
HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

RUNNING A ROLEPLAYING GAME IS WORK. IT'S FUN, IT'S REWARDING, IT STRETCHES YOU AND MAKES YOUR MIND FUNCTION IN NEW, EXCITING WAYS... BUT IT'S WORK. THAT'S OKAY. WORK IS GOOD. ANYTHING WORTHWHILE REQUIRES EFFORT AND ATTENTION, AND IN GAMING ESPECIALLY, MORE EFFORT AND ATTENTION IS LIKELY TO YIELD A BETTER OUTCOME.

If you've never run a game before, it can seem overwhelming. It's not. I don't know you, but I'll go out on a limb and assert that people dumber than you have run successful games. Running a game requires effort, but it's not something so esoteric and complicated that only a brain surgeon can do it.

The GM's duties boil down to this: When the players show up and their characters are ready, you present them with a situation. They react to the situation. You present the outcomes of their reaction. They react to those outcomes. Lather, rinse, repeat. The whole art of running games comes down to creating settings, stories and circumstances, then altering them as the PCs go through — altering them in ways that are fun, challenging, exciting, and which open new opportunities for continued play.

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

THE GM'S BASIC DUTIES

Here's the meat—and—potatoes stuff: Plot, character, conflict. If you can accomplish these practical tasks, you're there, or at the very least you have an excellent start.

GMs who fail at these can be termed 'incompetent'. I'm not saying that to be unkind, but to distinguish them from the 'dysfunctional' GMs I'm going to discuss later. If you take it easy, pay attention and keep everything in perspective, you should be able to run a game functionally *and* competently.

THE PLOT

A story is when things happen. Cool characters alone do not make for a good story, even if they're in a cool setting. Here, I'll show you.

"Tarzan and Sherlock Holmes walk into a bar. They have a few drinks, talk about last night's game, and then they go home."

That's not a story. That's not even a *joke*, because it doesn't have a punch line. Plot is the punch line.

"Tarzan and Sherlock Holmes walk into a bar. Holmes says to Tarzan, 'I bet I can predict what you'll order if you let me examine your hands.' Intrigued, Tarzan complies. Holmes squints at Tarzan's fingernails, turns to the barkeep and says, 'He'll have seven shots of Scotch.' 'That's incredible!' says Tarzan. 'How'd you know?' 'Because you had the same thing last night, you lousy drunk,' Holmes replies."

A QUICK LEXICON

On the off chance you don't know these acronyms...

PC: Not "Personal Computer" or "Politically Correct" but "Player Character". A character controlled by a player, meaning, not you. The PCs should be the most important characters in the game, though not necessarily the most powerful.

GM: "Game Master" or, if that's too S&M sounding, "Game Moderator". The person adjudicating the rules, presenting the plot and deciding the outcomes after the PCs make their choices. In other words, you.

GMC: "Game Master Character". Any character you control, that is, not a PC.

Now you've got conflict (can Holmes predict correctly?) and dialogue and interest and even a *dénouement*. ("Dénouement" is French for "Everything gets explained.")

In this case, the characters drove the plot, because Holmes made his bet and initiated the conflict. You can't always rely on your PCs to do that, so as a GM it's a good idea to have an event developing — or even better, a couple of them.

Events for a plot should focus around a conflict (see below). They should involve repercussions that the characters care about.

PAPER TIGERS

Every so often, I like to throw some obnoxious and obviously inferior opponent (or opponents) against the PCs. Someone they can handily defeat without major consequences. Someone, in other words, who serves mainly as a foil so that the PCs get a chance to show off how buff they are.

The no—brainer example is the bully in the bar. He picks a fight, won't take no for an answer and winds up supine in the gutter with his teeth broken and his kidneys bruised. Many games offer a more social milieu, so the example might be a sneering lecher who gives the PCs a chance to befuddle and distract him so they can get the naïve coed (or other victim) out of the way.

There are no big moral issues here. There's no massive, plot—reinforcing reward. It's a chance for the PCs to show off, pure and simple.

Is this pandering? Well, a bit. But people play games because they're fun, and being a cool, competent guy who can handle himself adroitly is fun. One core element of gaming is escapism, and easy victory is a nice escape.

The problem lies with diminishing rewards. Throw up a paper tiger for a character once every three sessions or so, but no more than that. Make sure every character gets one periodically. Don't overdo it and — most importantly — make sure they don't interrupt engagement with real tigers.

If every problem is easily resolved, it stops being a story about a cool guy doing neat stuff: It becomes an unstory, because the character never encounters a task that lives up to his abilities. If your players start taking success for granted, it's going to stop feeling like success.

Paper tigers remind characters that they're competent and can get stuff done. But they're intermittent rests between bouts with durable opposition.

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

The characters should be able to alter the outcome, but it shouldn't *always* be easy.

The rough outline of plot starts with some sort of introduction or story insertion or "plot hook". It progresses through rising action, arrives at a climax, and then there's falling action.

The Hook

This is what gets the players interested and, through them, the characters. To motivate characters, it helps to hold out rewards or threaten punishments, or both. If they're going to miss out on the carrot *and* get swatted by the stick, it's easy for them to tell what you want them to do. Great, right?

Yes and no.

I ran an informal online poll about bad GMs and one frequent complaint was about 'railroading' — where the GM has a very concrete idea of where the story is headed and permits no deviation. Characters who act predictably get rewarded. Those who don't are humiliated, robbed, damaged or otherwise schooled.

While the GM is in charge of the world and what happens in response to the PCs' actions, that doesn't give authority over the PCs' choices and decisions. This means you. It's essential to respect the players' free will when they're deciding how their characters think, feel and act.

On the other hand, a GM who shows up with no preconceived ideas can't be accused of railroading, but she can be accused of apathy. Ideally there's an interplay between the characters' desires and your plots, but you have to find a balance between cramming them into a script, and having nothing for them to do.

Luckily the gray zone between "strict control" and "nothing at all" is quite broad. The solution is to create a situation that's unstable, introduce the characters, and let things play out in a manner that feels natural. Appeals to self-interest are good: So are insinuations of threat. Using both may be overkill.

The hoary old gaming cliché is that a stranger approaches the PCs in a bar with a treasure map. This became a cliché because it works: The appeal of gold and violence is enough for many characters. But let's see if we can't improve on it, hm?

The way you bait the hook can make it more appealing, and to find the right bait you need to look at the characters' backstory.

'Backstory' means 'everything that happened to the characters before the game began.' Sometimes the GM provides part of the backstory. ('For this game, you all have to be in the starport at Ursa Minor, and you all have to know and get along with one another.') Sometimes the GM provides *all* the backstory. ('You're all the children of a doddering and aged king. He has to choose *one* of you to inherit the crown, but has not yet made his choice.') Sometimes the GM doesn't provide a thing. If you go that last route, it's perfectly fair to tell the players to come up with a rationale for why they trust one another and are working together. Monitor the character generation process — you're the objective observer who can spot the character that's going to cause problems. ("Since the others are all playing loyal soldiers of the Empire, having a noisy insurgent ideologue in the party may not work." Conversely, "You both want to make highly personable tactician characters, and the party doesn't have anyone with much medical skill. Can you re-work a bit to address these issues?")

Many games gloss over backstory, and many GMs let the players write it but then don't pay much attention. That's wasteful. By examining what the players already decided about their characters' lives, you can suss out what issues concern them and what sort of game they want to play. For instance, if *all* your PCs are charming, sociable, control many lackeys and servants, and have low-to-absent combat skills, you're going to have some unhappy players if every problem requires a violent resolution. Conversely, if you give them plenty of chances to outwit, outmaneuver and downright lie their way into power, they're playing the game they want.

A good hook, then, has the following.

- Promise of reward OR some threat that must be met
- A tie in to the character's backstory

I'm also going to suggest it should have

- An obvious way to get involved
- Flexibility for when the characters ignore it or approach it obliquely

Those last two are pretty important, even though you'll only need one of them. If your plot hook is set on a far away island and the

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

PCs have no boat or money to hire one... well, who would blame them if they shrug their shoulders and ignore it?

It's also possible that even the juiciest hook gets overlooked. Have a couple others on hand — preferably a plan B that can't be easily ignored. If the PCs decide that going out to the spooooky, probably haunted castle isn't the game they want to play, well, fine. *Don't take it personally.* Don't get upset and, especially, don't punish them somehow. They control their characters, so if they don't want to go poking around some manky dungeon, have an alternative. See if they won't nibble on something that keeps them in town, again something tailored to their interests.

No matter what plot they engage, try to be prepared for the unexpected. Players are creative types sometimes, maybe as creative as you, and they try to find their way around things in a way that hurts them least and helps them most. This is addressed at length under "Conflict" on page 5, but the same advice from there applies here.

Rising Action

Everything that builds up to a showdown and increases the tension is called "rising action". As a general rule of thumb, it consists of the characters making a gain or suffering a setback. You want your rising action to consist of a mix — some triumph, some failure — but you don't want to predetermine this. *You do not want to decide, in advance, that the PCs succeed at the first encounter, lose in the second, succeed in the third and fail in the fourth.* That's railroading at its most repugnant, even if you do it well and it seems natural to them.

Instead, I recommend a variety of encounters that you feel are balanced, with possible rewards and obstacles arising naturally from either success or failure. By 'variety' I mean situations that call for different skills — some social, some physical, some combative, some puzzling and so on. By 'balanced,' I mean that if you characters react with average intelligence and get average rolls, the outcome depends entirely on random chance. If they react really cleverly, they should overcome. If they're stupid, well, that should have fallout. All this is part of conflict, so — again — it's covered there, on page 5.

If your characters are waltzing through every encounter, tighten

things up, especially in the beginning when you're getting your bearings with your PCs. Similarly, if they keep failing, maybe you're overestimating their abilities and need to ease things up a bit.

Let's suppose your proposed plot is "small abandoned fortress is infested with zombies." A member of the local gentry, Sir Hook, has inherited the fortress and its contents after the death of an aged relative. He sent a servant to check it out and he never returned. Rather than go himself (the old place was *dreadfully* drafty and out of the way) he'd like to persuade some hardy and trustworthy people to do it. But he'll settle for the PCs.

You expect the zombies to be pretty tough — a notch or two above a paper tiger — but nothing the party can't handle, even with a few bad rolls. Your plot is, they get rid of the undead and either claim the fort or they take off with its contents. Furthermore, the source of the zombies is a demon that's gathering strength nearby. Your plan is for that demon to be the main antagonist.

You might decide to throw up some roadblocks before the characters even reach the castle proper — just in the interest of building up gradually and letting the players get the hang of their new characters. First, they encounter a washout where a flooded river has swamped the road, stranding them with a garrulous local. If they can figure out a good way to get themselves over the river, they save some time. If not, they have to go miles out of their way. If they can get themselves and the peasant across, she's grateful and provides good information about the fortress.

Second, they run into some suspicious locals who dislike outsiders and try to bully anyone who looks weak, or maybe steal from anyone who looks strong. Dealing with the ne'er-do-wells successfully gets them off the PCs' backs permanently and earns them some respect from decent folks. Failure (which includes brutally murdering them) alienates the same good people.

The final challenge is when they get to the fortress and get their first inkling about zombies. Handled carefully, they can get in a good position and get tactical advantages. Handled badly, it's a slugfest.

See how this works? Events crop up in their path, with potential and risk, but nothing that's really derailing or seriously deadly... yet. You work up to that.

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

You can stretch out the rising action for some time. If the climax comes too soon, it won't stand out as special. If you delay too much, though, your players are going to get bored waiting for it. The optimal amount of rising action varies from group to group, so I can't give you a perfect number of sessions. Just be aware that your particular players might have wanted more or less.

Climax

The climax is the big finale in which the characters uncover enough of what's going on that they can take decisive action. It is often a great idea to set up the circumstances and then hand the resolution to the players. If you have a preconceived notion of the Right Way to handle the major issue, you'll resist different solutions that might be as good or (let's face it) *better*. If you think the Evil Overlord should be shown the error of his ways by means of a space armada and that the climax should be the clash of a thousand starfighters, you may be cheating your players of a different sort of satisfaction. Maybe they want to *talk* to the Evil Overlord. Maybe they think he's not so much evil as misled. Maybe it would be a better, more fun, and more satisfying game for them if they could redeem him and persuade him to step off his dark path.

For the zombie castle example, perhaps the PCs sent a messenger to Hook requesting backup, while they engaged the enemy. Then they proceeded to lure the zombies into a series of deadly traps, dispatching some and chasing off the others without getting too badly hurt. They figure Hook will show up first thing in the morning to find what a top-notch job they've done, and then he and his soldiers can do the busywork of chasing down the stragglers that fled into the wilderness. The sun's going down and no way are the PCs heading into zombie-swamp after dark.

That's when they see that the zombie-swamp is coming to them... with reinforcements.

Here's the climax: Can the PCs defeat the zombies? Do they need to take them all out, or is it enough to survive the night until the cavalry arrives in the morning? Did their messenger even get through?

You expect your characters to hole up in the fortress and play at "Night of the Living Dead" until the reinforcements they sent for

arrive. But it's also possible that they try to take the fight to the zombies, or that they make a run for it. Whatever they do, if it's the climax it has to be tense, exciting and constantly in doubt. If they flee, it has to be a thrilling chase scene until they get to the village... and then what happens? Are the villagers up to the challenge of fighting a horde of the undead, or have the PCs just doomed them? If they defend, can they hold them off despite exhaustion and limited numbers? If they go out to battle, do they have a prayer in the world?

The climax should be the biggest conflict in a plot line, and you don't want to clutter up a climax session with much fallout from side-plots or rising action stuff. Focus in on the big showdown or debate or battle or escape. Test your PCs to their limits, and — here's the important part — don't pull your punches.

When I say 'don't pull your punches' I don't mean you should give your PCs an impossible challenge that inevitably kills them. You play the role of their enemies, but you are not their enemy. Your job is not to beat them, but to give them a fair challenge.

Part of the fairness is that the bad guys may win. If the PCs fail, don't torque coincidence so that they escape, and don't have some GMC show up to save their bacon (and make them look like chumps). Many players would actually rather have their characters go down to death fighting than get bailed out in a humiliating fashion by some pet character controlled by the GM. Better, many would prefer to leave their character in an untenable position if it saved the other characters. You can't really ask for a better end to your character's story than "He died saving everyone else."

Sometimes though, characters die stupid and pointless deaths. Depending on your feelings and your judgment of the game, you may opt to spare characters who died only because some lucky creep rolled an absurd string of unlikely successes. On the other hand, maybe you're just fine with characters dying pointlessly — especially if it encourages the other characters to play through their grief, and if it serves the plot.

By the same token, if they *win*, let them win. If you snatch their victory away at the last second by some petty and intrusive GM plot crank, do you think they'll be happy showing up to next week's session?

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

I'll be honest, I can't imagine what would make a GM want to abuse his players that way, but in that poll I ran, that was a common complaint — that the GM was cheating so that the characters always failed, or always failed if they didn't do exactly what the GM wanted. If that sounds like fun to you, I don't know what to tell you. Maybe running games isn't something you should do.

The end of a story should be like the end of a great novel or a great movie: Everything comes together, creating untenable tension, and then it snaps and reshapes events. If it's a good climax, no character comes away unchanged. That should be your goal.

Falling Action

At the end of the movie "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" you get brief blurbs explaining what happened to everyone after graduation. That's falling action. After the climax, everyone adjusts to a new position. Here's where rewards, both in-game stuff like wealth and gratitude, and rules-stuff like experience points, get parceled out and explained. This is a calmer sequence where the characters get a chance to work out how they feel about what happened and display that. It's also the time to plant seeds for future adventures.

Let's assume the characters bungled zombie castle. They bailed out and the zombies followed, killing one character after he fell off his exhausted horse. The others got as far as the village and had time to panic the residents before the hordes showed up. The PCs and the peasants managed to repel the zombies but only at the cost of terrible casualties. Now the zombies are back in the fortress, the village is decimated and Hook shows up to a huge mess. He's not happy.

Maybe the characters decide to just get the hell away — they've done enough, the peasants hate them and it's time to cut their losses. Maybe they're angry at Hook for sending them in unprepared. Maybe they think he should compensate them for the zombies they *did* wipe out. Or maybe they're devastated by their failure and want to make it right, doing everything they can to help battle the scourge and rebuild the village.

Depending on how they play it, they could regain the villagers' trust, or make an enemy of Hook, or rally back to defeat the zombies (and ultimately the demon responsible). If they do make a comeback, it's going to be far more satisfying because of this setback. But

the beginning of the comeback story emerges in an ending of bitter defeat.

CONFLICT

Here we come to the brute, beating heart of it. Conflict arises when peoples' desires run into obstacles. The obstacle can be another person ("I'm in love with a cruel man's daughter and he hates me") or nature ("This grain is going to spoil if we sit out that storm in the harbor, and the famine was bad when we left") or some other circumstance ("I'm really poor, and I'd prefer to change that").

The samples above, by the way, are all external conflicts. That means they're something outside of the character being thwarted. There are also internal conflicts, where a character is literally her own worst enemy. Internal conflicts arise when a character has to make tough decisions between two bad outcomes ("If I lose this battle, my homeland may fall to the invaders, but the only way to win is by killing my long-lost sister") or has to choose between two conflicting goods ("I love her, but if I marry her I'll never be able to inherit the crown, and she'd never accept the role of 'mistress'.")

How does a character overcome challenges? Is she direct and blunt? Does she seek the path of least resistance? Does she always try to choose honorably? Does she always seem to go for the most destructive, sadistic, harrowing option? All these things are a chance to be informed about a character, and all these things give insight into what game the player wants to be playing.

Your job is to provide opposition. Not every problem has to be profoundly difficult — go back to page 2. for my little essay on cakewalks. But certainly some challenges should be, you know, *challenging*. Dealing with failure reveals as much character as capitalizing success. More, probably. Don't be afraid to allow the characters to fail if that's how the dice fall out. (Players, don't be afraid to fail.) On the other hand, don't force them to fail by providing obstacles too powerful to overcome. Or if you do, do so because you're setting them up for grudgy rematch at the climax: That's perfectly legitimate. How many movies have the hero get beaten like an American cricket team in the first reel, only to get payback sevenfold at the end? Just make sure the players understand that the characters get another shot... if they earn it.

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

It's not impossible, of course, that your players may have their characters do something really stupid. If you've made a point of establishing how elite and deadly the Imperial Crimson Guard are, and two of your PCs decide to charge them, with no strategy, for no very good reason... well, that's like touching a clearly labeled electric fence. In all likelihood, what's going on is something outside the game. The players are bored and want to stick it to you, see if you're going to hold to your cherished notion of the game or if you'll give them a break. If you want my opinion on this behavior, go read the section on "Leadership". Or maybe the essay on how to be a player. There's a dynamite section on kicking out troublemakers.

A pointlessly easy adventure is just as stupid and ultimately boring as a pointlessly hard one. Present them with middle ground. Make sure they know when they're probably getting in over their heads — or that they can get out mostly intact, anyhow.

Now, there's a big difference between a player who's being contrary (or stupid) and one who's simply doing something you didn't expect. The first can take their lumps. The second you need to respect. For example, a group of PCs may meet the character you've designated as the game's major antagonist... and they may try to *join up with him*. What do you do?

The knee-jerk reaction is often denial. "Dark Lord Soanso isn't hiring!" But why not? Why not let them be part of the problem for a while? Maybe even for as long as they like. Perhaps you can use their service to show them, up front, just how horrible Lord Soanso is. ("Well then, just break her legs and toss her off the cart! I'm a busy man, dammit!") If they get into it, clearly they want a game of being evil. You can deal with that by letting them get their ya-yas out until eeeeeevil just isn't fun any more. Then you can put out feelers about a redemption plotline, which could turn out to be all the more interesting for having trolled the depths before the slow climb to the heights.

It doesn't have to be a big moral curveball either. Perhaps you're planning a lively and lengthy game of deadly cat-and-mouse through the thickly forested emplacement of the Jungle Monks of Ereg, but your PCs decide, "Hell, we've got those crazy monks bottled up. Only two ways out of the jungle valley and we're

ensconced at both. I ain't goin' in there. Let's just starve 'em out a couple months, see if they crack and, if not, go in after the leaves fall when we can see what the hell's going on."

This may be disappointing to you if you planned on that jungle hunt being the climax of your game. You can change-up on the fly though, and have the monks counterattack one of the choke-points after the first month of blockade. Don't feel like you have to pull some alternate climax out of your sleeve: By going for a waiting option, your players are showing you they're willing to put up with more rising action. They're willing to gamble setbacks (as the increasingly desperate monks fall back on guerrilla tactics or unleash secret weapons) on the hope of getting an advantage. That's fine. Save the climax for *next* session after you've had a chance to think of one.

When the players do something unexpected, don't punish them. Understand that they aren't trying to screw you. They're just trying to resolve the conflict, and you should be commended for creating one challenging and realistic enough that they're thinking creatively. Their unexpected action is a gift to you, like a reward for being a good GM. It's your chance to confront the unexpected — the same sort of excitement you've been giving them. Cherish it.

RULES RESOLUTION

As GM it's your duty to drive the rules. You decide when a character can do something as a matter of course, when it has to be rolled for, and when it's simply out of the question. You evaluate penalties and, if your game's typical, you hand out experience points at the end of the session.

This is a lot of power.

(You also decide how all the GMCs react to the PCs' actions, which is also a lot of power, but that's covered later.)

Because you have this power over the game, it behooves you to use it wisely, in the pursuit of everyone's fun. I'll say again that it's not your job to beat the players. Let's face it, if you want to beat the players — and by 'beat the players' I mean 'look like a jackass and ensure that your friends are miserable so you can ride some petty authority trip' — you will.

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Instead, it's your job to keep the playing field level and to keep the game interesting. Most games have tools built in for making things easier or harder. You can use these, not only in response to what's being tried, but in reaction to what's at stake and how much it matters. You may decide that a particular fact a character's trying to find in a library is both rare and irrelevant. In that case, you might want to just tell him he can't find it and move the game along. But if he's really adamant about wanting to know, you can give him the fact as a freebie — and move the game along.

Here's how you decide how challenging any given task should be, in no particular order.

- How difficult is it within the game setting?
- How big is the reward?
- Does it make the character look cool?
- Will it derail the plot without providing new opportunities that are as good?

Things that are more difficult according to the logic of the setting should have rules penalties — obviously, lifting lead bricks is harder than lifting clay bricks. That's the 'objective' difficulty.

If the reward for success is disproportionately large, you may want to raise the tension by making it more difficult.

Alternately, if succeeding makes the character look cool and isn't going to ruin some other player's plan, or bring the plot to a premature and less exciting end, you may want to keep it simple.

The plot consideration takes the most GM finesse. You don't want to *cheat* — either to ensure success or preclude it. But at the same time, you want the challenge to feel real and urgent. By keeping your finger on the pulse of the game, you can know when it's time to make things harder and when it's time to make them easier. Your first duty is to enable the players to tell a good story with their characters, not to give them a cakewalk or a steady diet of failure.

It's also a GM's job to understand the rules. When players have questions, they're going to ask you. You do not want to end up pawing through this book in the middle of the action while you refresh your memory about how somebody's "Fleshly Plasticity" power works.

If the mechanics seem too fussy or clunky to you, by all means change them. Altering rules so they suit your tastes is as honorable and reasonable as cutting the garlic in a recipe if garlic makes you gassy. Most of the time, this sort of tinkering boils down to deciding how much authority you want to cede to the rules. This is a matter of personal taste — just make sure your players know how it's going to go. If you're slanting simulationist, (meaning, you let random factors filtered through the rules be the ultimate arbiter) then study! Make sure you know how the PCs' skills or abilities or devices work so that you're consistent when they use them, or when they try some fancy maneuver. If you're going narrative (meaning, you apply your common sense and use the rules to sculpt outcomes), be really clear communicating to the players what they need to roll and get for this particular action, and strive to be as consistent as you can. Nothing ruins the fun of a game as much as the feeling that the GM is being controlling and arbitrary... unless it's a GM so hesitant that she's looking up rules in the big book every twenty minutes.

I'm not saying you shouldn't ever consult the manual during play, but try not to break tension or interrupt the flow of play to do it. Games have tense, fast-paced times and they have down times. If you must check the book, do it during down times.

CHARACTER

The players control the main characters. You portray everyone else. This is a big job. To make it easier, remember that not every stablehand, or even every head honcho they meet, has to be as intricately detailed and elaborate as a PC. It's okay for a character to be sketchy or two dimensional if she's only involved for a few scenes and then dies to show how the monster works. The players can project a rich inner life onto that GMC if they want, but by and large they're more concerned with their own problems.

For the purposes of running GMCs, we can break them into four categories: Major characters, minor characters, antagonists, and extras.

Extras are people who are basically setting. They don't need to have individual names, they don't need stats, they're there to take the PCs' hats and answer questions about where the bathroom is. In a fight, they're unworthy opponents, and any marginally

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

competent fighter should be able to cow or clobber them without even rolling.

Minor characters get names because they recur and have some stake in the plot. The bombastic settlement administrator who could be an ally or a pain in the neck is an example here: He's

an element of plot, and he has a personality, and the PCs have to deal with him as an individual. Minor characters may or may not need stats, but they certainly don't need a full character sheet — a few simple notes like "Make inspiring speech, 7d" and "Resist fast talk and flim-flam, 8d" may be enough for that mayor. To portray

KEEPING THE VILLAIN ALIVE

PCs tend to play for keeps. If someone gets in their way, their instinct is to instantly escalate to lethal force. On the surface, this looks like very sound tactics — nip a small problem in the bud before it becomes a large problem.

But it's poison for plot.

The best plot is one in which there is one unified issue or problem or enemy and, over the course of much effort and despite many setbacks, the characters either overcome it (and have a happy ending) or succumb to it (and die in tragic glory). If they find the bad guy who's in charge of it by the second session and whack him, that tends to deflate the plot.

One tactic is to have an enemy government or guild or corporation. With big faceless collectives to battle, scraping off the leadership level is just one tactic. Someone new pops up and the Church of the Leprous Wolf continues. Nevertheless, having an identifiable face of evil is powerful. So here are some ways you can introduce an enemy individual and keep him alive long enough to really drive the characters mad with rage — which, in turn, drives the players mad with joy when they defeat him.

- **Dodge.** A villain with spectacular evasion abilities who isn't shy about running like a whipped dog can survive a long time. It's indisputably frustrating to fight a guy you can't hit, but it's also hard to respect a foe when the most common comparison is 'he runs like a whipped dog'. But this can be made to work, if you're ready for them to mingle contempt with hatred.

- **Deadliness.** PCs certainly respect an enemy who decapitates one of their tough fighters on the first pass of a fight. They may flee him, especially if the system you're using has a reputation for deadliness. On the other hand, hysterical fear may make them feel cornered and force them to fight until only one group leaves. If it comes down to that, your plot is derailed no matter who wins. Deadliness is a good combination with the dodge emphasis, however. A guy who gets cornered and slices off a PCs' arm before escaping isn't someone to dismiss — as long as he runs after proving himself. However, both combat-intensive survival strategies are far from foolproof, as the occasional unexpected underdog victory is a feature of many games.

- **Political Connections.** If the bad guy is the sector commander, that's likely to give bloodthirsty PCs some pause. Setting your blaster to "Disintegrate" isn't just a matter of personal vendetta now, it's armed insurrection. The more political your game is, the better this works, since his followers are able to make trouble for the PCs. But not all PC groups operate legally, or maybe you want a villain who's an outlaw himself. While this is a good option, it's not universal.

- **Disguise.** Perhaps their opponent is known only as "Mister Crimson," no one's seen his face and he has countless tricks to conceal his identity. Killing him isn't the issue — the immediate challenge is to find him. ("Paging Mr. Soze, Mr. Keyser Soze...") This also opens up the classic plot twist of having the nemesis' secret identity be a friend or ally of the PCs.

- **Achilles' Heel.** Hey, Sauron didn't bother hiding from anyone. Some opposition can only be destroyed by some highly specific and arcane means — destroy the One Ring, bullseye that thermal exhaust port, pour a small quantity of water on her. The drawback of this approach is that you may have one idea of what the vulnerability is, but your PCs just can't figure it out, becoming increasingly frustrated with what looks like a railroad plot. There's an escape hatch to this, which is to simply decide that their most plausible theory about the weakness is correct (no matter how far afield it is from your plan). If you're okay changing your plot midstream, fine. If it's not to your taste, also fine — just be aware of the pitfalls.

- **10,000 Minions.** Some games, you know your enemy, you're confident that you could wring his neck... but he's miles away in his black basalt fortress and the army between you and him is pledged to his defense. The only real problem with throwing waves of minions at the PCs is that it may start to feel repetitive. The cure is to spice the mix with other options: If this guy's got such a following, other authorities are unlikely to want to get on his bad side (political pressure) and while he himself may be no combat shakes, he could employ skilled body doubles (disguise) and bodyguards (dodge). It's especially juicy if that bodyguard is someone the PCs like or at least respect. If you can pull off that scene where they say, "In other circumstances, we would have been friends." "Yes, good ones. To the death, then?" "I'm afraid I can accept nothing less" — then you're golden.

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

minor characters, give them a memorable element or two — a particular way of dressing, a habit of speech, a big ghastly scar or some behavior tic — and keep that consistent. Even if they players don't remember the name, they may remember, "Oh yeah, the coachman's daughter with the stutter."

Interestingly, the more the PCs interact with minor characters, the more real those characters become. Don't fight this. Some big and unexpected fun can arise as characters get promoted from 'wacky neighbor' to 'major ally'.

Antagonists may or may not get names, but their purpose is to put up a fight with the PCs, pure and simple. You may not catch the name of that goliath on the battlefield who's coming at you with a sword in one hand, a shield in another, and a big warhammer in the third — what the? Three arms? Yikes! — but he's certainly a cut above the hat-holder. Characters like this should have full combat stats, because their function in the plot is to have long, glorious fights with the PCs. (If your players don't care for battle, you may never need an antagonist. Most players care.)

Major characters are those who are involved again and again, and who either support the PCs and need their support in turn, or — most commonly — are the enemy against whom the characters strive. You're going to portray these characters a lot, you're going to need to make coherent decisions on their behalf that feel real, so you need to get into their heads. These characters are, for you, as detailed as the PCs should be to the players. You should identify with them... as long as you don't fall into the trap of wanting them to be the main characters. The PCs are the main characters. Your major characters exist to provide plot and resistance to the PCs, so when it's time for them to fall back and let the heroes be heroes, do it gracefully. When your beloved villain dies at the PCs' hands, it should be the climax of climaxes, your death of Hamlet, but the PCs' big scene.

DESCRIPTION

At last, a GM task that isn't fraught with peril! With character, plot, conflict and rules — with all that stuff you have to keep a balance between fairness and story bias and fun maintenance and everything else, but *description*, ah! That's far, far less political.

Here's how it works. You play the character's senses. When they enter a scene, you describe it, telling them what they see, hear, smell and otherwise observe. Note: You don't get to tell them what they *feel* about what they're seeing. That's the player's job, though it rarely hurts to say something like, "Yeah, it looks like your brother struggled a long time before he died. Looking closer, you see they pulled his fingernails out. How do you feel about that?" In fact, any time you want to stall while you figure something out, or just want to slow things down for pacing purposes, you can play psychologist and ask for a read on the character's emotions. Many players love to tell you about their characters.

Good description shows the important (or maybe just most obvious) stuff without bogging down in useless embroidery. Good description uses a lot of senses — on a battlefield the characters should feel mud under their boots and hear the cries of the dying and the wounded, louder even than shouts of terror and command. They should taste smoke and smell blood with each breath as the sun beats down on the chaos.

When players ask for more details, supply it but don't sweat it. If there's no particular relevance to how a given GMC is dressed, you can make something up or just gloss over it — "He's dressed very nicely," isn't terribly evocative, but may communicate to the player that this isn't a detail that needs to matter much. Describing his furs and jewels may, however, communicate exactly how rich he is, or his taste, or his history. After all, a guy in a fancy and finicky confection of lace and pastel fringe creates a much different impression than someone in exquisitely cut but subtle gray velvet.

One pitfall to avoid is inconsistency. If there was only one door into the room a moment ago (or last session), saying that there are two now is going to confuse the players, snap the illusion and lower their trust in what you're telling them. This is a problem. How much of a problem depends on how major the disconnect. If it's a minor detail, you can shrug and move on — no one will care and no one should. Big things though, you need to get right. Take notes. Review them before the gaming group is all together. It doesn't have to be flawless... it just has to be better than the players' notes.

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

It's impossible (and undesirable) to catalogue everything in a given space. Tell them what's relevant but (here's the tricky part) be flexible with stuff that might become relevant. Just because no one noticed that there's a mop in the room doesn't mean the room has no mop: If a player asks "Is there a mop or something around?" your answer should depend, not on whether you put 'mop' on your mental list of room props, but on whether it's appropriate ("No, the Dark Master's private meditation chamber does not have a mop") and whether you think they're going to do something cool and/or scene-wrecking with it.

Certain places, just by their nature, contain certain things. Characters in a blacksmith's shop should be able to find a hammer and some bellows. Characters in a forest should have no trouble finding sticks and leaves. Characters in a library can find books, paper and ink. Even things that just *might* be in a certain place... it's often a good idea to let PCs find them, as long as it's plausible and they're not becoming ridiculously lucky. Giving the players a little bit of ownership of the setting opens possibilities for the characters. (Finding a broom in the blacksmith's shop, a character sets the bristles on fire and makes a torch. A PC maneuvers a guard onto a patch of ice before trying to trip him. A character whips up a simple but elegant meal from forage at the campsite.) Furthermore, giving them that scope to imagine gets them invested in the game. If they have some authority to decide there's an incredibly heavy, elaborate and filthy spittoon in the tavern, they're more likely to produce some interesting and comical characterization or fight choreography involving a big dirty jar of drool. It gets them into it because it's theirs and they're making it, instead of having it be yours and they're just looking at it.

THE GM'S ADVANCED DUTIES

If you can manage the concrete elements of conflict, character, description and plot, you are a competent GM. That probably makes you a fun GM... as long as you're applying those skills the right way. But even a GM with encyclopedic rules knowledge, deft plotting abilities and a superb grasp of drama is going to fail if she is running the game in the wrong direction, or if she misunderstands the point of the exercise.

Here goes:

The purpose of the game is for everyone to have a good time.

This would seem to be obvious, but many anecdotes indicate that people lose track of it. To keep your GM eyes on that prize, there are some rather more abstract concerns, above and beyond just knowing how trip attacks interact with charging attackers. There are elements of attitude. I hesitate to describe a 'GM mystique' but certainly there are approaches that work and those that crash and burn. Here's what works.

TRUST

Your players need to trust you to run the game. You need to establish a standard of fairness and stick to it. You need to make an effort to be consistent — with the rules, with the facts of description, with the personalities of your GMCs. They need to feel that they have a reasonable chance to make assumptions and predictions about the game world: If you're not consistent, there's no point in doing that. If you arbitrarily throw meaningless opposition at them whenever they try something unorthodox — or worse, whenever they're nearing success — they'll conclude that it's your game and that you're just using them for your own amusement without giving anything back.

Running a game is fun, making up the jungle—gym of the story is neat, but you have to trust the players enough to let them play on it — even if they're not playing the way you expected they would.

You need to trust them, too. You must be able to trust your players to make a real effort to interact realistically and to commit to their character. If they aren't doing that, you can't give them the game they want. If they're not involved with the character and don't really care, it doesn't matter what you put in front of them.

The difference is, when a GM doesn't trust her players, she has so much power over the rules, the setting and the GMCs that she may be tempted to try and 'encourage' the players to 'do it right'. Then you just get antagonism. Instead, you have to use all the tricks in the GM bag to *seduce* the players and draw them in. Give them spectacle and opportunity and challenge and excitement. Give them a fair game. Offered that, anyone with the potential to play well, will.

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

TONE CONTROL

“Tone” means the emotional backdrop of the game. Is your game going to be gloomy and desperate, light-hearted and frolicsome, or somber and majestic? These are tone concerns, and they influence character, plot and description.

Decide on a tone before the game starts and you’ll save yourself a lot of headaches — headaches that are hard to explain without considering tone, such as the dissonance caused when characters based on splatterpunk high—violence assumptions are tossed into a political game of intrigue and insinuation. Or the issues that inevitably crop up when one player’s character is desperate, one is frolicsome, and one is majestic. Something’s got to give there, or the party is going to constantly tug in different directions.

One way to communicate tone is to tell your players “This game is gritty and combat can be deadly fast, so be hesitant to escalate — the GMCs are.” Or to say, “This is a talky game of somewhat satirical realpolitik — people do cruel things for absurd reasons, but as politicians the characters can often escape the consequences of their callousness.” That’s fine as far as it goes, but there’s a difference between having a tone and merely asserting one. If you tell them what you’re planning and don’t follow through, you’ve misled them, and that’s unlikely to turn out well.

Once you’ve set the tone, maintain it. Description is the most immediate and simple way to keep tone consistent. If the game has a tone of moral degradation, and the PCs are the relatively-clean heroes who are going to fight the power, you can reinforce that by stressing details like muddy streets, horses with sores from being made to pull loads too heavy for them, the potbelly on the mayor’s mistress while urchins starve in the street... If your tone is bright and fully of shiny, heroic wonderment, you can describe the fresh air of the forests, the tall and graceful spires of the palace, the dewy rosebuds climbing the trellis by the baker’s house... any and all those details might be in *both* games, but you’ve only got so much time in a session to describe things. Concentrate, then, on the details that fit the feel you’re after.

LEADERSHIP

This is a big one, and tough. Gaming is fun, it’s an entertainment, and most likely you’re going to do it with a group of friends. Most of us don’t like bossing around our buddies — we like to go along, get along, let consensus emerge in a laid back form of democracy.

That works... to a point.

In gaming though, the GM has more power. It’s your setting and your plots and while the players have the main characters, the burden is on you. If a player skips a session, the rest of you can probably muddle through. If the GM blows it off, there’s no game.

Like it or not, you’re the leader while you’re running the game. You should certainly be an *enlightened* despot who cares about her players’ desires and who respects their input, but you can force things to happen in a way that players can’t. I’ve cautioned again and again about abusing the authority that comes with being GM, but there’s an upside to that authority as well.

The upside is, you can lead.

If you act a certain way, the players are likely to model that. If you prepare and have a good grasp of the rules, you can encourage them to do the same — hearing “Hey, before the game starts, you might want to brush up on *exactly* how long that spell takes to cast and how it works” from the GM carries a lot more weight if she’s not running to the book every ten minutes. It also carries more weight than if it comes from another player.

If you break character in order to stick in a Monty Python joke during tense moments, the players are going to feel that’s okay. (In your game group, maybe it is.) On the other hand, if you want your drama to be pure, you certainly have the right to shush a disruptive player who cracks wise at an inappropriate moment.

Some people, assertive people, find this very easy to do. If you’re not assertive, you’ve got a choice. You can put up with enjoying the game less than you should, or you can screw up your courage and call out the tone—breaker. In most cases, the guy doesn’t realize it bothers you and simply making your position clear one time suffices. But if a player consistently breaks the game...

HOW TO RUN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

or is rude to you... or is being a jerk to the other players... well, you may need to kick him out. This, too, is a traditional role for the GM — policing individuals so that they don't screw with the collective. It's not necessary all that often, but when it comes down to it, you're better off booting the guy who can't play along. If you don't, the odds are pretty good that the game dies a slow, painful death anyway.

FAIR CONFLICT

Why is gaming fun?

It can be for the same reason that chess is fun — you manipulate the rules to get an outcome you like. It can be for the same reason that poker is fun — you calculate probabilities in a system with random elements in pursuit of advantage.

It can be for the same reason that a film or a play is fun — characters are put into trying circumstances and deal with them (or fail to deal with them in some compelling way).

The common element is conflict, opposition and obstacle. It has to be a fair conflict, too — anything else is unsatisfactory. (No one wants to play chess against an equal opponent if you start out down a queen and two rooks). But it also needs to hold out the promise of improvement. The character (or player) needs to be able to take concrete steps to better his odds and improve his situation. At the same time there needs to be the real risk of over-reaching (or stagnating) and making the situation worse. This is what's behind all that rising action: Is the character on the right track? It's also what's behind falling action: Did he meet his goals?

Some GMs implement fairness by writing up a set of circumstances beforehand, balanced against the PCs' abilities, and then letting the chips fall where they may as the players attempt to navigate their characters through it. This 'dungeon' approach has a long and honorable tradition. If it works for you, okay. But it's prone to the 'death spiral' effect if you construct it strictly, in which one setback makes the next setback more likely, until a cascade leaves the characters writhing helplessly. If you can run a good tragedy, that works. Otherwise, you might find yourself interrupting your plans to bail out the characters — so building some wiggle room into the initial setup is a good idea. Rigid prep like this also makes it harder to respond when the PCs get some wild notion and jam off after it. No matter how much you try to prepare and anticipate, some day they will make your jaw drop. Accept it, adapt to it and move on.

Other GMs go session-by-session, adjusting this week's challenge based on last week's actions. This requires constant effort, but it's easier to cleave to the players' goals, actions and current success level. The issue with this approach is that your game may drift and feel plotless. If everyone's having fun, that's not an issue. If it's starting to feel stagnant and pointless, you may want to pre-load a little more to get a greater sense of direction.

You're going to have to experiment and find out what works best for your group and yourself, but that's actually a big part of the fun of it — trying new things and enjoying unexpected successes. As long as you're fair with your players, they'll usually forgive quite a bit. As long as you put in the work, even average players can provide a more than ample payoff.