the Tales*, *Cthulhu 101*, *The Nazi Occult*, the “Lost in Lovecraft” column for *Weird Tales*, and a series of Lovecraftian children’s books. Half of the podcasting team behind [Ken and Robin Talk About Stuff](#), he lives in Chicago with two Lovecraftian cats and his non-Lovecraftian wife, Sheila.

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*“Run for it? Running’s not a plan! Running’s what you do once a plan fails!”*  
—Edward Bassett, in *Tremors*

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In “The Simple Art of Murder,” the immortal Raymond Chandler said: “When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand.” Everyone knows this quote. That’s because, like most things Chandler said about writing crime fiction, it’s really good advice. But far less-often quoted, and almost as good advice, is what he says just before that: “The demand was for constant action; if you stopped to think, you were lost.”

Around the gaming table, nothing slows the roll more than the GM who stops to think. In horror games, this pause also threatens the mood for three reasons. First, because the GM isn’t providing scary information or eerie sensory input to the player characters—she’s locked all that stuff up in her own head for now. Second, a pause—after the first 20 seconds or so—slackens the tension and defuses the mood. “Nope,” says our primate brain, “not a real threat.” Third and worst, into that pause comes the players’ jokes, or irrelevant comments, or anything else that isn’t horror gaming. That such responses are biological and natural doesn’t make them any less destructive of the roleplaying moment.

No, you have to keep things in motion, push the story a little past your event horizon, set up a scare or a fight. At worst, you have to provide something *in the game world* for the players to talk about or else they *will* talk about something outside it. And so we come back to Chandler and the man at the door with a gun. In a horror game, perhaps it’s a werewolf at the door with a gun, but you’ve absolutely got to have him there waiting to kill your PCs and save your game for the night.

## Know Your Villain

Okay, maybe it's not a werewolf at the door with a gun—it's a vampire with a broadsword or a serial killer with an amulet or a sentient computer virus on their phone. Or on someone else's phone. Who does your villain, your mastermind, your Big Bad send to the door of inquisitive strangers, and what instrument of pain do they bring? Maybe it's not their door: If the heroes have a "patrol area" or have camped for the night, or have hit the bars to find some clues, they're on monster turf. What resources does your boss monster have on his native soil?

Presumably, you know your villain pretty well: roleplay him. In 10 seconds, use something in his arsenal to make the heroes' day—or night—worse. It doesn't have to be his A-game; maybe he's punishing an underling or testing some near-rabid pack betas by sending them on a suicide run to soften up the heroes for the real—the well-planned—attack. It doesn't have to be *right then* in game time; if the moment isn't right for horror, fast-forward at will. "That night, after you've all gone back to the warehouse to rest up, you hear a rattling at the door . . ." Call for surprise, or initiative, or Sense rolls, or whatever, and use that time to think up some more horrible details of what might be out there. Add a creepy detail that meshes with an earlier clue, a gory description of the attacker's filed teeth or blood-matted fur, or imply that the attack means that the characters' location is known to the evil they oppose.

The figure at the door might, of course, be an innocent! But she brings news of a dark kind: A werewolf came to her father's door and . . .

The attack is the first and easiest of these responses to run, not least because during the inevitable fight scene you can be thinking two or three scenes ahead again. But the villain—you—should have more than just one attack on the PCs up his sleeve. What is your monster's standard M.O.? Does your Big Bad behave ritually: worshipping Nyarlathotep at the rising of Jupiter, or killing babysitters every full moon? Throw the signs of another upcoming ritual at the players, in as eerie a fashion as you can. ("A rare conjunction of planets" is always good for an unplanned but ritual action.) Is there something your villain always wants? Call the heroes to the scene of a break-in at the blood bank, or the museum, or the morgue—anything to get them in the way of a bunch of monsters on a heist. Repeated action toward similar ends makes the villain seem real, like she has an agenda larger than just harassing the heroes.

## Know Your Tropes

In addition to your own villain, or your own monsters, keep lots of other villains and monsters in your hip pocket. Or at least their spoor.

Get to know the horror genre. Read horror books, and weird short stories, and vampire comics; watch monster-of-the-week TV shows and scary movies. Even mediocre horror is fuel for inspiration, of the "if I were writing this" variety. But good horror is better, and great horror is the best. Keep track of what scared you, of what seemed like a great horror moment. Maybe you saw a really good kill scene or heard a way creepy sound effect. A monster concept got under your skin, or a reveal got you out of your chair. Remember those scares, those symbols, those moments, and recycle them into your game.

You can write down promising tropes on an index card or a blank page of your campaign notebook, like you would potential NPC names. Cross the trope off when you've used it, and write another one below it before you shut the notebook for the night. Try to keep a variety of tropes on the list: action tropes, hints or shadows, weird encounters, moments of sheer dread, big scary reveals. Then tie them into your campaign as best you can, either when you write them down or in the moment.

When you're stumped and your villain isn't up to enough villainy just yet, pop out something new and horrible from your stash of terrifying tropes. Throw the trope into that encounter at the door, or spring it on the players for them to respond to. Then follow where they lead you, scattering more tropes and weirdness as you see opportunities. Demons, ultradimensional abominations, mad sorcerers and scientists, dream-killers, or entities that simply twist reality leave horror-sign everywhere; your own monsters should have their own spoor that you can mix in to lay a trail to your main villain if need be.

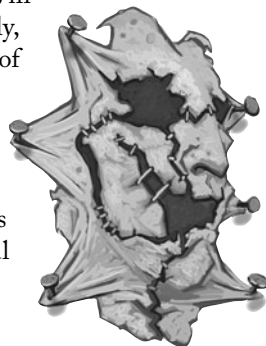
Worst case scenario, you have something creepy the players couldn't figure out—that's a good hour of horror, if you play it right. Leave it as a mystery, or use it as the foreshadowing of the next Big Bad or a guest monster.

## Match Your Tension

So which is it? A werewolf at the door or a weird color in the window? An attack or an omen? An NPC death-scene, or a monstrous death-trap? As the GM, you should already know the answer to this: whatever the tension of the game needs right now. Horror games should never let the tension stop or go slack, unless there's a big yank coming up in the next scene. When you notice yourself running out of running room, take a couple of seconds to feel the game's current tension level. At minimum, match it. If you can't extend the tension with a creepy trope or a new victim or some ritual spoor, ratchet it higher: That's when the Sense Trouble and Listen dice have to hit the table as you send werewolves to the door. It's never "just the wind" or "only the cat." That's for movies. Around the game table, the only cure for tension is adrenaline: in short, a fight scene.

The key to pacing is the "tension, conflict, and release" pattern used in virtually every slasher movie made since 1979. (The original *Halloween*. If you haven't watched it, watch it. John Carpenter literally wrote the pattern for you.) The babysitter ventures into the kitchen; we see the knife missing from the knife rack.

We see shadows behind the fridge: She's being stalked! Will she see the killer? Where is he? This is the tension. Suddenly, the killer jumps out! Stabbing, and flailing, and throwing of burning popcorn! This is the conflict. After the babysitter is chased through the kitchen, there's always a few minutes of cathartic screaming, crying, and panting before she ventures upstairs to be stalked through the bathroom. This is the release. In an RPG, that release almost always comes after a fight, or at least after a lot of very purposeful die-rolling.



Look at the same rhythm, even simpler. Think of roller coasters, another example of people voluntarily scaring themselves: tension on the uphill sections, panic in the free fall, and release on the long downhill runs. Try to make the mechanism less obvious than a formula slasher flick (and try to make it as scary as a good roller coaster), but it works. Find out where on the roller coaster your game is right now—either keep climbing, or start pushing things over the top.

If you already have the night's gaming planned out, feel free to discard the "slasher movie model." But if you already had the night planned out, you wouldn't need to fall back on improv.

## Watch Your Players

Finally, watch your players. Watch their reaction: Do werewolves at the door bore them, but splayed trilobite remains fascinate them? Do vampires creep them out, but victims produce condescension or contempt? There's plenty of time to educate them out of those reactions later, with a really scary werewolf or a really heart-tugging homeless man. For this moment, this moment when you might lose it, follow your players' reactions to pay dirt.

Emphasize the things the players seem nervous about. If they want to roll for something, let them, and make the answer a creepy one whether they win or lose. Come back to whatever fascinates them, from a new angle or through a new lens. Agree with their deductions, especially if they deduce something awful. (Players are often remarkably willing to assume far worse things than you've planned for them.) If you've got a good rapport of trust, play with things you know the player hates: A player nervous around spiders reacts well when his character walks face-first into a web. Don't intentionally trigger real trauma, of course, and don't push any buttons you don't know the labels on, but the bleed of horror from PC to player doesn't always have to go one way.

If your players have watched or read some of the same horror you have, use that familiarity to send a frisson down their spine: Even if some know-it-all player says "Oh, this is just like that episode of *Buffy*" at least he's engaged! He's following your lead; time enough to put a twist on it or put more teeth in it when he's led the other players into the encounter. Even if you don't have any twists except a few creepy details handy, enter into collaboration with that player! Raise with the goriest details, send monsters aplenty into the mix, add fog or magic or Sanity rolls or whatever you need to keep the fight dark and scary even if all the players saw it coming. Horror is mutual; sharing control of the game is far better than losing control of it.

Nothing, not even werewolves with guns, can save a game you've completely lost control of. But the good news is that by keeping track of only these four things you can keep control of the game—or at least keep the illusion of control, which is, after all, pretty much the same thing across the GM screen. Even if you feel like the night is getting away from you, keep running. Take notes on the run; write down anything you're going to have to explain to the PCs or to yourself in the cold light of day. End on a high and horrific note, and you can take all week to figure out how to really get your control back. And to stat up another werewolf with a gun.

# Agreement, Endowment, and Knowing When to Shut Up

Jason Morningstar

Jason Morningstar is a game designer who lives and works in Durham, North Carolina. His best-known game, *Fiasco*, is published in seven languages and won the Diana Jones Award for Gaming Excellence. His least known game, *Baby Wars*, is a tactical infant combat simulator that he wrote in elementary school. Jason's writing has appeared in *Fight On!* and *The Unspeakable Oath*, and he's done work for Pelgrane Press, Red Moose Games, Red Moon Medicine Show, and others.

My advice on improvisation at the gaming table can be distilled into five words:

**Listen more than you talk.**

It's pretty simple advice, no matter how you parse it. And it will make your game better, I promise.

Let's talk about talking for a minute. You and me, we like to talk. We like to tell stories and perform and entertain and communicate and share our ideas. These traits are hard-wired into all our human brains, to some degree innate, but you and me? We really like this stuff. We're drawn to it, and it was never beaten out of us for whatever reason. We were drawn to roleplaying and we're drawn to being the boss—the one who gets to tell stories the most, to clown around and perform and share the most. The one who gets to talk the most—the GM, right?

And that's great, but it is entirely possible to talk too much.

I'm not referring to being a clueless boor, because you and I are well adjusted, sensitive, reasonable people who care about our friends and want to have fun with them. In fact, all my advice is predicated on love and trust as a baseline. I'm not talking about not listening—I'm talking about not listening *enough*.

Roleplaying is a collaborative applied art, and that collaboration comes in the form of the interchange of both constructive ideas and complex social cues. It is at its best when everyone involved is actively working toward shared goals, consciously or not. When it works well it is positively magic—addictive and thrilling. We make something beautiful together out of nothing, and we make it for the satisfaction of each other. We are, collectively, audience and performer. The entire process is an improvisatory exercise, and improvisation is hard.

One of the core tenets of theatrical improvisation—one that ports effortlessly to gaming—is the pairing of endowment and agreement.

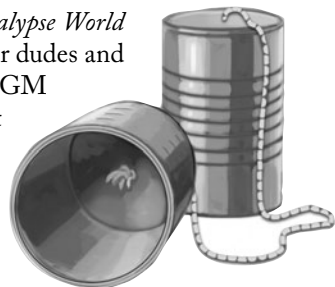
Endowment is the offer—the tentative contribution to the table’s collective fiction that is either accepted or rejected. In theatrical improv endowment literally endows another performer with some attribute, motive, or goal. In roleplaying that can certainly be true, but it can also be parsed more broadly to include the scene, the shared world, or even larger themes. While on stage it’s easy to say “. . . and you’re my wife,” at the table endowment can easily go beyond the observable and direct—“. . . and death here is meaningless” is a snap to offer, because our stage is as big as our weird collective brain.

Agreement, in contrast, is the acceptance of the offer—embracing the contribution and making it real in the collective fiction. Eager, reckless agreement is a good sign that you are listening, and listening hard.

So you say I’m an office worker and that’s it, I’m an office worker. You endow and I agree. Maybe I agree I’m an office worker *and* I’m rejecting your health insurance claim—I agree and heighten, adding detail, another bedrock improvisational move known as “yes, and.” Put in gaming terms for a GM, Vincent Baker sums it up nicely in his game *Dogs in the Vineyard: Roll the dice or say yes*. If the players want to do a thing, unless it becomes necessary to inject tension, they just do that thing. They endow, you agree. This has the happy effect of always propelling the action toward things that matter and eliding the stuff that really doesn’t. When you get to something dice-worthy, really dice-worthy, you’re ready to roll the dice.

As a GM, you probably endow the world more than you agree to the offers of others. The traditional model forces most of the world-building and scene-painting endowment onto your shoulders and asks the players to do all the agreement. Just as much as practicing endowment forces your players to talk where they ordinarily wouldn’t, for your part as GM practicing agreement requires you to listen. This is pretty basic stuff, but it is really easy to get caught up in the details of your world, or the grind of procedure, or your own ideas about how things ought to play out. The more you listen—the less you talk—the easier it is to agree.

An added benefit is that actively listening to your players—their words and their behavior—is going to pull you out of thinking about your world, your plot, and your procedures. Another benefit is that it will reduce the amount of endowment you provide and increase the number of offers coming from the rest of the table, which is always a good thing because your friends are pretty smart and you are probably pretty lazy. A game that helps you listen as a GM is Vincent Baker’s *Apocalypse World* (what is it about that guy?). In *Apocalypse World* it’s in the rules that you ask them questions about their dudes and the world—essentially fishing for endowment. As GM you don’t get to roll any dice, ever, so resolution isn’t on your mind.



Endowment is the traditional prerogative of the GM, although endowing players' characters is sometimes socially or mechanically taboo. This is a curious artifact of our wargame roots that has been hard to shake, although I'm personally shaking as hard as I can. Endowment comes naturally to new players. People completely new to roleplaying endow like crazy, and it is usually beaten out of them. Personally I think this is tragic, and the fact that it is almost ubiquitous among new players ought to tell us something about how our brains are wired. We should be encouraging the instinct to endow, to lay on details, to adopt an authorial stance, rather than discouraging it—and not just with new folks.

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I was once running an electro-punk romantic science campaign set in 1912. One of the players created a tough, competent, starched-shirt ex-Royal Marine as his character, and I thought challenging his raw competence and physicality would provide for some compelling roleplaying. I decided to afflict this character with river blindness, *onchocerciasis*, during some swampy adventures in sub-Saharan Africa. The conversation went something like this:

ME: “And your guy has contracted river blindness.”

HIM: “No he hasn't.”

ME: “Yes, the diagnosis is confirmed.”

HIM: “He does not have river blindness, Jason.”

At that point I was confronted with two choices. I could realize that he had emphatically not agreed to my offer of endowment, or I could lose a player—and possibly a friend. And just like that, the Royal Marine's sight was spared! The world I envisioned changed a little—in effect, my friend made a counter-offer about something that was very important to him, and I accepted. It would have been easy to not listen and stubbornly court disaster—in fact I'm sure I have, many times. You probably have, too.

I love the story of the Royal Marine's brush with river blindness because it lays bare the myth of the distribution of power at the game table. My friend refused to play ball with the fiction I, as GM, offered. The “rules” said he wasn't allowed to do that, but the “rules” are a polite fiction, and they are a small part of the system with which we were engaged. A much bigger part is the social context we build as friends and collaborators, and on that level being the GM matters not a whit.

Endowment, in particular, relies on that complex set of social interactions at the interpersonal level. Offers of endowment can and should be rejected sometimes. Matthijs Holter's game *Archipelago* has a brilliant game mechanic that addresses this.

In *Archipelago*, everyone has the power to assess another player's creative contribution and explicitly reject it, saying "try a different way." Obviously this is always an option, but by calling it out as part of the rules *Archipelago* establishes the expectation that we are working together to craft the best possible story and that we are all actively listening, all the time. If you aren't listening you won't know that the offer someone just made is weak, imperfect, discordant. "Try a different way" might sound harsh, but when you get into the groove of using this mechanic with people you respect and trust, it serves as a course correction mechanism and makes your games sing. Had we been playing *Archipelago*, my idea about the Royal Marine's tragic infection would have been much less fraught with social peril.

Speaking of social context, agreement can be a little humbling and even distressing when you practice it aggressively. Your friends may put your guy in situations you wouldn't have dreamed of—maybe even circumstances you don't like. There's a fine line between playing to fail, which I heartily encourage, and getting pushed into things that make you uncomfortable. There's no reason to blindly accept every offer—you know your character and the world you want to play in, and sometimes your vision might clash with that of your friends. When this happens, don't agree! Take a break and talk about it instead. Find the points of contact and figure out a happy way forward. Being game for the endowment of others doesn't mean surrendering your agency—as character *or* player. You love and trust these people, remember? Everybody wants to have a good time, so let them help you get there.

Once you start clicking as a group, making bold offers and accepting them with careless abandon, three things are going to happen—first, your game is going to veer off into some wild directions, and second, the drama and adventure are going to go through the roof. Suddenly your characters are going to surprise you with their vulnerability and their choices, and the world is going to be filled with the unexpected and untoward. As GM your job will become much easier, and the quality of your sessions is going to improve. And finally, the third thing will happen—you will want to go further.

The next step is to take your play into some metagame-y territory using reincorporation.

Reincorporation is another staple of improvisation, and when done right it can be positively magical. The idea is to conserve every notional bit of creative mojo—every NPC, every theme, every bit of action, everything that appears "on stage," and to reach into that basket *first* when introducing some new element. You do this anyway; reincorporation just labels it and gives you a way to articulate the technique.

At my table, when we're collectively searching for something I'll often say "let's try to keep it in the family"—meaning re-use something cool we've already established.

Here's an example:

HIM: "Clearly somebody is going to intervene and pull the sheriff's son off you at this point."

ME: "Right. Maybe we have a strong man in the circus? Somebody big and tough?"

HIM: "Maybe, but didn't we already establish that the clowns were kind of badass?"

ME: "Oh yeah, two weeks ago we learned that they all fought in the Pacific in World War Two and are kind of off-kilter! Perfect!"

HIM: "I think those guys could just sort of appear."

ME: "In their makeup, out of costume, smoking cigarettes."

HIM: "And break up the fight. Let's do it!"

In this example a circus strong man we'd never met would have been fine to advance the plot, but by reincorporating the clowns the whole scene was that much richer—and we got to learn more about those guys, who gradually became central NPCs. My friend and I alternately made endowment offers, but the best offer—the one that reincorporated—was the one that was agreed to.

These techniques are things you do anyway, all the time. I'm not revealing hidden truths here. I hope that by giving them names and focus you will find ways to use them deliberately. They've improved my play immeasurably, and I hope they will do the same for you.

# Why Improv

## Meguey Baker

Meguey Baker is a game designer, textile conservation specialist, and sex ed teacher living in western Massachusetts with her husband and three sons. In her game design, Meguey focuses on games that help players tell stories they might not otherwise explore. She started roleplaying in 1978, began designing and GMing in 1980, published her first game in 2007, and hasn't stopped yet. Her best-known game is the critically acclaimed *1001 Nights*, a game designed to create enticing stories in the manner of the *Arabian Nights*. The pivotal game *Apocalypse World* was written for her; the rest of you are just lucky.

When you set out to tell a story or run a game, there are two main ways to do it. One is to spend time beforehand figuring out the details, writing the backstory, and getting all your preparation done before your players arrive. That's great fun sometimes, and it's cool to have the time and energy to do that. However, it's not always an option, or something that fits what you want out of the game, or even compatible with the game's design. That's when the other option is called for: improvisation.

When you are creating things on the spot, in the moment, you are engaged with the players in a different way. Instead of waiting for them to do something that connects to your prepared material, you are acting and reacting to what they said right now, right here. You might have some ideas or a rough framework, but the details are wide-open spaces ready to be filled in with unexpected things you could not have planned for in advance, and at the end of the session you are in a place you could not have predicted. That's improv.

So how do you do it? It can sound daunting, especially if you are accustomed to the more planned-out style. Coming up with new material on the fly, with those faces looking at you, waiting for you to be the amazing GM, the fantastic storyteller, or even the excellent player, can be intense. It's good to have some things to fall back on, and I don't mean predetermined plot hooks. In order to give yourself a safety net, you have to look back at where stories come from.

### Where Stories Come From

When we are very young, we hear little story seeds all the time. Picture books, nursery rhymes, finger games—they are full of stories. Some of them hold bigger stories. Let's look at *The Grand Old Duke of York*, a children's game with a very simple rhyme.



Oh, The grand old Duke of York,  
He had ten thousand men;  
He marched them up to the top of the hill,  
And he marched them down again.

And when they were up, they were up,  
And when they were down, they were down,  
And when they were only half-way up,  
They were neither up nor down.

So he rolled them to the left,  
He rolled them to the right,  
He rolled them over the top of the hill  
And then he set them right.

What happens in the rhyme? Children stamp their feet, bob up and down, lean left and right, and tumble over. What happens in the story behind the rhyme? The Duke of York marched his army out onto Salisbury Plain in a futile effort against William of Orange. Underneath the rhyme is a story you know and can use. In fact, there are several stories there—the duke who must fight even though the odds are against him; the soldiers who are buffeted by the rule of an incompetent leader; the defeat of an enemy through the use of favorable landscape; the cunning

escape of a small force as they disappear “over the hill.” Any one of those could become a backdrop or basis for a character, if not a whole campaign!

Any nursery rhyme is the same: a tiny little story with keys to lots of other bigger stories inside it. Your only preparation here is choosing which rhyme and which story. Choose a little story you know very well, unfold it, and embroider it with new details and twists as you go along. Maybe the duke is an enchanted prince. Maybe the armies are robot clones. Maybe the hill is a gate through time and space. Improv means it could be anything.

Some folks at this point will say, “Oh, I have a great idea! I’ll use my favorite metal ballad as a seed! It’s got a band of men who are warriors, rolling into the land they have been promised and are sworn to defend, they meet these other guys and there’s a big fight and one of them has a magic guitar . . .” Stop. No. Too complicated, too much going on. In order to be a good tool for supporting improv play, and especially improv GMing, it’s got to be simple.

If you can’t fit all the important details on a 3x5 card, it’s too much. You run the risk of having to rely on other people to do exactly the right thing or the whole story falls apart. If you really want to use that song, just go with the title. Same with movies and TV shows—there’s already a plot, and the temptation to control and shape what is organically coming from your players (or yourself) is very heavy because you already know where that story goes, and so does everyone else at the table.

One foundation that no-one else knows are the places that are personal to you. Using their family mythology as a basis for stories is a longstanding given for autobiographical writers, but you’ll be doing something different. You know the stories I’m talking about—the ones that come out every time the extended family is together, the ones that tell you who you are and what you value in the broader sense.

The time Grandma chased a bear, when three year-old Aunt Karen cut off the baby's curls, and when Grandpa lost the farm. When you are making a character, PC or NPC, you can use your own family as inspiration fodder. Exaggerate traits and change details, but those are characters you know *well* and can play in reaction to almost anything. Use family mythology to inform and underlie the action you improv. Assign that story about Grandpa to an NPC and away you go, with all kinds of playable, believable motivation for your story.

A final method for generating improvisational story seeds is “following the balloon.” This is the most free-form option, because it really can go in very strange and unexpected places. You start with a simple image or scene and watch to see what happens. Don't try to direct or make logical steps of “this, then this, because that,” just follow the balloon. It floats across a river where a little silver fish is playing and the fish is hungry so it goes to find a worm on the muddy river bottom and there's a gold ring! The ring was discarded a long time ago by a jilted lover. The ring wants to be found. A fisherman's hook comes drifting down into the water and snags the ring and pulls it up to the sunlight—now the fisherman is rich! He takes the ring to market and . . .

And on and on and on. Do this for a little while and see what comes to you. Start with your characters in their current situation and see where it goes. Go back and do it again. Write down notes after you have followed the balloon for a bit and see what ideas look really interesting. Be ready to switch points of view and change direction at a moment's notice.

## **Walking Backward in Front of Your Players**

All of this leads to a way of GMing that is a step sideways from the traditional image of the GM as sole guide and holder of all secrets, to be revealed only as they desire. Instead, the improv GM is constantly facing the players, responding to what they are doing, passing the story back and forth between them, occasionally tossing it out ahead, but usually just walking backwards in front of the players. You might be in front, but you are not leading except to glance over your shoulder to try to avoid stepping in a hole. You are thinking a couple steps ahead, not miles ahead.

Even if you have the Grand Old Duke as the framework, and you suspect he might be up ahead around the next curve, the players might stop here for a while, or backtrack, or go haring off after rabbits, so you have to be prepared to do one of two things: Move the Duke into the path the players choose, or follow the players where they are pointing you. Your job, after all, is to provide details, give feedback about how the world reacts to the characters' actions, and keep an eye out for holes and interesting things coming out of the woods around the characters.

Your job is not to think of every single possible path ahead of time or to nail down all the answers—let things unfold as you go along. Walking backwards means watching the faces of the people coming toward you, glancing where they are looking and reading their cues. If they look excited about something, give more details! If they look thoughtful, stop walking and wait a bit. If they look nervous, walk slowly and with great dramatic awareness.

Since you are not trying to provide all the content ahead of time, you must work with your players. Surprise each other; surprise yourself. You might think the story is all about the Duke of York and his doomed army, but if you allow enough room for improvisation and follow your players' direction you could discover entire other stories far more compelling, set against the backdrop of the Duke's war but unlike anything you had planned.

## **Actual Tools**

There are plenty of things you can do to make yourself a better improv GM. Here are a handful of techniques to practice alone or while you are playing.

### **Connect the Dots**

Grab two small objects at random and tell the story of how they are connected. Who made them? Why? What strange purpose unites them? How did they both wind up in your possession? Tell it straight, and then embroider the details until it's a fantastic tale of wonder and adventure. Put one down and pick up another and repeat. This helps you become comfortable with finding connections between seemingly disparate things and incorporating the unexpected, both of which help make the improv aspects of the game feel supported and cohesive instead of uncertain and scattered.

### **No Nouns**

Describe a thing as completely as possible without naming it. Use every sense. This helps you expand beyond visual descriptions, which increases your ability to improvise details that feel fresh and interesting. "There's a bottle on the desk" is more engaging if you add "the smooth, cool surface gleams in the soft light, and there's a dark liquid inside that smells thickly spicy."

### **What's Their Story?**

Sit in a public place and imagine where people are coming and going to, and what epic tasks and mundane quests they are undertaking. Weave their storylines together if you like. This helps you think about people (and characters) as part of a greater story, one you see only part of, which can reassure a GM who is used to mapping out all the details ahead of time. This can be applied to player characters as well, but in that case it's good to ask masses of questions so you actually find out what their story is and get to respond to it rather than guessing.

### **The Boring NPC**

Pick an NPC that seems to be a throwaway character and "follow the balloon" a bit with them as the starting point: "Robin was in the armory one sunny afternoon when a bird flew in the window, flapping awkwardly with a torn wing . . ." This gives the NPC more depth, and gives the PCs some unexpected unplanned detail to build on and play off of.

Look for your stories everywhere, but don't expect to know how they play out—that's what improv GMing is all about.

# You're in a Bar

Eloy Lasanta

Eloy Lasanta is an ENnie-nominated game designer with a half dozen original games under his belt, as well as credits on some of the best games in the industry. When he's not running Third Eye Games, though, he takes his on-the-fly GMing very seriously and has been doing so for the last 20 years. It doesn't matter if he is running games at home, at a local game store, or at a convention, his attention to detail and his love of gaming fuel his games and create big adventure and big-time fun.

Every GM has heard, or spoken, these terrible words at the start of a campaign at some point in their roleplaying careers: “You're in a bar.” It's one of the worst premises in the world, but it has been done to death because it's just plain easy. Saying that all of the player characters just so happen to be in a bar together at the exact time that something happens, and then they are collectively hired for a job, is quick, dirty, and takes very little imagination.

But when it comes to improvisation, giving yourself—and your players—a solid, interesting foundation for future invention and creativity is important. It might seem like a small thing, but just by taking some time to craft a believable, entertaining reason—or set of reasons—for the PCs to be together, you're laying the groundwork for more engaging improvisation down the line. Ditching the “You're in a bar” premise is something I've tried hard to tackle in my own GMing career, always providing lots of different storylines and hooks for people to latch onto and ride.

I see the appeal of the bar, of course. Players come to the table with their characters already made, so what is a GM to do without knowing everyone's individual backstories, goals, and motivations? You're given a range of colorful characters and then the players smirk at you, daring you to attempt to change one thing on the sheets they so meticulously filled out. “You're in a bar” is an easy way to sidestep potential problems: Diverse characters all just happen to be where the action is, no juggling required on your part.



My groups tend to focus more on their characters' interactions and growth than on numbers and statistics. It is more about getting into character and delving into a character's psyche than what class you've picked; less about “what I can do” and more about “why do I do it.” But even with that focus, a lot of those games (though not all of them) seem to start off the same way: “So, you're in a bar.”

It doesn't matter what type of game it is, either: It could be a futuristic sci-fi bar with floating chairs and robot drink-servers, a modern-era cesspit with a bunch of drunken slobs on stools yelling nonsense at the bartender, or a medieval inn where the adventuring party was staying while not actively searching for a mystical object of some kind. From my own experience, this type of setup usually comes from an inability to quickly get the group together for better reasons.

It's no one's fault, but shaky beginnings often lead to shaky relationships—and relationships are one of the building blocks of great improvisation in games. If the only thing my character has in common with another character is that they just happened to be in the same place when something crazy happened, then there's no built-in trust, no friendship, no camaraderie—nothing for them to stand on. There is nothing stopping any one of the characters involved from just walking away and wiping their hands of the whole thing. And if the PCs do stick together, the foundation for improvisation (for the players and for you, the GM) is a shaky one.

This kind of setup obviously works in survival horror games, where you aren't necessarily supposed to trust everyone you meet and you may just be stuck with the people nearest to you when, say, the zombie apocalypse spreads across the world, but it doesn't work for the majority of games. That doesn't mean that games that begin with this premise are bad—I've had a lot of fun with them—but it makes for a rocky start when the characters don't have real reasons to be together. By incorporating personal connections, your gaming group gets more out of the stories and adventures they undertake.

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## **Organizational Connections**

One of my favorite ways to avoid the bar scenario is to make a work-related reason for the characters to be together. The characters might be coworkers, but even work acquaintances or people who they've seen on the payroll but never met can be worked into the setup. Depending on the kind of organization the PCs work for, they'll work together differently. PCs in the military, for instance, will each have a rank that immediately gives them a pecking order for the players to work off of. Even if they meet in a situation where they might normally distrust strangers, they'll follow their commander's lead when entering the fray.

On the other side of the coin, if the characters all work for CompuCom Technologies and are meeting at an office for an IT job, their hierarchy is much different. Even if they don't know each other, office environments have their own way of massaging people's opinions about their coworkers. Office gossip about misconduct with administrative assistants, accusations of brown-nosing one's way to the top, or falsifying sales records to win the company raffle are all just examples of things that can color a group's interactions. These don't always have to be negative; the top sales agent or human resources officer may be called on to perform certain tasks for the group.

Even in fantasy games, there are guilds or social groups to which the characters can belong. The PCs will answer to the same person, making it imperative that they work together to handle whatever missions, adventures, or jobs are put to them. These societies are often secretive and may even encourage mistrust, but that can be enjoyable in its own right: Not knowing who the other people in your party are is part of the fun. The other part of the fun is figuring out why you were grouped together in the first place, which can add a lot to a conspiracy-themed game.

In short, it doesn't matter what kind of danger you put them up against: They are all there to do a job or all have a similar background. That means they have some common denominator to allow them to relate to each other when things go south (as we all know they will).

## Reunion

The other main setup I use is to make the characters related in some way. They don't need to be blood relatives; in the right situation, friends can be like siblings and neighbors can be like parents. (It takes a village, right?) So I often like to start a campaign with all the players making characters that are related to one another in some way. If they're all siblings or childhood friends, then everyone will feel like they're on the same "level." If one character is the parent and the others are kids, then the parent's player has control over the other characters that she might not have wanted or intended to have. Parents can guilt their kids into doing things—now imagine guilt-tripping your kid into triggering a trap so you don't have to . . . Conversely, it usually wouldn't be good roleplaying for a kid to put his mom or dad in danger.

In short, it's probably not great to have that kind of balance, unless it's intentional. I once played in a great monster-hunting game where the PCs were a boyfriend and girlfriend, the boyfriend's dad, and the girlfriend's grandmother. The balance of social power made the game interesting, and we liked it. Not everyone will.

And what better reason for a family to get together than a reunion? It doesn't have to be an actual family reunion: It could be a group of friends who haven't seen each other in years coming back for a friend's wedding, or a death in the family that brings everyone home for the funeral. Whatever the reason, the characters are all together in one place—but with good reason. Even characters who don't get along can be explained by bad blood or loss of communication between the two. ("I don't even know you anymore, man.") And now that they are together, you can hit them with whatever catastrophe you like and launch them into adventure!

## Prologue

The easiest way to avoid the pitfalls of having to explain why characters are together in your game is to not have them start out together at all. This may not be the best approach for a new GM, as it requires spending some solo time with each player as you work to bring them all together. If done right, it can add a lot to the players' understanding of how their characters work and think before the craziness of the actual game begins. Even if the goal is to eventually get every character to a bar at the end of the prologue, this method automatically gives the PCs reasons and motivations to be there.

Maybe one PC is there to pick up girls, while another is there to avoid a fight she was having with her husband. One character could be an old regular getting drunk at the bar, while another is there because she's the bartender. Or a PC could be there because it was the first place he saw while fleeing a stalker, or because she received a mysterious note telling her to show up at the bar or she would never see her child again. By employing a good mix of motives you've got a compelling and intricate story for each character, even though you ended up at a bar anyway.

This approach, however, isn't without its hang-ups. It requires individual time with each player, which might leave less patient players bored. It also means that you need to dig deeper into each character's history and create supporting characters and personal conflicts for them to deal with, and eventually use those connections to lead the PCs to the same location. With games like *Part-Time Gods* and *Fate*, this is easily accomplished, but not every game makes it simple. One way around this is to do prologues via email with each player before getting together to actually play. This ensures that no one has to wait for their turn, and everyone can still start in the bar because they've already experienced their own individual prologues.

## Bringing in Outsiders

These relationships become even more important if the time comes to add a new player to your gaming group. Think about what the new player has to go through: He must contend with all this built-up history the current players have already experienced and also suffer from "new guy" status in-game, meaning no one listens to his advice or strategies and nobody trusts him.

However, using some of the approaches I've gone over, it becomes easy to bring in new characters on the fly without it feeling forced. Maybe the new character is a brother, cousin, or childhood friend of one of the other PCs. Perhaps she was simply hired by the same person who hired the rest of the group, and the current PCs are instructed to show the new addition the ropes so she doesn't slow them down. The choices the new player made in his email prologue might also provide unexpected connections or reasons for him to become part of the group.

Coming up with good reasons for the PCs to get together and stay together is a simple but powerful technique that creates a strong foundation for future improvisation. When in doubt, you can always fall back on how the PCs got together, or why they stayed together, for inspiration. That's true whether you're planning adventures, thinking about the arc of a campaign, or scrambling to come up with a scene on the fly: By knowing why the PCs became the group they are, you—and your players—have fertile ground to work with when deciding what the PCs are going to do, or riffing off of something that happens to them during play.

And hopefully, you never have to start a game with "You're in a bar" again.

# An Ear in the Grass: What David Lynch Can Teach You about GMing

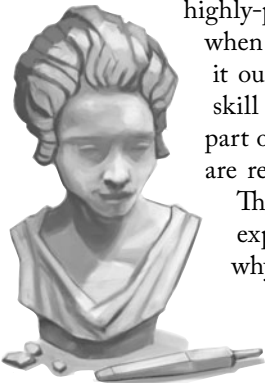
Alex Mayo

Alex Mayo learned to play RPGs in 1979 by reverse engineering the only game product he had at the time, a copy of D1-2 *Descent Into the Depths of the Earth*. At age 11, Alex started raiding Ral Partha's dumpster for discarded miniatures molds (Mom's record player worked great for spin casting!) and has been making it up as he went along ever since. Alex is the co-founder of the Geeky & Genki Network ([GeekyAndGenki.com](http://GeekyAndGenki.com)) and Geeky & Genki podcast, and is an alumni host of This Just In From Gen Con.

*"You see, in a way, every film is experimental. It's said that Spielberg knows exactly what he's going to do before he's on the set. I believe it and I don't. I use a script and storyboards like blueprints; they give me a solid structure on which to build. But what's in the script and what's out there – the real actors on the set with their props for the first time are two very different things. When those elements are finally in front of me, I begin altering the script to make the most effective use of them. Say a light blows out. Suddenly, there's more darkness and something that freaks you out, generating an idea that was never in the script[.]"* —David Lynch (<http://www.thecityofabsurdity.com/dune/duneprevue.html>)

RPGs are, in essence, an improvisational experience. The rules, scenario, and physical ephemera that make a tabletop RPG possible are merely tools which the players and GM utilize to guide their moment-to-moment play. Even in highly-prepared sessions the narrative of an RPG is what emerges when the participants involved take that bare structure and flesh it out with their imaginations. Improvisation isn't just a useful skill to employ when playing or running RPGs—it's an essential part of the medium. Without improvisation, the players and GM are reduced to being actors carrying out predetermined actions.

That moment where someone at the table does something unexpected, or takes the game in a bold new direction . . . that's why we sit down to play.



As an inveterate film buff, I'm always looking for stuff to plunder for my tabletop games—plot devices, characters, locales . . . But for GM techniques and basic storytelling nobody has taught me more than David Lynch. It probably sounds a little crazy; the vast bulk of Lynch's movies are surreal, paranoid fantasies that often verge on incomprehensibility. If you peer under the hood, however, you'll find that Lynch's intuitive *modus operandi* is quite applicable to the gaming table—especially if you're interested in running games by the seat of your pants. Here are a couple of things I've cribbed from Lynch's toolbox that I've found useful over the years for running sessions with little or no preparation.

One of the biggest fears I encounter when running low-prep games is that the session might devolve into aimless wandering. Minimal preparation means that I'm depending on the players to take some of the initiative and pursue their own agendas, and even the most self-motivated groups can occasionally lose direction. When this happens at my table I introduce what I call an Ear in the Grass. This term, of course, refers to the opening of Lynch's 1986 film *Blue Velvet*, in which the plot is kicked off with actor Kyle MacLachlan finding—what else—an ear in the grass. An Ear in the Grass is something strange which evokes a proactive response from the players—it is an object or plot device so mysterious and tantalizing that it demands investigation. Why is that ear lying in the grass? To whom does it belong? Should we try and return it or report it to the authorities?

While An Ear in the Grass is an incongruity it is important to keep it appropriate to the setting. The reason an ear in the grass works so well in *Blue Velvet* is because a severed ear is in total contrast to the otherwise banal, suburban setting. A severed ear lying in the street might elicit minor, if any, curiosity if that city happens to be Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar or Sanctuary, the city of Thieves' World. An Ear in the Grass works because it is strange—because it doesn't belong. It intrudes on the natural order of things and by its very nature demands attention. Furthermore, an Ear in the Grass need not be an object. Certainly it can be a mysterious amulet that falls out of the pocket of a foreign merchant, but it can also be a strange mute child who seems to know the PCs and insists on following them around town, or a vivid dream or vision compelling them to travel somewhere distant.

It's probably worth repeating: An Ear in the Grass is not about directly building narrative so much as it is about motivating the characters to action. The actions they take in response are the narrative—they're creating the story as they do stuff. An Ear in the Grass gets them moving in a specific direction and lets the PCs direct play. An Ear in the Grass need not turn into an epic quest—it can merely be a fun distraction to drive a night's worth of play. But if you string it out by lengthening the breadcrumb-trail it can stretch across several sessions or become a focus for the campaign—or it can be a side plot to the current campaign, taking elements of the ongoing story in a new direction.

What separates this from a prepared plot element is that you don't necessarily know what the Ear in the Grass means when you present it to the players. It is a seed around which plot and action will accrete as the players work to unravel its meaning. The trick is to keep it a mystery until you resolve for yourself what's actually going on.

Deepen the enigma by leading the players to yet another (hopefully more focused) question—think of it like an onion, with every clue leading to another layer to be peeled back. At some point you'll have to figure out what it means, but when you introduce the Ear in the Grass it can be as much of a mystery to you as it is to the players and still work.

Fight the impulse to stonewall the PCs when they try to find answers you don't have prepared. Sometimes it can feel a bit like laying track in front of an oncoming train. Don't know how the Finger Bone of K'zarth ended up in the pocket of that corpse? Buy yourself time by giving them something to do—make their lives more interesting by deepening the mystery. That scholar of K'zarthian lore they tracked down is dead . . . and there are a handful of cloaked assassins waiting for the PCs to show up! When in doubt, or if the PCs seem indecisive, prompt them to action. Instead of waiting for the PCs to arrive with the Finger Bone of K'zarth, have those assassins hunt them down.

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## **An Ear in the Grass is not about directly building narrative so much as it is about motivating the characters to action.**

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So, the players are running all over the campaign world trying to get to the bottom of this bizarre thing you've thrown at them. How do you begin to fill in those blanks which allow them to resolve the mystery you've posed?

I should say this at the outset: What follows is a fairly spoiler-filled discussion of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, and I'd hate to ruin it for the unwary. So be warned!

Many directors take advantage of happenstance, but Lynch is uniquely predisposed to making use of it. One of the most famous examples of this technique occurred early in the development of *Twin Peaks*. From the outset, Lynch and series co-creator Mark Frost had intended Laura Palmer's father, Leland Palmer, to be her killer. Of course, anyone who has seen the series (and the prequel film *Fire Walk With Me*) knows that while Leland Palmer physically committed the act he was actually possessed by a demonic spirit called BOB, who appears as a swarthy-looking fellow at various points during the series. A well-known bit of behind-the-scenes lore explains that BOB wasn't originally part of the plot, and that Lynch only included him after a set decorator, Frank Silva, inadvertently trapped himself in Laura Palmer's room during shooting. Lynch was taken with the accidentally captured image of this strange man lurking around in Palmer's bedroom and subsequently altered the plot of the series to include Leland's hellish puppet master.

The key insight here is to keep your eyes and ears open for anything that might be useful. Serendipity is your best friend here—but you must be observant and ready to pounce on anything that can be used to give coherent shape to the story. Frequently these intuitive leaps are easy and obvious, in which case great! There is no shame in doing the obvious thing—cleverness is a good thing, but don't get hung up on it. Don't be afraid to think outside the game if something spurs your imagination.

In a recent session of *Numenera*, the PCs at one point descended into a cave to seek shelter from a howling storm. It would have been easy to describe a simple cave and do the usual “The evening passes without incident” thing, but I had recently seen *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* and was inspired to use the subway catacomb from that film to flesh out a larger underground cavern. I basically described the environs to the players as I remembered it in the movie (with a little bit of cosmetic alteration, of course—the flock of monstrous bat-like creatures and radioactive tomb were included to reward the players for taking the bait). The result was a fun little impromptu dungeon delve.

Occasionally, however, making this work requires a bit of finesse and you need time to organize your thoughts. It can be helpful to look at this from a filmmaker’s perspective. The above example demonstrates how films come together not so much in front of the camera (or in our case at the table) but in the editing room. Think of the time between sessions as your “editing room.” Examine your (presumably copious) notes and see what can be used to piece together the plot. Many times I’ll run sessions building up questions in the players’ minds and then take those elements and piece everything together between games. In practice this is a bit like moving the goalposts, but if done well the players will never know. Sometimes it’s as easy as taking the players’ speculations and running with them, other times it requires picking up story threads from elsewhere and tying them into the current plot. This is similar to reincorporation, a technique frequently used in improv theatre—the idea being that you create a sense of consistency and veracity by re-introducing pre-established plot devices. True reincorporation is something that happens at the table, but it’s perfectly acceptable to work it out “off-screen.”

If I may return briefly to *Blue Velvet* by way of summary, it’s important to note that the ear is more important as a means of bringing the protagonist into a deeper, wider mystery—there’s much more going on than simply finding the ear’s “owner.” Lynch gives the audience a payoff, but by the time you find out whose ear Jeffrey has found the film has taken you on a much stranger trip. It’s possible to use these techniques to create the same kind of atmosphere—Lynch’s films often explore subconscious images which can lead to an atmosphere of paranoia and dread . . . which for some groups can be immense fun. It’s not necessary, however, to drag your players through a Lynchian nightmare in order to adapt his intuitive methodology. Give the players a mystery to unravel and then follow their lead. Let your intuition guide you.

It may seem a bit daunting at first, but with a little practice you’ll find your ability to run games with little or no preparation will increase exponentially. Even if you run highly-prepped games you’ll find that occasionally using these techniques will make you a more flexible GM, capable of handling whatever situation the players create.

# On the Herding of Cats

Kurt Schneider

Don't let the tough-guy image fool you; Kurt Schneider really does have a soft nerdy core. He's been gaming since the first time disco was cool, was a founding member of and contributor to the GMing blog [GnomeStew.com](http://GnomeStew.com), and regularly contributes to a number of gaming forums and mailing lists under the nom de keyboard Telas or TelasTX. His work is featured in Engine Publishing's *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters* and *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game*. He currently resides just outside Austin, Texas with his wife and three children.

*On a warm summer evening on a Greyhound bound for nowhere, I met up with a catherd. We were both too tired to sleep, so we took turns staring through the window at the darkness until boredom overtook us, and he began to speak.*

*He looked at me and said, "Son, the secret to herding cats isn't an electric can opener, it's following the pack wherever they go, while giving the appearance of being in charge." Although he reeked of cat piss and poor life choices, those words have stuck with me ever since.*

Running a roleplaying game has been compared to the herding of cats. While a bit of an exaggeration (no player has ever napped on my laptop), this analogy contains more than a kernel of truth. Players will often pull in different directions at the table, and rarely seem to follow what the GM has laid out as the expected path or plotline.

My advice: Stop *fighting* the cats, and start *following* them. One of the most versatile tools of the improvisational GM is the ability to listen to your players, and to weave the threads of their conversations into the whole cloth of an adventure. GMing is much easier, and the game is much more satisfying to the players, when you know how the players see the game and what they expect to happen. The easiest way to do this is to simply encourage the players to talk about the game.

This approach does have some caveats, and probably is not for everyone. Not every player is willing to be honest in front of the GM or other players; it eats up valuable time at the table; the players are contributing to their own challenges, and can manipulate the situation to their advantage; and not every GM is capable of maintaining a poker face when the players throw out the perfect idea.



However, if you're willing to be quiet and listen, the players will make your game richer and more personal, and will often help break through the logjams that sometimes block a storyline. And if you're really lucky, they may even unknowingly create an entire plot arc for you.

## Perceptions and Expectations

In this instance, the purpose of listening to the players is to learn their perceptions—and expectations—of the game. Improvisational actors start with whatever situation they are given, but an improvisational GM uses “our story so far” *as interpreted by the players*. Similarly, just as a good improvisational actor can play off of the expectations of his audience, an improvisational GM who knows her players' expectations can leverage them to create a more personalized and moving experience at the table.

By listening to your players discuss the game, you'll learn how your players are perceiving the game, as opposed to how you have presented the game. Players don't always interpret things in the game the same way that the GM does. (For a humorous example, Google “Dread Gazebo.”) Try to see the game through their eyes. It's often much easier to run with their perceptions instead of trying to constantly correct them. In addition, they may see connections or conflicts where you might not.

Obviously, feel free to correct any misunderstandings that are just too out there or that will interfere with everyone's enjoyment of the game. If undead are always evil, remind the players of that when they start talking about trusting the vampire queen. On the other hand, if the players don't seem to care that elves and dwarves don't like each other, and it doesn't impact the game, let it go.

Also, by listening as they speculate on the direction of the game, various plot threads, NPC motivations, and the like, you'll get a feel for the players' expectations and desires. Which NPCs are trusted and valued? Which plot threads do they seem to latch onto? What sessions were most memorable, and why? What do they expect the NPCs, factions, and GM to do, and why? The best way to work an audience is to know their expectations, and what GM doesn't want to deliver the best possible game for his players?

## Backstory, Because Everybody Has One

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*“I choose a lazy person to do a hard job. Because a lazy person will find an easy way to do it.” —Bill Gates*

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I love running games, but I have a near-pathological resistance to doing story prep. NPCs and locations are easy, and a plot or scenario might occasionally write itself. But for years, it'd be an hour to game time and I'd have a stack of NPCs and no idea how to weave them and the events that had already transpired into a compelling story.

This is not how many of us were raised on running a game. Scenarios should be pre-written, theoretically tested, possibly include (ugh) boxed text, and have some built-in redundancy in case the game veers from the expected plotline. Sure, there's some room for improv, such as when the players want to sneak in the back way, but GMing often comes with an expectation that the plot is already laid out.

I was frustrated by my own lack of prep, and ran too many off-the-cuff adventures with mixed results, until I started listening to the players discussing the game. Their ideas and guesses were solid, and they had the benefit of each other's criticisms. Most importantly, it was easy; all I had to do was sit there taking the occasional note while they discussed the game. Over the course of a campaign, the players became my muses. More importantly, the quality of the game improved as it became personalized by their perceptions and expectations.

## Techniques

Over the years, I've developed a few techniques for interrogating the players, often without their knowledge. But first, you have to be ready to really listen to what the players are saying, and be willing to set aside your own preconceived notions of the game.

I strongly suggest taking a covert approach at first, since the players may not speak freely if they feel that "anything they say can and will be used against them." On the other hand, a covert approach could be interpreted as somehow "lying" to the players. You know your players best, and you should make that call. As an aside, my players were fine when they discovered that I'd been using them as muses, but not all players may have that level of trust in their GM.

Occasionally ask for a recap of the events leading up to the present, including any clues that may lead to the next adventure. Encourage the group to discuss things, and be willing to let the discussion go on for a bit. Manage the discussion, but resist the urge to correct any misconceptions unless they are glaringly wrong.

At the end of each session, have each player describes three things she learned. For example, one player might say, "Jacob (1) runs a shop in town, (2) sells contraband at marked-up prices, and (3) seems to know quite a bit about the local politics. I think we should get to know Jacob." Even though Jacob might initially have been a spur-of-the-moment shopkeeper with a few "under the counter" wares and a bit of advice about the local scene, he is now far more. With the input of the players, Jacob the shopkeeper has gone from bit player to major NPC.

Take another look at the players' character sheets and PC backgrounds. Has anyone taken an unusual skill or ability, but not used it yet? How could you create a situation in which they could use it? In the same vein, review the characters' history and backstories, looking for loose threads or forgotten NPCs or events. You may be surprised at what you find.

If their discussion reminds you of an element or a situation from a movie, story, or prior gaming session, use that instead. The point isn't to have the players dictate the plot, but to use them as inspiration for it.

If the discussion stalls, mention a few options and let the players discuss their relative merits. Develop the option that they seem interested in that will work with your existing plans.

If you have a certain NPC or aspect that you'd like to see included in the discussion, bring it up repeatedly. Players almost always pay close attention to whatever the GM emphasizes.

Some players have been burned by previous GMs, and may be hesitant to discuss the campaign in front of you. Tell them you need a few minutes before you can run the game, and pull out a sourcebook, but take notes about the conversation. If necessary, find a place away from the table, but within earshot.

Catch the players away from the table, and ask them individually about the game. A good cover story is that you're just making sure that they're happy with the game so far. A player will often talk about his or her suspicions without the other players around. Email or online chat can be good for this.

Ask the players collectively and individually what their favorite parts of the game have been so far. This may lead into a discussion of expectations, but will definitely give you a handle on what they've enjoyed so far.

Foster an environment in which the players can add details to the world, possibly by rewarding them for their contributions. From the physical ("Is there a fire hose on the wall?") to the social ("Are any of the bar patrons from my culture?") to the situational ("Do any of my old friends work for this corporation?"), encourage the players to think outside the box and help build the world their characters occupy. You may need to balance giving them some authorship of the world and keeping them from abusing their power.

## **Now What?**

The players are not writing your plots for you, nor are they dictating the scenario. But by describing their perceptions and expectations of the campaign, the players are giving you the raw materials with which to improvise the scenario or plot arc. The more raw materials you have at hand, the better a game you can improvise.

Remember that your job is not necessarily to fulfill the players' expectations, but to utilize those expectations in weaving the story. Just because the players expect the old and wily grand vizier to betray the child-emperor does not mean that he must. Use their expectations for full effect, whether by fulfilling them or by thwarting them. This point is especially pertinent when it comes to plot twists and red herrings. Jacob the shopkeeper could be a handy ally, but he could also be a spy for the Big Bad Evil Guy, an informant for a local faction, or trying to use the characters to set up his own power center. Your players will almost certainly give you more options.

Finally, knowing how the players perceive and interpret the game, and what their expectations are, you can personalize sessions, plots, and entire campaigns around them. Through their discussions, you will learn what they like, dislike, fear, and hope for, and can take them on a roller-coaster ride created just for them. The game may not be how you intended it to be, but it will be how they will enjoy it.

# I Say, Then You Say: Improviseational Roleplaying as Conversation

Michelle Lyons-McFarland

Michelle Lyons-McFarland started working in games back in the day and has been here ever since. She's worked both in-house at FASA and Wizards of the Coast and as a freelancer for OPP and Green Ronin. She's co-owner of Growling Door Games and recently published the narrative game *A Tragedy in Five Acts*. She's also a PhD student in English literature and composition at Case Western Reserve University. Her first GMing role was in the early '90s, sending runners through the streets of Seattle after a demon in a bottle.

Communication is at the heart of nearly everything we do, every interaction we have with anyone or anything else, ever. You're trying to get your dog to stop jumping up? You're communicating. You're sending your elf ranger to go collect fire lilies on the side of Mount Helicon on your game console? You're communicating. You're writing a paper for class, or an email to your boss, or a status report for the meeting? You're communicating. We (and arguably, all manner of sentient things) are constantly sending signals out into the world—auditory, visual, tactile, and otherwise—in order to get a response from our environment. It's unconscious and automatic, a transmitter that's stuck in the on position, a feed that never runs out of content. We are the signal.

We don't only put out information, though; we also take it in. We've got two-way capacity installed with multi-channel input available. We see, hear, taste, touch, and smell, and even more than that, we've developed technology to store up information for later consumption. We can take in vast amounts of data, categorize it and synthesize it and analyze it until we decipher patterns in the raw material, which we can process and craft responses to indicating relevant meaning. All of this is required before we send out data, and then we do it again to judge the responses, and then again to send out our responses to the changes we perceive. All of this processing is required in order to take part in something as mundane as a conversation, the everyday building block of communication.



If that sounds complex, it is, but it's also such an automatic process for our minds that we rarely take notice of it. In fact, it's even more complex than that, because aside from certain situational scripts (ordering fast food, exchanging pleasantries like "Hi, how are you?" and "I'm fine, and you?"), every conversation is unique. We rarely know for certain what someone else will say to us, or when someone will choose to initiate conversation. Again, we culturally create social scripts that people tend to stick to as a form of shorthand just to simplify the options a bit (greetings and good-byes are particularly suited for this, but transaction scripts are common as well) but most of the time we are making it up as we go, responding to input and creating new output to match it. Conversation is improvised and we all do it, all day long.

This essay is about roleplaying, though. Specifically, about improvisation—a topic which might seem to be promoting a difficult if rewarding form of play. It can seem very daunting, the thought of going with the flow, abandoning our game plans, and trying to be entertaining at the drop of a hat—except that, as shown above, we do it all the time. It's like breathing, or at least talking, which is really at the heart of roleplaying games. Conversation is improvisation, and that's what roleplaying is.

Let's take a closer look at the core elements of roleplaying, in case this assertion seems strange. Setting aside the rules and story elements for the moment (although we will come back to them), roleplaying is a form of cooperative storytelling. If I, as the GM, say that you've entered the room, one or more players will respond with questions or statements or descriptions. I then respond with more information, either changing the scene to accommodate their actions or resisting their additions, redirecting the conversation to reflect what I think should happen. The players respond, and so on until we come to a consensus and then begin the next exchange.

Just as with conversation, there is a give and take in creating that cooperative story. Everyone has to participate. Everyone has to listen. If I ask what color the wall is, someone has to be willing to give me an answer. If you want your character to hide behind a corner and punch a bad guy, I have to be willing to give you an answer that reflects your desired action in some way. If I give an unexpected or irrelevant answer, such as telling you about the casserole I brought for dinner, or if I fail to acknowledge the desire for your character to punch the bad guy, then I've stopped participating—and in the opinion of many, I've stopped roleplaying at all at that point. Or, to talk about conversation again, if you ask how the weather is, I have to respond somehow about weather. If I fail to do so, we aren't talking anymore, are we? I might say something and you might say something, but if they don't match or acknowledge each other, that isn't actually a conversation—or at least, it's not an effective one.

The heart of a satisfying roleplaying experience, then, is the same as a good conversation: The joy of a verbal game of catch. That graceful semantic leap from one idea to another, just like trapeze artists, catching and releasing and doing it again when neither participant knows exactly what's coming next. Speak, listen, respond in turn. The rules and narrative elements act as a group contract of sorts, letting us all know what sorts of conversational scripts and rhetorical moves are appropriate, but they're just guidelines and shortcuts to help keep everyone moving in the same creative direction. In the end, we're all still catching the conversational hot potato and handing it right back off again.

That formula is also the heart of improvisation. Improv isn't a soliloquy; even actors or comics who do improvisational performance often do it as a troupe, or do it in response to suggestions from an audience, or both. There is a give and take to improvisation, just as in roleplaying, just as in conversation. No one is in it alone. You can't be, particularly in roleplaying. Everyone is there to participate; it's a social event and exercise (which is also why one person taking all the attention is a problem; the conversation can't function if it's all a solo performance). The scary part about improvisation, in fact, is not that it requires a response to unforeseen data—we do that all the time. The scary part is that it evens the conversational playing field.

Among the scripted exchanges we have regarding rules and genre and storytelling conventions, there's an additional set of scripts in use in roleplaying: the player/GM scripts. Many roleplaying games establish these roles as an integral part of the game, shifting the balance of power to the GM by giving her more say over conversational direction and negation than the players have, all in the interest of promoting gameplay (also, in the interest of managing an ongoing conversation with multiple participants, all of whom may have different goals). This role is reinforced when GMs set up stories, or scripts, ahead of time, or when they know things crucial to the narrative that the players do not. Using these predetermined directions and responses for conversations saves the GM a lot of time and gives her the last word, preserving that power dynamic and giving her shortcuts.

Improvisation, however, levels the conversational playing field. Without a chance to prep and plan, the GM scripts are far less useful. The power dynamic of the group is instead forced into a more cooperative mode, relying on conversation rather than narration to hand off bits of the story and direction. The GM isn't necessarily without power, but there's a flexibility introduced by eliminating a number of those pre-programmed GM scripts. Everyone relies on everyone else to make their conversational hand-offs; teamwork becomes essential.

We all rely on conversational shortcuts; they save us valuable processing time, for one, and enable us to signal when we're entering or leaving a conversation, or when we're bringing something new into play. When we get rid of one set in the name of opening up creative control at the table, we have to replace it with something. But how can we do that when the whole idea is that none of the participants in the game/conversation know what's coming next? What strategies can we apply in order to make improvisation flow easily and keep the conversation moving?

## Listen

It seems like the most basic suggestion, and it is, but listening is hard. We all listen, but we also all anticipate what someone else is saying. Often we react to the scripts in our head rather than the people around us. In a more traditional roleplaying setup, where unequal conversational power is the norm, it's easier to gloss over it when someone isn't tuned in. For improvisational games, however, everyone has to pay attention and stay on top of what's being said.

## Be a Team Player

Every time you have something to say, keep in mind that you need to give the topic to someone else in such a way that they can usefully respond. You don't throw the ball over someone's head or drop it at your own feet if you want them to catch it. The same holds true in conversation. When you're offering an idea, leave the door open for someone else to follow up on what you said. You want a response to what you're saying; give the others an opening to provide it.

## Use Conversational Moves

A time-honored GMing trick is “yes, and . . .” When a player asks for something or requests an action, the GM should avoid saying no, but rather should allow the action and follow it up, if possible, without breaking the game. “Yes, you shoot the vampire *and* it drops an old brass key.” Instead of stopping with the player's action, the GM adds a new wrinkle or detail that feeds into continued exploration and story progression. It's an additive conversational move, building on the previous detail given.

“Yes, and . . .” is an excellent way to keep things moving, but it's not the only conversational move you can use. It's one of four common responses that open the door for additional material and interaction. The other three are:

- “Yes, but . . .” allows the action but offers a mild contradiction. “Yes, you can have the money, but you have to pay it off plus interest in a fortnight or Big Louie comes for you.” It raises the stakes and adds a complication.
- “No, and . . .” adds a complication and detail. You can think of it as, “no, because . . .” if that's helpful. “No, you don't steal the watch, and now the guard is following you.” Alternatively, “No, you can't have a cookie and now it's bedtime. Go to your room.” Rather than ending the conversation, it closes off an avenue of inquiry and redirects it.
- “No, but . . .” is a softer redirection, as it allows for further exploration of the topic if not using the original approach. “No, you can't sneak past the bouncer, but his designer shirt tells you he might be open to a bribe.” It adds detail and encourages alternate moves as a response.

Conversation is something we do all the time, and thus improvisation is something we do all the time. You cannot have one without the other—without the ability to bring new information into play, conversation is simply scripted exchanges; without the back and forth of conversation, improvisation is simply solo performance; and neither of those options by themselves can constitute roleplaying. By adding rules and agreed-upon story conventions, as well as being mindful of the communal, cooperative nature of the activity, we can bring conversation and improvisation to the fore, giving us new, fulfilling, creative ways to get that story told.

# Names, Voices, and Stereotypes

Wolfgang Baur

Wolfgang Baur is a game designer and editor best known for his work with Wizards of the Coast, TSR, and Paizo, including a stint as the editor of *Dragon*<sup>®</sup> *Magazine* and work on the Forgotten Realms, Planescape, the Rise of the Runelords Adventure Path, and the Midgard campaign setting. He is the founder and publisher at Kobold Press, a small tabletop company which publishes award-winning volumes such as the *Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding* and the *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design*.

Improvisation sometimes stalls or fumbles from the very first word. The seemingly simple step of getting into character at the moment of assuming a role is one of the moments when you have to decide everything all at once: posture, tone, diction—everything you use to introduce a new villain, ally, or rival.

Now, the perfectly reasonable player question of “What’s your name?” is an invitation to make a character come alive. It’s also the moment where you as the game master—or as a player—first define the style and personality of the character for the other players. It’s the work of a moment, both the name itself and the tone of voice you use to deliver it.

Improvisation is about making moments count, so here’s a few tricks that may help create an immediate impression, which then turns into a character with personality and staying power.

## Fast, Powerful Naming

If your game is a modern one, you’re in luck. Those useless phone books that languish outside your door are perfect tools for naming NPCs. So are baby name websites, especially if you use a tablet or PC during the game.

Consult one if you need a particular sort of name (by nationality or by meaning). Clever players may get wind of a new, “unprepared” character if you do this, but so what? The character will thrive if you play it right.

For traditional fantasy or for licensed game settings like *Star Wars*<sup>®</sup>, you can find lists of characters by species or culture online, sometimes compiled on wikis. Print one out if you know your group will be visiting the wookiees, or tape a list of Tolkien’s elves somewhere if your D&D players are headed into an ancient forest.



Beyond that, though, naming is an opportunity. In fantasy, some interesting naming traditions go back to the Norse, to Greek gods, and to medieval kings and lords: bynames and sobriquets. A byname is bit of verbal branding for a character, and a sobriquet is a descriptive nickname like “Richard the Lionheart.” Names like “Honest Abe” or “Rathmar Silverclaw” describe a person’s character or an obvious physical feature. Similar sets of names are available for almost any category: Kobold Press has even published a free kobold name generator online that uses sobriquets to imply a certain amount of character.

Why are bynames helpful in gaming improv? Why does this technique work to generate character? Because bynames, nicknames, and sobriquets clearly hint at where your characterization is headed. For instance, Rustgear is a very different name than Eggslave which is very different than Starcaller. I’ve only told you bynames, and yet I suspect that was enough to create a picture in your mind of each of those characters.

If you are stuck for a “regular” name, the phrase “They call me the [sobriquet]” buys you time to come up with Rudmir or Yismilla. These names are more flavorful and more obvious than, say, Ethelred. Flavorful and obvious are both great advantages in gaming, where the GM is an information bottleneck. Nicknames and bynames are information-rich communication.

Depending on how much time you want to spend on culture and national themes, you can do a little more with naming. If you want to evoke a particular culture, tone, or personality in a specific way, you can allude to those themes through names. For kobolds, terms like “sneaker” and “stabber” might be cultural references—and remind players of those tropes—while “fletcher” or “starsinger” fit elvish themes. Generate stereotypes that work for the world, and reinforce those stereotypes in every NPC who reflects that race or culture.

A goodly part of improvisation is knowing how to deliver a familiar character by using stereotypes—but that’s not enough. You need to build on that and make it new again by tweaking, twisting, and reinventing the known character. But that first step, the moment when the audience says, “Oh, I know that guy!” is a crucial moment that propels players into the scene.

## **Memorable Voices**

Many gamers think that your character’s speech and dialogue during a roleplaying session define the first impression of those characters. They are only half-right: how a gamer delivers the battle cry or the cunning bit of flattery counts just as much, and yet it’s a topic that pretty much never gets addressed. Let’s give it a shot.

I’d argue that tone is a woefully underused tool, especially if the players are using an unfamiliar system or are relatively inexperienced gamers. Verbal stumbles, slurring, and the various accents or markers of clever or foolish characters are hints. Tone of voice, rhetorical postures, and how loudly, quickly, or quietly you speak all weigh in the minds of your audience. The loud and commanding elf-lord declaiming his repartee with perfect diction and a posh accent is a very different character than the smiling, mush-mouthed, and somewhat goofy pixie princess who keeps saying “like” and “so twee you are!”

We all know this from film and theatre, but sometimes at the game table we forget, or we lack confidence, or we doubt ourselves and our audience. This is a fatal error.

As a GM, an ability and willingness to try out different tones, accents, and styles of speech is a powerful way to define character quickly and easily. If you cannot perfectly impersonate every voice and style—well, really, that’s not a requirement! But there’s absolutely no reason not to take advantage of your voice at the table. Here are four vocal options for even the shyest beginner, and maybe an idea or two for the veterans as well.

## Accents

Not everyone can do an accent, but if you can it’s good fun. Start with something you know and like. Villains often sound British and upper-crust in movies, though any real-world accent can be sinister if you bring some sneering and moustache-twirling to it. The important element here is that the voice and accent you adopt be one you enjoy and can do easily.

It need not be every word you speak, but throwing out a “Good mornin’, me lovelies!” right at the start is a quick way to establish a Celtic tone. Is this a stereotype? Absolutely, it’s a hideous simplification of a rich and ancient culture and heritage. Is it immediately effective? Absolutely, yes, it is. As long as you’re not offending the Irish gamer who’s majoring in Gaelic literature, you’ll probably be fine with these sorts of shortcuts.

If you can carry off a falsetto (for men playing female characters) or a credible mock-bass (for women playing male characters), I doff my hat to you. It’s tough to maintain for a long stretch, but it can be a great way to keep your friends aware that you’re playing cross-gender. Props can do the same, but voices are more portable.

Not everyone will love this approach, some won’t mind it, and you all may disagree on what’s the right accent for what. For instance, should dwarves sound Scottish, Russian, Swedish, or German? Up to you, of course, and different groups of dwarves might fit into different vocal families. The real-world tones and voices you adopt might be just a hint of flavor, or it might be wholesale adoption of pop culture and real-world nationalities, but never doubt it is a great tool for portraying character and making NPCs distinctive and different.

## Familiar Tones

If you are good at impressions, you should consider using some of them as the start of a characterization. Ideally, if you can combine two things you’re likely to get more mileage from it, plus points for originality. If the orcish thug sounds like the Godfather with tusks and a fondness for the phrase “Chop ‘em inna bits,” that’s going to be memorable.

I recommend that not all your impressions be of celebrities or fictional characters from TV and film, though. If you can do an impression of a friend at the office or the quirks of your car mechanic’s drawl, you’ve got a ready-made vocal impression that won’t be recognized.

The feelings your players have toward a real-life friend (or a celebrity) can also be hijacked in the service of the plot. The smarmy HR director can easily provide the voice of the corrupt halfling bureaucrat. The ditzy gym rat can easily be the voice of the slightly dim goblin war chief. Once players figure out where a voice comes from, they may also transfer some of their feelings toward that person to the fictional NPC. It's surprisingly effective: In a game a couple years ago, we spent a fair bit of time trying to keep an NPC from harm because the GM used the voice of a beloved co-worker.

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## **Speech Patterns**

Everyone knows Yoda's odd grammar, or the rhythm of Smeagol's half-talking-to-himself speech. These are extreme examples of a tool that works, namely the repeated mangling of conversation. A mispronunciation, a beloved single word ("Hodor!"), or a fondness for flowery, abrupt, or convoluted sentence patterns with ridiculous vocabulary is tons of fun.

While you might think that mystics, preachers, nobles, kings, and wizards are good targets for this approach (and they are), there's no reason that the captain of the guard can't use grim, two-word pronouncements and the master smith can't be overly fond of fire-words and "fwoosh" sounds. Pick a thing and make it part of the rhythm of speech when you get into that character.

This may feel gimmicky or awkward at first. A great deal of your success, though, is in delivery. If you embrace the pattern and show some joy or relish in both the goofy and the serious tones you adopt, you'll have more success. If you are hesitant or inconsistent, you won't carry the audience along with you. Be bold and practice the voice once or twice ahead of time if you aren't confident you can adopt that tone when required.

## **Catchphrases**

Some speakers just can't help themselves. They use the royal "we," or they always say "As it happens, sir" or "Yoicks!" Catchphrases don't require an accent, but they are memorable and instantly define a character. Use and reuse them often.

The difference between a speech pattern and a catchphrase is slight: Catchphrases are shorter and often just a few words, constantly repeated. Speech patterns are the consistent mangling of all speech by that character, not just a few words.

## **Play it Again! The Power of Repetition**

If you really want to impress your players, think like a sitcom producer and make sure that characters aren't just one-offs. The best of your improvisations should come back—though in unexpected ways.

Repetition itself is simple enough: bring back the voice, drop the byname into conversation down the line, and make sure that the caricature or catchphrase is there so that players are reminded of the character's identity. You must keep that character's quirks available on the surface, by remembering the touchstones you used to bring them to life the first time. The more often the character shows up and the more often you practice the voice and mannerisms, the easier it becomes to assume the role.

Once established, the trick is knowing when to subvert the character you have created. If the catchphrase fails to materialize when the happy-go-lucky character shows up grieving and wailing, that's a much more powerful hook than the dour, grim, always-handing-out-serious quests character showing up to hand out another quest. Subverting expectations is a trick you can't play often, but you also can't play it if you haven't spent time on multiple prior occasions setting up the stereotype or familiar bedrock character.

## **Make a Lasting Impression**

Ground the name as a hook to bootstrap your improvisation. Use the full range of your voice and the correct range of vocabulary to establish personality. Repeat, repeat, and repeat. And then, when the moment seems right, do something new and unexpected. You may be pleased and surprised at the reaction you get.

# Selling the Experience

Don Mappin

Don Mappin works in executive management but instead uses his MBA for the forces of good GMing. An author of over a dozen RPG books over the years, he is most notably associated with the *Stargate: SG-1 Roleplaying Game* and the past two iterations of the *Star Trek* RPG. Don is a contributing author to the award-winning GMing blog [Gnome Stew](#). Today, still wanted by the masses, he survives as a writer of fortune. If you have a project, if no one else can help, and if you can find him, maybe you can hire Don Mappin.

Improvisational techniques tend to be considered the purview of actors, but they are also a key skill for salespeople. Consider the parallels in having to think on one's feet, provide important details, and respond to feedback. The salesperson may be seeking to close the deal, but at the gaming table you're selling something equally valuable, an experience. Whether your players "buy" into your story is made easier by using some commonly accepted selling techniques and improvisational skills.

## 1. Begin with the End in Mind

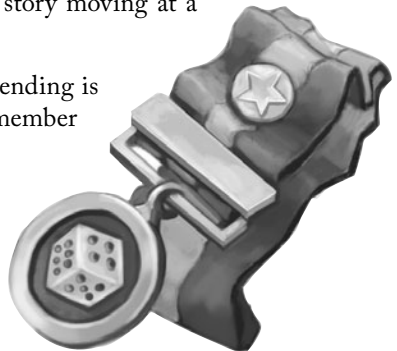
Starting the story usually comes with a burst of creativity that rides to the next wave, much like jumpstarting a vehicle. Once you get moving, momentum can keep driving you forward; however, you may not be looking far enough ahead. It is easy to focus on the beginning at the expense of the end. Where is your story going and what is the ultimate end state? These do not need to be entirely codified—and likely cannot—but a good story needs to finish with a satisfying ending. The GM prepares for the ending during lulls, carving out the bits that will wrap up the story. Define the elements that will need to be concluded, not only for the overall plot, but for the individual characters.

This "visioning" will help establish a mental picture of what the end should (or could) look like and will subconsciously direct your actions towards it. This also helps in decision making and keeping the story moving at a proper pace.

Starting strong is a great way to begin, but the ending is what the players will walk away and likely remember the most. Make it memorable.

## 2. Establish Control

It is not considered unusual for a GM to be in control of the gaming table and space, but an improvisational methodology of storytelling necessitates an even firmer grasp of control.



This is not to presume a dictatorial style of play, as the GM can still acquiesce and distribute the improv limelight to individuals as needed. What is important is the ability to regain that control when necessary. While players are constantly being improvisational during play, the GM still has to direct the story forward.

Owning the space and being in charge establishes confidence, a key emotional state for successful improvisation. That confidence provides a strong foundation for good improvisation and can often be responsible for people not even realizing that you are flying by the seat of your pants. A common technique used by actors and presenters is to mentally imagine their bodies filling the space they are in. This provides a mental cue that you are the space, and thus can fully embrace and control it.

### **3. Give Everyone a STAR Moment**

Author Nancy Duarte established a technique of using “STAR moments” during presentations so that people would leave with “Something They’ll Always Remember.” These often unexpected but memorable moments leave a lasting impression upon the viewer.

In this case it’s not necessarily about those key storytelling junctures where something unexpected or creative happens, but the individual moments that each player is able to have. Just like a star, give everyone a chance to shine. This can be through leveraging a special skill or ability, revolving a plot complication around the player, or simply tossing the proverbial ball to them and letting them run with it (an act of improvisational trust; see also “yes, and . . .”). Game mechanics can sometimes create their own STAR moments, but in such cases you are relying upon chance to provide them; better to help create the STAR moments for the players yourself.

Within the confines of improvisation and storytelling, STAR moments can be expanded to emphasize not only the “good” elements but also the “bad.” A crushing defeat; the villain escaping after a harrowing encounter; team success but at a greater—perhaps personal—cost. These moments are equally memorable, but ensure that they happen for the right reasons, not as something that could be seen as punitive or picking on a specific character.

STAR moments can be easier to construct without a script if the GM is paying careful attention, and are especially effective when bouncing actions off one another. As openings or hooks are provided by the players, note these opportunities to give them their STAR moment. They may not recognize the opportunity or take advantage of it, but during play there will no doubt be other openings that make themselves available.

Giving players STAR moments makes a gaming experience stand out as memorable. It’s the genesis of those “remember that one time in your game?” moments that will be shared for years to come.

### **4. Use the Three Learning Modalities**

Every person learns, processes, and stores information differently, comprising the concept of *learning modalities*. The modalities, or senses, are broken into three areas: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (also called tactile).

Researchers have concluded that on average 25-30% of people learn visually, 25-30% aurally, 15% kinesthetically, and 25-30% a mixture of the three. Thus, only 30% of the people at your gaming table will remember most of what is said while another 30% will remember primarily what they've seen.

Knowing this, you can adapt your improvisational technique to hook into each of these learning modalities to ensure that your players are actively engaged on all levels. Otherwise you may inherently focus on one modality, leaving a significant cross-section of your group struggling to keep up.

Visual learners are those who learn by seeing. To solve a problem they want to see it in some format to understand it better. They dislike listening for too long and will use words like *see*, *imagine*, and *picture* in their dialogue. Visual learners can also become easily distracted by visual cues, primarily because they're actively trying to take everything in. They will pause to imagine a description in their head, visually, before processing. Finally, the visual learner thrives on direct, face-to-face interaction, such as at the gaming table.

Auditory learners rely on hearing something to understand it. The auditory learner enjoys listening and speaking just as much. In fact, they can be impatient to provide their own input. Unlike a visual learner, an auditory learner is easily distracted by sounds or noises in the environment. They may ask for the background music to be turned down so they can concentrate better on what is being said. Dialogue and speaking is of great importance to them, so providing the auditory learner with plenty of auditory interaction actively engages them. Also, somewhat humorously, the auditory learner will voice their emotional state, sometimes going so far as to growl or sigh loudly when frustrated. Listen for these clues to identify your auditory learners.

The smallest group, the kinesthetic learners, relies primarily on tactile interaction or what "feels right." The ability to hold or directly interact with an item or object—such as a prop—grounds them in the experience. They will use such words as *feel* and *touch* when describing things and are easily distracted by movement around them. These players are also prone to fidget or move at the table, or even, during an extremely stressful or engaging moment, stand up and/or pace! The kinesthetic player is also prone to spontaneity and jumping right into things.

Mixed modality learners use more than one, but not necessarily all three, modes as their primary source of learning. In a perfect world everyone at the gaming table would fall into this group, but again only 25-30% of people fit this description and are comfortable with multiple modalities.

To best engage each type of learner at the gaming table, it behooves the GM to provide their experience in as many of the three modalities as possible. An NPC description not only includes the normal visual cues but also what they sound like, smells, or specific details like a texture of an object they are holding. Backing up a level, this is an auditory description, so these cues are even stronger if the GM can also provide a picture (visual) of the NPC or pantomime (kinesthetic) a common mannerism they possess. Now the players have been engaged through each of the modalities. Maps favor the visual learners while kinesthetic learners react well to seeing actions played out.

## 5. Kill Your Inner Editor

Every person has them, providing continual judgment and critiquing of our actions, causing us to self-edit along the way. A key improvisational skill is to kill your editor and let the creativity flow. We are our own harshest critics and while that little voice may be useful during day-to-day interactions, it often can hold us back. Making your inner editor take the night off can remove the barrier between yourself and a fountain of ideas, ready to flow.

This ensures that no idea is pre-labeled as too “dumb” or “silly” to bring to the table. You’d be surprised how many good ideas never see the light of day because our inner editor squashed them before they had a chance to be explored.

## 6. Be There

This may sound like a philosophical methodology but its importance is actually drawn from, again, real sales and acting techniques. In this modern age of information and inrush of stimuli, it can be easy to become distracted or taken out of the moment. Becoming flustered, losing command of the table, or even stumbling on adjudicating rules can be symptomatic of being drawn from the moment—or even contribute to it. It is the feeling of necessity to press on, unaware of one’s surroundings or moving at a breakneck pace to progress to the next element.

One common way to combat this process is by pacing and deliberately slowing things down. Often, silence is the best weapon to employ; the storytelling experience does not require non-stop communication where every lull in speech must be filled. The act of listening—of being *there*—and careful consideration while taking in the moment can yield better results than a nonstop stream of consciousness and energy.

We are prone to react immediately, to formulate an answer while the question is being posed. To be a better communicator, stop assuming you know what is being said and instead *listen* to what is actually said. Then act.

## 7. Choose and Move On

Ambivalence and self-doubt can kill any improvisational scene before it even has a chance to get started. A good performer will make a decision in the moment and move on. Once that decision has been made, don’t look back, only forward—that way the GM and the players can focus on the next element in the scene, rather than be distracted by “ifs,” “else,” or “maybes.” The self-perpetuating cycle of inner doubt is the barrier to making a decision. As an improviser, there is no right or wrong choice; there is only the necessity to *make the choice*. Without it the other players cannot act and the story will have run aground.

By using these techniques in your own games you can expect a more interactive and memorable experience, one where everyone at the table is fully vested in what is happening. Better yet, they become more active participants and will sell themselves on the experience. All you have to do is close the deal.

# Building Worlds by the Seat of Your Pants

Monica Valentinelli

Monica Valentinelli has been in the hobby games industry for almost 10 years. As a writer, she's contributed to game lines like *Vampire: the Requiem*, *All Flesh Must Be Eaten*, and *Eclipse Phase*. In 2013, she donned the role of brand manager and lead writer for the *Firefly RPG* based on the TV show. For more about Monica, visit her website at [mlvwrites.com](http://mlvwrites.com).

Let's face it: It doesn't matter how much planning you do or what types of plots you come up with, there are times when your players venture off the beaten path and you get stuck. Maybe you've got a player who absolutely has to investigate every shack and alleyway. Or maybe you're running a bit late, so you put together what you think you need and plan on muddling through the rest. If you're the kind of GM who gets stuck worldbuilding under pressure, this essay is for you.

Picture yourself at the table. Your players are (hopefully) hanging on your every word. Your dice are behaving. The plot is flowing, right up until you need "X." "X" is what trips you up, every time. When you get stuck, an intense moment can grind to a screeching halt if you're not careful. That's why worldbuilding is so crucial to a game. You don't realize how important setting is until it's obviously missing. When you or your players notice its absence, suspension of disbelief vanishes and your game isn't as much fun.

Worldbuilding can be a lot of fun if you have infinite amounts of time and energy, but there's a danger there, too. When you fall in love with a setting, it's easy to get lost in minutia. At the end of the day, a well-built world can still fall flat in your game if you don't keep the focus on the players. Any setting you build—whether it takes five minutes or five months—is an interactive backdrop for the characters.

With that framework in mind, I have some tips to share with you.

## Name It!

You might be surprised to see this topic at the top of my list, but I feel it's a big one. A bad name can make players laugh when you least expect it and shut down a powerful scene.

Now, it's very challenging to come up with a finely-crafted name in the middle of a session. This is a dead giveaway that you didn't prepare for your game. But stellar names require a certain amount of forethought because often they're indicative of the setting. And you may need a lot of them: characters, towns, villages, cities, and more.

To get around this issue, you've got two options. I suggest creating a list of names you can draw from ahead of time. Start with 10 and add names as inspiration strikes, and soon you'll have a great template to reference when you need to come up with a name that's representative of the setting.

The other option is to go the digital route and use a name generator. I'd do this ahead of time and play around with the names that randomly appear, so you know what you're getting. This method can be faster, but the names may not be as tailored to your needs.

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## Any setting you build—whether it takes five minutes or five months—is an interactive backdrop for the characters.

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### Set the Mood

One of the best ways to describe a setting is to focus on sensory details. This is one of the easiest methods to improvise your world if you haven't planned out scenes in excruciating detail. What your players can feel, hear, and touch is just as important as what they can see—provided you've got a clear sense of what “props” your players can interact with. Will they drink the ale sitting on the table? When they do, is it poisoned? What's more, these sensory pieces of information can increase tension, add drama, and provide players with an emotional need to keep the plot moving.

Take a small abandoned village, for example. Let's say the players have wandered into this area searching for a clue. Start with some descriptive details to fit the mood. If you're going for an eerie feel, let the fog roll in to partially obscure the buildings from view. Describe a foul chill lingering in the air and a stale smell. Or, if you're providing a sense of relaxation after a hard-won battle, clear the air and bring out the sunshine! Turn those same buildings into long-abandoned ruins covered in ivy and moss, instead.

Descriptive details will help you establish the mood for your players and set their expectations. If you get stuck, focus on the emotion you're attempting to relay and picture a movie that made you feel the same way. Take your cues from those visuals and then pause to let your players wander the area. Once that atmosphere is established, you've laid a great foundation to narrate a location or two.

### Create a Destination

After you set the mood, craft a town, village, or city and insert smaller destinations within its boundaries. You don't need to know everything before your players head inside. Start with the basics and work your way out from there.



To take a bird's eye view, start with a broad topic and get more specific as the players begin interacting with different elements. Places like the town hall, hospital, sheriff's department, and church are focal points that players might hone in on. This method of worldbuilding is just as valid as a larger-scale approach. Often the best way to help a new city materialize is to use a combination of the two techniques—provided you have time.

Here are some suggestions for larger points to think about:

- **Population:** How many NPCs are milling about? The more people you introduce, the more opportunities you have for plot hooks and interaction. Dropping in some characters is also a good way to slow down the players to give you more time to brainstorm.
- **Food:** How do the villagers feed themselves? Farming, hunting, and fishing are activities the players can engage in. Scarcity of food will make folk more desperate than those who are well-fed.
- **Economy:** Do the cityfolk have gold? Or do they trade? The inner workings of the local economy can reveal strangers in a new town or show what the citizens truly value.
- **Defenses:** If attacked, how will the city defend itself? Honing in on siege engines or cannon will help you prepare if your game heads in that direction. It also gives your players a sense of how well-protected the area is.
- **Landscape:** Is the town bordered by a steep ravine or body of water? How is the city laid out? These details can narrow down entry and exit points, establish mood, flesh out modes of transportation, introduce local flora and fauna, and provide a sense of location. A city that's surrounded by jagged rocks will have a different feel than a town that's built on the shores of a tropical beach.
- **Maintenance:** What condition are the buildings in? Contrast a run-down town hall with a public building carved out of marble. Clean city streets will be easier to walk on than dirt paths where the sewage is overflowing.
- **Age Established:** When was your village founded? Older cities can be more established than newer ones, but not always (catastrophes happen). Tie its founding to a historic event like an important birth, natural disaster, or invasion.
- **Leadership:** Is the ruler a mayor, queen, or overlord? The political structure will have a profound impact on many aspects of daily life, and it gives your players an answer to the question "Who's in charge here?"
- **Religion/Superstition:** Do the townsfolk worship a god or goddess? Are there any important prophecies or prevailing superstitions? These customs can breathe life into a town by showing what folks hold dear, how they view the supernatural, etc.

- **Technology/Magic:** How do the citizens get around town? By horse, on foot, or by teleportation? How do they light their homes? The presence of certain types of technology and magic are strong indicators of genre. These can make or break your setting, so proceed with caution.
- **Education:** Can the inhabitants read and write? What languages do they speak? Are they up-to-date on the latest news? Do they acquire knowledge through schools, tutors, or an interface? These things will have an impact on your players as they talk to the townsfolk or hunt for clues.
- **Local Customs:** How do the townsfolk honor the fallen? Do they celebrate any holidays? How do they dress? Customs like these will give your town a unique flavor.
- **Entertainment:** You've probably heard the story about the elf, wizard, and ranger who walked into a tavern . . . More to the point, public places where townsfolk go to have a good time are great locations for the players to meet with the locals and find new connections.

## At Your Table

If you're in the middle of a game, you probably won't have time to answer all these questions or research every last detail in advance. Once you get a general sense of things, let the players be your guide. Set the mood then let them point the way. If it's a setting they're already familiar with, players will take their cues from what they know. In most cases, you won't have to worry about cohesion because players often know more about (or will fixate on) particular parts of the setting than you will.

The trick to avoiding bizarre segues is to start by reinforcing well-established details. This creates boundaries for what you feel is acceptable, which is why sticking to the familiar works when you're under pressure. Follow up by dropping in a fresh detail to make your destination unique. Maybe there's a network of tunnels underneath your town, the chapel is made out of bones, or the townsfolk value fresh milk more than gold.

Another way to build out your world on the fly is to determine what your players want out of the setting. To do that, you need to figure out a way to make that destination meaningful to the plot or characters. A technique I use is to ask leading questions of the players so they direct me to where they'd like to go next. For example, say my group is hunting down a peculiar artifact and they have veered far off the path. Instead of asking them where they want to go next or why they strayed, I will pause and ask them to summarize the story.

Sometimes by devoting a few minutes to rehashing what's happened so far, the conversation gives me the opportunity to reinforce where they've been and what they know, and to remind them of what they might have missed. That recap ties their new direction back to the plot and makes it clearer what I need to build and, more importantly, *why*. By letting the players guide where they want to go next, they become active participants in the world you're building, because they are heading towards a destination of their choosing.

If none of these tips work and you're completely stuck for ideas, you can always default to that old standby: other games, supplements, and reference material. Every GM I've ever known, including myself, has a huge library of games to draw from. Wikipedia can be your friend, too; don't forget to scroll down to the bottom to find a list of additional resources. (The challenge, of course, is keeping your world interesting since so many folks draw from what they can find online.)

In closing, a note of reassurance: Don't feel guilty about worldbuilding on the fly. You're not a crappy GM if you forgot to take an hour and plot out all your locations. As long as your players are having a good time, nobody needs to know you didn't design those fields of lava in advance. Building new cities and intricate ecosystems is a lot of fun, but it's also a huge time sink and can lead to bad habits if you're not careful. Heck, I've got two settings on standby that I spent over 10 years putting together. They just keep growing, and growing, and growing . . . Maybe I should heed my own advice!

# Hitting Rock Bottom

Phil Vecchione

Phil Vecchione began blogging in 2008 as one of the founders of the award-winning [GnomeStew.com](http://GnomeStew.com) GMing blog. As a member of Gnome Stew he has written numerous articles on all facets of GMing over the years. As an author, Phil is one of the leading writers in the area of GMing advice. His work through Engine Publishing has earned a Gold ENnie, as well as multiple ENnie and Golden Geek nominations and an Origins Award nomination. Phil is also a podcaster, a freelance game designer, and owner of Encoded Designs.

Gabe was an up-and-coming burglar working out of Las Vegas who had developed an Oxycontin problem after getting shot on a job in Mexico. He had spent months on a slow downward spiral, and he was just about to hit rock bottom. Gabe was the most unlikely person to teach me about improvisation, but in life we often learn the most important lessons from unlikely sources.

Gabe was Myke's character back in a time when I was a traditional GM, running more "dudes on a map" types of games. In those days, I never considered things like collaborative storytelling or player agency. I did what I had done since I first ran *The Keep on the Borderlands*: I prepped my sessions, laying out stories through which I would guide my players. It wasn't a railroad, but it certainly was some kind of road. Truthfully, I was pretty good at it. Most of the time you could hardly see the road for all my illusions of choice and direction.

None of us knew that Gabe was going to hit rock bottom. The game had started normally, and I was running the group through a set of scenes for collecting intel on the target of their next heist—pieces of artwork owned by a wealthy Russian mobster. The characters were about to meet up to share intel and plan out the heist when Myke dropped a note over my GM screen. Little did I know that this would be a watershed moment in how I viewed, GMed, and wrote RPGs. Had I known, I would have saved the note for posterity.

I picked up the note and read it.

*"Gabe is not showing up to the meeting. Lucy has left him because of his drug problem. He is home crying on his couch."*

I could have ignored the note and shut Myke down; after all, I had plenty of material to cover that day, and this wasn't in my prep. But the note was intriguing, and I wanted to see where this would go. For the first time in the campaign, I didn't know where the game was going.



I was excited, partly anxious about running without notes and partly exhilarated about not knowing how the scene would unfold. I smiled and nodded to Myke.

Turning to the group, I said, “You all meet up at the bar to start planning, but Gabe does not show up.”

That would be the last time I would use my neatly printed session notes that afternoon. Everything else that happened was improvised by the players and me.

Xander and Alistair found Gabe crying on his couch, a plastic bag of pills on the coffee table in front of him. Between sobs he told them how Lucy, his live-in girlfriend, had enough of his using and left. He was a mess. They reassured Gabe that everything would be fine, and that they would get him help. Alistair took the bag of pills and headed to the bathroom to dispose of them.

I said, “Myke, make a Will Save for Gabe. He would not willingly give up his stash.”

Why did I do that? I didn’t plan on it; it came from instinct, but it fit within the context of the story. If he made the save, the scene would wrap up neatly, the crew could find Gabe some help, and we would get back to the Russian heist before the end of the day. Myke failed the roll.

Here’s the thing about Gabe: He was not only a burglar—he was the team’s muscle, the hand-to-hand guy. Panicking over the threat of losing his stash, he sprang off the couch, raced down the hall, and snatched the baggie away from Alistair before he could flush the pills down the toilet. Alistair tried to stop him but received an elbow to the face, and Gabe raced back down the hallway into the living room.

Gabe then came upon Xander, who tried to talk him down, but despite his money and nice apartment, Gabe had been reduced to a junkie whose stash had been threatened. He and Xander began to fight, and the fight spilled into the kitchen. Desperate to gain an edge on Gabe, Xander grabbed a carving knife from the counter, but Gabe disarmed Xander and delivered a few punishing blows. Running out of options, Alistair drew his Desert Eagle and fired, just missing Gabe.

What?! This awesome dramatic scene escalated naturally into a conflict, but that shot had just pushed it into player vs. player territory. This scene needed to end before one of the characters was killed and the campaign went down in flames. My mind raced for something to do next. I felt a rush of adrenaline kick in, the kind of rush that you get when you’re taking a test and time is running out. Then it came to me . . .

“Just then, Lucy comes through the front door, looks at the three of you, and cries out, ‘Stop it!’”

Gabe dropped the knife and the pills and fell to his knees crying. This was rock bottom—the love of his life was watching him fight like a junkie to hold on to his stash. He was done. He gave up the pills and agreed to get help. We ended it there, done for the night. It was the best session of the campaign.

The ironic thing was that just as Gabe’s addiction was about to be treated, I had developed an addiction of my own. That session, that scene, was my first hit.

It was a mind-expanding glimpse that showed me a type of gaming which until then I had never experienced, and with it came a cocktail of neurochemicals that created a visceral rush I call the GM's High. I was like Gabe when he started using: I started dabbling with improvisation. I kept running games the way I always had, but occasionally I would toss in a free-form scene and "take a hit." Some scenes were received well, while others fell flat. It didn't bother me, I was just experimenting.

To feed my addiction away from the table, I sought out RPGs that catered to more improvisational play—games that expanded player agency, the kind of games that would facilitate what Myke had done that day. My searching led me to games that encouraged GMs to let go of tight narrative control in favor of setting up scenes and letting the players determine how to resolve them. I began to collect these games, and soon the traditional hardcover RPG books on my shelf were getting squeezed out by more and more digest-sized books.

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For years my addiction didn't progress much further. I kept collecting and reading those digest-sized RPGs, but I was unable to get my players to play them; those games were too "out there" for their tastes. Unrelenting, I resorted to stealing . . . Stealing mechanics from those "out there" games and grafting them onto my campaigns, that is. Some of these chimaeras were viable, such as when my group and I used *Universalis* to narrate several years of a war within my *Iron Heroes* campaign. Other experiments were not as fruitful, such as when we tried adding *Fate's* Aspects to a *Corporation* campaign.

Subconsciously, the approaches I was learning from those digest-sized games had begun to permeate my GMing style. I started by co-opting concepts from both *Dogs in the Vineyard* and *The Burning Wheel*. At first, I found ways to make those concepts work within other games—and found that they made my games better. I made all choices within the game matter and have personal consequences; no more rolling to open a lock if nothing interesting could happen if they failed the roll. I did more to set up conflicts and scripted less about how they would be resolved. My addiction was in check, I was just a traditional gamer who liked to dabble in a little of that improv stuff.

It's possible that I would have never progressed much further if it hadn't been for *Fiasco*. As I read the rules for the first time, it was as if I had just taken my first hit of meth. This was a game that didn't dabble in improvisation—it swam in it and plumbed its depths. The game's very rules prevented preparation and threw you naked into improvisation and collaboration. I played my first *Fiasco* session, and my mind exploded. That rush of creative energy, of not knowing what was going to happen next, and the feeling of synergy with the other players as you created scenes together, burned itself into my neurons.

I began offering to run *Fiasco* for anyone who wanted to play. I had become one of those “*Titanic* people” who would offer to go to the movies with you just so they could watch you experience the movie for the first time. On the surface, I was running *Fiasco* to share with them the joys of improvisational storytelling, but the junkie in me was just looking for the next fix. I couldn’t get enough of creating a story at the table, reveling in how the mixing of my ideas with others kept producing things that were better than our individual ideas alone.

My craving for improvisation was soon transformed into a full-blown obsession. I would continue to run more traditional-style games, but I started building mechanisms into my prep so that I couldn’t directly control the outcome of a session. These mechanisms were designed to force me to put the fate of the game into the hands of the players, and to make the outcome of the session as much of a surprise for me as it was for them. It worked for a time, but I needed a stronger fix.

Soon I started getting frustrated with my campaigns. I didn’t want to run games with plots where I knew what was going to happen. I no longer wanted to craft complex story arcs and guide players through them. I wanted to create situations, drop the players into them, and then play off of each other as we collaborated to create a story at the table.

They say that it’s the people around addicts who get hurt the most. For Gabe, it was Lucy, his high school sweetheart, driven away by his craving for painkillers. For me, it was my gaming group. Over time I kept pushing the group to play more improvisational games, but most of them weren’t interested. I kept starting and killing campaigns looking for some magical combination that would bring me the type of play experience I was looking for while fitting into their concept of a traditional game.

That didn’t work. Eventually I started another gaming group, and Myke went with me. We found another player, someone who had the same addiction, who was reading the same games I was reading and having the same frustrations I was. The three of us started gaming together. In our first session, we clicked. I had found the play style I was after.

Today, my campaigns are collections of interesting NPCs and conflicts. There is no planned story, just some general direction for the session. What actually happens in that session will emerge through play. The story volleys back and forth among the three of us, being created layer upon layer. I go into each session not knowing where the night will take us, and leave satisfied with how things unfolded.

I still game with my old group, but now only as a player. We’re still playing more traditional games, and it doesn’t bother me anymore because I’m getting my improvisational fix with the other group. I am a functional addict, an improv GM.

Oh, and as for Gabe, he checked into a boutique rehab facility, got counseling, and recovered. He not only reconciled with Lucy, but they were married a year later. They retired to Hawaii after hitting the big score.

Thanks, Gabe.

# Off the Rails: When the Party Jumps the Track

Stacy Dellorfano

Stacy's been GMing about as long as she's been gaming, as her friends were slackers who wanted to play more than they wanted to GM. She cut her teeth in the early '90s on AD&D 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, then caught the bug and played and ran everything she could find. These days, she's the lead curator of a gaming zine *Randomocity*, is writing her own game called *Precious Dark*, and is the founder and director of the online convention [ConTessa](#).

When I first started GMing AD&D games just out of high school, everything was improvised. I was far too impatient and far too eager to do tedious things like prep. As I got older my patience grew, as did my desire to create fully realized stories and worlds. Unfortunately, I fell into the mistaken belief that the only reason I should ever need to improvise is when I failed to prepare. Thus, my improvisation skills atrophied.

What I forgot is every game has some level of improvisation, no matter how much you've prepared in advance. You can never guess where the players are going to go next, and it would take an insane amount of prep to cover all the possibilities. Pushing the group back into your prepared material can feel jarring and too linear, but I got flustered when I was put on the spot, and that led to frustration.

It finally dawned on me that if I went into both my prep and my sessions with the intent to improvise during the game, I'd be less frustrated. Enacting that philosophy also had other benefits, like being able to adapt the plot to the events in the game, which in turn meant the characters' actions had lasting impact on the world. It also cut down my prep time drastically, from 2-3 hours or more to about 30 minutes per session.

The culmination of this came during ConTessa 2013, where I ran the first-ever playtest of a game I've been writing called *Precious Dark*. I'd intended to run a couple of playtests before the convention, but I ended up with too much work at my day job coupled with the time sink of running the convention itself. By the time the game rolled around, I didn't even have the world described in any great detail.

It still ran splendidly. While I was walking the players through the game, mechanics, and character generation, I was also generating a random cavern map online, printing it out, and then keying the map with various encounters for the group to run into. The end product was fun and entertaining, and I learned a lot about my creation.

The biggest thing that I did to make that session run smoothly was to not panic. Next to that, the second biggest thing that made the session run smoothly had to do with the techniques I'd already cultivated thanks to my experiences running a different game months before.

## Why We Improvise

The game was a *Changeling: The Lost* campaign set in a Victorian-era steampunk San Francisco. I had an extraordinary group of experienced roleplayers, probably the best group I've run for so far. Their characters were interesting and dynamic, and they roleplayed every scene. They weren't content to have their game spoon-fed to them, and went out looking for answers to their questions . . . right into places I hadn't prepared yet.

The group was given the task of finding out how an ordinary human was managing to write the goings-on of the local Spring Court into the pages of a newspaper under the auspice of it being fiction. To me, the human himself was so unimportant to the plot that at first I didn't even bother to give him stats. In the story I was creating in my own head, he was a background character that would quickly fade away as soon as they discovered who the real culprits were.

Naturally, it didn't go that way and in retrospect I'm pretty glad it didn't. The group treated Roger (the NPC) like a disconnected-from-reality supernatural creature would—with very little empathy, concern for his safety, or even understanding for his predicament. They crashed his dinner meetings, toyed with his feelings (with two separate women), stroked his ego, and eventually convinced him to confront the very nasty creature that was pulling his puppet strings (though they didn't know that at the time).

Rather than fade in the background, Roger became his own character. The players had already formed opinions of who Roger was in their minds, and it came out in both their in-character treatment of him and their out-of-character discussions. I allowed that to influence me, turning Roger into an amalgamation of what I thought of him as and how the rest of the group saw him. To this day, he's one of my favorite characters.

He wasn't the only thing I improvised in that story, either. After the first couple of sessions of learning to roll with the group's decisions, I stopped prepping entire plots and started pulling together material I could use anytime. I still prepped the beginning of the stories I wanted to tell, but I left the details out with the *intention* to improvise.



In this way, the characters began driving where the plots went. I started stories with a scene or two and they took it away and finished them, often starting new stories in the process. The games almost ran themselves—all I had to do was figure out how the various NPCs would react to the group's antics.

## GM, Know Thyself

Knowing your strengths and weaknesses is an important part of preparing to improvise. It helps to determine the sorts of things that you actually need to prepare. I, for example, love putting time into creating setting-appropriate names for my NPCs. This doesn't come naturally and immediately to me, however. If I were to have to come up with names on the fly, everybody would be named "Bob" and "Susan." So rather than having a bunch of Bobs running around, I make lists of setting- and culture-appropriate names that I refer to whenever I need to create an NPC on the fly.

Really take some time to consider how you GM and in what areas you struggle with when you're put on the spot. The key to not panicking is having resources to call upon when you need them. Knowing what you actually need versus what comes naturally to you will help you focus on the right stuff and not waste any time.

After that, it's just a matter of making lists of the things you have the most trouble coming up with on the fly. Lists of names, places, items, personality traits—anything you find yourself reaching for when you're in the middle of a session.

Services like Pinterest are useful for collecting images of characters and settings, and the Internet is full of random generators of all sorts. Pick your favorites and make sure they're a click away.

What follows, then, are some of the broader strategies I use when I prep. They reflect my tastes as a GM and the "toys" I like to play with the most.

### Just the Hook, Please!

A narrative hook is a technique meant to capture the attention of the reader so that they read further. In a game, this is what catches the interest of the players and keeps them coming back for more. The traditional advice for creating a narrative hook is to do so with action, but good hooks can also be made out of other materials, such as a mysterious package or a whispered secret.

When I talk about only creating the *beginning* of the plot, what I'm really talking about are narrative hooks. Rather than creating entire plots, start by creating a list of hooks. Each hook should be descriptive enough that you can create a whole scene off of just that fragment, but vague enough that the details can be just about anything.

Here's a couple of examples:

*Dark stranger stumbles in one rainy night, bleeding from a gunshot wound and crying out for help. He babbles on almost unintelligibly about something chasing him.*

*A little boy comes by and leaves a note early in the morning, then scampers off into the streets. The note reads: "Come to the forest tonight. The elders are waiting."*

You might be tempted to define the boy and the stranger, or what's chasing the stranger, or who the "elders" really are, but don't. Instead, let PCs' actions determine what happens next and use your lists to fill in the blanks. This way if they're not interested in one particular hook, it isn't the end of the world; just pick another one and move on.

Narrative hooks don't have to come from lists, either. I like to leave lots of seemingly random items in my game with little in the way of explanation. For example, a 14 foot-tall sculpture made entirely of plungers. If the characters decide they want to figure out why the sculpture is there, a hook has been formed. If not, it's just a quirky part of the background, meant to make the place being explored seem weird and creepy.

Sometimes the items are even obvious hooks such as maps, notes, and clues to something worth exploring, like an advertisement for a floating goblin market located somewhere over the bay. Just don't get too attached to your hooks, as many of them are likely to be ignored.

If there's a plot that you really do want to run, break it down into just the skeleton, a checklist of the things the PCs need to complete that plot. This could include information, like "Discover the Spring Queen has recently disappeared," or actual items that need to be retrieved to do something, like creating a magical sword. Just steer clear of describing how various pieces are discovered and leave that up to your hooks, player actions, and improvisation.

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## Rather than creating entire plots, start by creating a list of hooks.

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### Random Table Adventures

I'll close with my most recent technique for quickly building a fun adventure—the random encounter adventure. This works best if your game is set around exploration or adventures that act similar to dungeon crawls—like exploring a haunted asylum. These sorts of adventures boil down to a map and a series of encounters. Rather than defining where everything is on the map, separate out the map and the encounters so they can be used on their own.

I did this recently with my playtest group for *Precious Dark*. The adventure was spawned from an ancient, worn Wal-Mart map that they got in trade after their last exploration. Rather than plot out where everything in the Wal-Mart was, I built a table of 20 encounters that could happen there. They varied in type from meeting an old woman who lived in a house made of all the pink toys to finding what looked like a car crash to the less colorful, but still fun, attack of 4d6 zombies.

Here's an example encounter:

*Whatever food was once left in this area has formed into an enormous black ooze that is slowly shifting side to side in its aisle, looking for organic material to dissolve.*

From there, I added details as necessary. Many of the NPCs had no stats, which was good because the group seldom solved their problems through combat. I went for a "horror movie aftermath" theme, and it seemed to work. The group stayed in the Wal-Mart long enough to experience 10 of the 20 possible encounters.

I'll be reusing the same adventure in a convention game for ConTessa 2014, and I expect a completely different story to be told. If you're a random table buff like me, this is the ultimate in improvisational fun.

## **Go Forth and Make Your Own**

As I mentioned earlier, you should develop your own techniques for handling how you specifically prepare to improvise. Just like the games we play themselves, these techniques should be modified to suit your particular style.

The most important thing that I've learned philosophically about embracing improvisation as more than just an emergency tool is I shouldn't get too attached to any one particular plot or idea. I find that starting a story and then letting my group define both the middle and the ending to that story can be great fun. We've had many great adventures together in just that way.

# The Social Sandbox

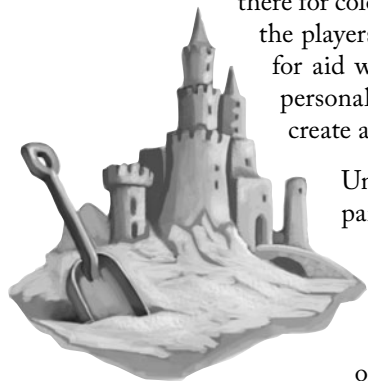
Walt Ciechanowski

Walt Ciechanowski currently works for Cubicle 7 Entertainment and has been a freelance writer in the RPG industry for a decade, or slightly longer than his biggest work in process: raising three wonderful children (Leianna, Stephen, and Zoe) with his beloved wife, Helena. Along with Walt's natural aversion to heavy session prep, Helena was also very instrumental in the development of Walt's social sandbox method (and often in highlighting the pitfalls!). After many nights of fantastic adventures Walt has discovered that the greatest "social sandbox" is his fellow players enjoying each other's company and a hobby they all enjoy.

I don't consider myself a "sandbox GM." I'm not the kind of GM that creates an area for the PCs to roam around in and interact with the various toys that I have strewn about. I'll even go a step further and say that sandbox games just haven't appealed to me since my earliest days of gaming. I really enjoy running campaigns that are more episodic in nature, where stories are being told and the payoffs more frequent. That's not to say that my players don't have choices, as they certainly do—this is gaming, not novel-writing—but I just prefer running more structured campaigns.

That said, I've never been much of a prep-heavy GM either. Each episode in my campaigns tends to be little more than a page of notes identifying the threat and offering a few opening scenes, and then letting the players decide how they want to run with it and finally deal with the threat. Sometimes it seems almost magical how they always manage to stretch a few hastily scribbled notes into a session or two of enjoyment! Upon deeper reflection, I realized that part of the reason they are able to do that is because all this time I've been lying to myself: I am a sandbox GM.

The vast majority of my campaigns focus on a particular location, be it a lord's manor, a starbase, or a seaside resort town. When designing these locations I also populate them with NPCs, people that the PCs are likely to interact with over and over again. While I place a few of the NPCs to foreshadow future adventures, most are simply there for color purposes. They add to the verisimilitude and give the players people to interact with at their discretion, asking for aid when they need it or following a particular NPC's personal thread when they find it interesting. In short, I create a social sandbox.



Unlike the traditional definition of a sandbox campaign, these social sandboxes don't replace episodic adventures. I still come to the table at the beginning of a session with an agenda; I introduce the scenario and I expect my players to run it down to a conclusion. The players, while in the pursuit of the scenario goal, start dragging in local NPCs.

Sometimes it's because they feel an NPC may have something to offer in furtherance of the goal; sometimes it's simply because a player enjoys interacting with NPCs because her PC has little to do at the moment or the adventure has taken them into the NPC's domain. In short, having a social sandbox helps fill even the flimsiest plot with a lot of meaty scenes.

So how does one create a social sandbox? For me the trick is to make each NPC interesting in her own way. One unwritten rule of gaming is that if an NPC is important then she has a name. For a social sandbox, a name is a good start but not nearly enough. I can't expect my players' interest to be piqued because the barista is named Joe or the mayor is named Taniya, so in addition to names I give them both *faces* and *threads*.

Faces are important, because I find they help my players visualize the NPC as well as differentiate him from other NPCs. Names tend to run together, faces don't. One trick I've learned over the years, especially in games where most NPCs are more or less human, is to "cast" an actor or other public figure to "play" the NPC. One of the best things about casting real people is that I'm not limited to the laws of time. I can cast John Wayne or Heath Ledger to play an NPC. Similarly, I can cast Harrison Ford as he was in *Star Wars* rather than *Ender's Game*.

Unless it's really important to me at the outset, I tend to let my NPCs' personalities evolve with their interactions. A side benefit of using a real-world actor is that it colors and influences the players' reactions to the NPC with little work on my part. This is turned up to eleven if the actor is famous for a role that mimics that of the NPC. Using Humphrey Bogart for the local private investigator is likely going to elicit a different reaction than using Tony Shalhoub, even if I'd never intended to use their personalities from *The Maltese Falcon* or *Monk*, respectively.

Usually I tend to go with the flow and use part of the players' expectations to flesh out the character. My Bogart NPC is world-weary and jaded, but maybe he doesn't do the right thing in the end. And while my Shalhoub NPC might not be hyper-competent he may have one OCD trait, like wiping his hands every time he touches something.

More important than the face, of course, are the threads. This is where the social sandbox really shines. With each NPC I place I ask myself "What would make this NPC interesting to the players?" Going into a new campaign I often know the players around the table. I know what gets their juices going and what sorts of threads would interest them. Even if I don't, I can play off the campaign's tropes and the choices a player made during character creation to construct threads that would probably interest them. For example, if I have a PC that considers himself the greatest swordsman in the region and I create a calm, quiet blacksmith that is rumored to be a great swordfighter as well, then I know it's only a matter of time before my player is going to interact with her. They could become allies, rivals, enemies, or even student and mentor. Maybe the NPC knows a few tricks she is willing to teach or she moonlights as a bandit.

Similarly, if I know one of my players loves dramatic “wounded characters” then I can introduce an attractive, charismatic NPC werewolf hunter who’s kind and honorable yet has closed himself off emotionally because of what happened to previous friends and lovers. As soon as I introduce this NPC I know that my player is going to bite (no pun intended—well, maybe) and try to build a relationship with this NPC.

The important thing about these threads is that they are malleable and can be replaced as needed. For example, I may create a friendly barista that craves some adventure in her life rather than preparing lattes for the superhero PCs each morning. Later, when a supervillain team wreaks havoc and almost kills her, the NPC changes her attitude. Now she appreciates her mundane life and does everything she can to protect it. Maybe she points out every weird thing she sees to the PCs, whether a true threat or not. Maybe the shock triggered a latent power in her genes and she’s struggling to come to terms with it while the PCs occasionally pick up a clue as to what’s going on. Or perhaps, more darkly, she joins a political group that wants to regulate and control all super-beings.

All of these examples are designed to be played at the players’ whims and independently but intertwined with the current adventure. For example, the PCs may be tasked with defeating an enigmatic monster that’s threatening the farmers around the city. While one of the PCs is getting his sword repaired by the blacksmith, she makes an offhand comment that provides a clue to defeating the monster. When asked about it, the blacksmith merely shrugs and says she’s learned a thing or two in her long life. The player may let it go at that and play through a couple of adventures before she stumbles on the blacksmith sitting alone in the tavern drinking and obviously bothered by a message she just received.

Along the same lines, an NPC’s thread could change with the campaign. The barista may constantly pepper the superhero PCs about their exploits, wishing she had the ability to join them. For a few sessions she’s nothing more than an amusing annoyance; she may even develop a crush on one of them. After collateral damage from a supervillain attack damages the coffee shop while the barista is working, her demeanor changes. The PCs may not notice it for a couple of sessions, but her coolness soon becomes evident to them. They may even overhear her boss chiding her for coming to work exhausted because she spends her nights with “that group.” A fellow barista may start treating her oddly because of something strange that happened when the two baristas were attacked on the way home from a shift. If the PCs decide to run these threads down over the course of their adventures they may discover her association with the political group and her budding superpower; if not then the NPC can simply fade into the background over time.

While I’ve found that social sandboxes add a lot of fun and flavor to a campaign, I’ve also discovered a couple of pitfalls. The first is simply that the social sandbox overruns the adventures. If everyone is up for it then this can be fun as the campaign moves into a more properly “sandbox” mode, but I’ve had a few sessions where some players were annoyed that a relatively straightforward investigation was sidelined because some players chose to focus exclusively on NPC threads. As a GM that likes the episodic format I try to balance the two as best I can and, when push comes to shove, the adventure always takes precedence. NPC threads can always be picked up later.

Another pitfall is the embarrassment of riches. I've found that once the players get interested in particular NPCs, they start dragging them into their adventures at every opportunity or even over-relying on their expertise. If, in my blacksmith example, the PCs start pointing out threats for the NPC to deal with since "she's the expert," there's a problem. Over the years I've used various methods to counter this, from forcing PCs to spend experience points to add NPCs as contacts, limiting their utility (e.g., "Sorry but she's visiting relatives during this adventure" or "He's an expert on vampires but knows next to nothing about werewolves"), or simply putting them on a bus, whether literally (the NPC moves away) or figuratively (the NPC becomes the aliens' next victim).

In spite of this I find that the benefits of a social sandbox far outweigh the pitfalls. Interesting NPCs make the setting dynamic while bringing a location to life for me and the players. Enabling the PCs to get involved in the NPCs' various threads helps build relationships, spawn interesting tangential scenes, or even create conflicts that enrich the actual adventures that much more.

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**Whenever I'm stuck for a scene or need to make  
one a bit more interesting, I reach into the sandbox  
and bring one of the NPC threads to the table.**

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One final point I'd like to make is that social sandboxes aren't just toys for the players. Whenever I'm stuck for a scene or need to make one a bit more interesting, I reach into the sandbox and bring one of the NPC threads to the table. I find that the players are usually only too happy to bite. Furthermore, when I'm stuck trying to come up with an adventure I often find that a particular NPC thread can be easily upgraded to an adventure. What if the barista craving excitement left her shift with a mysterious patron and went missing? What if the werewolf hunter uncovers a new breed of werewolf and needs assistance? Building on NPC threads often gives PCs ready hooks to jump into an adventure naturally, as they already care about these NPCs to some extent.

In sum, over my many fun years of GMing I've discovered that not all sandboxes are created equal, and that a social sandbox and a more traditional type of campaign complement each other well and provide a great experience at the table for everyone. For me, that's what gaming is all about!

# Why Trollworld Has Two Moons . . . and Other Tales

Ken St. Andre

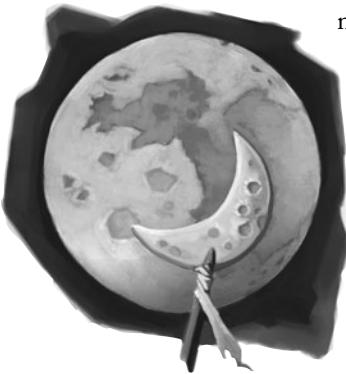
In 1975 Ken St. Andre (born April 28, 1947) rebelled against the earliest version of *Dungeons & Dragons*<sup>®</sup> and vowed to create his own fantasy game that would make more sense and be playable with just 6-sided dice. He did it, too. And so was born *Tunnels & Trolls*, the second fantasy roleplaying game in America, but the first to actually be copyrighted with the Library of Congress. His games include *Tunnels & Trolls* (T&T), *Monsters! Monsters!*, *Stormbringer*<sup>®</sup>, and *Wasteland*. T&T fans are invited to join Ken at [Trollhalla.com](http://Trollhalla.com). Ken is alive and well in Phoenix, Arizona, and he gets by with a lot of help from his friends.

All the best stories begin with “Once upon a time.” So . . .

Once upon a time when fantasy roleplaying was young (probably around 1978) I ran a “Travellers and Trolls” game for my friends Michael Stackpole, Elizabeth Danforth, James Peters, and Daniel Carver. The premise was that they would make *Traveller* characters (using the first edition *Traveller* rules by Marc Miller) and take them into Gristlegrim, my recently created morphic *Tunnels & Trolls* dungeon. They could arm and equip their player characters with anything they wanted from the *Traveller* rules and we would figure out how it worked under T&T rules, but they had to enter my super dungeon, find something, and make it back out alive. That was the setup.

Sabotage caused the good ship *Phoenix* to crash on Trollworld. The ship was not badly damaged, but would need some rare metal (mithril, which they called mithranium) in order to repair the hyperdrive. Sensors indicated that this metal could be found

inside a gigantic cube of stone that towered above the nearby landscape. Cutting through the stone with lasers didn’t work—the rays just bounced off. A doorway was located on the top face, and a party of starship crewmembers went to find the mithranium they needed. In the best tradition of *Star Trek*, this party included the ship’s captain, first officer, chief engineer, doctor, and some security personnel. In those days we all played with two or three characters at a time, so even with only four players we had something like 12 characters entering Gristlegrim.



The details of that epic delve are forever lost, but I remember that I had arranged my dungeon so that they had to start at the top and exit at the bottom. There were six levels to be covered, each level consisting of nine rooms laid out in a 3x3 grid. Each room was a cube 100 feet on a side, and each had one or more doors in the walls, floors, or ceilings leading onward. Each room had a trap, a treasure, or monsters to be defeated. (You can see the kinds of challenges our heroes had to face by taking a look at [Gristlegrim.com](http://Gristlegrim.com).)

We must have played for something like six or seven hours as they fought their way through my maze of traps and treasures trying to find the mithranium they needed to repair their ship. In a swords and sorcery world, they had blasters and vibro-blades. Instead of magic, they had science. In the best *Star Trek* tradition red shirt after red shirt died horribly (ah, what fun it was to revel in monstrous encounters and gruesome death and dismemberment back in those days!), and they gained fabulous treasures in gold pieces, magical weapons, and armor—all of it useless for the purpose of repairing their ship. They left a trail of shattered traps, headless ogres, and disintegrated trolls behind them, until finally they found ingots of mithril on the bottom level. At this time there were only five or six of their party members still alive, but this was the stuff they needed; their instruments confirmed it. And best of all there was an exit door in the very next room they entered.

Oh, they were feeling good as they pried that last door open and prepared to step out onto the surface of Trollworld once more. As GM I thought I would throw them one more curveball to hit. They looked into the night sky (it had been day when they entered) and saw the two moons floating in the sky—the red one and the black (it was really just dark gray) one, and looked at the strange stars and two moons, and did not see their ship anywhere. In the less than three years of roleplaying that we had done, we had never once discussed the geography or astronomy of Trollworld—it wasn't even called Trollworld back then. It was just the world, and if we thought about it at all it was just a mythic analog of Earth—as so many fantasy worlds are. Imagine their shock when instead of seeing one moon—our Luna—in the sky, they saw two. Their first reaction was to think that somehow this magical dungeon they had just gone through had transported them to another dimension, reality, or world, and that coming out through that door would strand them forever.

But the truth is that until the moment that I, as GM, had to describe what they saw outside that final door, I had no idea that Trollworld had two moons either. I made it up—right then and there on the spur of the moment, in hopes that they would draw the wrong conclusion and go back into the dungeon. You see, although they were star travelers, they neglected to ask me for any details about the planet where they crash-landed. They knew it was an Earth-like planet with primitive—pre-spacefaring—technology. You see, back then, it was all about dungeon delving. Nobody was worrying much about worldbuilding yet.

My players assumed that they had come out on a different world, and I did nothing to disabuse them of that idea. They went back into Gristlegrim, closed the door, and tried to retrace their steps back up through six levels of dungeon to reach the top. They didn't make it.

## TOTAL PARTY KILL!

(Actually, we had a lot of total party kills in those days. Grin.)

That was very satisfying for me as GM. I felt that I had won that evening's game.

And it was all caused by a moment's improvisation at the end. Sure, there was plenty of winging it as we went along—the game was apples and hamburger: two totally different styles of roleplaying crammed together for the evening—but the killer blow was in playing against assumptions.

Years later I got into detailed world building. I made up a 100,000 year-long history of Trollworld. I spelled out stuff about the history and cultures of different kindreds. I wrote about the geography and astronomy of the world. And I remembered that one night almost 20 years in the past, I had given my world two moons instead of one. Now Trollworld has two moons called Sar and Sharane, and there are legends that go with those moons—all because of an impromptu ad-lib made one night in an effort to fool my players.



I love roleplaying. I love it both as player and GM, though I will admit that I prefer being the GM to being the player most of the time. (And that's because the GM has to be totally involved in game and story all the time, while the players often have times when they have to sit and wait for others to take their turns.) All games require a certain mental flexibility in order to excel in them, but roleplaying requires the most from its players in terms of imagination and improvisation. Roleplaying really encourages the players to extend themselves. It isn't simply "Queen to King's Bishop 4." Have you ever seen a 6' 6" middle-aged man doing his impersonation of a 3" fairy using a blowgun on a thick-skulled ogre? I have. Wow! Ya gotta love it!

Many people prepare extravagantly for their roleplaying games. They have miniatures; they have sets done in loving detail down to the bloodstains on the dungeon walls. They have handout sheets full of character and object information. They have premade maps, and physical objects to hand their players at the appropriate times. And that is all very cool, and very creative in a crafts-y sort of way, and I have some admiration for GMs who go to such lengths to prepare their adventures for their players. But . . .

To me that all seems like overkill. Too. Much. Stuff!

*Tunnels & Trolls* is my game. One of the mottos of my game is: LESS IS MORE. Less time spent making up characters means more time available for exploring the adventure (dungeon). Less time spent dealing with individual combats means more combats, more exploration, and more gaming in general. Less time spent futzing around with miniatures and drawing a detailed map for the players means more game action in general. (I know that's not always true, and some people really love their minis and need to see if they're really behind a corner or not, but I'm not one of them.) When you have less stuff planned out in infinite detail, it often means you have to do more thinking on your feet, and on the run.

So, if you are on a dungeon crawl, does it really matter if the tunnels are 10' high or 6' high? Couldn't you just set the scene the way you want it to be as the GM? The Old Dwarf Mine is made for short creatures—there aren't going to be any 12' tall trolls in it. But I want trolls! Okay, improvise. The trolls here are only 5' tall, and are of a different species from the common rock trolls of the mountains. Hmm, what are they called? Dwarf trolls? Nah, let's combine the words, and call them "dwrolls." That sounds like the word "droll," which means funny. Okay, these dwrolls grin all the time, and like to play practical jokes—they are malicious, but not really vicious. Make them laugh, and possibly befriend them. All of that was improvised just now for you, dear reader, as an example of what anyone can do in roleplaying.

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## When you're gaming, don't worry so much about the rules and the details. Enjoy the game!

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I'm good at this sort of thing. I have met others who are not so quick on the uptake, but you know what? One improves at something by practicing it. When you are judging a game, you need to give your players time to roleplay their characters, give them chances to improvise their way in and out of situations. Let them do it or make them do it! That's how they get better at it. And the better they get, the more fun it is for everyone in the game. Live-action roleplaying is really good for this sort of thing. One thing I've been learning from John Wick, master of such LARP games as *Houses of the Blooded*, is to never (what never? well, hardly ever) describe and limit the action (and consequences, because ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES) for your players when you have the chance to let them do it for themselves—it's amazing what some players will come up with when put on the spot.

I have never owned a pair of Nike shoes, but I love their company because of their motto: "Just Do It." Seems to me, that's the perfect motto for roleplaying also. When you're gaming, don't worry so much about the rules and the details. Enjoy the game! Get into situations, think about the logic of them, and then roleplay/improvise your way through them. What you try might not work, but that might turn out to be hilariously funny (we've all been there). It's better than dithering around and wasting time. JUST DO IT.

END.

# The Unspoken Request and the Power of Yes

Jess Hartley

An avid gamer who has had the good fortune to make a career out of her love for roleplaying, Jess Hartley has written, edited, or developed dozens of games and game products for companies like White Wolf and Onyx Path. She also pens novels, short stories, and “One Geek to Another,” an ongoing column for *Gygax Magazine* on geek etiquette. In her nonexistent spare time she’s an avid LARPer, crafter, and cook. Jess dwells in the wilds outside of Portland, Oregon, with her husband, daughter, and a menagerie of other exotic beasts.

It’s a GM’s nightmare: You’ve spent hours and hours crafting a setting, detailing the world and its history until it’s as real as you can make it. You know your maps like the back of your hand, every fjord and archipelago charted out in loving detail. The population and economy are solidly established, and every NPC is a fully fleshed-out individual with goals and desires (not to mention a complete inventory of skills and resources). Your plot arc is solid and intriguing, customized to the play styles and social contracts established by the players in your pre-game planning sessions, and you’re confident the story you’re all going to create together will be epic in scale. This is the game that will star in “No shit, there we were” stories for years to come. You sit down to play, and everything is proceeding as expected, when suddenly . . . the game takes a screeching left turn into the unknown.

The characters run straight past all the doors to rooms you’ve painstakingly layered with plot and into the great unknown void you hadn’t fleshed out yet. Rather than charge Castle Villainous, they spend three game sessions interacting with what was supposed to be a random-encounter monster. They negotiate to become minions of the Big Bad Boss, and promote her agenda of world domination rather than smiting her in the name of truth and justice. Or they meet up with the only NPC with the secret to unlocking the ingenious puzzle you spent months weaving for them to unravel—and shoot him in the head.

Everything you’ve built, everything you’ve planned, goes out the window. You are left standing there—slack-jawed and confused—as your players wait patiently for you to tell them what happens next.

And you’ve got absolutely no idea.



German Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder might not have been a role-player, but his statement that “no plan survives contact with the enemy” surely rings true to any GM with more than a campaign or two under their belt. And while your players are certainly not “the enemy,” when they’ve managed to miss every plot hook you’ve thrown them and ventured into every dark place on your map? Well, they can certainly feel like it.

There’s no way to avoid players going in directions you’d not anticipated, or reacting in ways you could have never expected. It’s not a flaw in your game—it’s one of the joys of roleplaying. Together, GMs and players create something that is more than any of them could have come up with individually.

Planning is fantastic, and when a plot and a character group are in sync it’s a beautiful thing. Because of this, when things start to go astray many GMs experience a natural instinct to guide the players back in line. And while small deviations can be gently nudged back into the planned plot arc, sometimes there’s just no way to do so without giving your players the feeling that they’re being railroaded along a storyline, regardless of their choices, actions, or participation. (And, after all, if the players can’t affect the storyline, they might as well be watching a movie rather than roleplaying.)

Still, you can’t prepare for every potential choice your players may take, so what’s a GM to do when your players go off the rails?

Improvise.

Unfortunately, while making things up on the fly seems like a simple skill for the kind of creative spirits who are drawn to GMing, it can be very challenging to do well. When the best laid plans go down the drain, you may find yourself facing obstacles that could intimidate even the bravest soul.

You might be able to handle this through creative use of existing material. You don’t need to instantly come up with fresh material for every new aspect of the world the PCs unveil. Sometimes your planned content can be ported over to the new situation whole cloth. Important clues can be dropped in a new location, if the old one was blatantly ignored. Information can be given to different NPCs (after all, few secrets are truly known only by a single person!) or vital items can change locations (perhaps it was only rumored to have been in the first spot, or perhaps someone—or something—moved it for reasons you can retrofit between the next game sessions).

For times when the prepared material just won’t fit, pre-generated material kept on hand can be tapped to fill in as needed. Not every villager in the town-that-didn’t-exist-until-the-characters-insisted-on-going-there needs their own individual write-up. Generic villagers, space marines, school children, or businesspeople can all use the same template; minor differences in personality is enough to give players the illusion of a fully fleshed-out scenario, even if each of the NPCs’ statistics are the same.

In this way, a small portfolio of NPC archetypes will be enough to serve the improv GM well. A politician template can serve as mayor of a village, headmaster of a university, or a high-ranking military liaison, for example, while a trickster template can be tapped for anything from a crafty tavern wench or pocket-picking street urchin to an Internet con man.

Likewise, generic building interiors, landscapes, magical items, containers and contents, or vehicle templates can be a lifesaver when a GM is put on the spot to detail an unexpected situation on the fly. Many companies sell products such as these to complement their specific game setting, or to suit an individual genre, time period, or location.

Other improvisation challenges, such as remembering made-up-on-the-fly details at a later date, or integrating those improvised bits with existing story attributes, can be handled via simple note-taking and record keeping during and after the game session.

But perhaps the greatest challenge facing GMs in improv situations is creativity—how to proceed in telling an interesting and engaging story once your pre-planned plot has been tossed by the wayside. Fortunately, there's a tool for this as well, and it is one that each GM already has available to them: the players themselves.

The single most important rule in improvisational theatre is: Don't say "no," say "yes, and . . ." No matter what scene you enter, you accept it and add to it. In doing so, you not only validate the premises laid out already and keep the action moving forward, but you build on what has already been established, adding energy, detail, conflict, and depth to the story being told.

This same rule applies to improv in a roleplaying setting. Your players will give you clues about how they want their story to proceed, and this information not only may provide hints as to why they deviated from your planned plotline but also to the kind of story they want to be creating with you. Listen, react, and pay attention to their responses. By creating an ongoing communication loop between yourself and the players, you will find a plethora of creative ideas for improv storytelling that not only ease a lot of the pressure of coming up with new material off of your shoulders, but which are also tailor-made to interest your players—because they came up with them.

Sometimes these ideas will literally be spoken aloud by your players, often in the form of questions:

"Does he look like he's hiding something? Is he drawing his gun?"

"Are there any people around? Can I talk to them?"

"Have I heard of the Star of Gly'thdor? What legends are told about Yrick?"

"Is there anything weird about this? Am I getting a funny feeling?"

During actual gameplay, these are the clearest ways that your players will communicate to you as a GM exactly what sorts of situations they are interested in exploring, what aspects of the world around them are important to their characters, and where they want the story to go. Listen to more than just the questions themselves; think about the types of answers they're looking for.

Do their inquiries seem to indicate that they are spoiling for a fight? Give them a legitimate target. Players who are looking for something to defeat, destroy, or take dominion over may be frustrated by in-depth puzzle stories or long, "boring" social interactions. If they look like they're searching for a dragon to slay—give them a flip-pin' dragon.

If their questions seem to be focused on social interaction, on the other hand, break out the interpersonal roleplay scenes. Depending on the nature of their questions, they may be seeking out social situations because they enjoy that flavor of roleplay (in which case, give them NPCs to build positive and negative relationships with). Tell the story through the characters you control, both helpful and harmful to the PCs. However, they also may be using those character interactions to search for information in an indirect fashion, in which case it's less about the people encountered and more about the knowledge they possess.

If they're asking for more in-depth information, directly or indirectly, it can be a sign that they're looking for a deeper (rather than broader) game. Rather than worrying about what lies beyond the next horizon, concentrate on coming up with richer details about what is right in front of them. Rely on more than just visual descriptions; sensory details like sounds and smells can go a long ways towards fleshing out a setting for those who appear to be interested in the minutiae. And, if you can weave import into the details—maybe close examination reveals that the glowing moss patterns are actually sigils that reveal an important clue for those patient enough to spend time examining them—then you're rewarding your players for exploring the kinds of stories they've told you they want to explore anyway.

And if they seem cautious or suspicious? Give them something to be suspicious about—maybe there really is a hidden passage somewhere in the room, and that seemingly simple farmer might actually be a spy for the High Council. Just because they're paranoid doesn't mean that someone's not out to get them (and honestly, there's no greater joy for a paranoid character than having the rest of the group have to admit that she was right all along!).

By literally responding with “yes, and . . .” to your players' questions, you've given yourself an invaluable tool towards dealing with improvised situations at your roleplaying table. But not all players are comfortable asking questions. Sometimes when things go awry you'll find yourself faced with a wall of impassive faces, waiting patiently (for some definition of the term) for you to spin the story forward for them.

In these cases, actions speak louder than words (especially when the words aren't coming). Take a look at the actions your players' characters took (and the choices they made) that caused them to deviate from your planned storyline. Treat those actions as statements of what the players found interesting enough to pursue, what motivated their characters into action, and what parts of the world (physical or otherwise) they found worthy of exploring.

Just as an effective general must reconsider their tactics when presented with new information about the battlefield, weather conditions, or the enemy force, an effective GM has to be able to think on their feet. When your players' characters have just merrily tromped across your carefully crafted world, over the borders of preparation and development, and headed for the No Man's Land beyond, don't look at it as ignoring your story. Look at it as an unspoken request to build story together in a different direction. By hearing those requests—and saying yes to them—the outcome can be even richer and more satisfying than a plotline you've created on your own.

# It's Okay to Be Weird

## Martin Ralya

Martin Ralya got his start in the RPG industry in 2004 as a freelance writer, and has 25 published credits for Goodman Games, Paizo Publishing, and others. He has written over 1,200 GMing articles on [TreasureTables.org](http://TreasureTables.org) and [GnomeStew.com](http://GnomeStew.com). Martin founded Engine Publishing in 2009, and now works as a writer, designer, editor, and publisher; *Unframed* is Engine Publishing's fifth book. His work has won multiple ENnie Awards and been nominated for ENnies, Golden Geeks, and an Origins Award. Martin lives in Utah with his awesome wife, Alysia, amazing daughter, Lark, and nutty dog, Wicket, in a house full of games.

When you're GMing, it's okay to be weird. It's okay at other times, too (I teach my daughter, age five, that it's not okay to call people weird because it might hurt their feelings, but that it's okay to call *me* weird because it's true and I don't mind), but that's not what I'm talking about here.

I'm talking about running a weird game, saying weird things, and—most importantly—letting your weird ideas come out to play, because the weird ideas are the best ones, the most memorable ones—the most *you* ones.

Normal is boring. The expected thing, while often a useful tool (or crutch) in improvisation, can sometimes be boring. But weird? Weird is rarely boring, in large part because your weirdness is unique to you.

“Weird” is an overused word, though, like “nice,” and sufficiently overused to sometimes be pretty meaningless. “Weird,” as I'm using it in this essay and as it pertains to things you do while improvising in a game, refers to ideas that are bizarre, oddball, quirky, zany, surreal, and idiosyncratic to the point of strangeness. When it comes to improvisation, weirdness is important.

Making weirdness work for you in improvisation involves four things:

- Confidence
- The unexpected
- Instinct
- Indelible moments

Let's unpack each of them in turn and look at why they matter, how each one runs into and reinforces the next, and why they matter in improvisation.



## Confidence

Confidence is a key ingredient in good GMing. The ability to ham it up, act all crazy, and be yourself even when that might make you feel vulnerable or exposed or embarrassed is common to every really great GM. Letting your weird ideas bubble out and into the game is driven by that same sort of self-confidence, so start there: Give yourself the freedom to be yourself, weird ideas and all.

If you've ever started to say something while GMing and stopped yourself not because it was a bad idea, but because it was weird and you worried what the other players would think, that sort of self-censorship is poisonous to good—and enjoyable—improvisation. Don't shoot yourself in the foot. Be confident and allow yourself to be weird.

If you're already a confident person, whether naturally or because you've developed the skill (and it *is* a skill, one anyone can develop), then this will come easy. It's likely as simple as a small shift in your thinking—perhaps you've never considered that being a confident GM (or player) means letting yourself be weird.

But if you don't possess a lot of self-confidence, you might find this challenging. To make it a bit easier, keep these two things in mind. One, the other people at the table are like you in at least one important way (they're fellow gamers), and probably many others; they're more likely than the average person to embrace the weird things you do in the game. And two, throwing out weird ideas and watching them get built upon and developed and played with by others (which won't *always* happen, but will happen a lot more often than not) feels amazing. Once you've felt that magic you'll find it easier to do it again.

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### When it comes to improvisation, weirdness is important.

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## The Unexpected

What makes the game you're running (and probably think of as yours even though it belongs to everyone at the table; this is natural), or your contributions to a game (as a player or GM), unique is *you*. This goes double when what you're contributing is unusual or strange or unexpected—that's what makes it uniquely yours, whatever "it" is (an idea, a plot twist, a snippet of dialogue, a monster).

Unexpected stuff is the heart of roleplaying: We play to see what happens. It can be fun when what we expect to happen is what actually happens; it's satisfying to be right, or to follow a trope or much-anticipated scene or finale to its inevitable conclusion. But I'd argue that more often than not games are more interesting when the participants are surprised often, surprising each other often, and can rarely predict how things are going to shake out at any given moment.

In gaming, weird ideas—the ones only you have in your head, which are weird in different ways than the weird ideas the other players have bouncing around in their heads—are one of the best sources of those kinds of surprises.

For example, which of the following is more interesting?

This: “You duck under the crime scene tape and enter the apartment. The man’s body, half-covered by a bloody sheet, is in the far corner of the living room. Other cops are milling around, and the CSI guy is taking pictures. There’s a strange symbol painted on the wall in blood.”

Or: “You duck under the crime scene tape and enter the apartment. You immediately notice that everything—the walls, the floor, the furniture, what you assume is the victim’s body—is covered in what looks like pink fur. Looking at it more closely, you see that it’s actually some kind of mold or fungus. And it’s singing, faintly—a kind of high-pitched, undulating hum.”

Not only is the weird crime scene more interesting, it’s going to surprise the hell out of your players—and if you came up with that detail on the spot (as I did while writing that example, going with the first thing that sprang to mind) it’ll surprise the hell out of you, too. Your game will go in a different direction when you embrace those kinds of surprises.

Generating that sort of surprise depends on being able to trust your instincts, especially when your instinct is to say something weird.

## **Instinct**

In improvisation, a good rule of thumb is to go with the first thing that comes to mind. Sometimes that thing will be obvious, which is fine because it can be taken in interesting directions by the other players. Sometimes it will seem obvious to you, but actually be surprising to everyone else at the table; this is really nifty. But other times it will bubble up from that strange, secret place where you store—often unconsciously or subconsciously—your weird or peculiar or off-kilter ideas and surprise everyone, and that’s *awesome*.

To get to the point where you’re willing and able to let that weirdness flow out of you during a game, though, you need to have the confidence to be yourself without shame, and you need to embrace the unexpected. That second one can be a challenge if you’re the sort of GM who likes to plan ahead and stick to your plans; it’s less tricky if you’re not running that kind of game, but even then a truly unexpected moment can sometimes present a challenge.

The thing is, in my experience that sort of thing—the unexpected stuff that you didn’t plan for—tends to work out okay. Often better than okay: Those moments can sometimes come to define, or redefine, a game. Even when they prove challenging, you’ll learn from those challenges—whether you succeed or fail.

Trusting in your instincts as a GM and a roleplayer means being willing to fail, to make mistakes. Every GM, from first-timers to grizzled veterans, makes mistakes. I’ve been GMing since 1989, and I mess things up all the time. Gaming is complex and multifaceted and ever-shifting; there are too many fiddly bits for any GM to get them all right all the time. The more you trust your instincts in improvisation, the better at it you’ll become.

And if you can develop that confidence, that willingness to trust in the *flow*, and trust yourself to blurt out something fascinating and surprising and wonderful when pressed, you can create truly indelible moments.

## Indelible Moments

There are lots of reasons a game, or elements of a game like its characters, scenes, places, and individual moments, can be memorable. Think back on your favorite moments from games you've played and I bet you'll identify all sorts of reasons why they're memorable that have nothing to do with them being weird: surviving what should have been a total party kill because of one insanely lucky die roll, being so emotionally invested in a scene that you cried when everything came to a head, or marching your character off to certain doom because it's what she would do (dammit).

But I'm willing to bet you'll also identify some that are memorable precisely because something weird happened. And if you're anything like me, those will be among your favorites. For example, in the late '90s I ran a D&D campaign that (as they so often seem to) involved the PCs visiting a sage to learn about some clue I've long since forgotten. On the spur of the moment, I described the sage's house as being a hut mounted atop a tall pole, accessible via a ladder, and said that the sage himself was covered in shit—literally caked with it from head to toe.

When the PCs (and my players) rolled with it, he proved as knowledgeable as they'd hoped. And as payment, all he wanted was something interesting; they proffered a rather nice teapot, and he shared his knowledge with them.

Going into the scene, I knew nothing about this sage. Why I said—not *decided*, because I wasn't making a conscious decision, I was just talking—that he was covered in shit, that he lived in a hut atop a pole, or that he eschewed money in favor of odd trinkets, I have no idea. I let the first weird idea flow out of me and into the game, and followed it up with a second one and then a third, and somehow it worked.

More than 15 years later, I remember very few things about that campaign, but I remember that scene vividly. I remember what it was like to play this crazy sage, how he talked, the expressions on my players' faces, and how much fun everyone had during those few minutes. And more importantly, so do my players. If you walked up to any of them today and asked if they remembered “that weird sage,” I guarantee that they'd be able to walk you through the scene like I just did.

## Weird is Wonderful

We all have weird ideas. The best GMs use them, the most memorable games are full of them, and the more often you use them in your improv the more fun you'll have at the gaming table.

Use the weird ideas you already have. Designing a world? Work in all that strange stuff that's been kicking around in your brain for years. Planning a scene? Build it around that idea you had last week, the one that made you go, “Nah, that'd be too weird.” Coming up with an adventure? Stick in your latest weird idea, the one inspired by your favorite B-movie, and see what develops around it in play.

More to the point when it comes to improvisation, use the weird ideas you get. If you're adding depth to a character you didn't expect the PCs to interact with, let your mind wander and latch onto the first oddball thing you come up with. When you get the urge to blurt out something strange and surprising in-character, blurt it out. If you're winging it and going with the flow, don't put on the mental brakes—be weird and see where your players take it.

Roll with the weird. Embrace it. Make it yours. It's more than just okay to be weird: It's fantastic, and it's an amazing tool for driving creative, memorable, and deeply satisfying play.

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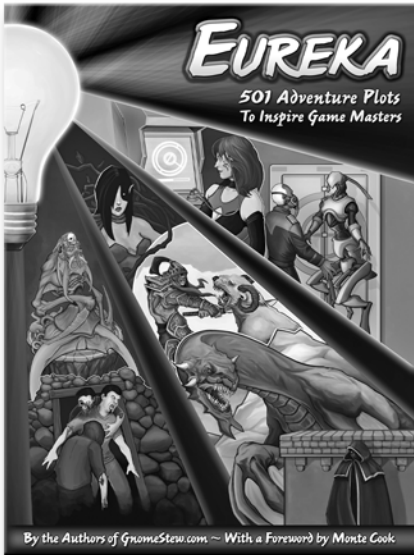
Working with talented, creative people is one of my favorite things about being a publisher, and *Unframed* was no exception: Awesome people made this book happen. For author bios, please see the first page of each essay; bios for the other contributors appear below. My thanks to everyone who worked on *Unframed*! —Martin Ralya

**Robert M. Everson**, aka “Spenser,” is a 30th Level Proofreader for the bloggers at Gnome Stew. He’s been gaming for over 30 years, has a voracious appetite for reading, and would love to publish one of his own game designs some day. This is his fourth collaboration with Engine Publishing, having previously worked with them on *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game*, *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master’s Guide to Session Prep*, and *Odyssey: The Complete Game Master’s Guide to Campaign Management*.

**Darren Hardy** has spent the last year rolling the dice, and continues to be happy with the results spiritually, professionally, and socially. Now living and working in Midland, MI, he loves being much closer to family, friends, and fun activities. He enjoys exploring new places, kayaking, cooking, Hangout gaming, board games, and helping others with their projects.

**Daniel Milne** is a gamer who makes his home in Utah. Whether it’s played on a table, through a console, or over the Internet he’ll be there to give it a test run. To date, he has thwarted 12 alien invasions, been orphaned 85 times, and saved the world from certain destruction on 163 separate occasions. Despite this, he has never rescued a princess.

**Christopher Reach** has been developing illustrations and designs for science fiction and fantasy games, web applications, and businesses since 2009. He spends his downtime biking, gaming, coding, and reading from his home in exotic northern New Jersey. To learn more about his work or contact the artist please visit his website ([www.ChristopherReach.com](http://www.ChristopherReach.com)).



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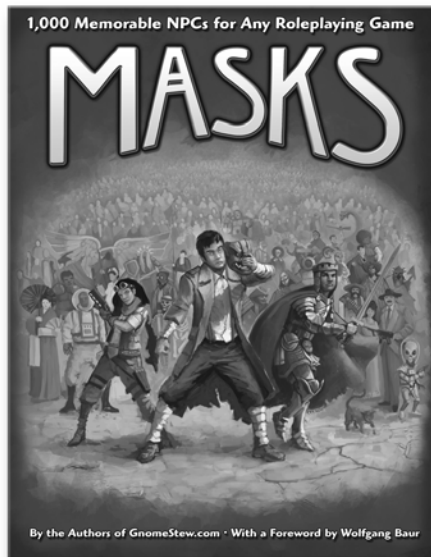
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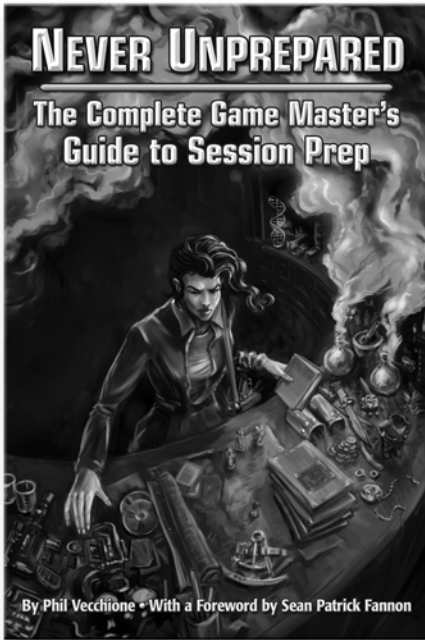


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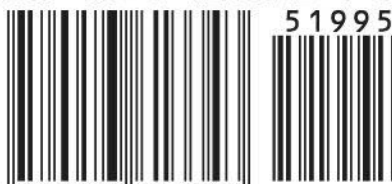
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