

UNCLE
FIGGY'S
GUIDE
TO
GOOD
GAME-
MASTERING
v2.0

RYU COPE

INTRODUCTION

A case of bad attitude

I've played in a *lot* of games, with a *lot* of gaming groups under a *lot* of GameMasters. When I first started gaming, I wasn't picky in the least — I was so desperate to roleplay (that's what we called it, but mostly we were just doing hack and slash) that I would join *any* game to come down the pike. For the most part, they fell along a bell curve: the vast majority were neither overly fun nor overly boring, they were average at best; a very few were the most wonderful games I had ever played; and the rest were utter bombs.

After playing that way for about three or four years (in countless different campaigns and/or groups with a revolving door of forty or so different gamers), I created a character that, for some strange reason, I thought needed more than just combat. I gave him a realistic-sounding name for the genre and played him as a separate, fully-realized person. As the game went on, I started giving him little personality traits that made him unique in his own right. I had a blast doing it, and the other players loved playing with him. I played him for about another two or three years in a variety of campaigns (we weren't too concerned with dragging characters from one GM to another), but I started to realize that I was the only one doing anything like this. The other players weren't doing anything more than rolling dice and announcing combat actions, and the GMs didn't have any problem with that since the only fun and excitement in their games was the combat.

So I started looking for other games. I branched out into other gaming systems, suffering briefly under the delusion that it was the system that made a game enjoyable (or not). After a few more years, I started running games, trying to include all the things that I found enjoyable. Players came and went, and (with a few exceptions) seemed to love the games I ran.

I noticed, however, that there was always a small group of players in my games who weren't really enjoying themselves, but who wouldn't speak up

about it. They were only coming because it was a game. Any game. Just like me when I started playing (and was still guilty of doing). Watching these players made me start wondering "why?". Why was I sitting through games I didn't like? The point of a game is to have fun, right? So why do it if you don't have fun? I mean, I *have* to go to work, which I don't really like but I have to do it to make a living. But I don't *have* to go to a game, I *choose* to go to a game. And in anything else, I would never choose to do something I didn't like if I didn't have to!

Because to me, **the point of a game is to have fun**, and I don't understand playing a game you don't like or you're not having fun playing. To me, it makes much more sense (and is much more mature) to gracefully bow out of a game I'm not having fun playing than going and sitting and grumping and trying to change everyone else to fit *my* gaming style. Why not just go find a group that already fits my gaming style?

And that's why I originally wrote the *Uncle Figgy's Guides*, as a way to explain my style and teach other GMs about it. This new edition includes most of the original plus a few more years worth of gaming experience. I also wanted to add in a few years worth of *Ask Uncle Figgy* (questions and answers about things that I didn't think of when writing the original, but that people cared enough to ask me about) where I thought appropriate.

As you read the newest edition of *Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering*, I ask that you keep in mind that I'm not saying that any of what's inside is the "right" way to play or that any other way is the "wrong" way to play. All I'm saying is that what's inside is how I like to run a game (quick, light, and with an emphasis on cinematic, heroic action), and how a game that I like best to play is run. After all, my whole goal (with both editions) has been to get more GMs running games I would enjoy so I might get to play a little more and have to GM a little less!

— Ryu "Dan" Cope

ABOUT UNCLE FIGGY

Uncle Figgy is the alter-ego of Dan Wakageryu (Ryu) Cope, an author, artist, game designer and tech geek. He is the creator of the *Ryu-Ki System: Sun Serra* tabletop RPG, which had originally been published by DragonDog Press, Inc. He is also the creator and host of the *Bad Buddhist Radio* podcast (www.badbuddhistradio.com) and has been a guest lecturer at science fiction conventions on subjects as diverse as game design, publishing, graphic design, art, technology, podcasting, religion, writing, editing, copyright law, angelology, mythology, martial arts and combat, and whatever else con organizers figure will fill a panel.

Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering is copyright © 2015 by Dan Wakageryu (Ryu) Cope.

Licensing and rights are hereby given to freely distribute this work for nonprofit purposes as long as this copyright notice, along with the author's name, are attached and left fully intact. No permission is granted in any way to use, excerpt, or include this work for profit. **Good gaming should be free!**

1 • GAMEMASTERING • RYU COPE

SYSTEM & RULES

Probably the most important decision you and your players can make is the game system you are going to play. There's a ton of them out there, and they fit all different genres and play styles. It's up to the players and GM to pick a game that meshes well with the game everyone wants to play.

Some game systems, for example, do modern day roleplaying better than others, while some do fantasy roleplaying better than others. I could go on and on about all the different types, and styles, but the point is simple: the point of playing a game is to have fun, so pick the system that maximizes the fun of you and your players. After all, Uncle Figgy's number one rule for playing a game is: **Don't play if you're not having fun!**

Fun is the goal, right? And the game you decide to play is essential to that goal. Now, I will grant that a good GM can make even a crappy game system fun, and a bad GM can make even the best game system absolutely awful. But why go to all the extra work forcing a system to fit when you can just go get one that already does (or at the very least only needs some minor tweaks)?

The Importance of Rules

Another reason the system, and its rules, are important is that they are the common ground for players and GM. By looking at the rules, both GM and players gain an understanding of what they can reasonably expect during play. When a GM changes or ignores the rules without telling the players, he or she has taken that common ground out from under the players' feet and placed it all totally under his or her own control. Any GM who needs to steal control from their players probably shouldn't be running a game. It's also been Uncle Figgy's experience that such GMs are almost always the first to pull out the harsh accusation of "rules lawyering" against any player who questions these surprise rule changes. Questions that never would have been asked in the first place if the GM had actually discussed them first! I can't stress it enough that **a GM should always notify his or her players of rules changes.** It's only fair, and any GM not interested in fairness definitely should not be running games.

When I play a game, I look at the system and rules to determine if it can handle the types of characters and style of play that I like. In other words, using the rules as a player allows me to create a reasonable expectation of how much fun I might have playing that game. I'm a big fan of cinematic action, for instance. As in "swinging on chandeliers, jumping on the back of a train as it takes off from the station, riding a shield surfer-style down a flight of stairs" movie action. If I see that a game's rules

discourages (or ignores altogether) that style of play, I probably won't play it.

But imagine, now, that I've seen a system that allows me to play in the way that I have the most fun. I make my character using those rules and sit down with my friends and the game gets underway. When it comes time for my character to shine, the GM reveals that, no, he didn't like those rules, and he has decided to go a separate way with the style, and he never told anyone about these plans.

This has actually happened to me as a player. Our group had decided to play a superhero game. In order to mimic "super speedsters", the game had rules for a character "speed" score instead of random initiative die rolls. The character I had created was a "mega martial artist" type who, through the channeling of his ki, was three times faster than the average human. He couldn't hit hard, but he would hit first (most of the time) and hit a lot. But then came the game and our first super combat, and the GM refused to use the speed rules of the system and instead went for the random initiative die roll. Thus negating my entire character concept.

Had the GM told me of his rule change before I made my character, I simply wouldn't have made that character (no sense in making a super speedster when that character's speed is rendered useless by GM fiat). And that applies to any and all Player Characters, actually. Heroic PCs are **supposed** to stand out from the crowd (unless their concept is that they really don't). So if a player chooses to play a character who is "different" from the average person, then what's the point of that character if the GM changes the rules so that character's "difference" is effectively nullified? (e.g., playing a priest in a system where priests can cast spells, but then, after you've made your character, picked out your spells, the GM tells you — or worse, you find out during game play — that priests in his world can't cast spells!)

It's so important, I'm going to say it again:

Because the rules are the common ground between the players and the GM, everyone should be made totally familiar with as many rules changes as possible before play commences; hopefully before character creation has even begun!

It takes nothing for a GM to say (as Uncle Figgy does before character creation) something like: "This game doesn't have much combat, so characters based totally on combat won't fit very well" or "I thought the magic rules of this system were kind of weak, so I changed them to make wizards a little

more powerful” or even “Yeah, I’d rather do random initiative die rolls instead of using the system’s speed rules, but if you want to make a quick character, I’ll give you a +1 to your die roll for every 3 full points in your Speed stat”.

Honest mistakes

Sometimes, though, the rules might state something important, and while running the game you forget it. If that’s the case, **be honest!** Admit it when the players bring it up! If the rules to your system say that a roll for an attack is made on three dice, and you forget (or didn’t fully understand in the first place) and call for a roll on four dice, don’t get aggravated at the player who calls you on it! There’s always a chance that a given player knows or understands the system better than you, and that’s not a bad thing!

The mature thing to do is admit your mistake, reroll the dice and keep playing. I once had a GM get quite angry at me for bringing up a fundamental rule in a system we were playing which he had apparently misunderstood, and which, in his interpretation, would have resulted in the unfair deaths of the entire party. When I pointed out the mistake, and its consequences, he got extremely belligerent, called me a “rules lawyer” and told me he did not appreciate me arguing with him. When another experienced player suggested that I might be right, the GM ended the game right then and there — claiming that he couldn’t run a game with such “insubordinate” players. I was younger and a little more hot headed myself, and told him that was probably for the best as the rest of the group didn’t like being treated like we were privates beneath an immature “drill sergeant” GM who couldn’t admit he might be wrong. Neither I nor anyone else in my group ever played again in a game that he ran.

As an aside, I found out years later from other gamer friends I knew that this GM (now in his 40s) hadn’t ever changed his tune and was still trying to browbeat players into “his way or the highway” and was still storming out of games whenever anyone pointed out rules mistakes.

Sometimes you shouldn’t follow the rules

Almost every tabletop roleplaying game has at least one sentence that says something like “these rules are only guidelines...” and that’s exactly the way they should be played.

Now, I know this sounds all contradictory with all the stuff I just got done talking about, but when it comes to actually sitting down and playing the game, there are going to be times when the rules just break down. Some of the sillier rules I’ve seen in

RPGs include:

- ◆ A rule where an infant could throw a football about 70 feet.
- ◆ A rule where a character had to apply so many modifiers to hammer a wooden stake through the heart of a prone and unmoving vampire that it started looking like an advanced algebra word problem (*Matthias’ player needs to roll a 17 or higher to hit, he suffers a -6 penalty for trying to strike a vital organ, a -4 penalty for the size of the heart, and a -2 penalty for the awkwardness of using hammer and stake as a weapon. He gets a +3 bonus because his target is unmoving and a +2 bonus because his target is prone. If he decides to take careful aim, he gets a +2 bonus to hit each turn he takes aim, up to a maximum of three turns. What number does Matthias’ player need to roll before he realizes this should all be one heck of a lot easier?*)
- ◆ A rule where a player character standing right in front of a loaded cannon would be relatively uninjured if it were fired.

The simple fact is that the people who plan roleplaying games (tabletop or computer) simply *cannot* predict every possible action or situation in which a rule might be used (and, consequently, might break down).

This is where tabletop RPGs have an advantage over MMOs. If you, as GM, find a rule breaking down, drop it and use your best judgement and sense of fairness. Don’t make your players sit and wait while you search for an “official” answer. Use your judgement based on what you feel is most logical and most fair and go for it!

I once had a GM who had to look through at least three or four books whenever a character wanted to purchase something. And if that thing wasn’t listed in one of the books, this GM would just say “Yeah, nobody has any” — even if it was something totally common! Because the rules didn’t specifically mention it, he was unable to deal with a request for it.

This is where you need to use common sense to make a fair judgement call. We all know that an infant can’t even hold a football, much less throw it. It shouldn’t even take a to-hit roll, much less one loaded with bonuses and penalties, to hammer a stake through the heart of an unmoving target. And standing directly in front of a cannon when it’s fired should kill most anyone, even if it’s only loaded with a powder charge!

The only rule that should be followed 100% of the time is the rule of common sense, fairness, and fun.

In the case of the GM I mentioned above, what he should have done was just make a judgement call based on the item's rarity and apparent worth. I don't think I have ever seen a gaming book that lists "bubblegum" in its "equipment" lists, but if a player says he wants to buy some, it's just a simple matter of using common sense to determine its availability (pretty much in almost every store in modern-day United States, not so much in a Fantasy world) and then give it a cost. No need to look at books at all! *(In all honesty, even in a Fantasy setting, I might decide that bubblegum is a rare treat for nobles and could be had in major cities for a hefty price.)*

Remember, the *only* rule that should be followed 100% of the time is that combination of common sense, fairness, and fun. As long as it follows that guideline — as long as it's fair, honest, and sensible — the GM's decision is one of the fundamental aspects of gaming.

What about cheating?

While there are many ways a GM can cheat his or her players — like changing rules on the fly, applying rules unfairly to NPCs vs. PCs (or to PCs vs. other PCs, i.e., playing favorites), or using ultimate GM knowledge (all of which is discussed later) — here the focus is on the *why* of cheating.

It's been Uncle Figgy's experience that when it comes to GMs cheating, it all boils down to only two types: good and bad. Below are a couple of examples of GM cheating. See if you can guess which one is "good" cheating and which one is "bad" cheating:

- A)** A PC is about to be shot in the back, and she doesn't have a clue. Even though you've rolled a critical hit that will kill her instantly, you tell the players that they hear a gunshot and a bullet shatters the glass she's holding in her hand.
- B)** A PC is about to shoot an NPC in the back, and he doesn't have a clue. The player has rolled a critical hit that will kill the NPC instantly, but you tell the players that the NPC bends down to tie his shoe at just the right moment and the bullet shatters the glass on the table next to him.

Both of these are cheating, and are pretty much an example of cheating in the same way. The first

one is good, the second is bad.

Why?

Mostly because it's a law of numbers. As the GM, you control an entire world's worth of characters. The players get only one at a time. For you, Vinnie the Thug can easily be resurrected as Johnny the Thug, Lefty the thug, Squints the Thug, Joey the Thug, etc., etc., ad infinitum. The player, on the other hand, only gets one Torinia Darkheart. When Torinia is killed, that's pretty much it. Sure, her player can create another character, but if she's any good, the new one just won't be the same as the last. Don't forget, too, that the

Player Characters *should* be the important part of your game. Not the NPCs, and not your story (we'll discuss that later).

Another thing to add is that cheating like in example B actually *punishes* the players. If the PCs have done the work to get into a position to where they can take a clean shot at someone they need to, don't punish them for their skill and, yes, even for their luck.

Now, that's not to say that there can't be extenuating circumstances they don't know about. If they're taking out a minor figure in the game, hooray for the PCs! If it's a major villain, however, what do you know, the PC took the shot and nailed him in the back, roll damage and the villain drops. Only to show up later thanks to his bulletproof vest (which the PCs might not know about unless they have very good information or they succeeded at some kind of "awareness" or "vision" check).

Basically, a GM should use "good" cheating (fudging dice rolls and such) to keep the game going and to keep it fair and fun. It's best for the light, cinematic gameplay style that Uncle Figgy loves so much — the kind where only heroic action ("I'll hold the line against the orc horde! Get the children to safety!") or sheer player stupidity ("I'm going to pull the lever labeled 'Pull Only For Instant Self-Destruct' and see what happens") gets a PC killed.

Bad cheating, on the other hand, tends to be used (at least in Uncle Figgy's experience) by GMs who feel that they have to "win" against the players, or force the players to follow the GM's "plan" for the game and/or story.

GM MINDSET

There's a lot more to running a game than just picking the system and knowing the rules (and when and where to best apply them). This section is about things a GM should keep in mind when deciding to step up to the plate.

FORGET WINNING

Seriously! Forget it. I know it's difficult, what with Western civilization's grand attachment to "winners" and "losers", but forget it anyway! When it comes to an RPG, and the difference between the GM and the Players, *there's no such thing as "winning"*. Roleplaying games are not the GM vs. the Players. I don't care if people have told you it is. I don't care if books have said things like "whose game is it, anyway?" (*and, yes, Uncle Figgy has seen gaming books where the author says almost exactly that in their forwards or introductions.*)

The real answer to the question of "Whose game is it, anyway?" is that it is *everyone's* game: The GM's and the Players'. Because the simple truth of the matter is that without the players, then you ain't got no game. Period. End of story. If you want to run a game without players, you're gonna end up sitting there playing with yourself.

Your Uncle Figgy has encountered so many GMs out there who believe that they either have to 1) kill off at least one character a game session to prove that they are in charge, or 2) put in clues that only have meaning to someone who already knows the solution. All in some pathetic attempt to prove that they're better than the players. These sad individuals suffer under the delusion that they're "winning" if the players can't figure things out or if the Player Characters are dropping like flies. (*And, yeah, I've been there, too, when I first started GMing.*)

Don't believe me? In one of the gaming circles I used to belong to, there was a GM who would cheerfully tell me how best to "beat" the players. Since I didn't play in his game, he felt free to chortle on about the amount of PCs he would kill off without a snowball's chance in the Sahara of surviving, and about all the clues he littered his game with that the players were too stupid (his actual word!) to figure out or totally failed to find in the first place. One

of his most memorable stories to me began with his instant and irrevocable elimination of a PC he didn't like (of course he never suggested a different character *before* beginning the game), and then his telling of the player to "Get over it and make a new character" while he continued on with the game. The story ended with him laughing about how the game ground to a boring halt because the PCs couldn't find the necessary clues to proceed. To this GM, it was *always* GM vs. Player, and it didn't matter that his games were unplayable, boring messes so long as he let everyone know that he was large and in charge.

The real "winners"

Okay, okay. If you're *that* hung up on the concepts of "winning" and "losing", Uncle Figgy will toss you a bone: You're winning if your players are having a good time and talk excitedly (in a good way) about the game when you get up to go to the bathroom. You're losing if your players show no animation other than when it's time to roll the dice in combat, or (and especially) when then they decide they'd rather do other stuff or play games under other GMs than play your next game.

If it doesn't make you happy to see your players having fun, then maybe you'd be happier as a player yourself. That should be a GM's first and most important goal: to run a game that everyone is having fun playing. Everything

else is secondary. If you're only happy when you see your players struggling, when you kill off Player Characters on a whim to prove your power, or when your game bogs down because the players can't figure out your "awesome" clues, then you probably need to take a step away from GMing.

And let's be honest, here. It's not much of a "win" in the first place. After all, you're the GM and already pretty much hold all the power. What kind of "victory" can it really be when you are the only one who really stands a chance to begin with?

AVOID GOD SYNDROME

Keeping with that line of reasoning, it's plainly obvious that the person running a game is (almost literally) the god of the game. The GM decides the fates of the NPCs and the PCs. Population, evolution,

An RPG is supposed to be a shared story. The game belongs to the Players just as much as it belongs to the GameMaster

weather, magic — all of a game world's creation rests on the GM's whim.

Problems arise, however, when the GM gets carried away with this minor power rush and takes it into the real world.

Symptoms of GOD Syndrome include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ refusing to discuss *anything* with the players (insisting that it's "my way or the highway" at all times)
- ◆ getting angry when players raise any kind of dissent about GM calls or the direction of the game
- ◆ threatening to kill characters when things aren't going his or her way.

I've seen GMs demand that players give them their character sheets and then rip them up because they were mad at players. I've seen GMs call players "idiots" and "losers" for not playing the way the GM wants them to. I even witnessed one GM go so far as to throw a player out of his game and out of his house simply for looking at the GM's dice when the GM rolled them on the table in full view of everyone.

All of these are examples of GameMasters who have let their power go to their heads.

Remember, a roleplaying game is supposed to be a *shared* story. The setting is just as much the world of the player characters as it is the GM's, and it's the players' game just as much as it is yours. If your players are not having fun, they leave; which leaves *you* without a game. And if you have no game, then you have no power at all.

A MATTER OF STYLE

This partly goes with this section, and partly with the whole "Players who fit" part in the section on **Groups & Players** (further in), but it's really about understanding your GameMastering style and whether or not it is compatible with the game style your players want to play.

I know I'm going to sound like a broken record (or a skipping CD, or, I don't know, a glitched MP3 file?) because I'm going to say it again: **Playing a game is supposed to be fun.** And *your* fun is just as important as your players' fun.

A lot of times, a GM's fun is directly related to the style of game he or she wants to run. I prefer light, quick, cinematic games where the PCs are heroic and active and hardly ever die (but do get messed with one heck of a lot!). You might not prefer that at all. You might prefer a game full of political intrigue and courtly diplomacy. You might prefer a game of

darkness and angst. You might prefer a game of doom and despair and fighting the good fight against unbeatable odds.

And, honestly, you've got to run the game *you* want to run. You've got to run the game that is fun for you. It's simple. If you're not having fun running a game, then it's almost guaranteed that the players aren't going to have fun playing it.

But here's the problem: your players might not like the same style you do.

So now you have a choice to make. Do you:

- 1) run the game your players want that you won't be happy running?
- 2) run the game you want to run and to heck with the players?
- 3) not run at all?
- 4) let the players believe (or worse, you tell them) that you're running the game they want while you sneak in all the stuff they don't like?

That, of course, is entirely up to you.

Personally, I use a combination of number 2 and number 3. I'm not going to run a game I'm not going to like because I'm not going to be good at it. Which means I only run the style I like and my players can go elsewhere if they want something different. Now, I know that sounds harsh, but it's actually better for everyone. Let's be honest, here, if you want Chinese food for dinner, would you really go to a Mexican restaurant and demand they give you Cha Siu Bao and an order of Mapo Doufu? And how good do you seriously think it would be if they tried?

Knowing that, whenever my group has requested a different style of game, I'll often suggest one of the other GMs in the group run it who specializes in that type. There's nothing wrong in admitting that you're not that good at something, or not that interested in it, and bowing out to give the limelight to someone who is. As long as you're not a jerk about it. You know, as long as you don't tell your players how stupid they are for liking that other style.

Don't run a game style that you don't want to run. No one will have fun playing it!

GMs and Players need to have the same idea of what style game they like to play.

This is one of those important things to bring up before you ever start running a game, of course. And sometimes, it can be part of the discussion about the system you're going to use (since some systems are more about certain styles than others). Just talk about the style of game you run and see if the players agree and are okay playing that style. Whatever you do, don't be so desperate to run that you don't talk about your style at all and let it be a surprise, and *definitely* don't lie about your style and then sneak it into a game, anyway.

As an example, I once belonged to a group that decided (as a group) to play a system/game that was about heroic fantasy with larger-than-life characters. A relative newcomer to the group volunteered to run, and since we had talked about the style we wanted, we guessed that he wouldn't have volunteered if he didn't like running that style. We couldn't have been more wrong.

What he really wanted to run was a doom-and-gloom horror game, but didn't want to tell us that for fear we would say no. So he tried to "sneak" horror elements into the game and wasn't happy when we didn't react with the traditional doom-and-gloom horror game response.

At the end of the first game session, he asked what we thought of his game and most of the players thought it only "okay". One of the players brought up that she could have done without the attempts at horror, as she wasn't that into it and really wanted to play heroic fantasy.

This, of course, greatly upset the GM who told everyone how sorry he was that "everyone hated" his game (no one said any such thing and were actually very nice in the constructive criticism they gave him). He then turned around and attacked the players, telling us how "disappointed" he was in us as we didn't "react" properly to the horror in the first place.

It was absolutely lost on him that, in a game where PCs can alter the very fabric of reality through magic, call down the power of the gods themselves through prayer, and slice enemies in half with giant swords and axes, elements that would be horrific (like a talking disembodied head) in another system were merely everyday occurrences in the one we were playing. (In all honesty, the most horrific things in the game were actually the Player Characters, what

with all the slaying and fireballing and burning alive of NPCs!)

CHECK YOUR EGO AT THE DOOR

What this really all boils down to for the proper GM mindset is **humility**. Sure, you're the referee of the game, and the storyteller, but it's not just *your* game; the players get a say in it, too. And if you're not willing to give the players their due — if you're not willing to give the players a proper place in your game, then you shouldn't be running a game; you should be writing a story. Because then you get to be in complete and total control of everything, and get to determine how everything is supposed to work, and how the plot is supposed to unfold, and you get to be in charge of every aspect down to each little grain of sand and miniscule microbe.

If that's what you're really looking for when running a game, just stop now and walk away. Uncle Figgy is here to tell you right now that players are going to screw with that control and that plan and that plot. And it has absolutely nothing to do with you (at least not with good, mature players). They're going to do it because *it's their job* to do it! The GM's job is to come up with the setting and the story that the players get to run around in like children at an amusement park. The GM's job is to be a referee and security guard, making judicious use of the rules to make sure the players are having fun.

Yes, the players are going to run around and do things you might not like. The players are going to test you and push you and push the game and push the rules and break stuff and twist the story and, well, that's the way it is! You can either try to work with them in such a way that everyone has fun, or you can get all upset and stupid that they're not playing the way you want them to play and you can shut the amusement park down so that nobody has any fun.

And if you see that the players aren't having fun — if you see that the games are bogging down and everyone looks bored (and it's *your* job to be watching for these things) — don't take it personally, talk to your players! Find out what they like and don't like about the game. Be rational and mature. Take criticism without anger. Ultimately, you'll be left with the decision of either changing your style to fit them, or admitting that you can't give them what they want and suggesting something different.

GROUPS & PLAYERS

WHOSE GROUP IS IT?

This is an issue I've encountered a lot. Because the GM leads the *game*, I've often noticed that the tendency is to think of the GM as the leader of the *group*. Especially if that GM is the group's *only* GM. After all, if your group has only one GM, then it is bound to that GM's will and whim. And that's just asking for trouble.

Some of Uncle Figgy's earliest gaming experiences were like that: the various groups I joined had one GM and one GM only — if he didn't feel like running, there was no game. If he felt like running something different, then that was what was played. Very often, these GMs ended up with that "GOD Syndrome" I talk about in the previous section. Not only were they the final authority in the game, they were the final authority in *everything* related to the group. Not surprisingly, many of them acted like petty little tyrants, always threatening to take their game and go home if they didn't get their way.

Another problem a GM can run into when being considered the leader of a gaming group, is that it then falls onto the GM to take care of any interpersonal problems within the group. In other words, the players will begin to think that it's the GM's responsibility to handle other players, rather than it being the responsibility of the group as a whole. And that's a responsibility that no one should want to take on insofar as it relates to something that is supposed to be fun! After all, who wants to end up being the Human Resources Manager for a gaming group, with all the "hiring" and "firing" of players that would entail?

To counter these issues, I started promoting the idea with gaming groups I GameMastered for that the gaming group was *not* "my" group. It belonged to all of us; players and GM alike. When players came to me about joining my group, I told them that I couldn't make unilateral calls, and I would bring it up for discussion and a vote with the rest of the group. The same went for the other group members: if they wanted to bring in a new member, they brought it up for discussion and vote (we also made potential new members "try out" for a couple of "test" sessions to see if they would fit in with the rest of the group). In

this way, we headed off a lot of problems before they even got started.

I once knew a gamer who was an obnoxious GM and an obnoxious player. He and his best friend belonged to a fairly large group (about eight people), and the two of them took it upon themselves that the group was "too big" and needed to be trimmed. They never discussed it with the other members of the group, but they called each individual they decided should be "cut" from the team and told them that the "rest of the group" had decided on that person's removal.

It came as quite a shock to each of those players, as no one had said anything to them previously, and as far as they knew, the group was going fine. Not surprisingly, it soon came out that these two individuals were trying to create *their* perfect group and were using underhanded tactics to do so. One of them (the obnoxious GM) even went so far as to say it was "necessary" for the betterment of *his* group.

In a funny turn of events, all of the "cut" members of the old group ended up forming their own group, and invited me to be a member. Fast forward a few months, and, well, *his* carefully constructed group had fallen apart. Not wanting to approach the people he had lied to in order to get rid of them, he approached me (since I was the active GM of the group at the time) and asked me if he could join *my* group. He was less than

happy when I told him it wasn't *my* group, I was just the GM, and it would have to be discussed among the other members. Not surprisingly, the "NO!" vote came out as soon as I mentioned that he had spoken to me.

The point of that story is that he and his friend caused a rift and destroyed their own group by taking it upon themselves to be the "leaders", while I forestalled any problems within our group by not making a unilateral decision about who was and was not allowed in. Imagine the rift I would have caused in that group had I just decided that I was GM so I could invite anyone I wanted to, and just had him show up at the next game! I'm willing to bet dollars to dice that the group would have been over right then and there.

A GM might be the leader of the game, but the gaming group itself should be the responsibility of all of the group's members.

The simple fact is what I've already said: It's not the GM's group, and it's not the players' group. It's **everybody's** group. Sure, no GM means no game, but no players *also* means no game.

The GM isn't so much a CEO, sitting at the top of the heap with everyone else below him, the GM is more like the Captain of a sports team — he gets to be in charge of some stuff (running the game), but ultimately he's just another player like all the others.

PROBLEM PLAYERS

All of that said, there still will be times when you, as GM, are expected to take care of a problem player. If the problem is in-game, then I'm a firm believer that in-game solutions should be used. If the problem is *out* of game, then the problem is the responsibility of the entire group, not just the GM.

Fortunately, I've never as a GM had to deal that much with problem players outside of a game. On those very rare occasions when I've had to, I've followed two simple rules: **Communication is Key** and **Be Nice** (which, honestly, are two rules that help out in all of the rest of life, too!).

First of all, be sure that the player is a *real* problem and not just a minor annoyance to you. Your Uncle Figgy once had a player who loved to try and see just how far he could bend almost every rule. He would gleefully debate, for instance, just *how* much weight a wooden plank might hold before breaking, so if he summoned a large pig onto that catwalk where the orc sniper was perched, the plank should break, right!? It was actually kind of funny, but it sometimes *did* get a little annoying to GM for him. But it really wasn't taking away from anyone else's enjoyment of the game, and the other players liked sitting back and watching the leaps of logic he would go through to try and pull off some crazy stunt in the game.

On the other hand, sometimes a player can be a *real* problem, and that's when it's up to the group to step up and decide if something (and what that might be) needs to be done. A good gaming group depends heavily on the maturity of everyone involved, and if one player cannot get along with another player (or the GM), then that player should be mature enough to put those differences aside for the good of the game, or should politely bow out of the game entirely.

Sometimes, though, a problem player doesn't have the maturity it takes to do these things. Often, they may stay and fight and argue in an attempt to push out the GM or player that they dislike. "Why should I have to leave?" they rationalize.

In situations like these, it is Uncle Figgy's opinion that players should be given the benefit of the doubt as to their maturity level. Since interpersonal conflict in a group affects the whole group, the whole group needs to talk to him about it. Calmly, rationally, and constructively. Let the problem player know that their attitude and behavior in the past have not been good for the group and/or game, and will not be appreciated in the future.

If it's a case of Player A doesn't like Player B (or the GM), and Player A refuses to play nice with them, then Player A needs to be informed that the game *will* go on whether Player A is there or not, and Player B *will* be there (or that GM *will* be running). This puts the choice squarely in Player A's hands. If he really doesn't want to play under that GM or with that player, he can simply not come to the game. And if he *does* decide to show up, then the group needs to make it clear that any improper behaviors will not be tolerated. A polite, but firm, "If you don't enjoy the games (because of whatever reason), then maybe you shouldn't come," is well within order. Again: if you're not having fun, why are you there!?

This very thing has actually happened to me, where a new player simply did not like one of the existing players in the group (he didn't think the existing player was a "good player"). Since I was the current GM, he asked me if I would get rid of the existing player. Neither I, nor anyone else in the group had a problem with that player, so it was simply a matter of telling the new player that "Yeah. He's staying. You can either learn to deal with him and not cause problems, or you can stay home." He chose to stay home.

In such sticky situations, it's always best to be as polite and non-combative as you can. In that way, you take the responsibility off of yourself (and the rest of the group) and put it back where it really belongs — with the person who has the problem to begin with.

Dealing With Problems In-Game

Sometimes, a player isn't a problem outside of the game: she's fun, she's funny, she's polite, everyone loves her. But in game, she causes all sorts of problems. Maybe she likes playing "evil" characters and starts trouble with all of the other Player Characters. Maybe she doesn't like being part of a group and wants to hog the spotlight. Maybe she likes to argue with the GM about *everything*.

What do you do about a player like this? Well, I'm a firm believer in the idea that "in-game problems require in-game solutions".

I once had a player who always wanted her

character to steal from the other players' characters (and any NPC she came across); which, of course, caused a few problems with party unity. This is an example of an in-game problem that was starting to cause out-of-game problems. The easy fix was to let her do what she wanted to do, but call for all the appropriate dice rolls. And if she failed, then she failed, with all the appropriate consequences. I also let the other PCs do what they wanted to do if and when they caught her at it (they ended up getting their gear back from her and leaving her alone in the wilderness — she didn't survive long on her own).

In other words, use the game to police bad behavior that happens in the game. If you have a player who has his character kill every NPC he comes across, then pretty soon the NPC authorities *will* take notice! Or a victim's family member might come looking for revenge (or hire someone to get it for them). Or a noble hero might decide to do something to eliminate the "scourge". Or maybe some of the more honorable party members might turn him in...

Remember, just because the PCs are the focus of the story doesn't mean they're untouchable. The title of "Player Character" doesn't give a character carte blanche to run amok in the game world without any consequences whatsoever.

PLAYER TYPES

Players who cause in-game trouble might be doing it because of their reason for roleplaying in the first place. In all my years of roleplaying, I've encountered many different player "types". Some are quite interested in the game. To others, the game is just something to do when nothing else is available. Below, I've listed the types I've come across. I've tried to arrange them in order from "most interested in roleplaying" to "least interested".

The "Mad Gamer"

This is the good GM's dream player, and, in Uncle Figgy's experience, the rarest of all players. This player *loves* the "role playing" part of roleplaying games and is as serious about it as the most serious of actors.

He uses props at the games (if his character smokes a cigar, he buys one just for the game even if he doesn't smoke). He speaks in different accents for each different character. He will try to match the names of his characters as closely as he can to the character and the setting (if you run an Arabian-nights style game, he comes up with a name like "Sha'bat al'Abatha" or some such). His characters will do things that seem idiotic in game terms, but if you look, those things are always totally *in character*. (If

he has defined his character as honorable, he will do stuff like always issue a challenge to any foe, even if he knows as a player that he gives up the element of surprise to do so.) To do anything else would mean for him to be *not* in character, which is worse to the Mad Gamer than his character's death.

His characters often will be "concept" characters that, more often than not, totally fit the game and setting, even if they're not game breakers. Min-Maxing and PowerGaming are totally foreign concepts to him. Sure, he'll try to make the best character he can, but only if it fits the concept he has created. Use a rule that gives his character a permanent boost to Strength for free? Why? His concept is for an agile rogue, thank you.

As long as he knows ahead of time what your gaming style is, and what setting and system you plan to run, he might be quite happy joining in or he might bow out until you run one more to his liking. (I once had a Mad Gamer who would *only* play high fantasy games, and would choose not to play if the group played anything else).

The biggest problem with the Mad Gamer is that he expects nothing less than perfection from his GM. If he's not having fun, he's gone; looking for another GM. He also requires that the GM (and the other players) respect him for his character playing (and creation) abilities, not how many monsters he can kill or his knowledge of the rules. The GM of a Mad Gamer, therefore, must give him what his character needs: if he has created a quiet, bookish, inventor type and the game turns out to be nothing but a slugfest, he'll leave. If he has created a sneaky, thief type and there's no opportunity for sneaking, he's not going to be happy.

Unlike the other player types, the Mad Gamer is hard to predict because he strives to make all of his characters different (usually depending on the mood he's in when he makes the character) — and he wants them to have different motivations and reactions. What you used against one of his characters won't necessarily work against any of his others. But, if you know his character, you'll know how to motivate the Mad Gamer, because most of the time he will do whatever his character would be most likely to do.

You also have to watch for party conflict with a Mad Gamer when the other player types can't fathom the depths of his being *in character*. (Uncle Figgy once witnessed a Mad Gamer playing a highly honorable Paladin turn his entire group, including himself, into the game's authorities because of the group's part in the capture, interrogation, and torture

of a bad guy. Needless to say, the other characters' players were a little ticked off. Especially when the Paladin actively "discouraged" them from breaking out of prison.)

It's important to note, however, that it wasn't the Mad Gamer who made the decision, it was the Paladin character of the Mad Gamer, because being *in character* is more important than anything else. When all the other players are sitting around the table laughing about something, don't be surprised if the Mad Gamer is just sitting there watching. After all, he's only going to join in the frivolity if his character would be doing so. This can make it look like he's not having fun, but he's really having the time of his life simply being someone else.

If there's anything the Mad Gamer should work on, it's the idea that sometimes his being *in character* so deeply might interfere with the ability of other players to enjoy the game (in other words, he might be taking the game way too seriously).

The "PowerGamer" ("Min/Maxer" or "Munchkin")

This gamer is less about the "role playing" part of a roleplaying game, and more about the "game" part. Like a fantasy-football fanatic, the PowerGamer is obsessed with the rules and the numbers. She wants to wring every drop of ability she can out of the character creation rules. If there's a point-break or a die bonus, she'll find it. She genuinely likes playing, but she's locked into the concept of being *the best*. The best combatant, the best assassin, the best wizard, the best whatever.

Her characters are usually not very creative, and she probably doesn't play them with any style. What they will be is the most efficient and most powerful that the system and setting have to offer, and if she doesn't know how to make them the most efficient and most powerful, she'll find out — she examines the rules as much as she can in attempt to find the most useful character types and/or combinations. In class-based systems, if one class of character in a given system seems stronger than any others, she will almost always go for that class. In systems where point values are used to design characters, she will constantly redesign her characters for maximum cost-effectiveness and point breaks.

The only real problem involved in playing with PowerGamers is that they can (and will) quickly turn into Rules Lawyers if they feel that they are being cheated out of rules that they have relied on to make their characters *the best*.

If there's anything the PowerGamer should work on, it's the idea that not all the enjoyment in a game comes from points, statistics, and numbers, and

sometimes great fun can be had in an RPG without being *the best* at all.

The "Average Joe"

Your basic gamer. There's nothing extraordinary about the Average Joe in any way, either positive or negative. He likes gaming, but he hasn't quite understood that his characters are supposed to be different from each other and from himself. He shows up on time for all the games, but he might not take them too seriously. If one of the other players starts talking about work or a recent movie while the GM is busy with other players, the Average Joe will join right in.

The Average Joe is the easiest player type to predict and motivate because all of his characters tend to be the same, and they all tend to be exactly like him (at least in personality and motivation). Uncle Figgy once had a player in one of his groups who was a perfect Average Joe. When playing a superhero game, his character was a big, metal-covered, muscle-bound, combat machine. When playing a fantasy game, his character was a big, metal-covered, muscle-bound, combat machine. When playing a cyberpunk game, his character was... well, you get the idea.

There really aren't that many problems involved in playing with an Average Joe so long as no one expects too much of him. He'll tend to go along with whatever the other players decide in pretty much anything. Put him alone, and he'll tend to do whatever he thinks other players would do in that situation (he may even ask them, right then and there, what they would do!). His character's actions will always be based on what the Average Joe would do or think, not what his character might do or think.

If there's anything the Average Joe should work on, it's getting more involved in the game and his characters.

The "Copycat"

I can't be exactly certain who enjoys gaming more (or less), the Copycat or the Average Joe. One thing is certain: the Copycat wants to play something she's seen in the movies. Or on TV. Or in comic books. Or something she's read about.

If she's allowed to make an exact replica of some cool character she's seen somewhere else, she's quite happy roleplaying and seems to enjoy it very much. If she can't bring her favorite fictional character to life in the game, she won't be happy at all.

Copycats are very easy to GM for, as her character will almost always do exactly what the original would do in any given situation. In other

words, if you know the original, then you know the Copycat's duplicate.

Of course, the biggest problem with the Copycat is that she expects her character to be just as powerful, well-known, and respected as the original. In systems with randomly determined attributes, this could be next to impossible. In systems with point-based characters, the Copycat might not be able to afford the cost of the original. And the Copycat almost *never* understands just *why* she can't have exactly the character she wants.

If there's anything the Copycat should work on, it's that she should strive to use her *own* imagination when creating a character, not someone else's.

The "Psycho Killer"

This player type likes to roleplay about as much as the Copycat, but only while he's getting his way. If he *doesn't* get his way, he lashes out by having his character attack everything in sight. When he goes shopping for a weapon and the store owner won't give him a price he wants, the Psycho Killer kills him. If an NPC cop stops him for something, the Psycho Killer kills him. If someone has something he wants and he has no other way to get it, the Psycho Killer kills him. If anyone in the least bit annoys, frustrates, or gets in the way of, the Psycho Killer — you guessed it — the Psycho Killer kills them. The Psycho Killer believes that his character is the sole purpose of the game, and every NPC should bow down to him just by right of his being a Player Character (and the other Player Characters better watch their step, too). And, of course, there should never be any consequences for all of these deaths, either.

It's very easy to spot the kinds of problems inherent with the Psycho Killer. The better issue is what to do with him? Uncle Figgy's chosen solution is to let the game world take care of him. Simply keep track of the death count around the Psycho Killer's characters. When the number gets out of hand, that's when the game world authorities step in. In a supers game, for instance, if someone is murderous enough, other supers (maybe even other party members) will hunt him down. Sometimes (such as in a horror or fantasy game) even the villains might band together to take out a common threat, or at least use him as a scapegoat for all of their own bad deeds.

Usually, after having it proven in game several times that his character is *not* the biggest and baddest and most important thing in the game world, the Psycho Killer settles down and becomes either an Average Joe or a Combat Monster.

If there's anything the Psycho Killer should work on, it's the idea that a good game world, just like

the real world, has rules and consequences, and his character is not immune to them.

The "Combat Monster"

Fight! Fight! Fight!

That's the motto of the Combat Monster. She loves gaming for three simple reasons: combat, combat, and *more* combat. She's only happy when she's rolling dice and rocking heads. If more than five minutes goes by without her being able to fight something, she sits quietly in the corner like a dark cloud until the next combat begins. In fact, it's relatively easy to forget she's even there, as her characters will just follow along blindly until a combat occurs.

There's really no problem with having a Combat Monster in your game as long as you're running a hack-and-slash campaign. But if you're running a game that isn't combat intensive, she'll be unhappy. And chances are good she'll make sure everyone knows that she's unhappy.

I once belonged to a group with a serious Combat Monster. No matter which of us was taking the turn to GM (the Combat Monster never did), he complained that there wasn't enough combat. Political intrigue? Forget it. Epic swashbuckling adventure? Yawn! Investigation and puzzle solving? Come on, man! Where's the freaking combat!?

At the end of every gaming session, he would tell the GM that the game needed more combat. Always and forever. More combat, more combat, more combat.

Eventually, the rest of the group basically sat him down and said "We like the games as they are. We like the adventure. We like the puzzles. And we think the level of combat is just right. You can either deal with it and enjoy the game as it is, or you can go looking for another game." He said he would stick around and quit complaining, but eventually he just stopped coming because the games that were being run just didn't have enough combat for him.

The best way Uncle Figgy has found to deal with a Combat Monster is basically the same: Let all the players know what your game style is like, including level of combat. If the Combat Monster doesn't like it, but everyone else does, politely suggest that she might be better off seeking a different game where she might have more fun.

If there's anything the Combat Monster should work on, it's the idea that there is a lot more fun to be had in gaming than just in making to-hit rolls and damage rolls. She might just have fun with some of those other aspects if she gives them an honest try.

“Captain Boredom”

It’s Saturday night, there’s a game, and he doesn’t have a date, so, sure! He’d *love* to come!

But that’s the only time. He’s really not interested in gaming at all; he just has nothing better to do and this way he won’t be bored.

If you’re running a one-shot game, that’s fine, but don’t invite him to an extended campaign because he’ll probably have something better to do when the next gaming session rolls around.

A Captain Boredom will tell you how much he enjoys gaming, but if someone else invites him to a movie (or a club, or anything else he thinks might be more exciting) on the same day as the game, don’t expect him to show up. If he *does* manage to make it to a game, he’ll be more interested in socializing than actually playing. Captain Boredom uses every lag in the game, no matter how slight, to start up a conversation on, well, anything *other* than the game.

In Uncle Figgy’s younger days, he was in a group with a Captain Boredom player who would show up only for every other game or so. His excuses ranged from “I had to go to a junkyard to look for a part for my car” to “a couple of friends called last night and invited me out to a club” (even though the game sessions were planned two weeks in advance) and even “I totally forgot about the game and went out with this girl I just met!” And, of course, he never notified anyone *before* the game that he wasn’t going to show. He just didn’t show.

When he *did* show up for the game, he spent the vast majority of it either with his nose stuck in his smartphone as he sent and received texts, or drawing away in his sketchpad. The only time he paid any attention to the game was when the GM (and thus the attention) was directly focused on him. As soon as the GM spoke to anyone else at the gaming table, it was back to the text messages.

The biggest problem with Captain Boredom is that he’s just not interested. He claims to want to game, but what he really wants is to have people around him. It’s best to do the gaming group a favor and just not invite him. Since any extended campaign relies on the commitment of all involved, it puts a strain on the GM (who must work out the absence of a player character) and also the other players (who probably were counting on that player character to be there) when the Captain Boredom doesn’t show up because he’s found something better to do.

If there’s anything Captain Boredom should work on, it’s that many other players see the game as *their* “something better to do” and he’s interfering with

that if he’s not going to commit to it; if he’s not into the game, it’s best if he leaves it to those who are.

The Friend

Roleplaying? What’s that? Do you mean that Dungeons and Dragons stuff?

The Friend really *is* ignorant of roleplaying and gaming. In Uncle Figgy’s experience, it’s usually the girlfriend (though it’s definitely *not* gender specific) of one of the other players, and she’s just there because her boyfriend is and he asked her to “Try it, honey. It’s fun!”

Sometimes she’ll join in. Other times she won’t. If she *does* try it, she usually sits quietly next to the person she’s with, not saying a word as they urge her to play and explain the game and her character sheet to her.

There’s always a possibility that she might decide that “this gaming stuff is *awesome!*” but I’ve never seen it. At best, I’ve seen the Friend become a Captain Boredom who shows up for each gaming session only because her friend does. Usually she finds something better to do during subsequent gaming sessions and doesn’t show up at all.

While she’s there, however, the GM can (and should, it’s the polite thing to do) try to get her involved in the game. It’s best not to waste tons of time making a character for her until you know she’s going to enjoy it and stick around. Also, I wouldn’t give her a character that is going to be integral to the plot of upcoming games, since you don’t know if she’s going to be there for them.

Do try to get her involved, but *don’t* force her if she seems less than enthusiastic. Be friendly, not pushy. And don’t pressure her to take a starring role.

If there’s anything the Friend should work on, it’s on giving the game an honest chance; she might really like it. Other than that, she shouldn’t insist on coming just because her friend does — it’s awkward for everyone involved.

Special Case: The Rules Lawyer

On its face, this is the guy who argues with the GM over rules decisions the GM makes.

Sometimes, he just likes to argue. He knows the system inside and out, and he’s memorized every book it has. He knows exactly “what” does “how much” damage, and he knows exactly “how much” damage “what” can take. If you’re the GM and you screw up, he’ll call you on it. In some cases, he’ll be right and you should admit your mistake. At other times, he may be dead wrong and he’s just arguing to get his way (usually when it’s a PowerGamer and the rule regards something that will end up in him

not being *the best*). This is the *true* Rules Lawyer.

A second situation where the true Rules Lawyer shows his colors is when there are rules that the player really has no right knowing, and that the player character shouldn't know at all, such as NPC or monster stats and attributes. The Rules Lawyer often relies on those rules to get an "edge", and if the GM forgets those rules, or (worse) changes them without telling the players, the Rules Lawyer swings into gear!

Let's take a fantasy game in which Uncle Figgy was a player: The rules for this system specifically mentioned that animated skeletons take double damage from fire and fire-based attacks (dry bones and whatnot). Knowing this, one of the players (A PowerGamer who was totally unable to keep player knowledge separate from character knowledge) attacked a group of skeletons with a fire-based spell.

Now, I don't know if the GM made an honest mistake, or if he intentionally ignored the rules because he didn't want the battle to be over as quickly as it would have been (looking at the GM in question, I suspect the latter — he was a PowerGamer himself). The player in question immediately turned into a Rules Lawyer and the entire game stopped while the two argued for quite a while, neither willing to concede the point for the betterment of the game. The argument ended up shutting that session down.

So what went wrong? Lots of things, actually. Stubbornness on both their parts not the least. Firstly, the player was wrong for not keeping player knowledge separate from character knowledge — just because *he* knew skeletons' took double damage from fire, would his character (who had never encountered skeletons before) know the same?

Second, the GM shouldn't have cheated to make the game go the way he wanted. And if he hadn't cheated, he should have admitted his mistake and used the rule as written. (It would have been best had he allowed the PowerGamer to blast the skeletons into ash at that moment in the game. Later, the GM could have introduced fire-resistant skeletons with some kind of warning as to their "special" quality.)

Thirdly, both parties should have set their egos aside for the sake of the game. The GM could easily have said that he understood what the rules were

but that this was a special case, so they don't apply. The player could just as easily have said something along the lines of "Holy crap! Fire-resistant skeletons! Something magical must be going on!"

I want to point out, here, that rules questions arise honestly, and GMs should not immediately leap to accusations of "Rules Lawyering" any time they do. Such behavior alienates the players and makes them feel as though they can't talk honestly with the GM.

("GOD Syndrome" GMs often throw around the "Rules Lawyer" label any time they feel their authority is being threatened.)

Keep in mind, however, that Rules Lawyers can come from *any* player type when major system rules are changed or ignored, and the GM has not told the players beforehand (it all goes back to that "system is the common ground" thing). If you don't use rules as written,

make absolutely certain that the players have been told about your changes before the game even begins! Preferably before character creation. This way, if there are going to be any arguments or Rules Lawyering, they happen before play ever starts.

To manage Rules Lawyering that crops up in play, admit readily to mistakes you may have made, adjust the situation, and get on with the game. If you're relatively certain you haven't made a mistake, don't argue with the Rules Lawyer (that's what they want). Tell your players you'll look it up and discuss it after the session ends, then apply your best judgement call (fair, honest, and fun) and get on with the game!

Remember, be polite but firm that you won't argue about it.

If there's anything the Rules Lawyer should work on, it's that:

- 1) he's not necessarily always right
- 2) there are exceptions to every rule
(The rules of a gaming system aren't hard and fast — there are always going to be situations and combinations that neither GM nor game designer could be prepared for)
- 3) don't argue during the game, it slows it down, is awkward for the other players, and can make you look like a jerk
(If you have a good, mature GM, she's doing her best to make the game as fun as possible for everyone involved. Let her do her job and make her calls.)

Someone questioning a call doesn't mean they're a Rules Lawyer.

CAMPAIGNS & ADVENTURES

This section deals with things to keep in mind when designing a single adventure or an entire campaign. It's a lot of work to do these things effectively, and sometimes a GM does more work than he or she needs to do — which can lead to all kinds of problems later on.

STOP PLANNING

You know how it is: you spend days, maybe weeks, planning a fabulous adventure or an amazing campaign. You've got your clues. You've got your red herrings. You've got your macguffin, your villain, your victim(s), your plot, and your story. You know it's just going to wow the stuffing out of your players. You bring it to the gaming table and start running your little GM heart out, and your players just kind of yawn, blink at you, and then start talking about what kind of pizza to order.

They think the plotline you've spent so much time on is more boring than the latest news of Great-Uncle Gilbert's prostate exam, they're missing your clues left and right, they think your story is boring, and they're chasing after the red herring as though it's the most interesting thing in the world.

Quick! What do you do!? Honestly? Throw it all out the window. Burn it. Bury it. Eat it. Wrap it in a steak and feed it to your pet piranha. Why'd you make it, anyway?

The simple fact is that you *cannot* predict *everything* your players are going to do. I've seen the seemingly stupidest individuals become instant geniuses when roleplaying — thinking of things I never would have thought of in a million years. I've also seen some of the most intelligent people I know turn into absolute morons who couldn't work their way out of a dungeon room with only one door to the outside, and it's open! You can never predict with 100% certainty how your players are going to react, or what they're going to do. And if you force them to follow that adventure you did all that work on, they'll resent you for it. (Unless you can make them think that it was their idea in the first place, see "Uncle Figgy's Big 3" in the next section.)

Self love is NOT the best love

That "forcing" part is actually a pretty big danger to watch out for. A GM who overplans runs the risk of loving his well-crafted story so much that he might get angry at the players for not following it. I once played in a superhero game where the story was seriously cliched and boring. The GM threw in a red herring that the players found much more interesting; it was a much more interesting story. The GM got extremely peeved that no one would follow his story, and resorted to some pretty crazy stunts to

force the game back on (his) track. He even began to cheat; ignoring and changing basic rules and character attributes to "bully" the players into line. The most notable example came when he declared that it would take 30 seconds of "in game" time for a character traveling at 250 miles per hour (about 4 miles per minute, or 2 miles every 30 seconds) to cover only one-half of a mile. He did this simply because his story absolutely *required* an NPC to perform a certain action before the player characters got to him.

Playing favorites with yourself

And that's another danger of rampant planning and "story crafting": NPC favoritism. A common pitfall for GMs (not just GMs, either, but a lot of designers of MMORPGs, too) to fall into is to become so much in love with their NPCs that they have a tendency to take over the story, especially when the story has already been planned out and the players refuse to follow it. PCs can't figure out the clues? Have your wonderful NPCs come in and explain how stupid they all are because the clue was just so easy. PCs having a hard time defeating the wonderful villain you've created? Have your NPC be the only one who can take him out (if he needs to be taken out at all — he's probably so awesome that nobody should be able to touch him). Better yet, what about when the PCs end up kicking the snot out of your precious villain? Easy! Just cheat! Have him all of a sudden become smarter, stronger, quicker, or somehow much more powerful than he really is. Whose game is this, anyway? It belongs to the GameMaster, right? It's his story, isn't it?

Wrong! Uncle Figgy has said it before and he'll say it again: the game is for the *player* characters, *not* your NPCs. The PCs should be the movers and shakers of the story. They don't have to be the most important or biggest motivators of the game world, but they *do* have to be the most important people of the story (adventure). If the players can't figure out your clues, maybe you've made the clues just a little bit too esoteric (maybe innocently, maybe out of some need to prove how much smarter you are than the players). It's *your* job to keep the game moving and exciting. If the players can't figure out the clues, you need to make them easier. If the PCs can't beat the villain in the climactic battle, you need to fix things. Make him a little weaker. Better yet, make him hold back until the PCs are strong enough to go head to head with him. (Fiction is full of this sort of thing: the villain throws henchman after henchman at the PCs, but refuses to get into a direct confrontation with them until they're so powerful he can no longer avoid it). And if you've made the

villain too weak, and the PCs are dusting his doilies, let them. They'll feel good about the easy win and they'll all go home happy. If you've played your cards right, one or two of them might even begin to worry that it was *too easy*... They're right, of course. That easy-to-beat villain was only a small fish in a big pond, and there are plenty of barracuda out there who just might be a little ticked off at the loss of one of their friends and/or relatives. Not to mention that now rumors are starting to get around about the PCs' strengths and weaknesses, making them that much easier to counter.

Lastly, don't be afraid to see one of your NPCs die — what's good for the players' characters is good for yours, too. The death of an NPC that the players have grown to love will inject a touch of drama into the game. Even a villain that has been taunting them for years will leave a vast hole in their hearts when he finally bites the bullet. And in quite a few gaming genres, the death of an NPC could be just the beginning of how much a pain he can be!

THE BARE BONES

You still have to do *some* planning, though. You need to know who the villains are, for instance. And who the good guys are. And what (and where) the adventure's goals are. But you really shouldn't come up with much more than that. A good author has to come up with everything: plot, setting, antagonists, and (here's the important bit) the protagonist(s). The nature of an author's protagonist will dictate how the character gets from Point A to Point B, but the author gets to make changes to the character to make sure he really *does* get there.

You're a GM, not an author. You ain't so lucky. You don't get to change the player characters, they belong to the players. It's the players' job to decide where and how to move them on the playing field. And that's the good part for you — you might not get to change your story's protagonists (the PCs), or determine how they move on the field, but you get to change the field! You get to adjust the plot, the setting, and the antagonists!

If you overplan, you end up making it difficult on yourself to do that adjusting if you need to (and take it from Uncle Figgy, you *will* need to). The best way to deal with this fact is to simply construct a basic skeleton (or framework) for the game and then let the gameplay flesh it out. That way, you won't be stuck in the position of the PCs having to do a certain thing, or having to be in a certain place, just to move the game along.

For example, if you absolutely *have* to have the PCs to run into the Thing Forgotten In The

Fridge, don't plan on a specific place for it to show up, because then you have to make sure that your players get to that spot. Instead, plan that the Thing could attack in several different spots at several different times. Chances are good that your players will end up in one of those many spots at some point, then Boom! Thing attack! As an added bonus, they'll think you planned it all along!

So how much is too much and how much is not enough? In my experience, there's "planning wide" and "planning narrow".

Planning narrow, where you might create a single, long, involved storyline or path is the one you want to avoid. It's the easiest way to plan. There's one path and one goal. It's great if you're writing a story, but you're not writing a story. You're running a game — a *cooperative* story. And your game is going to get stuck if the players don't like that one path and/or don't feel like reaching that one goal.

Planning wide is best for running a game, but unfortunately it's also the most difficult. Planning wide consists of coming up with multiple paths, none of which are set in stone, that your players can choose to explore. A wide plan will often have many different long plans throughout, many of which overlap. Once the PCs have decided on a path to follow, then you can hit them with the long plan for that path — so long as you also provide jumping-off points in case your players feel that they're really *not* that interested in the particular path they've chosen.

And if you really want to get fancy, you can have some of those plans connect and overlap. This is best if you have players who want to follow a different path while the rest of the group goes after the main path. My tactic is just to give them their own path that ends up circling right around to join back up with the main path at some later bit. (And that sometimes is affected by the other PCs on their paths, or that affects the paths of the other PCs.)

CAMPAIGN TYPES

When you're deciding on how you're going to run your campaign or design your adventure, be aware of two particular pitfalls to look out for: the **Monty Haul** and **You're All Gonna Die!** games. Good games fall in between these opposite extremes, but I've played in quite a few that were either at one end or the other.

Monty Haul

Monty Haul gets its name from the host (Monty Hall) of an old television game show called "Let's Make a Deal". In the show, contestants would be selected out of the crowd, handed a prize of, say,

about a hundred bucks (just for being picked!), and then asked if they wanted to keep the cash or trade it in for a hidden prize. And that hidden prize could be something totally awesome like a new car or an all-expenses-paid vacation, or something totally worthless like a wheelbarrow with a flat tire.

Monty Haul games are pretty much the same. For amazingly trivial exertions on their part, the characters are given rewards that far outweigh the efforts. Something along the lines of the PCs pick the lock on the first door in the dungeon, and inside is a pile of gold, two magic swords and an enchanted suit of armor.

Too often, Monty Haul games are the result of GMs who want to keep everyone happy, so he hands out all kinds of cool toys at every opportunity. I've actually played an MMORPG that's guilty of this (they want you to be happy, because if you're happy, you just might spend money on microtransactions for the game). It even has an NPC who hands out daily quests that really are as simple as popping off to the corner store (one such was just to go talk to a different NPC standing just across the city courtyard and then return for a couple thousand experience points and some gold!).

One fantasy GM I knew once asked me to help him reign in characters from his Monty Haul campaign. Over the course of only three games, the GM's Monty Haulism had led his players' characters to become vastly overpowered (almost godlike). Fortunately, the system he was running provided creatures and magic spells to help take care of just such issues, and I was able to show the GM how best to use them; but it would have been best if he hadn't started off Monty Haul in the first place.

You're All Gonna Die!

You're All Gonna Die! (YAGD!) games are at the opposite end of the gaming spectrum. In YAGD! games, the characters go through countless obstacles and harsh trials for very small rewards, indeed. And it's not just tabletop RPGs, either, the designers of another MMO I've played have almost zero sense of "risk/effort vs. reward" and require players to put in great amounts of time and energy (and frustration) for only the *chance* at equivalent rewards. Or you could pay them real-world money for in-game currency and just buy the good rewards right from the start. The game studio would prefer you go that route, of course.

Since the average tabletop RPG GameMaster doesn't usually charge real money for pretend goods, the GM of a YAGD! game is generally one of those GMs who still believes in "Winning" a

roleplaying game, and the way to keep score is the body count of the PCs. It is common in the average YAGD! game for *at least* one player character to be killed (usually unfairly) during each gaming session. Often, the PCs face overwhelming odds and come out on top only to face some unavoidable encounter designed solely to steal victory from the players.

I once played in a game where the GM happily broke rules and created fiendish traps that existed for no purpose than to murder PCs (there was no logic behind them, no story reason for them, they were just there). Even the monsters the PCs faced were far more powerful than the group could ever hope to conquer. Out of the six characters beginning the gaming session, only one made it out (the GM's best friend, no less), and the experience and treasure award was pathetic. The GM even explained the poor reward by saying that was all the lone survivor deserved since the group didn't finish the quest.

There *is* an important note, here. Some systems and games were designed to be run in this way (I'm thinking of the old **West End Games'** *Paranoia* and even **Chaosium's** *Call of Cthulhu* — the former meant to be funny and the latter meant to be very doom and gloom). I've even run one-shot horror games where I told the players beforehand that it was very likely that all of the characters were going to die, it was a matter of dying with "style". Those kind of games don't count as YAGD! games. It's the games that aren't *meant* to be that way that I'm talking about, here.

What it all boils down to when designing (or running) is risk (or effort) vs. reward. Rewards need to closely match the trials, time, and effort required to earn them. If the characters work their fingers to the bone for hardly any reward, after a while they'll likely stop trying. After all, why bother playing if they can't progress in the game and they're just going to die, anyway. Players are less likely to be unhappy with the situation in a Monty Haul game, but there is a tendency for them to stop feeling that rewards are special, with each load of treasure being met with nothing more than a yawn and "oh look, *another* powerful item. What else you got for me?"

GAME BALANCE

These two game types are part of what game designers (and savvy GMs and Players) refer to as "game balance". It basically means asking if something is too overpowered or too underpowered for the game. Is something so useful that nobody wants to use anything differently, or is it so useless that nobody wants to use it at all?

A good example of this is when I was playtesting

the *Ryu-Ki System: Sunsera* game, I had come up with a magic system that any character could use (wizards were just the best with it). The problem was that *all* of the playtesters were trying to use it as often as possible, even when they shouldn't have been. You know it's unbalanced when the warrior would rather try to use the magic system than swing his sword in the middle of a melee.

Game balance is important, but I've also seen these two magic words used by game designers and gamemasters alike to explain away poor decisions and arbitrary rules.

I was once on a panel at a science-fiction convention with a well-known game designer. Someone asked him why, in his game system, wizards couldn't use armor. His first answer was that "it took too much training", and a member of the SCA (that's the "Society for Creative Anachronism"; a group that recreates medieval and renaissance fighting styles, weapons, and armor) in the audience asked how much training it took to throw on a chainmail shirt. The designer then answered that "metal armor interferes with magic", whereupon another member of the audience asked how there could be magical swords and armor, then. The designer, now a little hot under the collar, snapped that it was for "game balance" and then refused to discuss the issue further.

To be fair, that very issue in the example above was a frequent target of attack, and I'm certain the designer was tired of addressing it. The simple truth was that wizards in armor didn't fit his idea of what a wizard should be. Relying on the excuse of "game balance" was nothing more than an ego bandage to cover up the fact that the decision was rather poorly thought out and made little sense (as could be seen by the designer's responses).

Don't get me wrong, here. Sometimes rulings must be made in order to promote game balance. If a GM runs a dark campaign where combats are bloodily realistic and death is quite common, she definitely doesn't want to see a character who is virtually untouchable and can slay anything with a single whack of a sword. Remember, a GM can disallow any character that you think doesn't fit into the spirit of your game, and a good GM should always check over any "outside" character before allowing it in. Just be fair, use common sense, and be nice. The good GM lets a new player know, "This is what my campaign is like. These are the best types of characters to have. These are the rules we are (or are not) using. These are the PC attributes that are available and these are the ones that are unavailable." And so on. The bad GM lets the players

do what they want without guideline, waits until the game is on the rocks, then resolves to underhanded scheming and arbitrary "GM call" decisions.

Another example: Your Uncle Figgy once played in a fantasy game where the quest object was hidden in the center of a maze. Once in the labyrinth, Uncle Figgy's wizard character used a "find direction" spell to navigate. This, of course, upset the GM because it was making easy work of the carefully constructed maze. In other words, it was unbalancing to the adventure he had planned (see the trouble in too much planning?). Instead of handling it in a mature manner, however, he responded by telling me, "If you use that spell again, I'm going to kill your character!" It was the last game I ever played with him.

So how do you handle something this unbalancing? First of all, be very familiar with your system of choice, and how it can possibly be abused. This goes double if you're using a pre-published adventure (this GM had the unfortunate habit of buying a pre-published adventure, then running it the same day he got it without ever reading it through first). Players are resourceful, and you can bet your favorite dice that if there's a way it can be abused, the average player will find that way. (And *not* necessarily on purpose, either. Some of them simply stumble onto a good idea that works. And if it works, why not use it?)

The first superhero game I ever ran, I made the mistake of allowing a very powerful psionic hero. When the supervillain showed up for the climactic battle, the psionist stepped up and promptly mind-controlled the villain into giving up. Bang! Game over! Talk about unbalanced! And that was entirely my fault because I tried to run a game that I wasn't familiar with. If I had known the rules better, I might have been able to improvise a way out of the situation, or simply disallowed that kind of psychic power in the game. (*My solution since then was to give all intelligent beings in that system — PCs and NPCs — a mind shield that made them a little bit resistant to mind control. And I always let the players know that fact before character creation!*)

Also, be ready to improvise your way out of an unbalanced situation. Taking the case of the wizard in the labyrinth, a good option might have been to have the magical quest object at the center of the labyrinth interfere with all uses of magic within so many yards of it (or if not the object, then the table it was on). In that way, the decision to let the player use the spell effectively at first still stands: it can get the party *near* the artifact, but not within reach of it. Or maybe the GM could have decided that the builders of the maze would have taken such

spells into consideration and covered it with an enchantment to deliberately mislead those spells — making going at it the “hard” way actually the easy way! Then all the GM would have had to do was turn the map upside down and assume that where the PCs thought they were wasn’t where they really were.

In other words, there may be something in your game that seems to work most of the time (it’s “balanced”), but if it should become temporarily “unbalancing”, then there also are ways to temporarily “balance” it. Game balance is important, but it’s not a cudgel to be used to bash players into line when you’ve made a mistake.

I LOVED THAT MOVIE!

In computing, there’s an old term called GIGO (pronounced “guy-go”). It stands for “Garbage In, Garbage Out”, meaning that what a computer creates as output is only as good as what it gets for input. The same goes for the brain of anyone designing (or running) a game (well, for creating *anything*, really). The better the quality (and greater the quantity) of stuff you take in, then the better the quality of stuff you can create. The creative mind is like a set of building blocks, and the more building blocks you have, and the more sources they come from, the more amazing what you’re going to create from them can be.

It’s been my experience that a creative person is only hurting himself by refusing to look at certain things, or by deciding that other things are beneath them or are not interesting to them. By cutting out an entire genre, for instance, you’re only limiting the building blocks that you could be loading into your brain. Unfortunately, it also has been my experience that a lot of gamers (GMs included) have no problem limiting themselves to one or two genres, both in what they watch/read/listen to, and in the games they run.

I can’t count the number of games I’ve played in where a GM has watched a specific movie or TV show, or read a specific book, and loved it enough to turn it into a game. And that’s fine if you’re specifically running a game set in that movie or that TV show. But if you’re just adding it to the game you’re already running, there’s some things I’d like you to think about.

First of all, you run the risk that some of your players have seen the same movie. This, of course, is a very common occurrence — people who game together usually have similar interests. If your players are the generous type, they’ll forego the snide comments about your lack of creativity, but they’ll *still* know the movie and how the plot moves and

where it goes at the end. And even though they’re *supposed* to keep player knowledge separate from character knowledge, that’s kind of a hard job to handle (and, honestly, a lot of players just can’t).

Secondly, you have to remember that the screenwriter of the average movie or TV show, or the author of a book, pretty much has complete and total control over the characters. GMs don’t get that luxury. It goes back to what I talk about when I say to stop planning: The characters still belong to the players and are theirs to do with as they see fit. You’re going to have a very hard time getting them to follow the plot and story the same way the characters of the movie/TV show/book did.

If you *still* want to turn your favorite thing into a roleplaying game, remember to keep it *fun!* If your players aren’t following it the way you want them to, then they obviously think differently about it than you do. Don’t force them onto the “movie path” or you run the risk of losing them. Scripts of any kind often are too tight for the average player character, who will seek to break out of any restrictions at any opportunity.

The best thing to do, then, is to take the *idea* of the movie and then let the players go where they will with it. If your movie is one with which your players might be familiar, twist the idea while you use it (add some of those creative building blocks I was talking about). The “killer alien loose on a spaceship from which there’s little chance of escape” can just as easily be done in a fantasy game as the “killer undead on a seafaring vessel from which there’s little chance of escape” or even the “killer rogue in the dungeon from which there’s little chance of escape”. Sure, your players might recognize the idea if you set it on a spaceship, but would it be so apparent in a different setting?

Again, this is where it’s important for you to get your inspirations from anywhere and everywhere. A good GM, like a good artist or a good writer, should be open to as much as possible. Good ideas hide in the most unlikely of places, and even in genres different from the one you may be running. As a happy side effect, if you find a good idea in a place where you would rarely look, chances are very good that your players wouldn’t think to look there, either! I once got an idea for one of my best games watching the Power Rangers while babysitting my niece, and since my players all thought the show was “beneath them”, not a single one of them recognized the idea. Part of the game’s success was the “newness” (to them) of the story!

RUNNING THE GAME

So you've gotten your ideas and built your skeleton and now it's time to run the actual game. What's the most important thing you need to know (besides that it's supposed to be *fun*)?

THINK FAST AND BE FLEXIBLE

That's the only way you can run a great game on only a skeleton. Remember, no matter how hard you try, you can *never* plan on every possible action a player could choose. That's one of the reasons why CRPGs and MMORPGs are so limited, there's just no way a designer can think of (and then program) all the possibilities. I mean, what happens when the warrior in the party decides he wants to take a flying leap off the table, snag the chandelier, swing across the room and put his foot right in the villain's face?

In most CRPGs and MMOs, the answer is "yeah right, you can't do that." Your game should *not* be the same! Sure, it's easiest to say something lame like "you can't do that" or "you can't reach the chandelier". Yawn. BORING!

Think fast! Be flexible! Make him roll some dice to jump up and grab the chandelier. Is he wearing full plate armor and carrying a sword that could be used as an I-beam in high-iron welding? Then maybe the rope won't hold him. But don't tell him that! Let him roll those dice. He made it and grabbed the chandelier? Awesome! Now use common sense, fairness, fun, and a sense of the dramatic (or comical) to make your decision on whether it can hold him. Maybe the chandelier isn't all that heavy, so the tavern owner didn't use a very strong rope to hold it up. Halfway through the warrior's swing, the rope breaks, bringing warrior and chandelier crashing down right in the middle of the villain's henchmen!

Improvisation is the keystone of good GameMastering. It's what separates the entertaining GM from the droning reader whose games are nothing more than "Make an attack roll. Okay, you hit. Roll damage." You need to think fast and be flexible in almost every situation. If you've decided that the PCs need to go into a specific farmhouse, be ready to change your plans if they don't (or won't) do it. Maybe what you wanted to happen in that farmhouse could be moved to another location.

As an example, I once ran a horror game in which I had planned an encounter in the kitchen of a haunted house. Once there, the players would have been attacked by a haunted carving knife, which, when finally restrained, held an important clue. But the "irresistible" hook I had devised to lure them in to the kitchen turned out to be a lot more resistible than I had planned. It was imperative to the plot, however, that they get that clue! So I improvised.

Instead of a haunted carving knife floating around in the kitchen, the knife ended up being wielded by a zombie shambling around the house. And once the PCs had taken care of the zombie, then they had to deal with a haunted, flying, carving knife! Once the screaming and shooting and bleeding was finally over, the PCs had the clue and they never once had to go into the kitchen like I originally had planned.

Another good example are pre-published adventures. Often, they have seemingly useless items placed apparently at random in dungeons, cities, caravans, whatever. The droning, reader GM ignores them, but you can bet your backside that the players won't. I once had a player load up on office supplies in the lobby of a bank during a superhero game, so trust me when I tell you that some players think that if you mentioned it, then it *must* be important. Maybe that barrel of apples you just described is nothing more than a barrel of apples for a little background flavor, but don't be surprised when a player decides that her character is going to fill her pack. Maybe she'll use them as throwing ammo. Maybe she'll use them to make friends with some horses. A player's reasons can be surprising, but you can't let yourself show that you've been surprised. Take it from your Uncle Figgy, players can sense fear and uncertainty. If they do something unexpected, then do something unexpected right back! Don't cop out just by saying "you can't do that" or "it doesn't work" or "nothing happens". Do something exciting!

Think fast and be flexible! So the PC has filled her pack up with apples. If she gets in a fight or falls into a pit, roll some dice and tell her how many of those apples have been squashed. And if she doesn't wash her pack out, don't forget to have her be swarmed by bees and other flying insects looking for a sweet treat. Don't forget to have a horse munch a hole in her pack while she's not looking.

Think fast, be flexible, and make your game fun!

BE OVERLY DRAMATIC

It goes with what I was just talking about as part of improvisation. Don't settle for just "you try to jump the pit but you don't make it. You take blah blah damage." Yawnsville! Get dramatic with it!

In one of my games, I had this very thing happen. The characters came across a pit blocking their path. One of the characters, an acrobat, decided that she could jump across despite the crumbling stone and low ceiling. When her player asked me, "Can I jump across?" I gave her the best answer any GM should give when asked a "Can I do X?" question: "You can try."

Secretly, I had decided that there would be a penalty to her die roll, so to give her some warning I told her "The footing looks pretty treacherous, but you could probably make it if luck is on your side". She ended up totally blowing the roll, but instead of being all boring and ending the whole scenario with a super-lame "You don't make it", I drew the scene out for all I could.

"You're not going to make it!" I said excitedly (talking loudly and quickly in these kinds of situations makes the players more tense and excited). "Quick, make an Agility roll to grab the other side!"

By doing it that way, I'm giving her another chance at salvation (despite what a lot of GMs think, instant PC deaths aren't fun — it's always better to keep your toys around longer to play with them than to break them right away), but I'm putting the responsibility for that salvation on her character. The player made the second roll, so then I had her make yet a third roll to climb up (again at an unmentioned penalty due to the crumbling rock wall). She failed.

"The stone you just grabbed hold of pulled out of the wall! Quick! Make a roll to grab another one!" Another failure. By this point I had given her enough chances, so I figured this was it. But still, what about all that training as an acrobat? "Make an Acrobatics roll to take half damage from the fall."

No problem. Now she's at the bottom of the pit. A bit shaken up. A bit banged up. But otherwise fine. Until the other players get close enough to that crumbling wall to try and rescue her...

There's much more to the story, mostly involving more rock being pulled loose from above and nearly landing on her head, but that bit should suffice to prove my point. I took the simplest and most cliched fantasy trap — the pit — and turned it into a major scene exciting enough to show up in an action/adventure flick.

MILK WHAT THE PLAYERS GIVE YOU

Savvy readers will pick up the inherent evil (and glee) in that comment I made in the last section about not breaking your toys too soon. Trust me on this one, it's a lot more fun to mess with the players than to kill the player characters.

Your Uncle Figgy once played in a superhero game where one of the PCs had a major love affair with his car (not surprisingly, so did the player of said PC). On the very first game, the GM got tired of the car and player's constant roleplaying about it, so he destroyed it beyond repair in one fell swoop during a super brawl. What. A. Waste. Here is this thing, this *one* thing. This perfect opportunity that can be used

to manipulate the player and add to the game, and the GM just throws it away.

Fortunately for me, the player moved the character (and his car) over to my campaign. I milked that car for all the drama, tension, and heartache I could wring out of it.

First there was an explosion in the character's face that blew him into the car's front quarter panel. DENT! Character (and player) freaks out and the rest of the players have a *great* laugh. Next game session (and a couple of months of game time) and the precious car is now repaired and in pristine condition. Until a critical NPC who is riding in the passenger's seat gets shot by a sniper. Now the car has a broken windshield *and* blood all over the interior. So it's *back* to the body shop...

I kept this up for as long as the campaign went on, and boy was it fun! I used that car for so much more enjoyment than the one-punch card played by the original GM. I'll say it again, it really is a lot more fun to play with toys over the long run than break them right away!

Now, I know, sometimes players won't give you all that much to go on, but sometimes they'll give you at least *something*. It's your job to latch onto it and milk it dry. I once had an Average Joe player whose character was just ordinary. He barely gave me anything. But one day he gave me something: the player (and consequently his character) was always looking for a bigger and badder weapon. Jackpot! That was all I needed! Keep a careful eye on your players and chances are good that you'll see something, too. Then squeeze every drop of drama and fun out of it that you possibly can.

DEATH OF A CHARACTER

Adding in to the proper way to play with your toys, I'd like to propose the radical idea that killing player characters isn't as great a prospect as keeping them around. It's been my experience that the rampant killing of player characters is one of those over-rated ideas that is mainly used for a bizarre form of "keeping score" where the GM thinks she's winning if the body count is high enough. And, honestly, player-character death should be so much more than just a notch on the GameMaster belt.

Now, I'm not saying that a player character should never die. I'm not saying the GM should never kill a player character. I'm saying that a player character death should matter and/or be warranted. In other words, it should be part of the story, or it should be because of player stupidity. But either way, it should have a *reason* (and that reason should

be more than just GM malice). If Thaugnar the Wizard wants to sacrifice his life by jumping into the evil sorcerer's summoning circle so as to disrupt it and save the city, then it happens and good job to Thaugnar's player! If Dud the Barbarian decides he's going to slap the king in the face while surrounded by the king's elite guard, then so long Dud, and let's hope Dud's player has learned that it's not too bright to do something guaranteed to get his character turned into a pincushion.

The GM must walk a very fine line when it comes to the deaths of player characters; either too much or too little results in the cheapening of the event's emotional impact. I once joined up with an established gaming group that had experienced *way* too much character death. The players were so desensitized to it that there was absolutely no emotion at all even when it was their own characters getting offed at the whim of the GM. Character death was immediately met with "No problem, I have another one ready". I felt like I was playing in a video game where all you had to do was hit the start button and respawn. Death meant as little in this game as it did in games where PCs never die.

Since I like a cinematic game, this just turned me off immediately. There was no drama, here. No roleplaying. It wasn't heroic. In heroic literature, it's usually a big deal if a main (or even a secondary) character dies — people grieve, partners seek revenge or go crazy and turn to evil. The world mourns the passing of a hero, and isn't that what the characters of a roleplaying game are supposed to be? Aren't they supposed to be the heroes? If not, then why are they the ones on the adventure? Why are they the ones the story revolves around? And if they're not any of these things, then where are the people who are?

Of course, too little character death can run the same risks; making the players feel that the PCs should get away with everything, or be able to make absolutely idiotic decisions, because the GM would *never* kill a character. Just as with killing characters too much, avoiding character death altogether makes the risk lose its bite. And if it somehow happens that a character *does* die, it can have unpredictable effects. Some players, used to the idea that their characters are "immortal", might actually get angry at the death of their character, no matter how justified. They might actually decide that you are wrong and their character isn't dead. It sounds strange, but I've actually had it happen where a character died a thoroughly deserved, justified death, and the player argued with me and told me that I was wrong and her character wasn't dead, simply

because she didn't believe I would kill a character. To be fair, though, she had come from a gaming group that claimed to practice "immersion" where players were allowed to dictate what happened to their characters because it was *their* story, after all — so if a player didn't want anything to happen to their character, then all they had to do was say it didn't fit into their immersion.

And, yes, I understand that I promote a similar idea, but I also say that it's a *game*. A *collaboration* between the players and GM. If all we're going to do is play a game of "GM says you get shot and you say 'nuh-unh!'" then all we're really playing is cops and robbers, without rules, like little children, and we're no longer playing a roleplaying game.

Traps: Use and Abuse

While I'm on the subject of PC death, I'd like to talk about a personal pet peeve of mine: the trap. I understand that traps can be a staple of many roleplaying games. I use them myself. But I want to pop the balloon of the "sudden instant death" trap that a lot of hot-air GMs are so fond of.

There are a few reasons I dislike this kind of trap, the first being that they're just not very realistic. Especially if it's for a place where intelligent beings live and/or work. I'm sorry, but I just can't see anyone sane being so obsessed with "protection" that they're willing to sacrifice their own lives (or the lives of their loved ones) just because they might happen to use the wrong key or punch in the wrong code after a long night at the pub.

The second reason is that they're just not very dramatic or exciting. Every time I've seen an instant-death trap in a game, it has always gone something like this:

GM: Whoops, Lonnie, you hear a click when you open the door.

Lonnie: I jump back as far as I can as I can.

GM: A three-ton block of stone as long as the hallway falls on top of you. You're dead. Got another character?

Don't get me wrong, here. Sometimes traps like that really *were* used in the real world. But they weren't used in what was essentially someone's home or office. They were mostly used in old tombs where *no one* was ever supposed to get in or out! The wizard's castle just is *not* going to be like that! Sometimes, in modern warfare, you would get instant-death traps like that (think landmines), but simple traps to incapacitate a single member of a squad was far more effective at lowering the overall effectiveness of the squad than simply blowing up a

single member of the squad (because the squad then had to take care of the wounded member, in one way or another).

In a good RPG, use traps for dramatic value, not an “instant kill” point for the GM. Look at the “traps” used in heroic movies or fiction. Some of them may be deadly, some of them may be difficult to spot, but all of them have some way to escape from them. Usually at the last possible second and after a very harrowing bit of scrambling. And what’s wrong with that? That’s what heroic roleplaying is all about.

If you find that you simply *must* use a sudden-death trap, sacrifice an NPC to it first so the PCs can see just how dangerous it is. If they proceed after that without trying to find out all they can about the trap, then let them have it! But you still should give them some chance of getting out of it, if only to make them sweat and think about possible alternative career options.

PLAYING THE GOOD NPC

Another important part of good GameMastering is in how you run the NPCs the characters encounter. Too often, Uncle Figgy finds that the average GM slips into something he calls “monsteritis” (or worse, plays NPC favoritism, see the Campaign section for more details). Monsteritis is an insidious disease that leads GameMasters to believe that everything not a PC or a “townsfolk” is a monster, open for rampant slaughter at any point. The GM suffering from monsteritis has NPCs of any and every race or species that never negotiate and always fight to the death. Monsteritis-spawned NPCs know no fear, no love, no joy, and no peace. They exist to kill the PCs, no matter the cost to themselves, and there are never repercussions when the PCs mow them down.

Not surprisingly, this is part and parcel of MMORPGs. I’ve even played one where the “heroes” (i.e., the Player Characters) are *required* to do things like capture NPCs as “slaves”, whip prisoners of war to make them work in forced labor camps, and wipe out other sentient creatures for no reason other than “they’re in our spot” (so much for being the “heroic” good guys). No creature ever runs for its life, no creature ever pleads for mercy, and all creatures fight to the death.

Granted, these are computer games, so they are kind of forced to be shallow by the limitations of coding and processing power. But for a tabletop RPG, it’s not very bloody likely, and it’s not very deep or realistic, either. I mean, in the real world, even the most “unintelligent” of animals will flee pain or approach pleasure. But Monsteritis NPCs take the pain until it kills them, and only seem to get pleasure

from being stupid and evil. And when it comes to so-called “intelligent” creatures, again, just look at the real world. If a gun was fired on a crowded street, not many people are going to stick around and see what’s going on. The average person is going to run, possibly screaming all the way. So why should game NPCs be any different?

Again, here is where you need to use common sense. Some soldiers are trained to fight to the death. Some people have a sense of honor that leads them to do the same. Some people just don’t have anything left to lose. At the same time, though, some people will get amazingly angry and spew profanities like an erupting volcano, but will never throw a punch and will become *very* apologetic if confronted with violence. Where I live, most people stop and drop when they hear the police yell “freeze!” and the one’s who don’t do their best to run; shooting back only when they’re trapped or they feel like things have gotten out of control. Even some of the vilest of killers have preferred capture over death because there’s always the chance to get free and spread their mayhem in the future.

Remember the old saying “he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day”. This should usually be supplied to most intelligent beings, no matter the race or species, and a lot of the unintelligent beings. Usually, the lower and/or higher the intelligence of the being in question, the more likely they will be to follow it — those of lesser intelligence react more along the lines of stimulus-response than from any concept of “honor” or “nobility”, and those of higher intelligence will be most likely to rationalize the need for self preservation. Ask a child why he ran when he was frightened and you’ll probably get an answer like “I was scared”. Ask the intelligent adult why she ran, and the response might be “I knew I couldn’t do anything, so I thought it best to flee and seek help”. And in a game or other “dramatic environment”, that intelligent adult might decide to flee and get training for the purposes of seeking revenge...

Animals, on the other hand, can be different. Most animals in today’s world have learned to fear humans; they attack only when cornered or starving. In a world where animals haven’t learned to be afraid of mankind (or a world where they have the strength and ferocity they don’t need to be afraid) they might see humans as an easy food source. Since animals have no need for material goods (i.e., treasure), they usually only attack for one of three reasons: Territoriality, hunger, or protection. The mother fighting to defend her young usually will fight to the death, while the male fighting over territory will

generally be more than willing to find a new place to be if he's getting his tail kicked.

The motivation of any NPC is key to his, her, or its actions. Motives for any being can be pretty much anything, including (but not limited to): fear, defense, honor, revenge, greed, necessity, or just plain old instinct (like hunger or even illness). And of course you can use any combination of these, such as a character whose honor dictates that she must defend the weak and innocent.

Also, don't forget that each motivation comes in a multitude of varieties and reasons. Fear can branch into fear of injury, fear of death, fear of pain, fear of loss, fear of commitment, fear of capture, not to mention all those phobias out there. And a person doesn't have to be greedy just for money. There's greed for power, greed for love, greed for knowledge (curiosity), greed for territory (Uncle Figgy even once had a player whose character was greedy for weaponry). As for defense, don't fall into the trap that people only defend themselves against physical threats. More and bloodier wars have been fought over defense of religious belief and ideology than for almost any other reason.

UNCLE FIGGY'S "BIG THREE"

Unlike actual toys, PCs can be a lot harder to play with. They're like toys with minds of their own, and they're not necessarily going to want to play the way you want to play with them. Sure, once in a rare while you may get a player who makes a character who is totally heroic. The kind of character who leaps willingly into the gates of the demon-filled abyss just to save a puppy. Who ignores no cry for help, whether it be from a stranger, a friend, or even a villain. You can picture this character with hands on hips, chest puffed out proudly, and maybe even a glowing aura sparkling around her as woodland creatures gather at her feet in awe.

But you're probably not quite that lucky. It's just not all that realistic and it probably won't happen very much (at least, not unless you force your players to make characters like that, which opens up a whole other can of worms). On the average, you're going to get characters who aren't quite that noble or decent. Honestly, your players are looking to have a good time, not to make your job easier. The cold, hard fact is that sometimes, the players just aren't going to agree to go along with what you want their characters to do, and they'll resent it if they think you're forcing them.

The key, then, is to "gently nudge" the players into doing what you want them to do while misleading them into believing that it was all their

idea in the first place. To accomplish this, you can use the same motivations that bring your NPCs into fully realized, three-dimensional life. Unfortunately, you can't dictate a particular PCs motivations or beliefs. That's up to the player to decide. What you *can* do, however, is use what Uncle Figgy calls the "Big Three": **Fear**, **Greed**, and **Curiosity**.

Fear

Even in the bleakest genres where death is common, players don't want to see their characters die. Some don't even want to see them injured. And it's been my experience that almost every player views the idea of a character getting captured to be even worse than death!

Fear, then, becomes a great motivator. Not the kind of fear you need to evoke when you run a horror game, but the plain, simple fear of "I don't want anything to bad to happen to my character".

Players won't go into that farmhouse? Put a bigger threat outside it. They still have a choice — stay and face the threat or go hide in the farmhouse — but they'll think it's *their* choice to make. Most of the time, if the external threat is big enough, they'll run for the farmhouse instead of waiting around to see what's coming.

A word of warning, though, using fear as motivation is the sledgehammer of the toolkit: it's big, it hits hard, and it's fairly obvious. Use it too much, and sooner or later the players will pick up on it and come to the realization that you're herding them to where you want them to go, and (in their eyes, anyway) that's just as bad as forcing them.

Another reason to avoid overusing fear as a motivator is that it can lead to either desensitization (Yeah, yeah, there's something scary out there. There's *always* something scary out there.), or it can lead to what psychologists call "learned helplessness", which is the idea that if you're always faced with something bad, eventually you just accept it and stop trying to get away from it or change it. Neither of these are ways you want your players to think or act.

Greed

This is what motivates a lot of people. Greed doesn't have to be just "evil money grubbing", either. When people work at jobs that they hate, they do so both out of a little bit of fear and a little bit of greed — they want comfort, security, and whatever pay that job gives, and they're afraid of losing those things if they don't have the job.

Most player characters, however, take greed a teensy step further. They want power (whether it be

through more powerful weapons or more personal power; that is, character advancement) or they want money. Whatever it is they want, though, this kind of player/character wants *something*. And sometimes they want it so badly that they'll go after it no matter the risk (of course it's always better if the risk seems very small to start with).

If these characters won't go into that farmhouse, that's where the NPC traveling with them needs to say something like "Didn't Old Man Carvey live there? They say he hid all sorts of [whatever the character wants] before he died." That's usually enough to get the greedy ones moving.

Just like fear, though, be careful when manipulating a player through greed. Mainly because it will require you to find that gambling-style sweet spot between promising rewards all the time, but only paying out enough to keep them coming back. And that sweet spot is different for each person.

Curiosity

This is the easiest to use, but not necessarily the easiest to find. People who are motivated by curiosity will do what you're trying to get them to do for no reason other than they want to see what's going to happen. They want to follow the story. These are the players who will go into that farmhouse just because it's there and they want to see what's inside.

The biggest problem with curiosity as a motivator is that it's hard to determine what, exactly, might pique someone's interest, and things you think are boring might just be super interesting to them. If you throw the external threat at them outside the farmhouse, they might just totally ignore the farmhouse and go investigate the threat instead! And they might not care about the value of Old Man Carvey's treasure, they just want to know what it might have been.

Pay Attention

Remember, this is where you especially have to watch your players and their reactions, and get to know how they're playing their characters.

In some game systems, the characters might be saddled with some kind of disadvantages that affect how the character is played. These might be things like codes of honor, vows, phobias, or even delusions of some sort. In these types of systems, the GM's job is made much easier: the system has provided rules the GM can use to directly manipulate a character.

In other systems, though, no such things exist. The GM has to be more subtle about nudging the players about. Uncle Figgy's Big Three can be used

to manipulate either the character (because that's the way the player plays her) or the player (because that's the way the player thinks). Again, subtlety is the key. You have to master the art of making the players go where you want them to while making them believe that it was entirely their own idea.

Once, I ran a game where I had a Mad Gamer who had created a thief who wasn't very greedy but who was just shy of the label "cowardly" — the player always said his character had "a healthy respect for physical well being". The rewards for the adventure he and the party were undergoing just weren't quite enough to interest him once the true danger of it was found out, so he wanted to quit.

He tried to leave the party and strike off on his own numerous times, but he was already in too deep. The danger he faced alone each time he did so was much greater than that faced by sticking with the group. The long and short of it was that just by having once been part of the party, he had become a marked man hunted by several powerful enemies. Safety was in sticking with people whom he (the character, not the player) didn't like and who didn't like him.

To get him to go along with the adventure, whenever he tried to deviate (by leaving the party), I would have the villains pop up and he would realize that it was safer to stick with the rest of the group for his own protection.

Fear, then, became the motivator I needed to use for his character. The other players/characters in the party I was able to motivate through a blend of all three. One player I was able to motivate simply because I had given her character a vision of what she "might" do in the future, and the player took it to mean that when she was presented with circumstances similar to those she had foreseen, then she *had* to do what she had witnessed in the vision. (I also was fortunate enough to have a player who flat out told me that he would go wherever I wanted his character to go by way of "signs" from the "god" only his character believed in.)

KEEPING THEM ALL TOGETHER

A big argument I've noticed when talking to players and GMs deals with whose responsibility it is regarding player conflicts. I used to think it was solely the realm of the GM (and I said as much in the first edition of the **Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering**). But I've since come to the understanding that this argument is really lumping two entirely different things together: actual player conflict outside of the game, and group conflict inside of the game. I address the former in the

“Groups & Players” section, so here I’m going to address the latter.

I’m sure we’ve all seen it where an adventuring party (characters, not players) just doesn’t get along, and I’ve heard some people say that it’s the GameMaster’s job to keep the party together and all the characters at peace with each other. I’ve also seen others just shrug their shoulders and say that conflict is the way of the world, and no GM should try to exert the large amounts of control necessary to keep a party of widely different characters in total agreement with each other all of the time.

One of the reasons this becomes such an issue is that in-game conflict sometimes leads to out-of-game conflict. Especially if there’s a single player who just absolutely refuses to grasp the concept of a roleplaying game being a “social” endeavor. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve seen a player who (for some deep psychological reason that probably could use a little professional attention) absolutely *needs* to play a character that is just pure evil. I mean, this guy wants to kill any new characters he comes across, keeps secrets from the rest of the group, tries to steal anything and everything from all of the people he’s supposed to be trying to get along with. In short, this player just plays his characters to be nothing more than an absolute and total jerk.

Not surprisingly, this kind of gaming attitude grinds the game to a halt, leads to hurt feelings all around, and can cause huge rifts in the play group (it was actually one of the reasons the last group I was in fell apart, as the GM’s best friend was that kind of player and everyone just finally had enough).

It’s my belief that, while a jerk player is the responsibility of the group as a whole, a jerk character both *is* and *is not* the responsibility of the GM. Not in any heavy-handed, ruling-from-above, way, but in using the setting and gameworld. Remember: in-game problems call for in-game solutions. It’s not the GM’s job to tell a player “No, you can’t steal from your party members” (though a gentle reminder that such a thing is probably a bad idea isn’t inappropriate). It is *definitely* not the GM’s job to enforce interparty harmony. It’s not realistic, and would require the GM to exert vast amounts of GM power to accomplish:

Bob: Gristle is going to stab Wizzo and take his magical boots.

GM: You can’t do that. Everybody has to get along.

Bob: What!? Why?

GM: Are you arguing with me, Bob?

Or how about:

Bob: Gristle is going to stab Wizzo and take his magical boots.

GM: Okay, just as Gristle goes to stab Wizzo, he trips and drops his blade at Wizzo’s feet. Everyone sees it.

Bob: What!? Wait a minute! Don’t I even get to roll for that!?

GM: Fine. Roll your dice.

Bob: Made it! I hit Wizzo for...

GM: Nope. It *looks* like you’re going to get Wizzo in the back, but for some reason you miss...

Do both of these examples seem unrealistic or unfair? They are, but they’re both examples I’ve watched GMs force onto their players in an attempt to enforce interparty harmony at all costs. These examples are far too heavy handed.

So how *do* you enforce interparty harmony? You don’t! You can’t *force* characters to get along any more than you can force players to get along. If they’re not going to, then they’re not going to. Period. End of story. It wouldn’t happen naturally and sometimes it just isn’t fun to play. In fact, in one extended campaign I ran, the favorite PC (of *all* the players) was one whose player ran him as a royal pain in the posterior. All the *players* loved him. All the *characters* hated him (but he was extremely useful to keep around).

Of course, this goes back (like so many things both in-game and in the real world) to maturity. It requires a group of mature players who understand that it’s only a game, that *everyone* is there to have fun, and that one person’s idea of fun shouldn’t interfere with everyone else’s fun. And that means for everyone involved: the player of the jerk characters, and the players of the characters they jerk around. Everyone needs to realize that it’s a two-way street: the player who plays the character being evil to the group (because it’s how he has fun or whatever) has to be willing to take the consequences when they catch up to him. If he cheerfully slaughters other characters and tells their players to “lighten up” when they complain, but then has the nerve to whine when the other characters gang up on him, then the group should consider saying something to him (or getting rid of him if it’s his standard operating procedure). Nobody needs to game with immature fools.

I once played a jerk character — a rather dishonest wizard-type — in a group with a pretty straightforward warrior and a warrior/acrobat

hybrid. It was a rather generic adventure in which the group was sent to an underground crypt to retrieve a magical gem. Upon achieving our goal, Uncle Figgy's wizard promptly grabbed the crystal, cast an invisibility spell, and high-tailed it out of there. Of course the rest of the group was a little shocked and upset, but the GM went along with it. When the party finally caught up with my character, I fully expected them to slaughter him, and I would have agreed with their actions! That's one of the consequences for playing a jerk character! (In my personal opinion, they went way too easy on him.)

That brings me to how interparty harmony *can* be enforced: logic and realism. Every cause has an effect, and every action has a reaction. And it is on both the GM and the players to enforce these simple rules of nature. GMs should remember that most game worlds are pretty dangerous for the loner — if you have a character who stabs another in the back, then grabs his stuff and runs, the game world probably won't go easy on him. There's a reason these groups band together in the first place, and it's the GM's job to not let the player ignore that reason just because you might be afraid of killing off a PC.

The other players need to get in on this action, too. If Biff the Paladin sees Gristle the Thief taking shots at Wizzo the Wizard, then both Biff and Wizzo

need to band together to take care of the problem; either by taking him out, capturing him to hand over to the game world's authorities, or binding him to a tree and leaving him to the mercies of the next critter to wander by. If they can't get the better of him, and Gristle the Thief gets away with murder, then this is where the GM should step in by keeping in mind that the authorities (or someone else) in most game worlds will start taking a definite interest in someone who constantly comes back to town with his friends' possessions but not with his friends. Maybe after the jerk-character's player loses a few characters to the police or even his own comrades, he might start to see the light. If he doesn't, and it really ruins the game for everyone else, then the group should probably consider not inviting that player back.

Either way, though, the GM should never resort to the lame response of "you can't do that" or any similar attempts at keeping the party together. Instead, it should always be a matter of action and consequence. It's always a good idea (again, both in the game and in the real world) for a person to think "If I do X, then Y will happen." This way, the decision to play nice is put on the player's shoulders, not the GM's. If the player decides not to play nice, then bad consequences should follow.

EPILOGUE

In the time since I wrote the original **Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering**, I've played in quite a few more games. While my gaming style hasn't changed, I've delved quite a bit more into what's going on *behind* a game (designing your own will do that to you).

To put it bluntly, everything in this new edition boils down to some very easy things to keep in mind. In other words, this is the TL;DR (Too Long; Didn't Read) version of the **Guide**:

Be Nice

A good rule to live by in real life, not just when running a game.

Be Fair

The GM is a referee as well as a storyteller, the rest of life might not be fair at all, but that's all the more reason to be fair and impartial in your game.

Be Fun

Whatever it is that you think is fun. This **Guide** was written for the game style that I think is fun, but if you and your players think a different way to play is fun, then that's what you should be playing!

Communicate

RPGs are games of communication, so communicate! If you're making changes to the rules, talk about them. If there's a problem, talk about it!

Be Mature

This one goes for both GMs *and* Players. Sure, take the game seriously, just don't take it *too* seriously that you forget to have fun. Being mature also means don't get so caught up in your own fun that you're ruining the fun of someone else!

Be Balanced

To be a good GM, you have a lot of fine lines to walk: A line between story and game, a line between power and humility, a line between leader and follower, a line between tyrant and pushover.

It's EVERYONE'S Game

GM and Player alike. No GM means no game. No Players also means no game. A good game has to be fun for everyone involved, and everyone needs to agree on what that should be. A problem that affects the group affects everyone in the group, and such a problem is the group's responsibility.