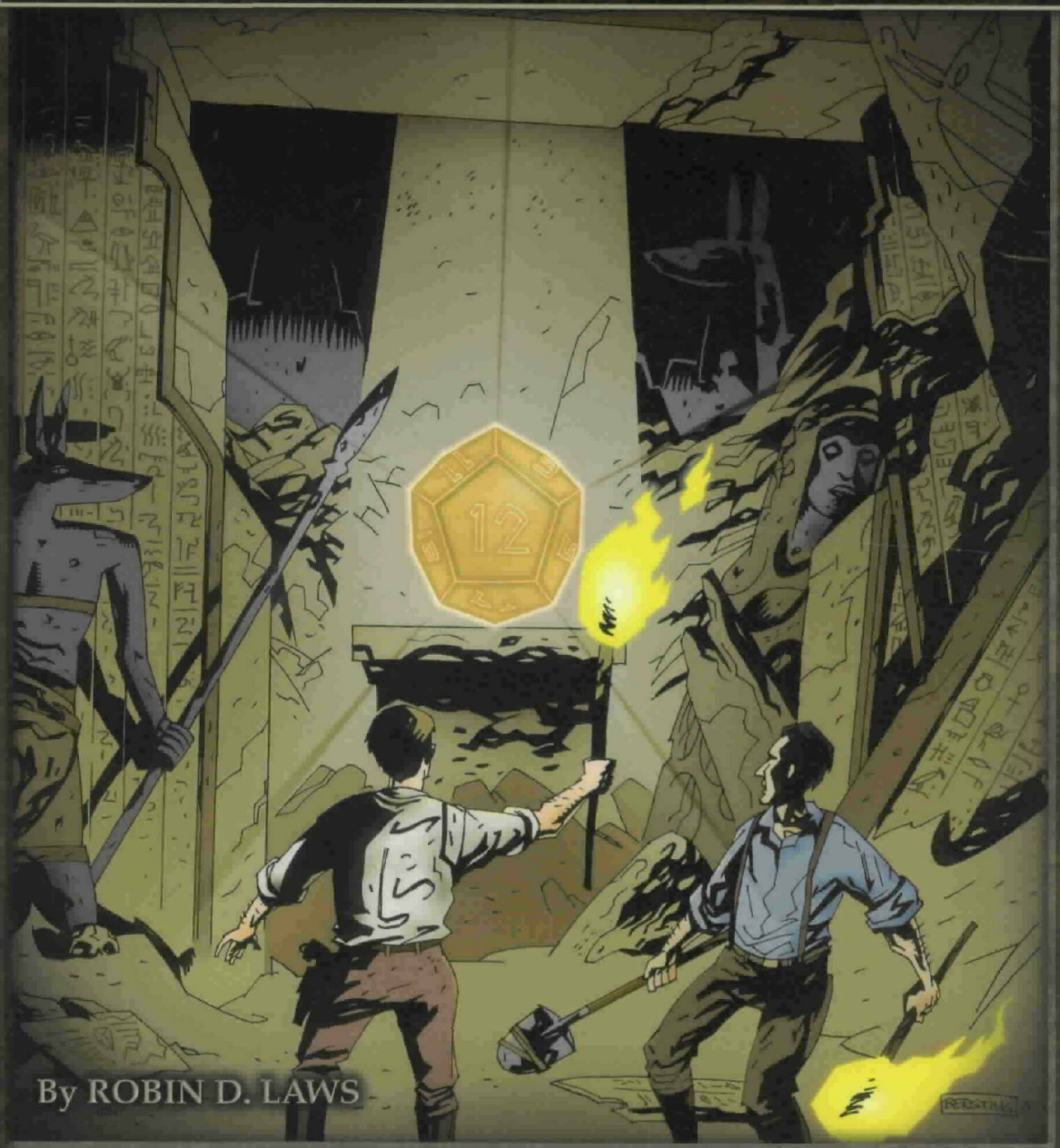
ROBIN'S LAWS
OF GOOD GAME MASTERING



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ROBIN'S LAWS OF GOOD GAME MASTERING

by Robin D. Laws

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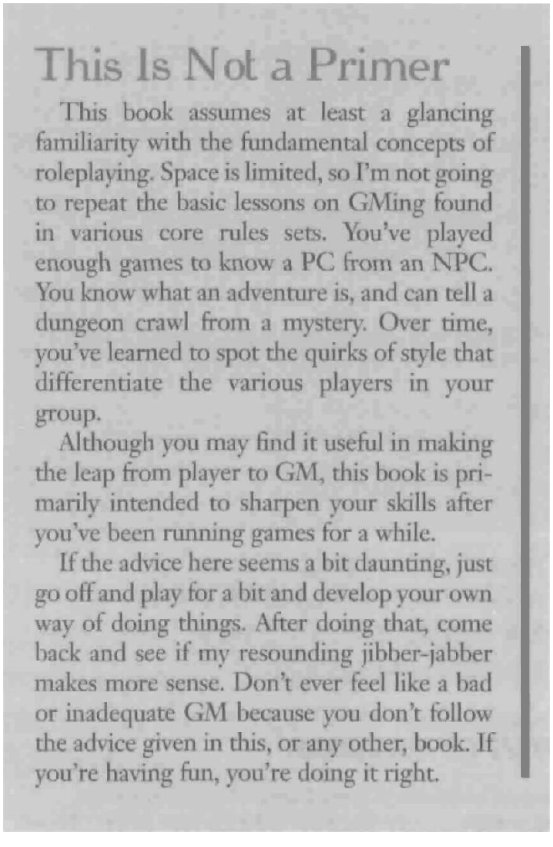
STEVE JACKSON GAMES

The Great, Immutable, Ironclad Law

Game designers, yours truly included, are an egotistical, control-hungry breed. That's why we prefer to avoid contemplating a certain essential truth of the roleplaying game. When you look at the various factors that determine whether any given group of players has a good gaming experience on any particular night, all of our efforts account for, at the absolute, outside best, maybe 30% of the equation. Our lovingly crafted rules sets, our peerless prose, the hours upon hours of playtesting, the painstaking research, the time we sweat away messing with minor details on all of those freakin' maps - all of it matters way less than we like to think.



This Is Not a Primer

This book assumes at least a glancing familiarity with the fundamental concepts of roleplaying. Space is limited, so I'm not going to repeat the basic lessons on GMing found in various core rules sets. You've played enough games to know a PC from an NPC. You know what an adventure is, and can tell a dungeon crawl from a mystery. Over time, you've learned to spot the quirks of style that differentiate the various players in your group.

Although you may find it useful in making the leap from player to GM, this book is primarily intended to sharpen your skills after you've been running games for a while.

If the advice here seems a bit daunting, just go off and play for a bit and develop your own way of doing things. After doing that, come back and see if my resounding jibber-jabber makes more sense. Don't ever feel like a bad or inadequate GM because you don't follow the advice given in this, or any other, book. If you're having fun, you're doing it right.

What really makes a difference in the success or failure of a roleplaying session is you. Your participation, whether as GM or player, has much more influence on the fun your group has than all of the game products in the world. Rule books are not roleplaying games, any more than a screenplay is a movie. The reams of material game companies produce provides but a blueprint for the real thing. The roleplaying game doesn't start until a bunch of people sit down, open up their dice bags, riffle their character sheets, and wait for the GM to clear his voice and say, "Okay, last week you'd all gotten into the escape pod and ejected yourselves into the heart of the Glanjiri Nebula ..."

This is both the blessing and the curse of the roleplaying form. In a culture increasingly driven towards passive consumption of exhaustively researched mass market entertainments, gamers take part in a form that not only rewards, but *demands,* active participation. **What** happens on any given night may not be as polished or quickly paced as even a middling episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* but it's great because it's yours. It's the active participation, the mixture that arises from the interplay between your thinking and your imagination, that makes roleplaying so vital and special.

Ironically, it is this very strength that will prevent roleplaying from ever becoming a mass phenomenon. Someday we'll probably find ourselves making regular treks to our local multiplexes to see movie versions of our favorite roleplaying properties up on the big screen, but that won't be the same. Maybe the interactivity of the Internet or the cultural seeds planted by ***Pokemon*** will make new generations more receptive to our elusive and delightful hobby.

If roleplaying is to grow creatively, game designers will have to continue to experiment and push the limits, just as painters, musicians and authors have done ever since their respective fields were born. But if we're to improve the quality of individual games and the overall popularity of the form, we need to look more closely at the other 70% of the experience, the part that arises from each group's individual interactions.

Though every player makes a huge contribution to a session, the person with the greatest influence over its success is you, the GM. (At least, I assume you're a GM. Unless a copy of this book has leapt into your hands by its own cruel volition. .) Weirdly, given the number of game books published every year, the techniques of good GMing have never been well communicated in print. The GM advice chapter of a new roleplaying game is always the first bit to get hacked away when the crunchy rules bits begin to overrun the desired word count, as they inevitably do. Instead, in this all-important area, we revert to an oral culture,

passing down the tricks of the art from experienced GM to novice. (Insert labored shamanism metaphor here.) This tradition, too, contributes to our little subculture's quirky charm, but it has its pitfalls. Just as the details of a sentence are invariably lost and garbled in the grade school game of Telephone, the most basic ideas of good GMing too often fail to make it up the stream of communication from one budding game master to the next.

What really makes a difference in the success or failure of a roleplaying session is you.

I submit to you that the most important, yet most often forgotten, rule of good GMing is this: *Roleplaying games are entertainment; your goal as GM is to make your games as entertaining as possible for all participants.*

Sure, it sounds pretty obvious, lying there all italicized on the page like that. It is nonetheless, the Great, Immutable, Ironclad Law to which the above chapter head alludes. How many times have you sat at the gaming table, bored and struggling, stuck in the middle of a session run by a GM who seems to have lost all touch with this simple principle? How many times have you, as GM, gotten derailed by your pursuit of some seemingly important goal, and lost touch yourself with the entertainment value of your game?

The mission of this book is to improve your GMing. No matter how good you are, you can keep getting better. Like all of us, you'll have your good days and your bad. On your good days, inspiration takes hold, and you don't need to think about theory. You just do it. This book is for the bad days, to give you the technique to get you through rough patches. Now, even if this book were so thick that no one would ever want to lift it from the shelf, it couldn't contain every possible useful technique. It probably leaves out some of your favorites. But, specifics aside, you can get yourself out of almost every GMing trap by asking yourself the following question?

What would be the most entertaining thing that could possibly happen, right now?

The rest is mere detail.

Knowing Your Players

If at least 70% of die success or failure of a gaming session depends on interactions between participants, any preparation to improve your GMing style must begin with a look at the people you'll be playing with. This is a point almost all published GM advice fails to address. Even good advice tends to address itself to an ideal group who all happen, as the result of marvelous coincidence, to share the same tastes the rules set in question happens to aim at.

In reality, though, no group is ideal. Certain players show different degrees of commitment than others. Some face a blizzard of competing commitments and can't show up regularly. All players participate with varying degrees of attention and enthusiasm. Some folks are deferential towards the tastes and desires of their pals, while others see only their own desires.

Tastes in roleplaying vary considerably; otherwise, there would be only one roleplaying game, which everyone would play in the same manner.

There is only one way to roleplay: the way that achieves the best balance between the various desires of your particular group.

IN-GAME PREFERENCES

Everybody comes to the gaming table for sligthly different reasons. Our biggest task as GMs is to direct and shape individual preferences into an experience that is more than the sum of its parts.

Accepting that each player's preferences and desires should be given roughly equal weight first requires us to compromise on our own tastes. This is easier said than done. Many of us become Game Masters in the first place because we want greater control over the gaming experience. We want to express our creativity and try out the cool ideas we've had bubbling away in the back of our minds.

It's all about striking a balance. If we sacrifice our own tastes too much, we'll get bored, and bored GMs run boring games. On the other hand, the most innovative campaign concept in the world means zip if you can't get your players excited about it.

It's all well and good to talk about the things that the average player generally enjoys, but nobody's group is average, and being generally satisfied isn't good enough. The key to great GMing is to figure out what your each of your players wants, and then to find a gaming style that contains a little something for everybody, including yourself.

To pin this down more precisely, fill in a copy of the Player Goal Chan (see below). It asks you to think about the types your players fall into, and the emotional experiences they seek from the game.

Player Types

People play roleplaying games for all sorts of reasons, but a few basic types tend to recur in large numbers. (I didn't invent these categories, many of which originate with the late Glen Blacow. I have departed a bit from the traditional list, though.)

The Power Gamer wants to make his character bigger, tougher, buffer, and richer. However success is defined by the rules system you're using, this player wants more of it. He tends to see his PC as an abstraction, as a collection of super powers optimized for the acquisition of still more super powers. He pays close attention to the rules, with *a* special eye to finding quirks and breakpoints he can exploit to get large benefits at comparatively low costs. He wants you to put the "game" back in the term "roleplaying game," and to give him good opportunities to add shiny new abilities to his character sheet.

The Butt-Kicker wants to let off steam with a little old-fashioned vicarious mayhem. He picks a simple, combat-ready character, whether or not that is the best route to power and success in the system. After a long day in the office or classroom, he wants his character to clobber foes and once more prove his superiority over all who would challenge him. He may care enough about the rules to make his PC an optimal engine of destruction, or may be indifferent to them, so long as he gets to hit things. He expects you to provide his character plenty of chances to engage in the aforementioned clobbering and superiority.

The Tactician is probably a military buff, who wants chances to think his way through complex, realistic problems, usually those of the battlefield. He wants the rules, and your interpretations of them, to jibe with reality as he knows it, or at least to portray an internally consistent, logical world in which the quality of his choices is the biggest determining factor in his success or failure. He may view issues of characterization as a distraction. He becomes annoyed when other players do things which fit their PCs' personalities, but are tactically unsound. To satisfy him, you must provide challenging yet logical obstacles for his character to overcome.

The Specialist favors a particular character type, which he plays in every campaign and in every setting. The most common sub-type of specialist is the player who wants to be a ninja every time. Other specialists might favor knights, cat-people, mischief-makers, flying diameters, or wistful druid maidens who spend a lot of time hanging about sylvan glades with faeries and unicorns. The specialist wants the rules to support his favored character type, but is otherwise indifferent to them. To make a specialist happy, you have to create scenes in which his character can do the cool things for which the archetype is known.

The Method Actor believes that roleplaying is a medium for personal expression, strongly identifying with the characters he plays. He may believe that it's creatively important to establish a radically different character each time out. The method actor bases his decisions on his understanding of his character's

Player Goal Chart

Player	*Type*	*Emotional Kick*

psychology, and may become obstructive if other group members expect him to contradict it for rules reasons, or in pursuit of *a* broader goal. He may view rules as, at best, a necessary evil, preferring sessions in which the dice never come out of their bags. Situations that test or deepen his personality traits are your key to entertaining the method actor.

The Storyteller, like the method actor, is more inclined to the roleplaying side of the equation and less interested in numbers and experience points. On the other hand, he's more interested in taking part in a fun narrative that feels like a book or a movie than in strict identification with his character. He's quick to compromise if it moves the story forward, and may get bored when the game slows down for a long planning session. You can please him by introducing and developing plot threads, and by keeping the action moving, as would any skilled novelist or film director.

The Casual Gamer is often forgotten in discussions of this sort, but almost every group has one. Casual gamers tend to be low key folks who are uncomfortable taking center stage even in a small group. Often, they're present to hang out with the group, and game just because it happens to be the activity everyone else has chosen. Though they're elusive creatures, casual gamers can be vitally important to a gaming group's survival. They fill out the ranks, which is especially important in games that spread vital PC abilities across a wide number of character types or classes. Especially if they're present mostly for social reasons, they may fill an important role in the group's interpersonal dynamic. Often they're the mellow, moderating types who keep the more assertive personalities from each other's throats - in or out of character. I mention the casual player because the thing he most fervently wants is to remain in the background. He doesn't want to have to learn rules or come up with a plot hook for his character or engage in detailed planning. You may think it's a bad thing that he sits there for much of the session thumbing through your latest purchases from the comic book store, but hey, that's what he wants. The last thing you want to do is to force him into a greater degree of participation than he's comfortable with. (Of course, if *everybody* in the group is sitting there reading your comic books, you've definitely got a problem …)

Emotional Kick

The types will only get you so far. Many people defy categorization. Most display traits of more than one type. All of us have our own individual quirks, which can be more important than the style category we fall into. Even so, the exercise of matching your players Co the categories helps you to start thinking about what they want from the game

In the next column on our worksheet, we go one step further and ask ourselves what emotion each of the players wants to experience in the course of the game.

Becoming Conscious of What You Already Do

Another question we have to ask ourselves, as we strive to better our techniques, is whether GMing is a talent or a skill. In other words, is it an innate ability that some of us have and some of us don't (a talent) or is it something we can learn (a skill)? My argument is that, at this point in the development of the hobby, it's a talent. Those who do well at it are good because they happen to already possess the qualities, like creativity, an intuitive grasp of narrative, and sensitivity to group dynamics, that the task requires. However, by finding concrete ways to teach and enhance those qualities, we can turn it into a skill. Sure, there are a few people whose minds work in a way that prevents them from ever acquiring the necessary qualities. The vast majority of us, though, can benefit by performing exercises that build imagination, narrative intuition, and so on.

The first step, then, in becoming a better Game Master, is to look at the things you do unconsciously, as part of your talent for GMing, analyze them, and start to do them more purposefully and systematically.

For example, most of us, to some degree, unconsciously take into account the varying tastes of each individual member of the playing group. Almost no one follows the step-by-step process laid out in the main text. I sure didn't, until someone happened to commission me to write an article on the subject.

You may be better than the vast majority of GMs, with very strong, unconsciously-expressed talent. Even so, you'll be surprised at the benefits you can reap from conscious evaluation of the good things you're already doing.

Power gamers generally want to feel a sense of reward.

Butt Kickers seek the flush of martial victory.

Tacticians want to feel clever.

Specialists' emotional kicks depend on the sort of characters they typically play. Ninja players like to feel sneaky and untouchable. Faerie princesses want a chance to be mystical and alluring. Players of knights want chances to feel noble and righteous. Even if you can't exactly see what draws Joe to play fish people all the time, or Janine to always want to fly, it's easy enough to see what they want. Specialists want chances to play out their characters' defining traits, whatever they may be.

Method actors want to feel an intense emotional connection to their characters, as brought about by the dilemmas they face in the course of the game. They're concerned not so much with what their PCs do, as with why they do it.

Storytellers want the overall game to move quickly, and resemble a fictional narrative. If you can involve a storyteller's PC in an ongoing subplot, advancing it slightly every session, so much the better.

Don't worry about the casual gamer. If he starts to show greater involvement in the game, by all means figure out what he likes and give him more of it. Otherwise, let him be.

Storytellers want the overall game to move quickly, and resemble a fictional narrative.

Using The Player Goal Chart

The Player Goal Chart serves as a big, fat reminder of our purpose as GMs. It shows us at a glance the various desires we'll need to knit together to make our games as entertaining as possible for the entire group. Use it when creating, preparing, or improvising scenarios.

When creating adventures, you can either use the chart as the starting point for your plotline, or use it to check your work after you've completed your initial set of notes.

To create an adventure around the chart, invent a scene for each player that delivers the emotional kick you think he is looking for. Give the power gamer a chance to earn a big reward. Add enemies the butt-kicker will enjoy vanquishing. If you have a tactician in the group, make sure there's a suitable problem for him to tackle, whether it's the storming of a fortress or the defense of a space station. For each specialist, see to it that the adventure contains an opportunity to spotlight the defining, cool thing that their characters do: the ninja gets to infiltrate; the cardsharp gets to overcome an obstacle with his mastery of gambling. Provide the method actor with a meaty choice to thrash over. Find a way to advance the continuing story of the storyteller's PC. And, as always, avoid pressuring the casual gamer.

You may be preparing to run a pre-existing adventure, either of your own creation, or one written by somebody else. To personalize it to your campaign, grab your Player Goal Chart and see if it has the elements you need to appeal to your group. If not, alter existing scenes or add new ones until you've gotten the right mix. It's possible that you'll find the scenario too hard to adapt to your group's collective taste; if so, the chart has served as an early warning sign, preventing you from running a disastrous session with an unsuitable adventure.

GETTING TO KNOW NEW PLAYERS

Obviously, this system breaks down utterly in the case of players new to your group. However, by looking at a new player's character sheet, you can make some educated guesses about his style. If he's chosen the most notoriously effective combinations of abilities your chosen rules system offers, you probably have a power gamer on your hands. A simple, off-the-rack fighter character probably indicates the presence of a butt-kicker. Tacticians are harder to spot, though they often like to create characters with military, police, or intelligence backgrounds. The specialist may give himself away by choosing a particular, well-loved character type, like the aforementioned ninja. New players who greet you with several pages of detailed character biography may be method actors or storytellers. If the tale is one of the psychological trauma that shaped the PC into the tormented individual he is today, we're probably talking method actor. If it's a narrative laden with plot hooks for your use, your group has just acquired a new storyteller. A new player who hasn't brought a character sheet, but uses one prepared by the friend who brought him, is likely a casual gamer.

Still, first impressions can be deceiving. You don't want to assume too much. If the new player is joining an existing group, just carry on as you were before, allowing him to insert himself into the proceedings, and display his style. On those rare occasions when you get together with an entirely new group, assume you'll get a mix of player types. It won't take long before you see which elements of your adventure they respond to and which they ignore. Again, the characters they choose to create reveal much of their tastes and expectations.

For one-shot convention runs, where you'll likely hand out pregenerated characters, you can get a sense for participants' styles by allowing them to choose between PCs you've cleverly keyed to appeal to the various player types. It's always a good assumption that you'll get a mix of types at any convention run, though the game you're running will skew the sample. Many games are popular precisely because they strongly appeal to a particular taste group. Expect power gamers to flock to your ***Rifts*** game, method actors to come for ***Vampire: the Masquerade***, and tacticians to sign up for ***GURPS***.

Picking Your Rules Set

Anyone who's spent any time at all reading internet arguments concerning the merits of various rules systems has seen the following exchange about a billion times:

First Arguer: "Rules system X rules. Unlike rules system Y, which sucks!"

Second Arguer: "Clearly, you possess the morals and common sense of a rabid baboon! Everyone knowst that system Y rules and system X sucks!"

Third Arguer: "A pox on both your houses! Everyone knows it's the GM, not the rules, that makes a good game!"

Both the first and second arguers would be correct, if they were prepared to specify what they need from a rules set, and to admit that their requirements might differ from one another. The first arguer might want, for example, a system that works well for ultra-powerful characters, while the second cares only about more down-to-earth PCs.

The tendency to confuse personal taste with objective quality is nearly universal. When we have a negative emotional reaction to something, whether that be a song, a movie, or a rules set, we rarely think, "Oh, that's not my cup of tea." Instead, we think, "Ugh! That's awful!" This basic principle of human perception is difficult to overcome, even when we're intellectually aware of it

There is no one best game system, but there is probably a game system that works best for your group.

When choosing a rules system, you have to pay attention to your aversions. Our brains are all wired differently. Running a game in System X might be second nature to you, even though I can't make head nor tails of it. Once you know that a rules set is going to give you results you don't like, you'll find it very difficult to have fun, which makes it hard to concentrate, which winds up in a frustrating experience for everyone.

On the other hand, it's just as difficult to run a successful game when you love the game system but your players are mostly indifferent to it. As in adventure design, where you're working to find a balance between the desires of the various group members, your choice of game system must be a compromise between your needs as GM and the preferences of the players.

Many GMs find one system they like and stick with it forever. Players who join their groups know they'll be playing that game. If you can attract and maintain a player group with the system of your choice, you're in an ideal situation. You don't have to think about this question at all and can happily skip to the next chapter.

The likelihood of your being able to maintain a group with your favorite game system varies depending on the popularity of the rules set and the strength of your local gaming scene. If your area crawls with gamers, you probably enjoy the luxury of being able to pick the rules set you most want to play. If you have trouble recruiting players, you may need to pick a more popular system, even though it might not be your favorite.

WINNING CONVERTS

Over time, you may be able to wean your recruits from a compromise choice to the game you prefer. Players vary in their degree of commitment to systems. It's much harder to dislodge a player from the first and only system he's ever played than it is to get a player who routinely switches between games to try your choice. Although all player types naturally prefer systems keyed to their particular tastes, some types care more about choice of system than others.

If your area crawls with gamers, you probably enjoy the luxury of being able to pick the rules set you most want to play.

Power gamers may emotionally identify with the cool super-abilities in their game of choice, and are the most resistant to change.

Butt-kickers often prefer the simplicity of the familiar, but might be lured away by a set that offers them quicker and more emotionally satisfying mayhem.

Tacticians may enjoy the challenge of mastering the quirks of a new rules set, so long as it provides a rigorous sense of logic and enough gritty detail to sink their teeth into.

Casual gamers want you to keep it simple. They're unlikely to have learned much of the rules to their previous game, and as long as they don't have to learn much more now, they may shrug and go along, as puzzled as they might be by your need to change rules sets.

Method actors and roleplayers may see the rules as a necessary evil. It's easy to convert them to simpler, looser systems but tougher to attract them to the stringently detailed rules sets tacticians like. However, if you know a complex system well enough to help them make choices and make its details invisible to them, they may go along. The rules tastes of method actors and storytellers sometimes diverge, though. Method actors often disdain systems with rules that influence the choices they make, whereas storytellers like rules that encourage PCs to act more like their counterparts from the world of fiction. Some purist method actors shrink away from rules that determine the progress of persuasion attempts and other character interactions, arguing that these should simply be acted out. You might argue that, just as players untrained in combat get to use dice to vicariously experience victory on the battlefield, those who aren't naturally persuasive should get to do the same in social situations. But in doing so, you're arguing against the thing that attracts the method actor to roleplaying games in the first place. Hey, nobody said that finding a game system for a disparate group was going to be simple . . .

All else being equal, it may be easier to get a group to check out a newly released rules set than one that's been out for a while. Members of an experienced group may well already harbor preconceived notions about any well-established game. While those opinions are as likely to be positive as negative, the naysayers always hold the balance of power in a situation like this. A new release seems exciting and fresh, and, if you run an entertaining game, you can overcome objections your players might otherwise have to its details. (Negative preconceptions of established games may be utterly unfounded, the result of an experience with a weak GM or mismatched player group. That offers little consolation if a player has concluded that the game itself was at fault.)

The drawback of trying a new game is that you may discover that you yourself don't like it, or that it isn't as good a match for your player group as you initially thought.

THEME AND TONE

Another factor to consider when choosing a game is how well its theme and tone suit your tastes, and those of your group. We often focus on how well a game's rules perform certain tasks: we want to know whether its combat system is elegant or clunky, its character progression fast or slow, its powers well-tested or unbalanced. At least as important is its emotional content.

Crunchy Bits

One of my pet theories about the popularity of roleplaying games goes like this.

Roleplaying is fantasy shopping for guys.

That is, men would, as a group, be more interested in shopping if a) it meant never having to leave the house and b) they were shopping for super-powers.

In that sense, the typical roleplaying rulebook is like a Nieman-Marcus catalog for super-powers. Depending on the game system and character type, these extraordinary abilities might be called feats, spells, schticks, disciplines, skills, high tech gear, psionics, or whatever. For lack of a better all-encompassing term, I refer to these things as "crunchy bits." Players who dig crunchy bits can not only have fun at gaming sessions, but can enjoy rule books at their leisure, paging through them in shivery anticipation of powers to come. It's no secret that the best-selling game supplements are collections of additional crunchy bits.

Dungeons and Dragons is the classic crunchy bits game, doling out coveted powers on a punctuated schedule that would make B. F. Skinner proud. (Skinner was the psychologist whose pioneering studies examined the impact of rewards and other external stimuli on behavior. He found that rewards that occurred every so often were more likely to encourage a desired behavior than those doled out constantly and consistently.)

Vampire ingeniously aims its play style advice at method actors and storytellers, but doesn't stint on the crunchy bits. Some of its top-level crunchy bits put to shame any zillionth level wizard/paladin with his +50 vorpal sword.

Though the power gamer is the purest exponent of the love of crunchy bits, even the most dedicated method actor or storyteller can secretly lust for them in his heart. They allow us to fantasize about flying even after we're too old to run around the house with red towels tied around our necks.

(Of course, I know that the above bit about shopping and guys is a vast, stereotypical generalization. The world is full of men who like shopping, and every year more and more women are coming to appreciate the advantages of the +50 vorpal sword. But, still . . .)

The vast majority of successful roleplaying games are power fantasies. They give players the chance to play characters vastly more competent than diemselves - or, for that matter anyone else in the world as we know it. In power fantasy, PCs always have a good chance of vanquishing their foes; in some games, players can even assume that their enemies will be conveniendy distributed by threat level. The power fantasy lies at the very heart of the adventure genre, in books

and movies as well as in games. It offers a generally optimistic view of life. There's no shame in enjoying this fantasy, and GMs who embrace and understand it tend to keep players longer than those who don't.

Some GMs use gaming as a means of enjoying a fantasy of power over the players, keeping the PCs under a tight leash. Except for the odd masochistic tactician who enjoys the occasional hard-won victory in such a game, players who stick with this sort of GM generally do so because they can't find anyone else to run for them.

A few games offer fantasies of powerlessness, in which PCs can expect to be buffeted about by a hostile world dominated by unbeatable enemies. Horror games, especially ***Call of Cthulhu***, come to mind here. The surreal conspiracy game ***Over the Edge*** (which I worked on) provides another example. You need a special group to sustain a campaign in a game that withholds many of the standard pleasures of the roleplaying experience... they attract method actors and storytellers but tend to drive off tacticans, butt-kickers, and casual gamers.

Several factors explain the great success of *Vampire: The Masquerade* and its sister games; one of the most important is that they allow players to explore the dark imagery of the horror genre while still playing characters who are quite powerful, and have a good chance of becoming even more so.

The appeal of power fantasy varies geographically. American audiences embrace it wholeheartedly; the basic themes of the adventure story strongly parallel those of U.S. national mythology. British audiences, on the other hand, view the power fantasy with greater suspicion. The English concept of heroism is less about victory than endurance in the Face of seemingly impossible odds. U.K. Game Masters therefore can assume a greater license to make things rough on their players.

You can change a game's default emotional content more easily than its rules. You can allow gun-toting Delta Force PCs to mow their way through Cthulhoid monsters, or drench your superhero game in blood and angst. Make sure, though, that you're confounding your players' expectations in a way they'll enjoy. Storytelling purists may be appalled if you make a traditionally dark game into a forum for cheery mayhem, and power gamers will quietly defect it their accumulated goodies prove irrelevant as the campaign plunges suddenly into hell.

ACCESSIBILITY

Another factor to consider when choosing your rules set is accessibility. To what degree does the rules set present a readily understandable set of stereotypes for players to latch onto? One of the most basic criticisms leveled at popular entertainment of any kind is that it's laden with cliches. This thought is so commonplace that it's hard to let go of, but the truth remains that, in roleplaying, stereotypes are extremely useful. They provide a common set of assumptions about the world and the lands of PCs who populate it. Stereotypes help players picture your imaginary world, and to make assumptions about the sorts of actions they can logically undertake in it The more the setting resembles something they know from popular entertainment, the more likely it is that they'll be able to plug into a pre-existing fantasy they've always wanted to indulge in. If you're playing a space opera game, it's not a bad thing that the player who has always dug Mr. Spock wants to play a detached, ultra-logical character with a secret knockout strike. It means that he's got a pre-established emotional connection he can grab off the rack and plug into your game. Roleplayers who GM tend to be more comfortable creating people and things than those who only play, so it's easy to forget how challenging many players find even the simple act of PC generation. Familiarity breeds a sense of comfort, which is necessary in a hobby that requires creativity from people who might not be entirely comfortable displaying it. It is most important to casual gamers and butt-kickers. Tacticians tend to prefer familiar settings, where their plans won't be thrown for a loop by weird facts of culture or physics.

On the other hand, method actors and storytellers are often drawn to freewheeling character generation systems allowing them to create PCs never seen before in the annals of literature. They seek out novelty and curl their noses at cliche. If your group consists mainly of these types, look for quirky, highly detailed worlds whose basic assumptions are alien to our own. Even these settings tend to present stereotypes, but they're unique ones gamers have to learn from scratch, without obvious analogues from other media. If you can assemble a group already intimately familiar with the elaborate background of a Glorantha or Tekumel, you can have your familiarity and your exoticism, too.

Demand *for* accessibility varies geographically, too. Unique, highly distinctive settings dominate the French RPG market. North American audiences, on the other hand, will give up their beloved archetypes when you pry them from their cold, dead fingers.

POWER BALANCE

Your choice of system affects your degree of control over events in the game. Generally speaking, the more a game depends on "crunchy bits" (see sidebar for a definition of this highly analytical term), the more power it cedes to the players, at the expense of the GM.

When a player activates one of the crunchy bits on his character sheet, control of the outcome shifts from the GM to the rulebook. Crunchy bits are typically written to work in a certain detailed and highly specific way. Where a TV writer might fudge the detailed workings of a main character's signature ability according to the demands of the current storyline, players expect the GM to fairly interpret the rules as laid out in the book. As characters progress in power

and gain ever more potent crunchy bits, the GM's flexibility in setting up obstacles to challenge them becomes increasingly constrained. When a PC gains Invisibility, a whole range of common action-adventure situations goes out the window. Likewise with flying, teleportation, the ability to pass through walls, time travel, and a host of other abilities. Often these powers allow their users to quickly and anticlimactically bypass the sorts of interesting challenges that make an adventure story exciting.

Even without these overtly plot-busting abilities, the action in a game becomes increasingly unpredictable as more and more crunchy bits are added to the mix. While GMs need a basic familiarity with the whole of a rules system, players can focus their attention only on the rules for their own crunchy bits. They therefore always know the rules better than their GMs do, and become adept at using these abilities to easily overcome obstacles that were planned to be difficult. When you are surprised by what a crunch) bit can do, your power to keep the present encounter fun and challenging is severely curtailed.

Rules sets in which crunchy hits predominate give power to the players.

Some rules sets curtail the power of the crunchy bit. This can be done in various ways. A system can offer a wide variety of crunchy bits, while sharply limiting the number of them available to any one character. It can present the ability descriptions in a vague and general manner that keeps the power of interpretation firmly in the GM's hands. It can omit the most notoriously plot-busting powers, or can place severe constraints on their use. A few systems forgo crunchy bits altogether, allowing players to define abilities themselves. They use very abstract ways of resolving actions, making all (or almost all) abilities effectively equal, in rules terms.

Rules systems that limit the impact of crunchy bits give power to the GM.

While we, as GMs, might naturally prefer games which give us the greatest flexibility, we have *to* remember that players like to have power, too. One of the many factors behind *Dungeons and Dragons'* enduring popularity is the way in which its power balance favors the players.

There is no one ideal power balance between players and GM. The best balance varies according to the composition of your group, because the need for player power depends on play style.

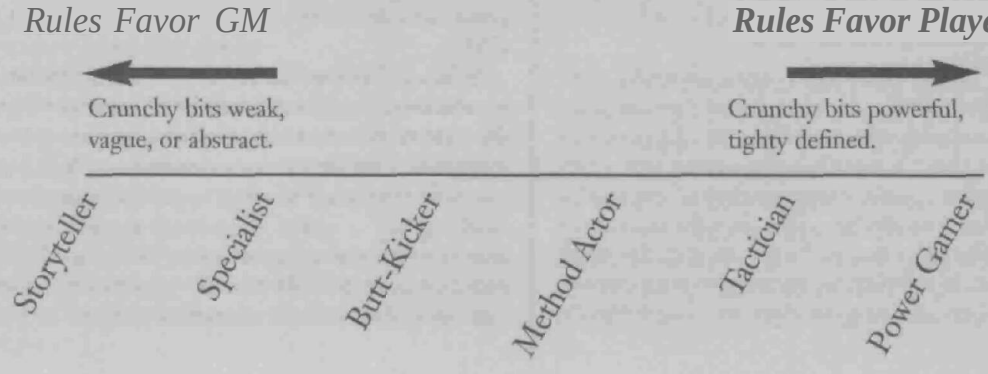
Power gamers, naturally, are the ultimate beneficiaries of any game system in which the crunchy bits go wild. The discomfiture of the GM is the supreme expression of their power. The harder, shinier, buffer and more defined a rules system's crunchy bits, the more they'll like it.

Tacticians thrive in systems that take power from the GM. They benefit most strongly from rules systems in which the game effects of various powers are tightly defined. They want to surprise the GM and easily overcome his obstacles. To a tactician, anticlimax is a good thing. A session in which the group risklessly circumvents every barrier placed in its path is the tactician's ultimate dream.

To the degree that method actors care about rules at all, they favor systems that empower players. In their quest to remain true to their character concepts, they sometimes put themselves at odds with other PCs, or stand in the way of plot developments necessary to the smooth unfolding of the GM's adventure. To maintain their autonomy, they often gravitate towards crunchy bits that protect their lone wolf behavior patterns. They want to be able to turn invisible and leave situations they don't like, or to fly away. They need to be able to resist mind control attempts and other similar coercions. Method actors may also choose crunchy bits that render them indispensable to the group. This tactic increases their negotiating power during disputes between players. Implicit in their every argument is the threat not to participate in a plan they don't like. The group, knowing they'll be deprived of a vital array of abilities, is forced to accommodate the method actor, even when he's a minority of one.

Butt-kickers want to wade into combat early and often. They like crunchy bits that make their PCs mightier in battle, but don't want other PCs to use

Game Systems: Continuum of Crunchiness



other abilities *to* avoid fights. So long as the opportunities for smiting are frequent and colorful, they tend to be indifferent to the power balance between players and GM.

Specialists want the defining abilities of their chosen character types to be effective, and they want chances to use them. Systems that define their signature crunchy bits broadly or imprecisely may suit them well, because they allow the GM to add interesting variations to the scenes they look forward to repeating over and over again. They don't want an obstacle to end anticlimactically if it means being deprived of the chance to strut their stuff.

Storytellers, happiest when game sessions unfold like fiction or a TV episode, thrive when the GM enjoys the flexibility needed to control pacing. The anticlimax beloved by the tactician is anathema to the storyteller. Storytellers tend to favor rules sets that either present crunchy bits in vague terms, or allow them to define their abilities on the fly; they enjoy personalizing and redefining their powers in creative and funky ways.

Casual gamers don't care much about the power balance, one way or the other, but are turned off by the wrangling and argument that tends to erupt when the balance is off. The right choice of rules set for the rest of your group will also be the right one for your casual gamer.

See the diagram on p. 10 for a graphic representation of the play styles and the rules sets they gravitate towards.

To determine the desired crunchiness level for your group, assign a score for each player in your group according to his play style. For players with odd combinations of preferences, you may wish to award half points or perform other arcane adjustments that feel right to you.

Power Gamer	+3
Tactician	+2
Method Actor	+2
Casual Gamer	0
Butt-Kicker	0
Specialist	-1
Storyteller	-3

Then average the results. A final score near 3 means that your group would probably prefer a system heavy on the crunchy bits, like ***Dungeons and Dragons,*** or one in which rules are tightiy defined, such as ***GURPS.*** A score near -3 suggests you should check out games in which crunchy bits are loosely defined (for example, ***Vampire: The Masquerade)*** or treated in an abstract manner that equalizes all abilities (like ***Hero Wars.)*** A result near 0 suggests that you should just go ahead and pick whatever the heck you want.

This is not to say you should utterly ignore your own tastes. You won't get far trying to use a rules set written for a style you can't stand. But a big disparity between your tastes and the apparent desires of your group serves as an early indication that you'll have to work extra hard to keep this particular mix of people challenged and entertained. There are things you can do to compensate for this taste gap between yourself and your players, and they're easiest to do if you're aware of the need for them in advance.

Homebrew Rules

Many GMs enjoy tinkering with rules, or find that existing rules sets don't cater exactly to their tastes. Instead of using a published system, you may want to use rules of your own creation. Rules tinkerers among you may want to heavily modify an existing rules set, or create something out of whole cloth.

The choice to use your own rules set imposes an additional burden on you, and on your group. During play, you'll be thinking not only of keeping the other players entertained within the current adventure, but about your rules and whether they do what you want. Players will feel free not only to question your rules interpretations, but to argue that the rules themselves need to be altered. Sometimes they'll be right, and their suggestions will improve your rules set. However, you'll be taking time away from the game itself every time you stop to discuss the rules. Certain players will enjoy this process as much as, if not more than, actual play. Before you embark on this process, you need to make sure that you have this kind of players. Players who also GM may take great interest in game design. Tacticians may enjoy policing your rules for violations of realism. Power gamers may enjoy looking for holes in your crunchy bit descriptions, though they'll shake their heads ruefully when you fix them.

On the other hand, storytellers may be bored by the process. Butt-kickers might figure that the time spent on rules issues might be better devoted to carnage and mayhem. The eyes of casual gamers will certainly glaze over. Specialists, once they've made sure that their signature powers work properly, may also join the ranks of the wearied. Method actors may resent a process that keeps their abilities in a state of flux, as you refine and alter your roster of crunchy bits.

Occasionally remind yourself that the playtesting process is of greater interest to you than it is to your players. It's easy to get caught up in the fun of creation and forget the gigantic favor your players are doing for you by agreeing to be your guinea pigs. Every so often, you should stop and ask yourself the following question:

Do my rules exist to make my game better, or does my game exist merely to make my rules better?

Campaign Design

A campaign can be designed on the fly, or from the bottom up.

A campaign created on the fly starts with an adventure, generally in the default style and setting of the rules set you've chosen. From one adventure to the next, you slowly add elements to it. Gradually it takes on a life of its own. The advantage of this approach is that you can respond to player choices, developing the aspects of your setting that they seem most interested in. The theme, tone, recurring NPCs and important settings of your campaign all arise more or less spontaneoasly. You don't have to think so much about addressing the tastes of your group; it all just happens naturally. On-the-fly campaign development also suits GMs whose schedules don't allow them big chunks of prep time.

On the other hand, some of us are better at advance planning than thinking on our feet. The internal consistency and vision of a grand plan may be more satisfying than the meandering feel of an improvised campaign. Planning may stop us from falling back on old habits and first impulses. If your villains or shopkeepers or fight sequences follow a noticeable pattern after a while, you may want to make advance notes to consciously sidestep your favorite cliches.

All else being equal, you may want to take into account the tastes of your play group. The more control a player prefers over the continuing storyline, the happier he'll be in an improvised campaign. Method actors may likewise feel constrained within plot lines that fail to address their characters' motivations. Storytellers may enjoy the grand sweep of a thoroughly-planned story.

Sometimes it's not so much a matter of whether you've planned, but what sort of prep work you've done. Tacticians tend to distrust elaborately plotted campaigns, because they feel they're being driven to a certain point, no matter how adroitly they scheme. At the same time, they favor deeply-detailed worlds that grow and change independent of PC actions.

GENRE

Whether you're improvising or planning, you'll first need to decide what category of action-adventure you want your campaign to fall into. Often, your chosen rules set dictates a genre. If you've chosen a rules set that supports multiple genres, the choice remains up to you. Pick a genre that interests you, whether it supports the plot device you have in mind, involves imagery that appeals to you, or arises from a book or movie you liked and want to emulate.

Again, it never hurts to stop and consider the tastes of your group before picking a genre. When in doubt, ask them what they like - but expect as many different responses as you have players. Our attraction to (or disinterest in) various genres can be subjective. It's just not something that can be argued logically. You may want to run an anime game, but if one of your most enthusiastic players tells you he's not interested because Japanese animation is "weird," you may have to resort instead to an old favorite.

The internal consistency and vision of a grand plan may be more satisfying than the meandering feel of an improvised campaign.

Fantasy tends to be a more popular genre in role-playing circles than in the media culture at large because it supports a wide range of play styles. It also justifies the largest set of possible crunchy bits. If your players don't seem sure of their own preferences, or are greatly at odds, fantasy is always a reliable default choice. Fantasy is also extremely pliable, allowing you to sneak in the key elements of the genre you originally favored without notice or complaint. Change the mutant information virus from the cyberpunk game they didn't want to play into a magical curse, and you're off to the races, with no one the wiser.

Player tastes may point you towards a genre your group will sign on for. If you're heavy on power gamers, you know you need to pick something wild and woolly, where characters routinely perform superhuman acts. You may need to hold off on your game of realistic military action until you've assembled a gang composed mostly of tacticians. Likewise, a game of Machiavellian court intrigue should probably wait until your storytellers and method actors gready outnumber the butt-kickers.

THE SETTING

Having chosen a setting, the next step is to work out where the action will take place. If you're working on the fly, you may need nothing more than a few key phrases or images, which you'll flesh out as you go. Serious planners may wish to make extensive notes on both the world and the general area in which the first adventures will take place.

Published Settings

Many published games provide a default setting, often one portrayed in great detail over a wide range of supplements. Sticking to a pre-established setting has its advantages. First, it's much less work; reading supplements is a much quicker process than writing them. Another factor not to be underestimated is the degree to which published settings are readily understandable, and therefore appealing, to players. You may find it easier to recruit new players if your games are set in an established and popular world. People can only take in a certain amount of information on any topic at one sitting. Players can learn much more about a setting by reading supplements over a period of months or years than you can impart to them in a few sessions of play.

There is no shame in using an established setting.

Another key advantage of established worlds is that players who've read the source material bring a predetermined set of emotional associations to the gaming table. They're invested in the world before you roll your first die. Some folks criticize game companies whose supplements are heavy on background material and fiction snippets, complaining about the ratio of useful material to "fluff." It may not be apparent how useful so-called fluff can be to a GM, in laying the atmospheric groundwork for you. Let's say you have the party encounter an NPC whose appearance and mannerisms clearly mark him out as a member of a formidable and scary group. In a setting of your own creation, you have to stop and explain what the group is, what the signs are, and why the adventurers should be quaking in their boots. You're telling the PCs that the group is scary, and they'll accept this on an intellectual level. But it will be hard to make them *feel* it. If you're instead using an established setting that at least a couple of the players are familiar with, all you have to do is describe the NPC, including a few visual signifiers of his group affiliation. Without any further prompting, they'll react emotionally, exclaiming, "Oh, no! It's a Tremere!" (Or a Humakti, or whatever. .) While reading the source material, they've already been *shown*, as opposed to merely told, why members of this group should creep them out

Fluff ain't so fluffy as it looks.

If you are using an established setting, I strongly recommend that you allow your players to read any available supplements for it. Adventures you plan to use, or cannibalize, are obvious exceptions. But if you know you'll never use a particular adventure, try to get your players to read that, too. The more the players know and feel about their imaginary world, the better. *Do this even when a setting tells you not to.* It's easier to get people to distinguish between player knowledge and character knowledge than it is to get them emotionally invested in an imaginary world. Many game lines overestimate the emotional value of surprise. Players spend way too much time feeling off-balance and confused as it is. They're already wondering what's around the corner, who really belongs to the conspiracy they're tracking, what their enemies can do, and so on. It goes without saving that your players will be confused and puzzled for great stretches of any game session. Let the players, if not their characters, know what's happening in the macro level of the setting.

Emotional investment is more important than the preservation of the setting designer's secrets.

The more the players know and feel about their imaginary world, the better.

Many gamers woefully undervalue the importance of illustrations. It's true that some folks are completely word-oriented and would be happier if roleplaying books consisted entirely of dense blocks of 6-point type, blown right out to the margins. Most of us, though, are visually oriented, and have a much easier time imagining people and places, especially ones from unreal worlds, when aided by artwork. First, it's always helpful to hold up a game book and show your players an illustration of a creature, place, object, or other item they need to visualize precisely. Less obviously, you also benefit when players have had a chance to absorb over time a wide range of illustrations from a particular game line. Pictures can convey the emotional aspects of a setting in a way that's difficult for most of us to do when all we have to rely on is our own extemporaneous speech.

The illustration is your friend.

Home-Grown Settings

For many GMs, though, the opportunity to build a world provides one of the main reasons to run games in the first place. The act of creation is fun and rewarding in and of itself. World design lets you enjoy gaming on your own schedule; you don't have to convene a group of players in order to work on a map or detail a culture. A unique setting makes your games especially memorable. You'll find it easier to create adventures and encounters that reflect your way of thinking.

The key balance in any setting is between originality and accessibility.

There's little point in filling dozens of binders with elaborate details on your created world if the end result isn't much different from a setting you could have pulled off the shelf.

Neither do you want to create a setting that's so far off the wall that none of your players can relate to it, or absorb the vast swathes of information they need to assimilate in order to understand what's going on and make sensible decisions for their characters.

The degree of originality you can get away with depends on your mix of players. The more enthusiastic the group, the more likely they'll be to attentively read the background handouts you give them. However, even a dedicated group of roleplayers can include people with conservative tastes; even those willing to put in the effort may not like the results.

For example, years ago I ran a really far-out fantasy game in which all of the characters belonged to a technologically primitive, tribal culture who lived in an incredibly hostile environment haunted by nasty monsters and even more dangerous deities. (This was eventually published as ***GURPS Fantasy II***.) The campaign was a great success, because the key players in that group were open to something deeply peculiar, and heartily took on the difficult task of roleplaying characters born and raised in this bizarre environment

I'd never try to run this campaign with my current group. While they're just as enthusiastic about gaming as the old gang, the tastes of its key members run more to the mainstream. Neither group is better than the other; they just like different things.

You probably know how conservative your group's tastes are, but, just in case, a look at your mix of player types should help. Specialists, butt-kickers, power gamers, casual gamers, and tacticians tend to prefer familiar settings. Storytellers and method actors may be more interested in novelty.

One time-honored method of balancing originality and accessibility can be found in the odd juxtaposition of familiar elements. Take two well-established games, genres, or cliches, and mix them together to create a combination which creates its uniqueness in the collision between well-known elements. My current game works this way: its entire premise is *"D&D in the Roman Empire."* Other examples might include:

- vampires in space
- cyberpunk goes to war
- swashbucklers investigate the occult

When in doubt, blindfold yourself, take any two ***GURPS*** sourcebooks off the shelf at random, and combine the results.

Tone

Of all the elements that keep players coming back for more (or send them screaming for the exits), one of the most important, yet least discussed, is tone. Attention to a game's tone was the big development in roleplaying design during the 90s. Creators began to treat game settings as entertainment properties, distinguishing them by style of expression, ideological attitude, and emotional content. The most successful exponent of this trend is White Wolf's World of Darkness series. Other examples include ***Deadlands***, ***Castle Falkenstein***, and ***D&D*** settings like ***Planescape*** and ***Dark Sun***. One of my own designs, ***Feng Shui***, was intended to fall squarely into this category. Although many of its fans regard it as an innovative design, what I think most people are responding to is its tone, plus a few unusual pieces of GM advice.

Every GM runs games with his own unique tone. If we are especially good we can evoke the different tones of various genres: we can run spooky horror, fast and furious action, campy space opera, and so on. Even so, elements of our personal styles will carry through from one campaign to the next.

Take a few minutes to consider your own GMing habits. In a few key words, how would you sum up the common emotional tone of your games?

For example, grim humor tends to creep into most of the games I run. First of all, it's a tone that comes naturally to me; it arises from my worldview. Secondly, I tend to pit the PCs against tough threats they can't overcome through a quick, frontal assault. They often end up feeling beleaguered, and a little comedy relief is useful in suggesting that things aren't so bad as they seem – or that they should enjoy how bad things are, because they're heroes, dammit, and trouble is what heroes are supposed to get into.

None of us can entirely escape our tonal habits; nor should we want to. But you may, as a change of pace, wish to run a campaign whose genre or mood is at odds with your usual *modus operandi*. If so, you may have to make a conscious effort to be more serious, or funnier, or lighter, or whatever. If you want your campaign to have a tone, pick out new key words, and write them in big letters in your notes.

By finding your campaign's uniqueness in the joining of familiar elements, you're one step ahead when it comes to the following test: how easily can you condense the core concept of your campaign into a single word or sentence? You don't need to share this sentence with your players, though it may help to pique their interest or get them oriented. This exercise is designed to ensure that you're operating from a simple, clear idea. Roleplaying games are based on pop culture genres tor two related reasons - because they're easy to understand and because people know and like them. In pop culture, simple, strong ideas are always better and more

appealing than complex, unfocused ones. The more clearly you can state your own basic idea, the more likely it is that your players will understand and respond to it. By all means, use references to relevant movies, comic books, and novels as shorthand.

In addition to the aforementioned combo concepts, good examples might include:

• Eastward Ho: an alternate history in which the Japanese settled America

• invading orcs have conquered the modern world

• a fantasy world 100 years after magic stopped working

• anti-globalist anarchopunks battle Nyarlathotep and his minions

MISSION

This obvious point doesn't warrant much space, even though it sometimes eludes authors of published game settings.

You must know, and dearly communicate, what it is that the PCs are expected to do.

If you're using a published game off-the-rack, this question probably won't trouble you. Most popular games provide a default activity tor their adventurers. You know that the PCs are supposed to raid underground complexes to kill monsters and steal their stuff. Or to advance the power and agenda of their supernatural cabal. Or to set up triangular trade routes between distant star systems.

On the other hand, you might want to take an established game but narrow its focus to a single activity. The group of fantasy adventurers might be working to restore the old elvish empire. Your spaceship crew might be made up of xenobiologists in search of new life forms. A western game might feature a super-posse deputized to track down supernatural outlaws.

Highly specialized missions give your game an element of uniqueness, but carry a couple of risks.

One, your mission might exclude a player's favorite activity. Method actors and specialists may object that a restricted mission limits their flexibility in character design. Most players come up with a character concept and try to fit it to your campaign, rather than starting with your imposed mission and inventing a character appropriate to it. If a specialized mission cramps your players' style, you may want to broaden it, or find another that suits then better.

Two, some missions are so specialized that it quickly becomes tough to create interesting and varied adventures. The xenobiologist example mentioned above might not yield that many plot lines, unless the PCs are adventurous do-gooders willing to set aside their main mission at the drop of a hat. You can only tranquilize so many Denevian Pus Worms before it starts to get old. And if the mission is just a pretext for unrelated adventures, why use it at all?

To test the sustainability of your specialized mission, think up a dozen basic adventure concepts, in quick point-form style. If you get stumped after three or four entries, your mission probably isn't broad enough.

When in doubt, blindfold yourself, take any two ***GURPS*** *sourcebooks off the shelf at random, and combine the results.*

Alternately, you might find it rewarding to let the players find a specialized mission during the first few sessions of play. This assumes that you are comfortable improvising, and that your players are proactive types who like to find the sorts of trouble they find interesting, instead of just waiting for you to supply the plot hook of the day.

Headquarters and Recurring Cast

If your campaign employs a specialized mission, you should give some thought to the group's base of operations and the NPCs who occupy it with them.

Many campaigns run aground when the PCs get themselves in so much trouble that they just want to leave the area, escaping at maximum speed from all of your well-laid plotlines. To avoid this, allow them a well-defended haven they can use to think and regroup. The defenses might be literal, as in a fortress or starship, or social, as in a noble household their political enemies dare not attack. In additions to supplies, repairs, and medical attention, it's also helpful to give the PCs access to advice and information. Otherwise, they may tend to "turtle," holing up and fruitlessly arguing over the best possible course of action. A patron or mentor character can help you move stuck adventures along, by steering the party away from dead ends and doomed plans. Servitors, agents, assistants, and sidekicks can pop in to provide clues when the group gets stuck but won't go out in search of additional data.

Adventure Design

Now that we've got a framework built, it's time to put something in it. The basics of adventure design remain the same whether you're diligently writing everything out in a detailed format like you see in published adventures, or whether you make it up as you go along based on a few scrawled notes on the back of a candy wrapper. In one case, you're doing it consciously, and in advance. In the other, you're improvising on the spur of the moment.

PLOT HOOKS

The starting point of any adventure is the plot hook. A plot hook lays out a goal for the PCs, and establishes the biggest obstacle that prevents them from easily accomplishing it. Ideally, you should be able to sum it up in a brief phrase or two. Start the phrase with a verb. If no verb comes to mind, your hook isn't clear enough, and the players won't know what their PCs ought to be doing.

Satisfying adventure stories have clear endings.

Here are some examples:

- track down the assassins who killed the sultan
- recover stolen plans to the XK-100
- find the Holy Sword of K'athaar
- slay the Lich King
- investigate alien sightings at White Rock Ridge
- stop Shark Man from robbing any more banks

A plot hook will also imply an ending for the adventure. Satisfying adventure stories have clear endings. The players must be able to tell when they have won. Victory conditions for the above plot hooks would be, respectively, vanquishing the assassins, getting the plans back, acquiring the sword, killing the lich, finding out what caused the alien sightings, and sending Shark Man back to the Electro City Institute for the Criminally Insane.

Because this is simple, it should be obvious. But too often DMs overthink their plotlines, focusing on complicated side issues (like, say, the intricacies of pirate culture, bizarre uses of nanotechnology, or hidden correspondences between the myths of Karrador) than on a clear, readily understandable set of goals for the PCs to pursue.

You don't need to make an adventure complicated. The players will do thai for you.

Remember, when you run an adventure, you see only the actual plotline that you've worked out in advance. You know who the assassins are, why they killed the sultan, how they escaped the palace, where they're hiding now, and what defenses they have in place to ward off pursuers. On the other hand, the players must dream up a number of competing answers for each of those questions. They must consider several sets of possible suspects, with various possible motives. They must look at every likely escape route to see which one the killers actually used, and so on. Players tend to be much more wary and paranoid than the adventure heroes of fiction; their characters are more prone to failure. False leads, red herrings and disastrous mistakes will all crop up in an adventure without your having to do much, if anything, to build them in.

STRUCTURING YOUR ADVENTURE

When authors of fiction talk about structure, they're referring to the process by which scenes and sequences are ordered for maximum effect on the reader or viewer. A well-structured story has the followingqualities:

- It quickly establishes its action.
- It steadily builds in excitement towards a climactic sequence. The climax is more exciting than any previous sequence, and resolves the plot hook.
- It presents information necessary to understand the story (also known as *exposition)* in small, easily-digestible chunks, as the reader needs to know it.
- It varies its rhythm. Scenes of intense action are interspersed with quieter sequences in which the characters reflect, gather information, interact with one another, and generally reinforce the reader's identification with them.
- It varies its mood. Comic moments may give us respite from an overall serious tone. In a comedy, the odd serious moment may allow greater identification with the characters. Horror stories slip in moments of calm, which allow the dread to build up once again.

Roleplaying adventures are clearly relatives of the story, novel, and movie, but the degree to which the structural requirements of these older forms should apply to a game session remains a matter of hot debate. The question vexes writers of published adventures, who are screwed either way. A scenario that details a predetermined plotline will be criticized as "too linear," no matter how many branches or alternate plot twists it includes. Conversely, an adventure that simply presents a group of NPCs and

a basic situation from which to improvise will be slammed as an unsatisfying read.

Luckily, you have a big leg up on die poor, benighted professionals. You don't have to worry about communicating your ideas to another GM, or creating an adventure for a group of players you don't know and will never meet. Instead, you can safely take refuge in the central point I'm so single-mindedly hammering home:

Like so many other things, structure is a matter of taste.

Different player types care to varying degrees about the amount of structure you impose on events in the game.

Tacticians are profoundly wary of structure. They don't want exciting climaxes; they want to plan so well that nothing interesting happens to their characters. To a tactician, the ideal conclusion is one in which the team gets maximum benefit for minimum risk. Tacticians crave long, uninterrupted periods of planning, which they consider to be the most interesting part of a game. They hate it when DMs disrupt their planning sessions by throwing in sudden action sequences. They couldn't care two hoots about mood or pacing.

Power gamers are indifferent to structure. They don't care whether they get their Blades of Power or Super Cybernetic Enhancements at the beginning, middle, or end of a session, so long as they get them. If you can arrange things so that their most mega-amazing powers get used in the big climax, that's fine, but structure is no big deal to them.

The casual gamer may pay more attention if you can hold the group's attention with strong pacing and building excitement. Or maybe not.

You can use structure to please specialists, even though they might not list it as a big fun requirement. They want to use the defining schticks of their chosen character types in a fun and exciting way, so if you can construct climaxes that require them to do so, they'll be extra happy. They get not only to do their thing, but to do it in the context of the most important events in the storyline.

Method actors like structure, provided that they can feel like the most important character in a storyline. If a structure exists that seems to put their concerns to one side, they'll exercise whatever power they have to make their PCs more central to it. Often this is the power of refusal; they'll decline to act until the other players adjust their plan to the method actor's conception of his character's behavior.

Butt-kickers like a sense of rising action and an exciting climax, insofar as the action rises from one fight scene to the next, and the big conclusion involves a great deal of smiting.

Structure is the storyteller's reason for being. He's come to the gaming table to take part in an exciting story. The more you can make your game like a work of fiction, the happier he'll be.

Your Structure Quotient

So, to see how much attention you should pay to structure, perform the following exercise. Give a score to each player, reflecting his apparent interest in structure and storytelling techniques. As with the similar system exercise (p. 11), you should use split scores for players with mixed tastes, and perform whatever other adjustments make sense for your specific group.

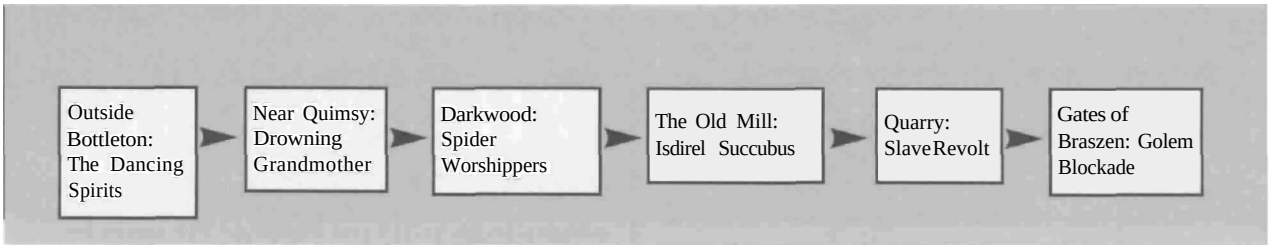
Storyteller	+3
Power Gamer	+1
Specialist	+1
Butt Kicker	+1
Casual Gamer	+1
Method Actor	0
Tactician	-3

Now average the scores. A score near 3 indicates that structure should be your primary concern: the more your sessions resemble movies or TV episodes, the better. A score around 0 suggests that, though it's okay to toy with these elements when it's easy to slip them in, you should go to no special effort to make climaxes happen. The nearer your score to -3, the more effort you should devote to eradicating all signs of traditional narrative flow from your games, learning to embrace the anticlimax as the most satisfying climax of all.

DUNGEONS AND OTHER UNSTRUCTURED ADVENTURES

Despite the inroads narrative-oriented games like *Call of Cthulhu* and ***Vampire*** have made over the years, most gamers still cut their teeth on plot-free adventures of exploration, action, and looting. The ultimate expression of this adventure type is the dungeon. Dungeons are great for starting GMs, because they don't have to worry about plot at all. The plot consists of the arbitrary order in which the PCs decide to knock down doors and beat up the monsters behind them. Although storyteller types find them utterly unsatisfying, your particular group may like mem just fine.

One of the big advantages of the unstructured adventure is that it's dead easy to create. Each area is a discrete and separate unit. You can add a new room to your dungeon complex at any time. You don't need to weave a complicated plot or worry about dispensing clues at the right rate. You don't have to play a bunch of different NPCs, keeping their motivations and funny voices straight. Your main concern lies in game balance, in making sure that the adversaries the PCs find behind the doors they bash down are neither too easy or too hard to vanquish, and that they treasures they guard are properly keyed to the characters' current power level. Any rules set that supports this style of play makes these decisions easy for you.



If you and your players like the dungeon-crawling style of play, let no one convince you that there's anything wrong with it. It is probably still true that the majority of roleplayers active today prefer unstructured, exploratory adventures. Most roleplayers still play ***Dungeons and Dragons,*** and use the dungeon style of play it best supports.

This style is popular because it's easy to run, and because it perfectly suits butt-kickers, power gamers, most specialists and casual types, and appeals reasonably well to tacticians. However, when storytellers and method actors first encounter plot and characterization, they experience an epiphany and drift off in search of games that better serve them.

If you and your players like the dungeon-crawling style of play, let no one convince you that there's anything wrong with it.

A drawback of the unstructured style is that GMs get tired of running it sooner than players tire of playing it. Because the hundredth dungeon encounter you design is more or less like the tenth, the adventure creation process gets monotonous after a while. The ease of the dungeon style turns out to be a mixed blessing, too; many come to find it insufficiently challenging. GMs are disproportionately likely to be storytellers themselves, and want to introduce intricate plots, play weird NPCs, and show off their lovingly detailed worlds.

So, if you dig dungeon adventures, more power to you. You have an easy time of it, and may not really need much of the advice laid out in this book. Your rules set of choice probably gives you all the assistance you need with this simpler style.

However, if you've bothered to read this far, it's a good bet that you want help with the more challenging structured style of play. It either fits your own preferences, or that of your players. This is why, now that I've made a point of recognizing the validity and popularity of dungeon-style adventures, I'm now going to proceed to mostly ignore them.

The main thing you need to remember when running a structured game is that some of your players will still want the pleasures they associate with an unstructured one, so you'll need to incorporate those into your planning.

COMMON STRUCTURES

There are several ways to structure an adventure. You can either pick a single structure that best suits your overall style, or the one that best matches the content of the adventure at hand.

Episodic

An episodic adventure consists of a number of scenes which are slimly connected to one another, if at all. The best example of an episodic adventure is a journey from one point to another, where the PCs are confronted by a series of unusual, dangerous, and challenging situations along the way. Though they encounters may be related by mood or theme, the scenes exist independently. The group's success or failure in an early episode has no direct bearing on what happens in later ones.

The episodic structure provides a good compromise between dungeon- and narrative-style play. The players don't get to arbitrarily choose which encounters occur; instead, they systematically enter each of your predetermined scenes, in the order you specify. But they don't have to master a complicated series of clues and can flee from failed encounters without worrying about long-term consequences. You can even skip an encounter entirely without having any effect on the other component parts.

This structure may appeal to you if your main interest as a GM is in world-building. The adventurers become tourists in your setting; each of their encounters underlines an interesting or exotic fact about your world. Episodic adventures lend themselves well to a light tone, either of picaresque humor or of fantasy and wonder. They may make for a nice break between more intense scenarios.

Episodic adventures have such simple structures that you barely need to diagram them at all. Each sequence leads to the next, with no *pesky* branching. If you ever did want to diagram an episodic adventure, it would look like the diagram above.

Episodic structures appeal naturally to method actors, who can behave as outrageously as they like in each sequence, without fear of lasting consequences. They also please power gamers, butt-kickers, and casual gamers, all of whom appreciate their simplicity. Storytellers may be disappointed by the lack of connections between scenes, and the absence of lasting consequences or recurring characters.

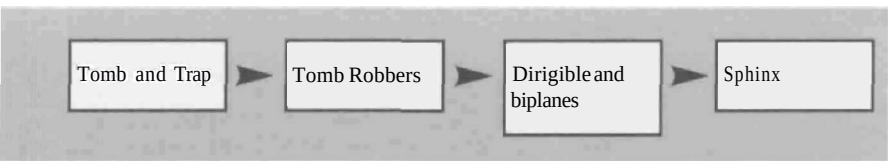
Set-Piece

A set-piece adventure structures itself around a handful - let's say three or four - of big sequences, each one of which grows out of a common situation. (The name comes from movie jargon; it refers to a big, showy sequence that stands out from the rest of the film. The foyer battle in *The Matrix* and the Klan rally in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are both set pieces.) Each set piece sequence involves linked characters and locations. You decide to engineer the plot so that the PCs encounter each set piece, in a specified order, but allow several possible ways of getting from one to the next. You should dunk of at least a couple of ways to make each transition, while also allowing tor the possibility that players will come up with unexpected but equally valid ways to make the leaps.

For example, let's say your game features two-fisted archaeologists in 1920s Egypt. You start by thinking up four cool scenes that fit the setting. You imagine a running gun battle with artifact poachers, driving through the desert. There's got to be a tomb exploration sequence, with deadly traps. And, to surprise the players with a monster that isn't a mummy, you want them to confront a powerful sphinx creature. For variety's sake, you decide to make the remaining sequence an airborne one, and envision biplanes attacking a dirigible.

Now you put the sequences in order. You know you want the sphinx at the end. In pulp-style adventure, the big monster always comes at the end. It makes sense that the tomb robbers would appear after the scene with the tomb. The dirigible seems more impressive than either of those, so it goes between them and the sphinx.

So at this point your structure looks like this:



Now all you need to do is find possible connections between sequences. It's best to have at least two possible ways to make each transition. This reminds you to keep things flexible, so that the players can't get stuck when there's only one way from A to B and they blow it. Sometimes only a single logical transition will present itself to you, no matter how hard you wrack your brain; this is acceptable if not preferable.

The easiest way to create two transitions between each pair of set-pieces is to think of one as the result of success, and one as the result of failure.

Let's return to our example, looking at the transition between the tomb robbers and dirigible sequences. If the heroes beat the robbers (or otherwise get to search their persons, vehicle, or encampment), they find plans for an attack on a dirigible owned by a dilettante collector named St. Francis Smythe. If the robbers defeat them (or lose but escape before getting their stuff searched), the adventurers can ask around in Cairo, hear that a fellow named Smythe has also been attacked by the same bandits, and get an invite to his dirigible party. The success transition should be faster and less risky than its counterpart failure transition, reflecting the positive outcome of the previous set-piece.

Branching

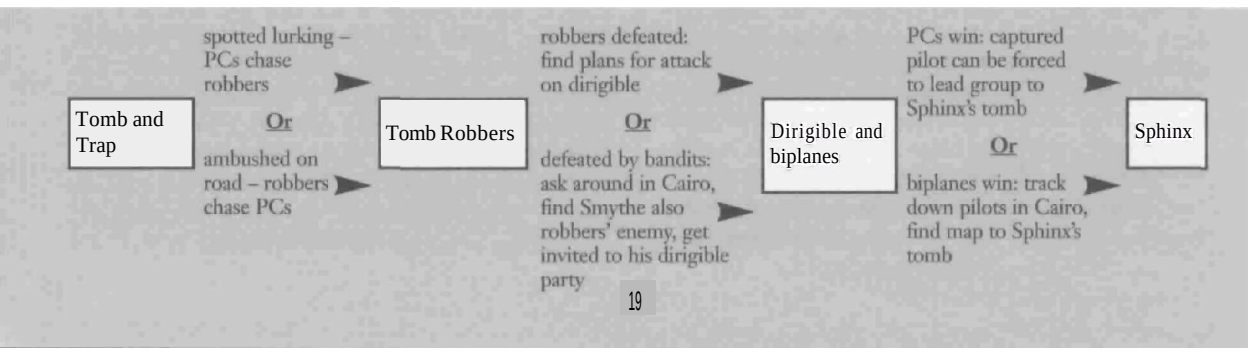
In the set-piece adventure, the heroes hit every major sequence you plan out; their success or failure in previous scenes affects their odds in the current set-piece, but never prevents it from occurring. In a *branhing* adventure, the plotline is structured like a flowchart. A successful outcome in scene A takes the PCs into scene B, but failure takes them to scene C. Results occasionally double back and generally feed the group towards one or two possible climaxes. Otherwise, the flow chart would go on forever, without resolution.

Let's say we have an adventure of hard-boiled spaceport mystery.

In Scene 1, the heroes are hired by a blue-skirmed femme fatale named Astoria, to protect her from a stalker named Zeebo. They shadow her as she goes about her business. Zeebo tries to capture her.

If they succeed in Scene 1, they go to Scene 2, where they try to interrogate Zeebo. If they succeed, they learn of his boss, The Slug, and begin to trail him. If they successfully shadow him, they go to Scene 15, where they learn that he, Zeebo and Astoria are all searching for a fabled *object d'art*, the Beteleguesan Kestrel.

If they fail in Scene 1, Zeebo captures Astoria and disappears. They must try to track him down. If they succeed, they find themselves in The Slug's hotel room, with Astoria captive, and learn about the Kestrel. If they fail, they're misled to a seedy club, the Z-Drone.



For more branches in this flow-chart, see the diagram on p. 21. You'll note that even it isn't completely resolved to a final resolution of the adventure. This is because the branching structure is very difficult to prepare fully in advance. It requires a very long flow chart, and a lot of thinking about scenes, only a small percentage of which will actually occur in play. Consequently, almost no one works out fully branching adventures ahead of time. When we improvise adventures off-the-cuff, we're often creating a branching adventure, but one in which we only **fill** in the cause-and-effect for successes or failures as we go along, for scenes that actually play out.

I include the branching adventure here because some players seem to expect adventures which are both prepared in advance and allow a large number of possible outcomes. Here we see that players can reasonably expect one, but not the other. If you're going to work out all of the scenes in advance, you're entitled to minimize the amount of work you must do by instead using the set-piece structure, where choices the players make determine how major sequences play out, but not whether they occur at all. If the players want a greater number of possible storylines, they'll have to let you improvise, and accept the drawbacks of on-the-fly adventure creation.

The overweening complexity of a fully branching structure also demonstrates why published adventures tend to be either very loose or very linear. Detailed, fully-branching adventures are impossible to contain within any reasonable page limit.

(You'll note that some of the flow chart entries say "Utter Defeat." Branching structures appeal most to tacticians, who require the possibility of total failure to make their victories meaningful. A group full of storytellers, on the other hand, will want you to steer the adventure back on course whenever their characters hit a dead end. For them, you'd replace the "utter defeat" entries with developments taking them back to other boxes in the flowchart.)

Two Rules for Transitions

Ideally, every transition between set pieces follows two rules.

One: *the PCs' ability to move from A to B never depends on the success or failure of a single action.* You never want to create a situation where the adventure grinds to a halt if the heroes blow a specific roll or make a particular mistake. Always find multiple ways out of any possible dead end in the storyline.

Let's say the group needs access to a particular occult tome to leap from the everyday world to the netherland of nightmares, where the climactic confrontation with eldritch evil will occur. You've decided that the characters need a successful Research roll to find the book in their enemy's library. But if that roll fails, you're stuck, and your adventure comes to a quick and anticlimactic halt. Perhaps you'd better also allow them a Persuasion roll to convince their foe's conniving manservant to find it for them. (You should also always be ready to allow any other logical ways of solving the problem, even if you didn't happen to think of them when creating your adventure. Your players' creativity is a thing to be cultivated, not rebuffed.)

Two: *Even if you give the PCs no opportunity to stop a particular bad thing from happening, you should at least give them the chance to affect the degree to which it happens.*

Your plot requires the conniving manservant to escape the PCs, so he can show up and do something important during the climax. You can expect the players to work mightily to stop him, and to be frustrated if it becomes clear that you've circumvented their every possible means of doing so. To reduce their frustration, you should at least allow them partial success. Maybe they can't stop him from escaping, but they can wound him, making their rolls against him easier when he shows up again in the climax. Or they can deplete the energy of his occult device, or whatever. Make sure that the players know that they've achieved something: "Just before he vanishes, he grabs his arm in pain; you seem to have wounded him."

Puzzle-Piece

A compromise between the prepared, fully-branched structure and the completely improvised scenario can be found in the *puzzle piece* model. Here, you create a situation and the characters involved in it. The puzzle pieces are the plot developments and bits of information the PCs must put together in order to resolve the storyline. To create a puzzle piece adventure, make a list of important NPCs, with personalities and agenda. You list important bits of info, taking note of who knows what. Finally, you sketch out (to the degree that you care about combat maps) the probable locations of action sequences.

When you run the adventure, you present the PCs with a route into these interconnected bits of information. They connect the dots themselves, choosing which leads to follow up. As they go along, they slowly meet the members of the cast and assemble the storyline. When excitement or plot logic demands, you insert events that move the story forward. You keep track of their progress, if necessary, by crossing out items on your list of plot developments and bits of information. If your adventure stands alone unto itself, you try to reveal the final pieces of information after a climactic action sequence or similarly entertaining crescendo. If the adventure is part of a

campaign, you can keep adding new clues and plot developments forever, as the PCs continue to build their own ongoing story.

Let's go back to the Betelguesan Kestrel adventure and see how it would look in puzzle piece format. Your preliminary outline might go like this:

• Astoria hires the PCs to protect her from stalker; claims to be novelist with demented fan

• "demented fan" really Zeebo, a former confederate

• Zeebo hangs out at Z-Drone club, a nest of thugs and killers

• Zeebo hates the owner of the club, Darvak (a space vampire) and will try to use him as a red herring

• Darvak is easily annoyed and has a torture chamber in the club basement

• Zeebo tries to kidnap Astoria

• his boss is The Slug, a criminal art collector

• The Slug awaits delivery of the Betelguesan Kestrel

• the Kestrel is a fabulous crystal sculpture from an extinct alien species

• Astoria and Zeebo stole it from X-K-BAR, android drug dealer

• X-K-BAR is en route to the station, to get it back

• also on the way is Wal Uston, a courier, who has the Kestrel

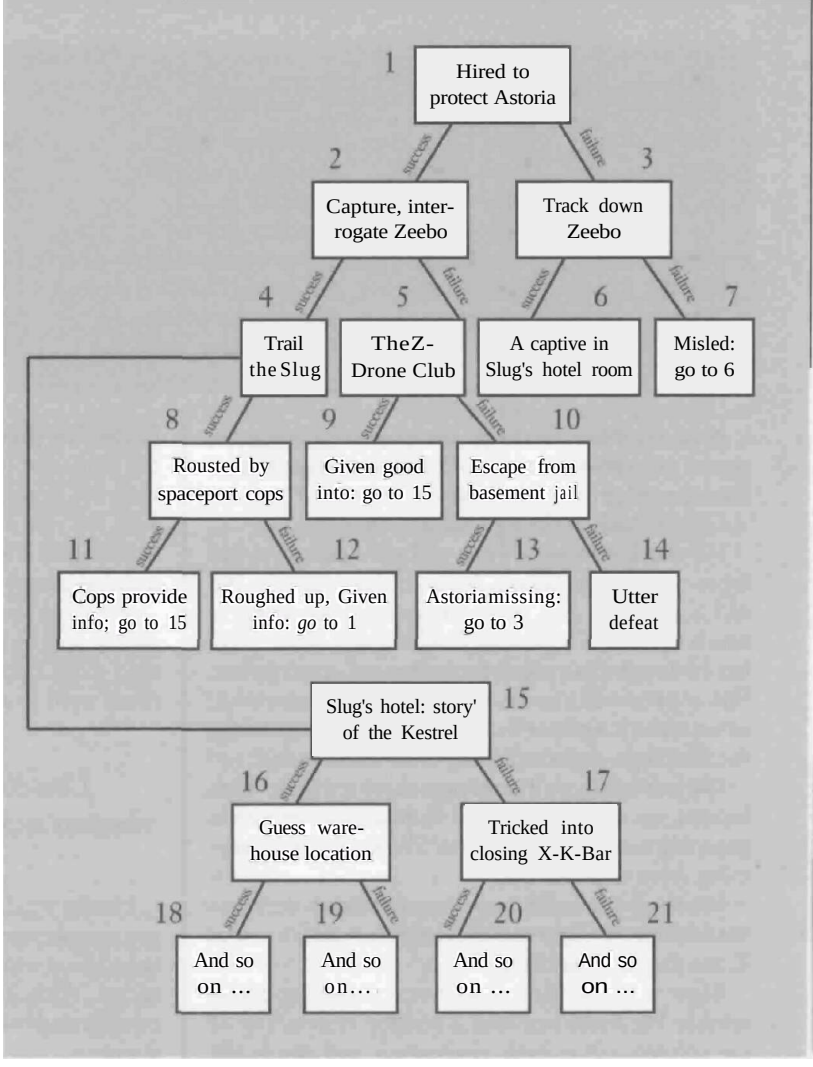
• Astoria has given him the PCs' office as an address to drop off the package

• if necessary, X-K-BAR snoots Wal Uston

• don't forget that station cops (recurring characters already antagonistic to the PCs) will stick their noses in at first sign of trouble

• final confrontation can occur on X-K-BAR's ship, in PCs' office, or Slug's hotel room

That's a much easier, more compact method of conveying the same information (more, in fact) that we find on the flow chart. It gives you greater flexibility when running the game - but requires that you know what to do with that flexibility.



Enemy Timeline

Another way to structure an adventure is around an *enemy timeline.* Here, you describe what the antagonists are doing and when, unless the PCs interrupt them. An enemy timeline of the Betelguesan Kestrel adventure might list the respective itineraries and plans of Astoria, Zeebo, the Slug, and X-K-BAR. Like the puzzle piece structure, it's an easy way to lay out a set of competing possibilities. I find it tough to use; as the PCs increasingly disrupt their enemies' plans, your notes on their likely activities become progressively less relevant It's useful mosdy in the specialized case of a chase scenario, where the PCs are tracking down foes in the midst of a crime spree, for example. I mention it here because you may find it in some published scenarios, and you may be tempted to use it as a model.

ADVENTURE WORKSHEET

Now that you've outlined your adventure, you can either flesh it out with game statistics and detailed notes, or leave these open to generate on the fly, according to your preferences. But before you proceed further, you should stop and once more consider the tastes of your players. Does the adventure contain the right elements to appeal to everyone in your group?

You've already filled out a player goal chart. Now it's time to transfer the info to an adventure worksheet, which carries over the information on that chart, and adds a column specifying how you intend to address each player's tastes.

Let's say that you've filled out your Player Goal Chart as follows:

Example Player Goal Chart

Player	Type	Emotional Kick	Adventure Element
Petra	Power Gamer	Getting Cool Stuff	Acquire Mysterious Occult Power
Sally	Butt-Kicker	Fighting	Fights, Lots of Fights
Trixie	Tactician	Problem Solving	Tactical Choices in Combat
Boutros	Specialist (ninja)	Being Sneakier-Than-Thou	Reconnoiter Lair of Sphinx
Marnie	Method Actor	Exploring Dark Psychology	Mystic Mirror: Find, Lose, Regain
Avram	Storyteller	Being in Fun Narrative	Cinematic Thrills
Christopher	Casual Gamer	Hanging Out With Us	Just Not Too Complicated

Now it's time to check out your adventure for appeal to everyone present. (Yes, I'm using a bigger than normal group, for the sake of example.)

Let's go back to the Egyptology adventure.

We check it to see if Petra will get a chance to get some cool item or power. Nope, not as it stands. We add a scene to the tomb exploration sequence in which she enters a glowing chamber and, if she plays her cards right, can acquire a mysterious occult power. Power gamers like to use, as well as acquire, new stuff, so we make it a power that will come in handy during the final fight with the Sphinx at adventure's end.

We know Sally will be happy: there are fights with bandits, an aerial battle, and a final dust-up with a great big monster, the Sphinx. We needn't add anything more to please her.

We resolve to build interesting tactical choices into the running gunfight and the dirigible battle, to make Trixie the Tactician happy.

Boutros, our resident ninja, wants chances to do his schtick. We make sure that a stealdiy reconnoiter of the sphinx's lair is both challenging and worth the effort.

Mamie likes to explore the angst of her character, a young woman traumatized by the fact that an ancient goddess sometimes possesses her body. We add an element to the tomb exploration that allows her to further her personal soap opera. She finds a mirror in the tomb that allows her mortal self to communicate with her goddess side. To motivate her to keep up with the rest of the adventure, we'll try to have the bandits take it from her. If we arrange this, we'll see to it that she can recover it in the sphinx's lair.

We drink we've got plenty of cinematic thrills for Avram. Just by having a structure in the first place, we tend to do a good job of keeping him interested. We rarely need to add anything for his benefit.

Does the adventure contain the right elements to appeal to everyone in your group?

Finally, we check the plotline and ask ourselves if it's too complicated for Christopher, who mostly wants to spend time with his friends, especially Trixie, his girlfriend. With its small cast of characters and lack of complicated branching, this adventure should hold his attention.

Now, with the slight changes we need to make to appeal to a couple of players, we're ready to either polish up our notes, or, if we like to wing things, actually play out the adventure. Which means it's time to move on to the next section ..

Preparing To Be Spontaneous

Many players are reluctant to ever take on the mantle of GM, and the chief reason for this is a fear of improvisation. We're afraid that we're not up to the task of thinking on our feet. It's the worry itself that, for many, serves as the chief impediment to successful GMing. Don't fret; improvisation is easier than it looks. It is also, surprisingly enough, something you can prepare for.

Although GMs have to make many decisions in the course of a game, there are a few types of things they can count on having to invent on the spot. By making a few notes, you can give yourself a foundation to fall back on when the time comes to make stuff up.

Most often, you'll need to create and portray NPCs. PCs are forever heading off in unexpected

directions and hitting you with questions like, "So is there a priest in this village?" or "How can I find an expert on quantum flux capacitors?"

NAMES

First off, every character needs a name. You already know the genre and setting you're working in, and have a basic idea of the types of names appropriate to them. The typical quasi-European pseudo-metheval fantasy setting features characters with simple, invented names with a vaguely archaic sound to them, like Jandar, Moriela, or Sir Elroth. A game set in Victorian Britain uses English names. A modern-day game probably requires proper names from around the world. For aliens in a space opera, we're talking made-up names with a futuristic tang to them: Kwaal, Ovoik, or Xebrod.

Always have a list of at lea ft 50 names on hand to attach as needed to the NPCs you invent on the spot. (You'll never need that many in a single session, but it saves you the effort of adding to the list before each game.)

Creating a Name List

In all cases, you'll need an assortment of both male and female names.

If you're playing a fantasy game, you can find a number of random name generators online. Some are freeware or shareware programs for download; others are web pages with reloadable output. My favorite web-based name generator can, as of this writing, be found at w**ww.ruf.rice.edu/~pound/**. This site, by Chris Pound, allows you to generate names based on over 40 languages, real and imagined. Thus you can create names for various ethnic groups within your setting, all of which can be distinguished from one another, just as we can tell a French name from a Spanish name without being directly familiar with either tongue. The more exotic languages on Chris' site might also serve as the basis for alien tongues. Some of the results are a tad unwieldy, and you may find yourself shaving off syllables or adding vowels here and there. Even so, a random name generator can give you a long list of useful names in a matter of minutes.

For historical games, seek out a textbook and crib as many names as you can. Mix up the first and last names: you don't want your NPCs to share the same names as recognizable historical figures. The eyebrows of well-read players might go up if they meet a taverner named William Blake and a cobbler named Samuel Johnson, but William Johnson and Samuel Blake will spark no such reactions.

Some kind Internet soul may already have created a name list for your chosen historical period. When I started a game set in Ancient Rome, I found a page for historical re-enactors that gave me years' worth of proper names, all formatted and ready to go.

Newspapers can likewise be raided for present-day settings. Again, separate out and recombine first and last names. Discard names one hears only in reference to a single prominent person. References to Steve Schwarzenegger or Yusuf Arafat will seem jarring, comical, or both. The business section of a newspaper is a great source of comparatively anonymous proper names; entertainment and political news tends to be a poorer source. Your other hobbies or interests may provide you with additional sources for the gleaning of contemporary names. Over the years I've gotten excellent international results from classical record magazines and film festival programs.

A fabulous net resource, available as of this writing, is the Random Name Generator located at **www.kleimo.com/random/name.cfm**. It draws on a name database using US Census data, allowing you to generate randomized contemporary names at the touch of a button. You can even set the obscurity level, from "common" to "totally obscure."

Using Your Name List

When you suddenly have to invent a new NPC in the midst of the game, scan the list for a name. We tend to remember names by their first letters, so try not to repeat the same initials too often, especially not in the course of a single session. As you take care to avoid NPCs with similar-sounding names, remember also the names of predetermined characters from the scenario.

When you settle on a name, cross it off your list. Write it down in your notes, along with other information about the NPC, which you're about to determine.

PERSONALITIES

A name is not the only thing you need to invent on the spot when creating new NPCs. They need personalities, too. While most GMs draw on a couple of stock characters - I'm partial to the dumb guy, the weasel, and the no-nonsense authority figure, myself - it's always good to force ourselves to vary our standard responses.

We can do this with a list of keywords, from which you can select personality traits right after you pick the NPC's name.

I personally use lists of actors. Any video/movie guide, like the annual Leonard Maltin book, can be used for this purpose. Or you can randomly hop from link to link on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com.) When I need to create a new character on the spot, I "cast" him or her, making the most appropriate choice from the list of actors. That gives me a physical description, and a personality suggested by the performers typical or most famous roles. This only works, though, if you're a movie buff like me, already equipped with a capacious knowledge of movie performers past and present.

You could, however, make a list of your favorite characters from fiction, figures from history, or any similar list derived from your own knowledge and interests.

Others among you may find word association an easier method. Flip open a dictionary or thesaurus, and jot down 50 or so random words. (The truly obsessive can search for and download the ENABLE list, a reference containing every English word, for use by *Scrabble* players.) When you need a personality for your character, look at the first unused word on your list and see how that inspires you. Some of us associate more freely than others. The easily inspired can choose any old random word and quickly get a useful idea from it. You may prefer to use only words that directly suggest personality.

See sidebar for a brief list of personality traits to get you started.

In keeping with the theory that it's easier and more effective to express a single, simple idea, assign only one trait to each NPC you create. Don't use keywords that don't mean anything to you, or that you think might be hard to portray. (For this reason, it's better to make your own list than to rely on mine.)

DIALOGUE

Spoken dialogue is your best tool for portraying any NPC, whether you create him for the adventure, or dream her up on the spot. Extemporizing dialogue in various styles to match the quirks of a large cast of supporting characters is always tough. In many cases, you must do so in a way that also reinforces the style of the setting. In a fantasy game, speech is usually flowery and formal. Space opera characters must speak fluent technobabble; cowboys should talk in genuine frontier gibberish.

Whether you're using dialogue to portray a particular character, or to create the illusion of tirrte and place, you can help yourself by writing out a line or two of likely dialogue for the major NPCs in your storyline. Many publishers now use this helpful gimmick in their adventures. You'll be surprised at how readily a line or two of sample dialogue can propel you into a character's personality and distinctive speech patterns, even if you never use the line directly. Don't worry if your subsequent improvisations are less scintillating than the prepared line; the first impression it creates will go a long way towards shaping your players' perception of the NPC.

OVERCOMING OTHER BLOCKS

Off-the-cuff creation of interesting characters is tough for everyone. Are there other things you have trouble inventing on the fly? If so, make similar lists to back you up the next time you're called upon to do it. For example, you might get stumped when you have to describe physical locations. If so, make a list of relevant descriptive terms, items of furniture, types of decoration, and so on. If you find yourself stopping the action to generate treasure hoards, prepare a bunch of them in advance. Some games focus strongly on costume, cuisine, weird fauna, or any number of other eccentric areas of description. The odder your setting's descriptive requirements, the more useful prepared lists of keywords become.

Personality Trait List

abstemious
accommodating
ambitious
angry
authoritative
awkward
bland
blithe
blunt
cautious
charming
cold
conceited
confident
conservative
contrary
controlling
corrupt
courageous
deceitful
defiant
dependent
diplomatic
dissolute
distrustful
dithering
dull
eager
eloquent
emotional
energetic
enigmatic
erudite
fearful
flamboyant
foolish
forgiving
generous
gossipy
graceful
greedy
gregarious
gruff
gullible
happy-go-lucky
honest
icy
ideological
ignorant
intimidating
inventive
joyous
licentious
loud
lustful
meek
menacing
miserly
mournful
officious
overbearing
perky
pious
plain-spoken
puritanical
rational
rebellious
reckless
resourceful
respectable
retiring
rugged
rustic
sacrificing
sarcastic
seductive
seething
self-effacing
selfish
self-righteous
sleepy
slick
slothful
smug
soft-spoken
stammering
stoic
stubborn
submissive
superstitious
swaggering
taciturn
unkempt
unpredictable
violent
voracious
whiny
wily
wise
witty

Confidence, Mood, and Focus

You've got your adventure ready. The players have gathered. The group has finished its hobnobbing, opened its cheesie bags, and has settled into the furniture. Now it's rime to actually run the game.

Compared to adventure creation, game running is tough to analyze and improve upon. Working at our own pace on an adventure, it's easy to stop and look at the results. During a game, we don't have rime to second guess ourselves. Sometimes we can correct our mistakes, but most often the best we can do is to make a note of them, so as not to repeat them later on.

The number one rule of running the game is: *You're doing a better job than you think.*

Like any other creative activity, GMing requires confidence and courage. Remember that your players have come to have a good time. This thought may put pressure on you, but it shouldn't: keep in mind that they're ready to meet you halfway. They have imaginations, too, and will put those to work in transforming your words into a visual picture of the world and their characters' place in it. Gamers can be a fairly low-key lot. Your group may be having the time of its collective life without giving any outward sign of enjoyment.

They want you to succeed. They know you've put a lot of work into your game. If they GM themselves, they know the combination of effort and *cojones* the task requires, and are sympathetic to the challenges you've taken on. If they never GM themselves, they may think of it as a near-impossible task, and are likely grateful that you've taken it on. Don't let the occasional complainer get you down. You're doing your players a big favor, and most of them know and appreciate it They want to have a good time gaming and are, on the whole, willing to give you the breathing room required to solve problems and improve your campaign. So relax and let things develop. The experience of continued play, coupled with a desire to keep getting better, will do much more for you than this book ever will.

READING THE ROOM

The ability to fudge the mood and attentiveness of your players is your single greatest tool as a GM.

The skill required here is one of simple observation. It sounds like such an obvious point I'd feel stupid for even mentioning it - but we've all been stuck in games where the GM not only lacked the wherewithal to shake bleary-eyed players out of their doldrums, but had no idea boredom had descended in the first place.

Train yourself to maintain a fix on the mood of the room at all times. If you know you have a tendency to let your own attention drift to other matters - rules issues, the details of combat, the minutiae of myth and culture in your chosen setting - you need to make a conscious effort to periodically check players' body language and verbal expressions for signs of boredom. Are people leaning forward in their chairs, or are they dumped back? Do they seem tired, or fidgety? Are they laughing and exclaiming excitedly, or are they mumbling and grumbling? Do they treat each other with good humor and courtesy, or are they getting cranky and argumentative? Are discussions focused on game events, or is the topic drifting? Are they occupied with the accoutrements of the game (rule books, character sheets, dice) or are they leafing through comic books or checking out the newest additions to your action figure collection?

Casual players may always show the warning signs of inattention, but if most ot your players are zoning out, you need to hook them back in, and fast

Train yourself to maintain a fix on the mood of the room at all times.

Fun Injection! Stat!

When the mood gets stale or sour, turn to your Player Goal Chart. Ask yourself what you can do that would please either the largest number of players, or the most obviously unsatisfied player, depending on the situation. If the butt-kickers are bored, toss in a litde gratuitous violence. Toss a strategic problem at the strategist Insert an opportunity for interaction to please bored method actors. Dangle the possibility of mighty treasure in front of the power gamer. To get the storytellers back in your corner, do something to get the story rolling again.

Do what is necessary at the moment and worry about how much sense it makes later.

It's better to alter the storyline of your adventure or the motivatimi of an NPC than to send the group away fed up and edgy. Never get so caught up in the details of your creative effort that you fail to achieve the fundamental goal of providing fun for everyone.

In extreme cases, you'll find that the group's sour mood has nothing to do with your game. Key members of the group may just be worn out from a hard day's work. Somebody might be coming down with a cold. A real-world beef between participants may be seeping into the game. If the problem doesn't emanate from your game, the solution probably doesn't, either. Sometimes all you can do is call the game to an early-halt and hope everybody's in finer fettle the next time you convene.

Sometimes it's better to quit early than to let had feelings attach themselves to your game.

Never get so caught up in the details of your creative effort that you fail to achieve the fundamental goal of providing fun for everyone.

Your Own Fun Quotient

You know whether you're having a good time or not. In the long run, you won't do a good job if you're not having fun. Your boredom and irritation will start to show through. But in the short run, it may be necessary to occasionally set aside your own taste preferences, or things you've already accepted as true about your setting and characters, to better please the group.

Focus

One of your biggest weapons against boredom is your control of the group's focus.

Think of stage actors. They work together to shift viewers' attention from one performer to another, so that the authence can follow the action of the play.

WHO HAS IT?

It's easy to tell who has the focus in a game session; it's the person who's talking. When you're describing the dank caves of Xebro III, you have the focus. When a player tells you which precautions he's taking as he descends into the caves, he has the focus.

Participants can share focus, by engaging in conversation. If you're answering a series of questions from a player, the two of you both have the focus. If three players are debating a course of action, all of them share it.

Ideally, everyone in the group would share focus equally. On a practical level, since all of the players need to get information from you to know what's happening to their characters, you'll take focus much more often than any other participant

Try to create situations in which you sit back, giving the players the focus. Often the most entertaining sessions spend much of their time on amusing interaction between PCs.

WHATISsTHE FOCUSON?

That said, what's important is not who has the focus, but whether they're doing anything interesting with it.

When the mood of the room goes sour, it's almost always because the focus is on something the majority of the group finds inconsequential, uninteresting, or actively annoying.

The focus can be held by any of the following:

- dialogue between PCs
- dialogue between NPCs and PCs
- resolution of events / the rolling
- your descriptions of people, places, and events
- dialogue between NPCs
- bookkeeping / character progression
- rules arguments
- debates over your decisions
- out-of-character, off-topic digressions
- dead air

In general, you want the first four on this list to take focus whenever possible. A skillful GM mimimizes the amount of time given to the rest of the list.

(Your group may have idiosyncratic tastes, actually enjoying items I've listed as problems. For example, some power gamers enjoy arguing over rules even more than actually using them. If your entire group, including yourself, fits this description, you should certainly feel free to keep on with the rules lawyering. It is much more likely, though, that only one or two members of the group like this sort of thing, making it necessary for you to clamp down on it.)

Focus Checklist

- ❑ dialogue between PCs
- ❑ dialogue between NPCs and PCs
- ❑ resolution of events/die rolling
- ❑ your descriptions of people, places, and events
- ❑ dialogue between NPCs
- ❑ bookkeeping/character progression
- ❑ rules arguments
- ❑ debates over your decisions
- ❑ out-of-character, off-topic discussions
- ❑ dead air

HANDLING SPECIFIC FOCUS PROBLEMS

It your games are unsatisfactory and you're not sure why, make a copy of the Focus Checklist. Copy the list and keep it handy during a session. Whenever you feel that things have started to go wrong, put a tick beside the entry currently taking the focus. You may need to add categories to reflect your group's particular quirks.

After the session, look at the problem categories and identify ways to minimize their hold on the focus in future games.

Too Much Inter-PC Dialogue

Both the most and least entertaining moments of games I've run have been sequences in which the PCs interact without GM intervention. How well this goes depends on your mix of players. If your players mostly enjoy getting into character, have a good sense of humor, and can discuss plans productively, you'll rarely need to intervene.

However, even a skilled group can, from time to time, get caught in a loop. When your group is unable to resolve a dispute between PCs, or agree on a plan to deal with their current dilemma, inter-player dialogue can bog down the game.

You don't want to step in on inter-player discussion too quickly. It's better to let the players work their way out of an impasse than to intervene yourself. Once they learn to work their way through a problem, they'll retain the results of the lesson for later. If you stick your nose in, their group dynamic may not progress.

Intervene only when a discussion is turning heated or the players have become visibly frustrated.

Most impasses between players arise from disagreements about either ***tactics*** *or* ***morality****.*

Breaking Tactical Impasses

When players fail to agree on the most effective way to solve a problem, it is usually because they're making bad assumptions. The group lacks crucial information, or has misinterpreted the information it has already gathered. Often at least one persuasive player has decided that the way you expect the group to solve the current dilemma is completely doomed to failure.

For many years, I ran games under the mistaken belief that a good GM never directly supplies advice to the players. I held it as a principle of good play that the GM provides descriptions of the setting, including dialogue from NPCs, but left interpretation of this information entirely up to the players.

I now understand that this is a good general rule, but not an absolute. Information flow between GM and players is always imperfect. All sorts of things can get lost as words travel from your lips to the players' ears. Players often fail to follow obvious leads or ask basic questions.

Be especially careful to keep players aware of the unwritten conventions under which your game reality operates. You may think of your game as a heroic one, where the reckless plans typical of cinematic heroes always enjoy a good chance of success. Meanwhile, your players may tend to assume a gritty, realistic world in which it's never a good idea to leap a chasm or get caught by the enemy in order to learn his sinister plan. Never be afraid to come right out and state the assumptions under which your world operates.

Players often fail to follow obvious leads or ask basic questions.

It's easy even for players well acquainted with your style to forget things from time to time, especially if they run or play in other campaigns employing contrary conventions.

When (and only when) impasses between players are caused by a lack of clues, badly interpreted information, or clashing assumptions, step in and clear things up with a direct hint. Identify, as omniscient narrator, the mistake they're making. While it may seem less intrusive to deliver the information by other means - like advice from a mentor character or the arrival of a surprise communication from headquarters - players who've gotten themselves into a planning rut often become too resistant to accept in-character information. They've become emotionally committed to their misinterpretations, and may rationalize them away: the mentor is giving bad counsel; the message from HQ is an obvious forgery.

Only by pulling back the curtain and speaking as GM can you shock the discussion back on track.

Breaking Moral Impasses

Deadlocks over the most expethent way to proceed are easy to deal with, at least compared to arguments over the morally right course of action. These blocks are often thrown up by method actors, and, to a lesser extent, storytellers, who seek to define their characters by periodically saying "no" to the rest of the group. They may have created characters whose psychological limitations prevent them from dealing with the dangers expected of adventure-oriented PCs, or whose moral virtues put them at odds with the cynical, casually treacherous persona many other players reflexively adopt.

(The freedom to be irresponsible is, for many, a fundamental component of the power fantasy that brings them to the gaming table. But that's a thesis for another day.)

Moral impasses are tough to handle, because they arise from very thing that the method actors most enjoy about the game: the ability to identify strongly with their characters. These disagreements can turn unpleasant, because of the emotion the objecting player has invested in his character's persona. Again, you may need to "pull back the curtain" and speak directly as GM, offering an alternate strategy that allows the group to move forward, without stepping on the method actor's conception of his character. Depending on the action the player is filibustering, you may, if you are very gentle and persuasive, be able to convince him that it does not actually contradict his code of ethics.

Too Much Dialogue Between PCs And NPCs

Dialogue between PCs and NPCs is usually a good and entertaining thing, but conversations can go wrong if they're repetitive or of little relevance to the main storyline, especially it only one or two PCs are participating. If you see that the attention of onlooker players has begun to flag, quickly wrap it up, summing up the salient points of the dialogue as the NPC finds a sudden reason to depart.

If you have trouble keeping dialogue scenes reasonably short and to the point, take a look at the TV series *Law and Order*, or either of its spin-offs. These police procedurals are crammed with scenes in which the investigators glean important clues from colorful supporting characters and then quickly move on.

One good way to deal with this problem is to begin each dialogue scene by deciding what else the NPC needs to be doing right now, instead of talking to the PCs. That way, you have an exit strategy, so the character can rush off, or shut the door in the adventurers' faces, as soon as all of his worthwhile information has been delivered.

Deadly Dull the Rolling

If you start to lose the room when the rules or dice come into play, ask yourself if the group is mostly uninterested in the more game-oriented aspects of the game, or if your grasp on them is looser than it could be.

A group heavy on storytellers, method actors and casual gamers may be more interested in the unadjudicated aspects of a roleplaying session than on old-school combats, traps, and maps. These are the folks for whom the exclamation, "And we didn't roll dice the whole session!" is the highest of all possible compliments. If this is the case, you can minimize the time spent on rules-heavy activities by removing them from your adventures wherever possible. Replace climactic fight scenes with climactic negotiations. Place the accent on characters the PCs can interact with, dropping mindless monsters and impersonal hazards.

If your group leans towards tacticians, power gamers and butt-kickers, and they're *still* bored when the dice bags come out, you probably need to jazz up your combat style a bit. Many GMs' energy levels drop when rules-heavy activities begin; they stop describing the world and start reeling off numbers. Numbers are fine for some groups, as long as you can project at least the excitement of a bingo caller. Shout out those damage totals! Shake your fists thwartedly when the evil villain misses! Gloat when he scores a critical hit!

Most players respond with even more excitement when you balance world description and the rolling. Intersperse the damage reports with vivid descriptions of combat. Think of yourself as a play-by-play announcer. If this technique does not come naturally to you, come prepared to each session with a list of 20 cool combat maneuvers for your antagonists to execute. If you can think up something interesting to say about each swing of the sword, that's great, but you don't have to go that far. One solid description for every three or four blows will work fine, stimulating players' visual imaginations. You want them picturing what's going on in their heads, not thinking merely of the pips on their dice.

Another trick I use is to always try to add an unusual element to an extended fight scene. Throw in special terrain, or give the bad guys some kind of gimmick. Situate the fight in a location with multiple floor levels. Pick places with interesting props - and use rules encouraging players to employ them to tactical advantage. Don't just have minotaurs attack the group in the middle of the road. Wait till the players are riding in a cart, then send in minotaurs on hang-gliders. If any activity is going to require a big bunch of the rolls, make sure there's something that makes it exciting and different. That will make it easier to describe in ways that keep the energy level up.

Too Much Description and Exposition

If eyes glaze over while you're describing things - whether you're talking about the shape of a cathedral, the number of rugose tentacles on an eldritch horror, or the cruel intricacies of Zanarian mating rituals - you need to fix one of two problems.

One, you may simply need to work on your delivery a little bit. Tape record yourself while you run a session. Then, after recovering from the initial horror of hearing yourself speaking off the cuff, check to see how much you vary your tone, volume, and speed while talking. You may be saying really interesting things in a monotonous way that makes them hard to follow. with a little effort, you can train yourself to speak more energetically. You may feel like a goof while you're working on this - often weak vocal presentation is a symptom of overall shyness - but you'll be glad when you finish. Although this exercise will improve your general communication skills and therefore your chances for real-world pay and promotion, we know that the really important thing is being able to vividly describe ogres and space aliens.

More likely, you face a second, more easily corrected problem: you're describing too much for the players to take in. People can only absorb so much information at one time. This is especially true for verbal, as opposed to written, communication.

You may be overestimating your group's appetite for minutiae. When describing things, lead with the one or two most important things the players need to know. If you're trying to paint a word-picture for them, remember that one strong image is much more powerful than five. It doesn't matter if everyone is imagining the small details differently. Paint the big picture, and let them supply the rest.

Likewise with background information. Tell the players only what they really need to know, as they need to know it. Give them background sheets to read in their spare time (for settings of your creation), or show them the supplements they should check out later (in the case of published worlds.) Keep the focus on events and characters, not on history, geography, or other background details.

Too Much Dialogue Between NPCs

Most GMs already know not to present long scenes in which their NPCs talk to one another. They instinctively know that it's weird and hard to follow. If PCs absolutely must hear NPCs converse, summarize the conversation's content without verbatim dialogue.

Too Much Bookkeeping

Players love to add things to their character sheet. In some genres the "supply missions" in which armor is purchased or laser pistols added to the cargo manifest, are as much fun to players as adventures. However, boredom can quickly take hold when one player spends actual play time deciding which spells to take or what to spend his next whack of experience points on.

Try whenever possible to have these bookkeeping tasks occur before and after the session's main action. If they're stopping the action repeatedly, you may need to have a friendly word with the players in question. Ask them to advance their characters between sessions, to prepare a list giving standard spell choices, and otherwise get their ducks in a row before the action begins.

Too Many Rules Arguments

You may find this hard to believe, but some people like to argue. Some of them even like to argue about rules. Maybe you and your entire group all fit into this category; if so, there is no such thing as too many rules arguments. For the rest of us, though, breaks in the action to debate the effect of high winds on the blast radius of a DNA grenade become extremely tedious after a while.

Rules exist to give the players a degree of control over events in your game - or at least, to ensure that *your* control over events is less than absolute. So it's important to respect them, allowing the game's crunchy bits to, at least periodically, interfere with your best laid plans and render your neat plot lines messy. You should briefly entertain players' rules objections, and try to consider them on their merits, independent of how much narrative inconvenience they cause you at the present instant. The key word here is *briefly.* Listen, think, decide. Flip a coin, if necessary; just keep the focus on game events. If the objecting player persists in his disagreement, tell him you'll discuss the matter after the session. Make it clear that your chief objective is to keep things moving. Retain the right to change your general interpretation of the rule in question, without retroactively altering the event that caused the dispute in the first place. In this post-game appeals process, try to assess the rules question on its merits, even when the rules lawyer has driven you to the point of frustration.

You may find this hard to believe, but some people like to argue.

Habitual arguers either like to hog the spotlight, enjoy needling you, or are power gamers who want to boost their abilities by wearing down your patience. By moving rules discussion to off-hours, you'll deflate the aims of the first two groups. In the last case, your firm resolve will generally calm the power gamer down, so that he'll look once more to in-character events to increase his overweening might.

Debates Over Your Decisions

Other disputes center around what the characters can reasonably do, independent of game rules. Shouldn't Dr. Queen have been able to get around the corner in time? Wouldn't Soul Brother have grabbed The Hat before he activated his super-speed ring?

If this sort of non-rules dispute about the action keeps coming up, your descriptions of events may be unclear. You might need to resort more to the use of miniatures, whiteboard maps, or other props to describe relative positions.

If players simply aren't reacting fast enough to your accurate descriptions, that's one thing. They shouldn't be permitted to retroactively alter the course of events when a better idea occurs to them. But if they fail to act, or take obviously illogical actions, based on a genuine misunderstanding, be prepared to "rewind the tape" from the point of confusion, and to work on improving information flow in the future.

Out-Of-Character, Off-Topic Digressions

Gamers like to talk. That's what roleplaying is, after all: organized talking, with imaginary super powers. Many of us have hot-button topics on which we can't help but pontificate, no matter how slight the provocation: plot holes in last week's episode of our favorite show, the relative merits of wire fu versus realistic fu, the physics of faster-than-light travel.

These digressions are deadly to game focus. You're probably as tempted as any of your players to engage in them. So make sure you all have a lengthy slice of time in which to socialize and shoot the breeze before the game proper begins. If you have only a short time slot for gaming, you may be tempted to get started as soon as everybody gets in the door and settled. This is a terrible mistake. Let the group yak itself out.

You'll lose more tone to digression by starting too soon than by letting the chat run its course.

Dead Air

The worst thing that can happen in the midst of a game session is nothing. Whenever you stop the action to perform some task or other (such as creating monster statistics, finding rules, or reviewing your notes) you lose focus and kill the group's energy level.

Several tricks help avoid dead air.

• *Prep Work.* If you must routinely break the action to work on something, you're probably not doing enough prep work. Identify the things you usually have to stop for, and prepare them in advance.

• *Multitask.* If you know there's prep work you haven't done, wait for moments when the players confer with one another, and do it then. Or train to talk and do prep work at the same time.

• *Fake It.* If you suddenly need to generate a planet, creature, equipment hoard, or whatever, decide on only the statistics you absolutely need, as you need them. Fill in the rest later. Although in some especially detailed game systems it's bad to do this (because the dungs you generate won't always be strictly legal), it's worse to let dead air seep in.

• *Make Notes.* This trick pertains to running prepared adventures. Make marginal notes, use a highlighter, or create a crib sheet to remind you of the content of each room, encounter, or sequence. That way you'll spend less time stopping to read ahead.

Improvising

Whether you're running a prepared adventure or creating an entire scenario on the fly, you'll eventually need to improvise you way into a story and out of various problems. The more you build your skill at improvisation, the more readily you can tailor your games not only to the general tastes of your various players, but to the specific plot suggestions they implicitly build into their character descriptions.

The very word "improvisation" may be enough to strike fear into the hearts of reluctant GMs. Do not let it faze you. It is not a complicated or airy-fairy thing. Even if you think of yourself as uncreative or imaginatively challenged, you can learn to do it, and do it well.

MAKING CHOICES

Improvisation doesn't happen in a vacuum. An improvisation is simply a choice you make in response to a situation in the game.

When faced with a choice, that stumps you, follow these simple steps:

One: Relax. Any halfway sensible decision you make will be fine, so don't worry about being perfect. Your players will cut you the slack you need.

Two: Imagine the most obvious result. Ask yourself: if this were a real situation, what would happen? Make a mental note of your answer.

Three: Imagine the most challenging result. Think of the PC most involved in the current situation. Ask yourself what outcome of the current situation would most challenge or threaten the character's identity, goals, or sense of self. If more than one PC could be affected in this way, pick the one who's had the least spotight time recently - unless the character belongs to a casual gamer.

Four: Imagine the most surprising result. Think of the most unexpected possible outcome of the situation; it must still be within the realm of believability for the genre and setting. A game based on action movies can embrace more improbability than a realistic one.

Five: Imagine the result most pleasing to the player. It's usually pretty easy to see what the player would most like to see happen.

Six: Pick the one that feels right. This is where your creative instinct comes in. One of your four possible choices (obvious, challenging, surprising, pleasing) will probably leap out at you as the most satisfying at the moment. Sometimes a choice will seem right because it fulfills more than one requirement: it's both obvious and challenging, or surprising and pleasing, or whatever.

Player	Type	Character	Plot Hook
Petra	Power Gamer	Mr. Sh'ok	Needs battery for his alien artifact
Sally	Butt-Kicker	Griff	Duke it out with spaceport trash
Trixie	Tactician	Lt. Bridge	Create triangular trade route
Boutros	Specialist (ninja)	Tomo Arisaki	Spy on Xolosians
Marnie	Method Actor	Eleia	Find Dream Reader
Avram	Storyteller	Doc Quaatson	Get memoirs published
Christopher	Casual Gamer	Steve Reynolds	Tag along

In the exceedingly unlikely event that all choices seem equally valid, pick one at random, using the following chart.

Roll 1d6	Result
1-2	Obvious
3	Challenging
4	Surprising
5-6	Pleasing

Seven: Think ofconsequences. Quickly make sure that your choice won't paint you into a corner, that you can still get from its probable outcome to the climax of your planned narrative (assuming you have one.) Also be sure that it won't unduly upset the player by seeming unfair or arbitrarily punishing. If the consequences seem bad, try another choice.

The more you build your skill at improvisation, the more readily you can tailor your games not only to the general tastes of your various players, but to the specific plot suggestions they implicitly build into their character descriptions.

Eight. Go with it. Having made your choice, describe what happens.

See the box on p. 32 for an example of the method in action.

This is a training-wheels method. After you master these steps, you'll find you don't need them anymore. You'll have internalized the process. You may consider only one or two alternatives for any given situation, or may immethately and intuitively leap to the best choice, as innately talented GMs do from the get-go.

Still, even the most brilliant of us find ourselves at a loss from time to time. Go back to the chart to jumpstart the thought process when inspiration fails.

IMPROVISING ENTIRE ADVENTURES

Improvising an entire adventure is simply a matter of making a series of good choices, whether you do so instinctively, or use the sort of chart illustrated above. While it's possible to weave a scenario out of whole cloth, it's always easier to lay some groundwork first

Preparation

The basis for an improvised adventure can consist of a simple plot hook laying out a situation, plus a few vague notes on the antagonists and other supporting characters. If your game system requires detailed statistics for characters, you'll want to have some of those handy, as well.

When a campaign has been rolling for a while, you'll find that it may start to plot itself, especially if you pay heed to the agendas the players provide for their characters. Start each session with a point form list (physical or in your head) of the PCs and the goals they're pursuing. Think of a plot hook that allows each PC to either advance towards his goal or fall further from it, depending on how well he confronts the obstacles you place in his path. The nature of the obstacles should, wherever possible, relate to the player's tastes. Butt-kicking players meet barriers that necessitate the kicking of butt. Tacticians get tactical problems; method actors face tests of will; storytellers experience weird and wonderful plot twists.

A sample set of prep notes for a game of this type is shown in the box above.

In a good improvised adventure, you may use only a few of the plot hooks, as the group fixes on a particular problem to solve. They may even devote their full attention to a throwaway scene, making it the plot hook of the night.

Cutaway Style

The self-perpetuating improvised campaign works best if you're willing to use the cutaway style. Allow players to occupy solo time in the spotlight as other players look on. Switch back and forth between players, allowing them to gather back together into groups and subgroups as the story and their various agendas demand. Require players to respect the difference between player and character knowledge, so that they can have fun as spectators without knowing what the other PCs are up to behind their backs.

PACING

So how do you make a completely improvised session seem to have structure?

First, you remember that only storytellers really care that much about structure, anyway. Other types may enjoy climactic finishes when they occur, but not as much as they like other things. Tacticians, as stated before, are often happiest when they cleverly avoid exciting climaxes of any sort.

But here's the simple secret: *Contrive throughout the session to have the most dramatic thing happen at the end.* So if your session ends at 10 o'clock, and you want to end on a big fight (still the default climax favored by gamers everywhere), and it takes about an hour to resolve such a donnybrook with your rules set of choice, do your best to get the fight rolling by 9. Bingo, you seem like a genius.

You actually only really have to pull this off in about one session out of four to have the desired effect. The odd lumpily unformed session actually serves to make the structured ones seem even more impressive.

Choices: An Example

You're running a game in which the PCs are interstellar traders. One player, Sally, abruptly decides that her PC, Griff Hamlin, will duck into an abandoned warehouse in a seedy spaceport district. The other PCs have banished Griff from their delicate trade negotiations after he offended their prospective business partner. Their decision made sense but leaves nothing for Sally to do. You had no way of knowing that anyone would go poking into warehouses this session, and so have no response prepared to Griff's action.

The *obvious* choice is to specify that the warehouse is just an ordinary spaceport facility, full of dusty boxes containing mundane commodities.

A *challenging* choice would place a truculent security guard in the warehouse. Griff's defining characteristics are his short fuse and disregard for authority. Such an encounter would further highlight them.

If the warehouse contained one of Griff's old enemies, supposedly deceased, that would be *surprising*.

Griff is obviously looking for diverting trouble, so the most *pleasing* choice would place someone in the warehouse on whom he can release his pent-up frustrations without ill consequence: let's say he comes upon a group of ruffians robbing the joint.

Sally clearly wants something interesting to do while she's exiled from negotiations. That makes the obvious choice obviously unsatisfying. You can tell that Sally is unhappy that Griff has been punished for exercising his main character trait, so challenging her with it right now seems a little heavy. The surprising choice might be good; you haven't thrown any big plot twists at the group yet. But the villain in question hasn't been dead long enough for his return from the grave to have maximum effect. Since Sally herself seems a bit out of sorts, the pleasing route seems the best way to go.

You can't think of any serious ill consequences of a fight with warehouse robbers, unless Griff gets killed. But that's an ever-present risk in adventure stories, which you can address by making the crooks' game statistics sufficiently puny.

"You hear a noise," you tell Sally. "Someone seems to be ransacking the place!"

A Final Word on the Ultimate Dilemma

I've been fortunate enough to participate in the odd convention seminar over the years, and if there's a Q&A centering on GM (or player) problems, I'm always struck by a disturbing common theme. The really serious problems that gamers run into have nothing to do with rules, GMing tricks like the ones mentioned here, preferred settings, or anything else that my advice can do a darn thing to solve. These are the seemingly irreconcilable gaps in taste between group participants. A storyteller-oriented GM tries to impose an epic plotline on a gang of players who just want to kill stuff. A nuts-and-bolts GM forgets to keep the PCs balanced against one another, leaving one player totally overshadowed. A method actor invariably shows up with characters guaranteed to find themselves at odds with the rest of the group.

In its own small way, this book means to address the problem. I've ruthlessly hammered home the seemingly obvious point that gamers have various tastes, and that a fun game tries to balance the competing

desires of its participants. *To* many folks, including those whose tastes are so pronounced that they've turned them into a philosophy of what gaming ought to be, this is not obvious at all. Hence the hammering.

For groups split by wide gaps in taste, all the laws of GMing in the world won't help. They need to learn some old-fashioned negotiating skills, and see if they can work out their differences.

This is not a book about negotiation; you can find lots of them on the shelves of your local library. When in doubt, though, the following rules work pretty well:

Make your approach polite, respectful, and soothing.

Listen to the other person explain what he wants.

Figure out how to solve his problem while also salving yours.

Propose the solution.

Be prepared to amend the solution bused on his input.

Some problems really *arc* irreconcilable, though, especially when the other party is immune to compromise. Sadly, sometimes your only choice is to eject the offending player, or to seek a new group entirely. Even sadder, depending on where you live, it may be hard or even impossible to find new players. I guess we'll just have to grow the hobby some more, to make compatible - or at least accommodating - players easier to find . . .

The Ultimate Law: If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It

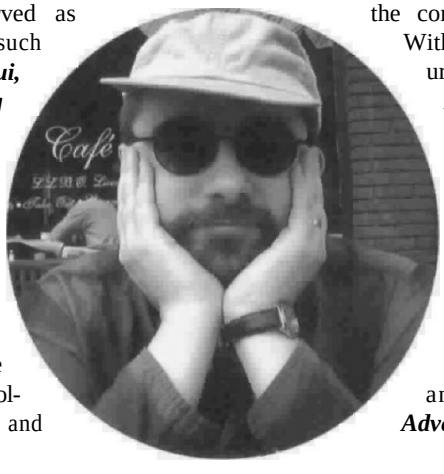
I've reached the end of my allotted space, and it's time for us all to go and run some games. But before we part, one last searing dictum rises up from the desert sands of time:

If your game is running just fine already, ignore everything I've just told you.

If your group is having a good time, you have no problems in need of fixing. Whatever you do, don't disrupt your game by trying to shoehorn in techniques or concepts, from this book or anywhere else, in order to GM "properly" or "correctly."

Come to think of it, I guess that's just another way of reiterating the Great Immutable Law I started with at the very beginning of this book: *If you and your players are having fun, you are a good GM.*

About the Author



Robin D. Laws has served as designer or lead designer for such roleplaying games as ***Feng Shui, Rune, Hero Wars*** and ***Dying Earth***. He's also a regular columnist for *Dragon* magazine, soon to take on similar duties for *Star Wars Gainer*. In addition to oodles of adventures and supplements for companies like White Wolf, FASA, Pinnacle, Last Unicorn, and Wizards of the Coast, he worked on the collectible card game ***Shadowfist*** and the computer game ***King of Dragon Pass.*** With cruel and mercenary intent, he urges you to check out his novels *Pierced Heart* and *The Rough and the Smooth;* the latter is the heartwarming tale of two anthropomorphic naked mole rats and the hideous carnage that ensues when they involve themselves in human politics. Robin is pleased to once again appear under the banner of Steve Jackson Games, who years ago published his first full-length book, the legendarily twisted and freakish ***GURPS Fantasy II: Adventures in the Mad Lands.***

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