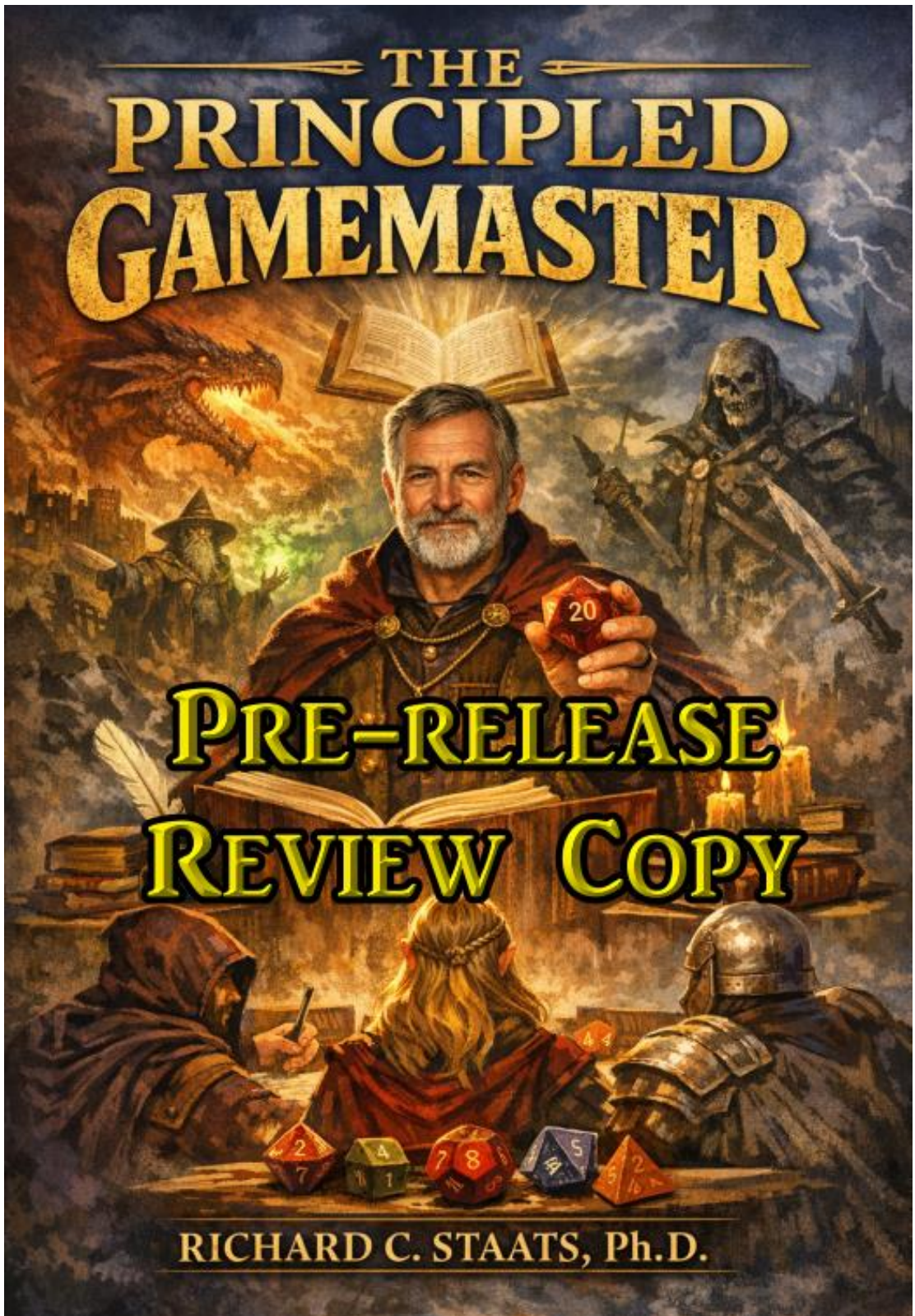




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Purpose

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This short chapter describes why I wrote the book and what I hope the book brings to the audience. The chapter provides motivation for reading the book.

The purpose of this book is to provide support to aspiring gamemasters and to guide those experienced gamemasters to even greater heights. The key to both of these are a set of simple gamemastering (GMing) Principles. They appear simple, and at one level they are. There is a depth to them that allows the reader to apply them in almost any gaming situation and, as the last chapters in the book will explain, to almost any situation in life.

This book has been a work in progress for over 35 years. Table-top role-playing (TTRPG) has been a part of my life since the mid-1970s, and the Principles this book is based on have been a key part of my life, business, and leadership strategies since 1990.

I wrote the book because I feel compelled to. I have been doing gaming seminars on World Building, Creating Memorable Non-player Characters, and other critical since Doverconⁱ 1992. The seminars have been based on the GMing Principles from the very beginning.

I spent my time from 1980-1990 out in the US Army and much of that time was in overseas assignments. In 1990, I had the opportunity to attend MIT and work to be granted a Ph.D. That pause, that time to think, allowed me to reflect on life and gaming lessons and described the distilled experience in terms of the GMing Principles.

In 1993, I left the active Army (though I stayed in the US Army Reserve) and started my civilian career journey. I adapted the GMing Principles to become my Leadership Principles that I applied to leading and managing organizations with annual budgets in excess of \$200M and commanding over 40,000 personnel by the time I retired in 2021. All of the people I led know the Perrin, Stafford, and Petersen principles, and many of them tailored the Principles and made them their own.

This book is an artistic act of love for all of you who enjoy my favorite hobby TTRPGs.

Audience

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This chapter describes who the book is aimed at and some potential applications .

The audience for this book is anyone who hopes to improve their TTRPG experience through study and reflection. Additionally, the GMing Principles have also been applied in a variety of real-world, non-gaming related situations. If you are a manager or leader of an enterprise and you are looking for inspiration or direction, this book would be a good read for you too.

The GMing Principles provide a framework for evaluating your current play and directing future efforts. Paraphrasing Lewis Carroll, “If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.”ⁱⁱ The Principles help the GM develop a broader perspective and instincts for how to handle situations that will increase the joy that their TTRPG sessions bring themselves and their players.

If you are a GM and want to try your hand at world-building, this book contains an entire chapter on top-down and bottoms-up world-building.

If you are a GM and want to develop and run memorable Non-player Characters (NPCs) this book will provide you with a tried-and-true method for enhancing your NPCs.

If you are navigating the challenge of forming and keeping a gaming group together then there is a section in this book for you.

If you are interested in how to apply your GMing skills to broader questions in business and in life, you will want to read this book.

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How to use this book

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This chapter describes some methods for reading and applying this book .

This book is more like a cookbook than a calculus textbook. The book is not designed to be read cover to cover in order. In the top-down worldbuilding section of the book, I describe the “calculus textbook” version of worldbuilding, where you follow each step sequentially and each action builds on the next. You can read this book that way, but the real magic comes in reading the chapters that are most applicable to you at the moment. There are no bad reasons for reading this book. Here are several reasons for reading the book and what chapters might be most applicable.

Everyone will get benefit from reading the purpose, how to use this book, and the principles chapters.

Newly minted or relatively inexperienced GMs will find the chapter on sessions, adventures, and campaigns very useful. The chapter is full of tricks and tips on how to run sessions and turn sessions into adventures and campaigns. The chapter is also a great resource for understanding common TTRPG concepts and terms.

If you are struggling with forming a party or trying to keep an existing gaming group together then the chapter on principled parties would be useful. The chapter describes how to find

players, how to recruit the right players, and how to encourage them to keep coming back session after session.

Perhaps you want to tweak your approach to creating and using NPCs. Then, the chapter on principled NPCs would be a good choice for you.

Worldbuilding is a vast topic, and many books have been published about it. The chapter on worldbuilding is one of the original sources of information on the subject, and thousands of GMs worldwide have used those techniques since it was first published on the Dr Games site in 1994.ⁱⁱⁱ Whether you are a first time world builder or just trying to tune up your worldbuilding process then you will want to read the worldbuilding chapter.

If you are looking for innovative approaches to improve your business or enterprise then the chapter on life, the universe, and everything will resonate with you.

Finally, if you are a very experienced GM and are looking to increase your positive impact on the gaming community then you should read the chapter on principles to get from good to great GM.

Acknowledgements

Richard C. Staats

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Introduction

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This chapter is the formal introduction to the book. It covers the style of the book, some of the educational approaches used in the book, and the learning philosophy of the book.

Unique Aspects

The book is unique in that it is a combination of deep insights leavened with practical experience and all described in a conversational manner. The book integrates storytelling and humor to bring the points home drawing on the author's experience leading and motivating thousands under the most trying of circumstances. The author has used role-playing as a tool in nation building, warfighting, and statecraft as well as a leisure time activity. Several past players credit their survival in combat to the lessons they learned at the gaming table with the author. As you read the book, imagine that you are having a conversation with the author. Just as in regular conversation, I will talk about things that we (the author and the reader) will do together, and I will mention my experiences and my stories. This is not a deeply technical, cold, academic tome. This book is a passing of information and experience from someone who loves our hobby and wants the readers to have the same awesome experience. (In chapter ZZZ, we will talk about going from a good to a great GM,

and part of that process is giving back to the community. Pay it forward.)

Style and Educational Approach

The tone of this book is conversational. Imagine having a conversation with a respected friend who is an experienced GM. That is the approach this book takes.

The book uses a combination of Constructivism and Behaviorism to ensure the reader understands the key points and the application to their own circumstances. While the author is the expert, the book encourages the reader to reflect on their own experiences to better understand the book's paradigms and to apply the lessons in real role-playing sessions and make the Principles their own. Different readers learn in diverse ways. Some learn best from reading material. Some readers are aided by storytelling and social settings, and others will learn best from hands-on application. The book will use all three modalities.

The book will use diagrams and acronyms to illustrate the points. The book will use: chapter objectives, summaries, examples and stories, and highlight key terms.

Terms and definitions

We will use the following terms throughout the book, and it useful to define them.

Role-Playing: (Here are three definitions.)

- Gygax in Role-Playing Mastery: "Acting out a make-believe position"^{iv}
- Costikyan in Toon: "Role-Playing is just 'Let's Pretend'"^v
- Schick in Heroic Worlds: "Quantified Interactive Storytelling"^{vi}

For this book, we will use Schick's definition. Each of the three words in his definition is important. Role-playing involves storytelling, but it is interactive. It is a dance between the Gamemaster (GM) and the players. Finally, quantified is a nod to the Perrin principle. It means that the GM is using some type of orderly framework to describe and adjudicate actions in the world.

GM: the person responsible for the organizational and narrative backbone of a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG). They are the person responsible for creating and managing the game world, guiding the story, and ensuring a fair and enjoyable experience for all players.

Character: The role a player assumes in a Role-Playing game.

Adventure: A Role-Playing session or series of sessions using the same characters throughout with a clear plot and a definite beginning, middle and ending.

Campaign: A series of connected sessions where the characters accomplish something which could not have been done in one adventure.

Fantasy Role-Playing (FRP): Role-Playing which takes place in a fantasy milieu.

Role-Playing World: The environment in which the characters interact. It has a consistent set of physical laws and a coherent mythical order.

Cross-Over: Travel from one Role-Playing milieu to another.

Multi-verse: Set of all Role-Playing worlds/milieu's possible for characters to enter from a particular campaign. (Note: these worlds do not have to all be run by the same referee.)

Party: A group of characters involved in a campaign who travel through the Role-Playing world together with a common set of goals and objectives. (Hereafter referred to as the Party.)

PC: Player Character, a character controlled by a player

NPC: Non-Player Character, a character controlled by the referee

Tie-In: Connecting two plot threads or regions that were not previously related.

McGuffin: a plot device or thread specifically designed to incite player interest.

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The Principles

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This critical chapter describes the GMing Principles that serve as the foundation for the rest of the book. There are three principles, the Stafford (creative), the Perrin (consistent), and the Petersen (fun), and together they create a framework that applies to almost any GMing situation. These same principles have been adapted to help guide large, \$100M+ organizations and even nation building situations.

Chapter Objectives

- Understand the GMing Principles
- Understand how the Principles complement one another
- Understand how the Principles relate to the GM's style

Introduction

The GMing Principles form the foundation for the rest of the book. The Principles are simple, but their application is elegant and produces exceptional results.

Where did the Principles come from? They grew out of years of GMing experience and a chance to reflect on that experience. I grew up in Wisconsin, near the birthplace of role-playing games. In 1977, a high school friend introduced me to role-playing. In those days, you could buy an entire campaign for under \$12.^{vii} The books were printed on newsprint, and the print quality was not the highest. We loved those campaign books. Early on, there were

very few supplements available, and everyone tended to play the same ones.

I attended college at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and at least at that time it was not known as a place that put a premium on leisure time activities. Our days were packed, and it was pure joy to find a couple of hours to run a role-playing game (RPG) session on the weekend. The cadets did not have access to a store that sold RPG supplements. Necessity is the mother of invention. I had to develop my own campaign. To be honest, I was not the world's greatest GM when I started out, but I was willing to learn from my mistakes. One of the things that I did then that I still do 47 years later is ask for honest feedback from my players. They were very honest, sometimes scathingly so, but I took their observations, desires, and disappointments to heart. Little by little, I improved as a GM.

The Principles were not written down at this point, but there were there influencing my GMing style as an unseen framework. After leaving West Point, I ran campaigns: at Fort Lee, twice at separate postings in Germany, in Korea up near the Demilitarized Zone, and finally at Fort Riley, Kansas.

At this point, my life took a major turn. I had spent a decade as a tactical, active duty, Army officer, most of that time was overseas. Now, I was heading to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to work on a Ph.D. My days were still incredibly busy. (I was a single dad with three children, still in the Army, and taking courses with some of the brightest people on Earth.) The difference was that I had time and was expected to think.

Of course, I started up a campaign at MIT. We played twice a week for nearly four years while I was working on my degree. At this point, I first put the Principles into words. I named the Principles

after three of the principals at Chaosium, Inc.¹ Gregg Stafford was the founder of Chaosium and emphasized creativity and uniqueness in all of his games. Steve Perrin was a no non-sense game designer who focused on clarity and completeness in the design process. Steve added the science to ensure the games that Chaosium produced were playable and understandable. Sandy Petersen was all about fun. Sandy told great stories about how as a GM he would change plots and details on the fly to ensure that all of his players enjoyed themselves. Together, the three of them constituted a well-balanced design team. Gregg, Steve, and Sandy approved of the Principles I developed and were proud to have their names associated with them.

Briefly, here are the Principles.²

Stafford Principle: maintain a sense of wonder in the campaign. Make sure there is always some surprise or something special that makes a session, an adventure, a campaign and your entire world unique.

Perrin Principle: be consistent. If you do something once, it becomes a precedence. The players will remember it, and count on it being the same next time. If it's not the same later, have a darn good, obvious to the players reason that it's different.

Petersen Principle: make it fun. Don't be afraid to change a plot to go with player enthusiasm. Try something crazy or goofy, even (or

¹ Chaosium website, <https://www.chaosium.com/the-chaosium-team/?srsltid=AfmBOopyUGbhNjzJeApOpf9fqG3zMWb1BOfJRtd9fBT0k25W-K3YjNy2>, 2025.

² The Dr Games website, <http://www.drgames.org/staats2.htm>, 1994.

especially) in serious settings. Roll with the mood and make it happen. Be high energy!

We will look at each Principle in more detail in the next sections.

Stafford Principle

The Stafford principle is all about making something memorable, something unique, something that taps into your personal style and creative genius. If there is one of the principles that helps ensure that your players keep coming back to your RPG table to play then it is the Stafford principle. When someone asks, what makes your world, your game, your campaign unique, they are really asking how have you applied the Stafford principle?

We all have personal areas of expertise and subjects that we love learning about. The Stafford principle is an open invitation to take those interest areas and apply them to your GMing style. If you are an expert on clothing and fashion then you could leverage that to be a unique aspect for your gaming.

When you think of the Stafford principle, think plot twists, exotic settings, secrets, and unique creatures. Think about your favorite book and your favorite movie. Why do you love them? How does the book and the movie approach their genres from a unique perspective? What is new and different about that perspective?

You can think of the Stafford principle as a lever with settings that go from zero to one. Zero is Earth normal. Zero represents the real world that your players live in. The social customs, the technology, and the laws are all the same as your players see day to day in their own lives. As you edge the lever up, the world becomes more and more different from the world we live in. Maybe magic appears. Maybe superheroes become real. Perhaps super science let's people travel to strange new worlds and seek

out new civilizations. Eventually, as you push the lever closer and closer to one, the gaming world becomes unrecognizable. It has different laws of physics, different social structures, and different intelligent groups.

What is the effect of moving the lever?

The closer you are to zero, the easier it is for your players to suspend disbelief and picture themselves in that world. The more the lever moves towards one, the more interesting and unique your world is. The challenge is that it will take more effort for your players to immerse themselves in that world and really understand how things operate and what to expect.

You have to find the right setting for you, your GM style, and your players' comfort levels.

Fortunately, the Perrin principle will help us with that.

Perrin Principle

The Perrin principle is all about consistency, playability, and predictability. As a GM you sometimes need to make "table calls." That is either rule on something that is not covered in the rules or is superseded by something that is happening in your session at that moment. The next time a similar situation occurs in your campaign, the players are going to expect a similar outcome. They may even use the ruling you made to benefit their player characters through careful planning. The Perrin principle says that it is OK to ad lib, but once you make a decision it becomes a new precedence.

The Perrin principle calls the GM to try to be logical and for things in the world and in the session to make sense to the players. The Perrin principle also pulls the GM towards providing accurate descriptions and ensuring the players have all the information they need. The Perrin principle is about completeness.

Game players, story readers, and movie watchers have expectations of what will happen in the session, the story, and the movie. For particular genres, there are conventions called tropes that are common occurrences. For example, in horror stories, you expect the group to separate and the monster to defeat some members of the group in isolation. In science fiction, TV serials, you expect the hero to nearly fail, but to defeat the villains by the end of the episode. This predictability is part of the Perrin principle. Predictability helps the players plan and immerse themselves in the setting.

If we were automatons then the Stafford and Perrin principles would be enough, but your players are people, and that leads to the Petersen principle.

Petersen Principle

The Petersen principle says that whatever else happens you should ensure that your players have fun. Sandy Petersen, the namesake for the principle, is widely known for his amazing convention sessions. Sandy is high energy, and his players spend as much time laughing and joking as they do on game mechanics. I do not know of anyone who did not enjoy having Sandy as a GM.

Plot, schmot. The Petersen principle says make sure that your players are having a good time. This principle encourages you to use appropriate humor in your sessions. Give the players what they want.

Like candy, sometimes even a good thing can be too much. The principles are not antagonistic, but they do complement each other.

Synergies between the Principles

Think of the principles as spokes on a wheel. If the spokes are in balance, all about the same length, the wheel rolls easily. If one spoke is too long or too short compared to the others then the wheel will not roll.

In addition to GMing, I also produce music. Some musicians are absolutely virtuoso performers. They are amazing to listen to, but many of them either cannot or will not play prepared sheet music. They are long in the Stafford principle, but short on the Perrin principle.

Conversely, there are musicians who will play every note exactly, exactly as written. Often their performances are stilted and sound mechanical. They are long on Perrin, but short on Stafford.

Some people love to have fun, but at the end of the day, they do not produce a lot. Think about the famous fable of the ant and the grasshopper. The grasshopper is long on Petersen, but short on Perrin.

When you are first starting your GMing journey, usually the most important principle to focus on is the Perrin principle. Try to understand the RPG system you are using. Read the rules and then try to see it in action either by watching videos or playing in a session at a convention. Once you have a good grasp of the basics, you can safely increase the uniqueness and levity in your sessions.

The three major principles will guide our exploration of GMing topics through the rest of the book, but here are a few more that can be helpful.

Staats Principle

Reward the players as well as the player characters. Handouts, riddles, music, and other props that can be experienced by the

players' sense directly or challenged the players' creativity rewards the players. The players are the ones that come to the sessions every week, and ultimately, it is the GM's goal to reward the players. Some players are fine with being rewarded vicariously through their characters, but it is so much more fun to be rewarded as a player during the session as well.

Creature comforts are part of this too. Providing a safe and comfortable environment are an important piece of the Staats principle. As an example, I usually try to provide a nice meal for my gamers at the beginning of the session. I feel it is one of the reasons that players come back campaign after campaign to play in my gaming world.

Sandy's Axiom

You should strive to include at least three senses in every scene you describe. The sensations can be just described verbally or they can be experienced through props. Most of your gamers will have five senses, and adding details about weird sounds, the unusual smell, or the texture of something adds significantly to the gaming experience.

Check on Learning

The Principles are the basis for everything else in this book. Having a clear understanding of the Principles will help you understand the rest of the chapters, and it will also aid you as a GM and in life.

- Without looking, what are the Stafford, Perrin, and Petersen principles?
- In your experience gaming either as a player or a GM, which principle has been most difficult for you to use?
- In figure 2.1, match the items on the left with the appropriate principle on the right.

<insert figure 2.1>

Figure 2.1. A matching game where the reader matches the descriptions on the left with the principles on the right.

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Principled Sessions, Adventures, and Campaigns

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This chapter describes how the Principles can be applied to prepare for and host great sessions, memorable adventures, and epic campaigns. The chapter is full of tips and tricks gathered from nearly 50 years of gaming. If you are a starting GM or a long-time, veteran then this is a good chapter to start with. Great sessions are the atoms that keep your players coming back to the gaming table session after session.

Chapter Objectives

- Be able to describe the differences between sessions, adventures, and campaigns
- Understand how the Principles can be used to guide the GM in creating and running great sessions
- Understand how the Principles combined with the steps in the Hero's Journey can be used to fashion epic campaigns.

Introduction

The first thing in understanding how to create and run great sessions, adventures, and campaigns is to know what they are.

Applying the Principles

The Staats principle is especially important to remember. The players, the physical, living, breathing beings, are the ones that will be coming to your sessions. It is important that they all feel safe, comfortable, and engaged.

The Perrin, Stafford, and Petersen principles will guide choices in crafting great plotlines, adventure arcs, and campaign objectives, but unless you can get the players to attend your sessions and engage then you are not going to get the full benefit out of your efforts as a GM.

Storytelling

This book will have many stories, some right in this chapter. Every great GM should spend some time learning to write and deliver great stories. In the book, the Story Edge^{viii}, the author makes the point that stories help you connect with your audience at an emotional level.

I grew up in a more or less tribal environment. I was surrounded by a large extended family, and we spent time telling stories. I learned a lot from my aunts, uncles, and grandparents about how to spin an engaging yarn. Additionally, I spent a significant portion of my adult life living in and working closely with Arabs in the Middle East. One of the best ways to get to know a person's culture is to learn his or her stories. I made an effort to learn Arabic stories, proverbs, and philosophy. (No group is entirely homogenous, but many Irish know the tales of Finn McCool, and being able to tell a story about Finn at the right time can be a wonderful way to help share ideas and build trust.) Almost every Arabic story I ever heard started with the words, "it might be true, or it might not be true." Finally, as an old soldier, we often ask, "what is the difference between a fairy tale and a war story?" The answer is that one begins with "once upon a time," and the other begins with "no kidding there I was."

An Inconvenient Truth

The best designed campaign and adventure fall apart if the sessions are poorly planned and executed, and players can have a

fabulous time if they play in fun, exciting sessions that have almost nothing to do with plot and overall accomplishment.

As a GM that spends time lovingly crafting detailed plots with amazing NPCs, dialog that would make Shakespear weep, and twists that would cause the world's best movie director to look on in astonishment, you might feel that this is all it takes for players to come back, begging for more.

Sadly, very sadly this is not the case. In the chapter on worldbuilding, we will spend some time talking about cost versus benefit for the GM. In other words, is the joy, the utility that you get out of the significant effort invested in high quality worldbuilding worth it?

The same is true of creating and running sessions, adventures, and campaigns.

First and foremost, it is important to meet your players "where they are." There are other books and online resources that describe various archetypes of players. I will simplify the types down to four archetypes: bards, historians, warriors, and jesters. **Bards** enjoy role-playing. They typically do not care a great deal about plot. They would be just as happy spending four hours haggling over a bag of tomatoes as defeating monsters or finishing quests. **Historians** are all about lore and making a difference at as high a level as possible. They love to hear about the secret mythology of the world. Their hearts sing when you defeat the evil lich of badness. Historians are not necessarily into hours of combat, and role-playing is a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. **Warriors** are, well you guessed it. They live for melee encounters. They get excited when the tactical maps come out, and they are ecstatic when the monsters or NPCs use a clever, new strategy. Finally, **jesters** just want to have fun as a person, not necessarily as a player character. These are the players that bring a

bunch of “dad jokes” and puns to use at opportune times in the session. They have fun playing with their friends. They also tend to get bored if a session drags on for too long.

You should craft your effort and your creative direction as the GM to fulfill the desires of your players. For example, if your table is full of warriors then fun will be had by all if you supply them with a non-stop series of melee encounters. You can spend your time crafting a detailed, multi-threaded plotline, but the warrior players are not going to necessarily appreciate it. One of my campaigns was at Fort Lee, Virginia in 1988. There was a map with a series of caves on it, and each cave was loaded with monsters and loot. The players loved defeating monsters and taking their stuff, and there was not a deeper, underlying, world shaking reason for the campaign. Everyone had fun. To be honest, a deep campaign with amazing revelations and lore would have gone over poorly.

Sometimes GMs use something called “Session Zero” to develop PCs, find out what the players are expecting out of the sessions, and manage expectations. It does not matter how you gather the information, you will be best served if you understand your players’ expectations at the gaming table. I have used paper surveys, online surveys, phone calls, session zeroes, and a host of other ways of helping determine and manage player expectations.

Running Great Sessions

The first thing is to ensure that the players feel comfortable and safe at the session. This can include practical things like understanding the players’ allergies and potential triggers. Also, players should be aware of the environment at the place you play. For example, my home is as allergen free as I can make it. Players cannot bring their beloved pets with them or smoke in the house. The temperature should be set at a moderate level, and the players should have comfortable places to sit and enough room to put out

their gaming resources. Lighting is important. I thought (the whole gaming group thought) that it would be a cool idea to run a horror session set at the ruins of an old building. Yeah, that was a huge mistake. No one could see the play materials, the wind create havoc with our set-up, and it was very uncomfortable.

This is not a requirement, but for many years, I have started sessions at my home with a meal. Sometimes we role-play a meeting at an inn or dinner at a noble's home over mouthfuls of real chicken. It is just one way that I let the players know that I appreciate them.

Applying the Principles

We have already talked about the Staats principle in light of providing a safe, welcoming environment for your gaming group. We will come back to this principle later.

The Perrin principle is critical. Providing a logical, predictable gaming setting helps the players manage expectations, plan, and brings them joy when they use what they know of the system, the world, and the scenario to defeat the opposition. You will want to ensure that the players either understand the gaming system you will be using or that you are providing ways for them to learn as you go. If you have table rules that differ from the standard way the system is run, let the players know upfront.

Sometimes the word tropes has a bad connotation, but it is really a key way of making your sessions approachable to your players.

John Truby wrote a wonderful book called the Anatomy of Genres.^{ix} The whole point of the book is how to write fresh, original stories while using enough familiar elements to allow for maximum immersion by your readers, gamers, or viewers.

Understand what genre your game falls in, and then, figure out which of the tropes of that genre you would like to use in your session. (It is OK to switch some things up as a surprise for your

players, but if all the tropes are wrong then you are more likely to anger than delight your players.)

Finally, the Perrin principle implies that you need to be organized, and a critical component to organization is having a clearly defined goal. "If you don't know where you are going then you are likely to get there."^x Know where you are going by setting clear, achievable goals for your session. Sample goals might include things such as: ensure all the players are familiar with the other player characters and main NPCs; find out what type of encounter each player enjoys; get the critical pieces of plot knowledge to the players; and, everyone has fun. You might use some of these, and it is fine to develop your own objectives. Just make sure that you have some.

The Stafford principle encourages you to highlight unique features of your scenario, sessions, and GMing style. If you do fantastic NPC impersonations then by all means include those in your session. Do you have a unique add-on to the melee system? If appropriate, show it to your players in play. Have you spent three weeks coming up with a killer plot twist? It would be a shame not to spring it on your players. Remember that the stranger your world is, the more memorable, but also the harder for the players to suspend disbelief. Find the right balance for you and your group.

The Petersen principle says make it fun. In the context of the session that has a lot of implications. We will cover some of them in the next section. Think about timing as a key facet of your GMing. You want to ensure that there is enough action and challenges to keep your players engaged, but you don't want them exhausted thirty minutes into your four hour session. Intersperse breaks into the action sequences. Give the players and their characters a chance to catch their breath. If the tone of the session

is heavy and serious, use some humor to leaven the mood from time to time.

A key application of the Petersen principle is remembering that the GM and the Party are not opponents. They are not at odds. If the Players and GM have fun then the GM is successful. The GM provides challenges for the Party to solve. The GM and the Party both rejoice when the Party overcomes the obstacles and successfully completes the adventure.

Rule Zero

The GM has a lot of responsibilities in setting up the world, creating interesting encounters, and running well paced, fun adventures. One of the GM privileges is Rule Zero. Rule Zero says that whatever the GM decides is ground truth for the session. It is important that players know that Rule Zero exists and that you abide by it. Rule Zero should be applied sparingly, but if it needs to be applied then ensure that it is clear to the players what your decision is.

Rule Zero can short circuit hours of aggravating arguments between the players and the GM. Once you realize that the best thing is to make a table call and move on, just invoke Rule Zero. Most players will respect your decision, and the fun can begin again in earnest.

We will discuss disruptive players in the chapter on recruiting, retention, and retiring of players.

Putting it together

When you are planning your session, it is useful to keep these five concepts in mind: Description, Reward, Conflict, Plot development, and Point of view.

Description

You are the window into your world. Your descriptions are critical. Remember Sandy's axiom to include at least three senses in every description. Humans have five senses (at least). In gaming we often just focus on what they see. Occasionally, a GM will describe what the characters hear, but you can do better. Smell, taste, and touch have huge emotional impact. Decades after my last combat missions, the things I remember most are the smells from the battlefield. Scientists tell us that scents are one of the most powerful ways of triggering emotions and memories.^{xi}

Props can help give the players a focus in the gaming world. Rather than just describing how something looks and feels, being able to hold an object in your own hands brings a whole new level to immersion and visualizing.

What is a prop? In this book, a prop is defined *as anything that stimulates the players' senses besides the GM's voice to help them suspend disbelief.*

Time for a brief story that combines the idea of props with the sense of smell. Years ago, I started using a small jar of essential oils, cinnamon in this case, as a prop in my campaign. Just before a tough encounter, I would surreptitiously remove the cap on the cinnamon oil. It was not enough to register consciously, but the players' subconsciouses picked up on it. The first few encounters, I did not notice anything obvious, just a little more wariness on the part of the players, but after a time, within moments after I opened up the jar, the party would start going into defensive stances, assume tactical positions, and have a heightened alertness. In most cases, this actually aided them significantly. I did not tell the players about the oil until the last session in a long-running campaign. I have mostly recovered from the physical beating I took that day.

Props can be documents, physical artifacts, music, food, or almost anything that you can prepare. We could spend a whole book on props, but one caveat. Props can be overdone. Make sure that if you use a prop that it does not take over the focus of the session.

Reward

As the Staats principle says, you should reward the players as well as the characters.

We will start with character rewards. Too often, GMs only reward the characters by giving them loot and experience. Really, the ways of rewarding a character are nearly unlimited. New capabilities is a broad form of reward. It can range from things like experience points in level-based games to skills training in skills-based games. It also includes supportive NPCs and new, useful magic items.

Increasing the character's span of control is another good way of rewarding the character. Make the character a noble, or give him or her a promotion in the great machine. Give the character some type of writ that deputizes them to work on behalf of a powerful benefactor.

Acquisition of wealth, of knowledge, of power, and a host of other tangible and intangible things are all good ways to reward the characters. A fun and easy way of increasing interest in acquisition is to create unique sets of something that will take time, talent, and treasure to collect. "In the chest you find, well, what?!? No, it cannot be. This is a gauntlet from the armor of the immortal wind warrior. It glows with a pale, cool, blue light, beckoning you to touch it, to feel it, to wear it." You can easily see how collecting the entire set of armor could become a driving goal for one or more of your PCs.

How does one reward the players? When you give a puzzle or riddle to the party, it is the players that solve the conundrum. This is something fun for the players.

A comfortable, safe, and welcoming environment is a reward for your players. As mentioned before, I try to provide a home cooked meal to my players before every role-playing session.

Pleasant Interactions are another way of rewarding the players. There is enough drama in life without introducing real world drama into your gaming group. We will talk more about this in the chapter on recruiting, retaining, and retiring players.

A very important way of rewarding the players is to ensure that at least once during each session each players' character is the "hero" for a scene. If the PC is a rogue then have a lock that needs to be picked or something requiring their expertise in legerdemain. Have the fighter take on a villain in one-on-one combat. The mage can use her mystic skills to solve a challenge, and the list goes on.

Conflict

Conflict between players is best avoided, but your characters should experience conflict. Without conflict, there is no scenario. Conflict is a good thing in proper form and measure.

One thing to remember is that violence should not be random and mindless. Make it further the plot.

Two caveats, one is conflict is like spice. A little can add a lot of interest to the session, too much and it will harm the session and your party. Finally, only choose conflict areas that you and your party are personally comfortable with.

Plot Development

Some aspects of GMing are more art than science, while plot development has an engineering aspect to it. Plot development

cuts across all of the principles. From a Perrin principle perspective plots are the logical sequence of events in your world. The events flow naturally from what came before and what your NPCs' wants and needs are. From a Stafford principle, your plot can be a unique trajectory of events, never seen before in the genre. The Petersen principle reminds us to make it fun for the players.

The plots in the adventure or campaign should be clear to the players. A good practice is to start every session by having a player or two describe what they believe the important plotlines are and how the previous session contributed to moving the plot. If the players are unable to recap and describe the plotlines then those plotlines need to be dusted off and emphasized during the current session. *Using NPCs to remind players of the plots is a good practice.* Perhaps a senior would like a status report before giving the party more resources. It could be that a local farmer warns the Party that shipments to the north are being intercepted by that orc army that the players are supposed to scout out and neutralize.

One rule of thumb is to think of adventures in terms of beginnings, middles, and ends. There is some dispute about this amongst experienced GMs. Every GM and every party is different. The extremes range from a completely open world ("the sandbox") where the players do as they please without any overarching missions or plots all the way to a set piece series of events and encounters that will happen no matter what the party does. (This is known as "the railroad.") Generally, there is an optimal point between the two extremes that work well for the GM and the players.

Point of View

Simply said, what a character knows, either player or non-player, should be related to the character's role, resources, and experience.

If the players are struggling, it is very tempting to find a way to provide valuable information to them via an NPC, but does that NPC really know that information? Gary Gygax used to joke about the very low level hireling who would suddenly spout the answer to the vexing riddle after the Party has tried several times. Even high-level, well-informed players are not omniscient. The Duke likely knows a lot about his duchy, but he might not know the details of how to counter the ancient curse on the fabled garden of chocolate.

Sometimes players have a hard time limiting the knowledge that their characters display. If a player has a long history in a particular setting, he or she might know things about the NPCs, the local flora and fauna, and even political secrets that their current character would not know. This is sometimes called “meta-gaming.”

The best way to challenge meta-gaming is to deliberately change things about the setting. It is best to do this gently in a non-lethal environment. Maybe these zombies are not killed by stuffing salt in their mouths. Once the player realizes that some facts are different, it becomes clear that using meta-gaming can potentially cause more harm than good.

Another issue a GM can face is a player trying to bring engineering or scientific information into a setting inappropriately. Those players quickly find out that gunpowder does not work as expected. Diseases really are caused by demons, and eating moldy orange peels only makes you sick, it does not treat diseases.

This most often manifests in fantasy campaigns, but similar issues can arise in modern day and science fiction settings. In your world, black holes might be used to travel between distant locations (ala *Spore*^{xiii}), but one of your players is adamant that tidal forces would rip the ships apart and cannot get past it. Your

world is not a physics demonstration, and some of the laws of our universe might not apply. It is sometimes useful to point out other inconsistencies between the real-world and your play world. If the point of contention is critical to your adventure then the player either needs to accept it (even if grudgingly) or the player needs to find another setting to play in.

Session Preparation

There is an old piece of advice that if you fail to prepare, you prepare for failure. If you are a long time GM playing in a world of your own creation then there might be times that you can run a session with little or no preparation. Even as an experienced GM, the chance for a great session goes up if you put some preparation time in before the event. What kinds of things should you focus on in preparation?

Props

Anything that you are going to present to the players whether it is a document, music, a physical object, or anything else should be ready to go before the session starts. Ensure that the props contribute to plot advancement and have them pre-staged at a location that will be easy to get to when you need them. It is often more effective to have physical props out of sight prior to the session to prevent distracting the players or giving them more information than necessary before the prop is presented. If the prop is sound related, ensure that whatever system you are using to project the prop works and can be effectively heard by the players.

Have a good grasp of the key scenes and major NPCs

You will want to read through the entire adventure before the session, but it is very useful to have the key, plot advancing scenes

in your mind as you go into the session. If the Party does something unexpected, and it is the Party's birthright to surprise the GM, then you will have a better idea of what items, information, and permissions the Party will need to obtain to complete the adventure, and you can tweak events to ensure the Party gets what they need.

An expert tip is to have *a list of names available to assign ad hoc* during the session if you need to introduce an NPC for an unforeseen reason.

Plan out the encounters

All the encounters need to be prepared before the session. Tactical Studies and Rules (TSR) published the Dungeon Masters Design Kit^{xiii} that included forms for various likely occurrences in your adventure such as melee encounters, role-playing encounters, tricks and traps, etc. You do not have to use this resource, but it is important to understand:

- 1) The purpose for the event
- 2) Who or what is involved in the event?
- 3) Is there any warning or information that might make the event easier?
- 4) What are the stages of the event, and how do the actions of the participants change from stage to stage? What are the triggers to change the stage?
- 5) What are the potential rewards and long-term consequences of the event?

Keith Ammann wrote a useful book called the Monsters know what they're doing^{xiv} that describes the tactics that many common monsters in a fantasy RPG setting might use. It is helpful from a Perrin principle standpoint. If the opponents behave in a logical, consistent, and challenging way it will increase the enjoyment of

the encounters and help the players with the suspension of disbelief.

Ensuring the area, the communications, and supplies are ready

You will want to ensure that your players know how to attend the game. If they are driving and there is parking, is that set-up? Do you have dice, maps, playmats, markers, and all the supplies you will need? If you are eating during the session, is that arranged? Do you have plates, flatware, and all the items for the meal?

You might be doing a face to face session, it might be entirely on-line, or it might be a hybrid. Ensure that you have all the items for the session in the appropriate form for the venue. If you are all playing face to face then maps should be printed out or able to be projected in a way that everyone can see them. If you are entirely online then you should ensure that you have graphical materials prepared and stored in the right format so that you can show them to the Players at the appropriate time. If you are in a hybrid situation then you might need to have both physical copies and electronic copies. I often run hybrid sessions with my Players, and I make a point to send our remote players electronic copies what the live players will see.

You should always do a trial run on any technology aid. Systems get routine updates, and often that means that systems that worked yesterday might not run today. It is best to try them out close to the day of the session.

Memorable Adventures

We defined an adventure as a session or series of sessions using the same characters throughout with definite beginning, middle and ending.

Determine the Game System and Genre

The first step is determining the genre and rule set you will be using. If the adventure is part of an ongoing campaign then these things are already set, but if you are starting to write an adventure from scratch then it is important to start with the basics. Picking the rule set does not always automatically fix the genre. GURPS^{xv}, Role-Master^{xvi}, and the Basic Roleplaying System^{xvii} are all RPGs that allow you to play at almost any point in time and space in any universe.

If you had to choose between emphasizing either the genre or the gaming system, the genre wins. I have been running a series of sessions at some of the larger role-playing conventions in the USA for several years called the “forgotten fun” series. I take older gaming systems that most players are not familiar with and create one-shot adventures for convention play. When I put these sessions together, I ensure that the prospective players understand the genre that the sessions cover whether it is fantasy, modern espionage, historical fiction, space opera, or something else entirely. I can teach the players the rules during the game, but it is critical that the players come into the session knowing something about the material that will be covered and have some idea of common tropes used in the setting.

Determine the Setting

You should set the specifics of when and where the adventure is taking place. Now, you have the genre, the gaming system, and a setting. You have a rather good idea of what is possible and expected during the session.

Create Themes

What are the main challenges going to be? Is this a character versus nature survival story? Will the party be asked to safeguard

someone or something? Will the party have to recover or obtain an item or certain knowledge? The choices are nearly limitless. I find that selecting one or two themes for the adventure will help ground your development.

Establish the Major Scenes

A major scene is one where the party faces a significant challenge on the way to the adventure's successful conclusion. Another way to think about it is what are the major milestones or events that need to occur for the Party to successfully complete the adventure?

I find it helpful to create a flowchart that captures those key milestones. Chaosium uses a best practice in their Call of Cthulhu^{xviii} modules. See the example in Figure 3-1. The chart shows the key steps in getting from the beginning of the adventure to the successful completion.

<insert Figure 3-1>

The figure shows the flow through major scenes in an adventure. The boxes are major scenes (e.g., major events, statuses, or locations) that the Party will pass through during the adventure. The arrows represent both potential connections between the boxes as well as potential requirements. To get from one box to another, you might need to travel. You might need a special key or item. It might require the party to accumulate a certain amount of wealth or gain the favor of a key NPC.

Note that some of the arrows are one-way, and some are two-way, allowing travel back and forth between boxes.

Create the Plot(s) and the Major NPCs

The plot is the framework of events, conflicts, and antagonist goals that form the challenges for the players to resolve through their characters' choices. The plot goes hand in hand with developing

your NPCs. If the adventure is taking place in an established area then you may have a list of existing NPCs that the Party will interact with. If you are developing an adventure from scratch then you will need to develop the NPCs as you develop the plot.

It is easier to ask some leading questions. What is the Party's interest in the plot? Why would they want to do it? Where does the adventure start? Where are the major locations the Party will need to travel to? Who will they interact with and why? Does the Party have everything they need to complete the tasks in the plot, or will they need some additional items, information, access, or gain some new capabilities?

The gaming system is important in determining expectations for the plot. In the role-playing game *Mazes* by 9th Level Games^{xix}, the characters do not increase in abilities as the adventure progresses. The adventures are designed to be episodic like a cartoon or action-adventure TV serial. You need to design an adventure for *Mazes* with the idea that the PCs are as good as they are ever going to be at the beginning of the adventure.

I was running a Call of Cthulhu^{xx} (CoC) session at a convention, and at the break I asked the players how they were enjoying the session. They were all very positive, but one player took me aside and said that there had not been any loss of sanity so far in the session, and you could not really run a CoC adventure with no sanity loss. Guess what? Using the Petersen principle, I ensured that in the second half of the adventure that there were several times when the PCs lost sanity points. (The gaming system and genre point you to player expectations, and at least some of those expectations need to be addressed.)

The main insights that the players have into your world come from your NPCs. There is a whole chapter on creating memorable NPCs later in this book. For now, in the context of plot

development, the NPCs should: have reasonable goals and objectives, some of those goals and objectives should make the NPCs intersect with the Party, and the NPCs should be able to affect the Party and either aid or hinder the Party's ability to successfully complete the adventure. The NPCs should exist independently of the PCs. If the PCs fail to take some action, reasonable NPCs may hire another group to undertake the mission. If the Party behaves poorly in the scenario and there are competent authorities then the PCs might find themselves in trouble with the local law.

If you need something to gently push the Party and give the PCs more information in a natural way then assigning an NPC to do it is generally a good solution.

John Truby says that incidental characters or NPCs fulfill one of several functions^{xxi}. NPCs can highlight the nature of the challenges confronting the Party either by demonstrating the issues or describing them to the Party. The NPCs can point out the positive attributes of the Party members by showing a decided lack of those attributes. For example having a cowardly guardsman is a great way for the Party to shine by comparison. NPCs can provide temptations or means to side-track the Party. If you think about your favorite movies or game modules, there was probably a moral challenge, and there was probably an NPC that tried to lead the main Point of View (PoV) character(s) astray. NPCs might provide information, equipment, or permissions that allow the Party to complete an important scene. Finally, NPCs can provide the motivation for undertaking the adventure's objectives. Who could say no to that cute, orphan's smile?

As you look at the major scenes and the plot threads connecting them, think about which of the connections would be best served through an NPC interaction. Then, carefully either select NPCs

from your existing stable or design appropriate NPCs if you are making your making the scenario from scratch.

One expert tip about NPCs, they make a great way of making a serious point without damaging your PCs. If saying the words wrong on the ancient script causes the character to burst in flame, have an NPC make the gaff. The players will likely take note, and social learning will have occurred.

Linking the Major Scenes

You know the major plot points, the major scenes, and the key NPCs. Now, you need to develop the linking scenes.

The linking scenes provide the connective material. They help set up the logic that links the major scenes. In one major scene the Party might be fighting vampires, and in the next, they might be breaking into the National Academy to steal a rare book. The linking scenes would create the connection between the two potentially disparate events. Linking scenes are useful for providing context.

Mark Pellegrino^{xxii} uses linking scenes to control pacing and rhythm, convey necessary information, and manage the passage of time and space. A story composed only of high-conflict dramatic scenes would be exhausting and relentless. Linking scenes provide the necessary "breathing room." They create a rhythm of tension and release, pulling the reader through moments of quiet reflection, planning, or travel before plunging them back into another conflict. Linking scenes are the ideal place to deliver exposition naturally. Instead of a clumsy info-dump, information is revealed as the PCs interact with knowledgeable NPCs or do research to find key information. Adventures never happen in real-time. Linking scenes are the tool GMs use to skip time and move characters from one location to another. A short linking scene can cover a journey of thousands of miles or a wait of

several weeks, efficiently getting the character to the start of the next major scene.

Blockbuster Openings

The idea of starting an adventure in the middle of the action has a long and proud history. The Roman poet Horace advocated starting adventures *in medias res*, in the middle of the action.^{xxiii} For one-shot adventures, you can start the session in the middle of a fight scene or under tense circumstances like the rogue trying to pick the lock on the royal vault before the guardsmen arrive.

For an multi-session adventure or the beginning of a campaign, you might need to provide a little bit of context first, but the action should not be far behind.

Be willing to kill your children

As a parent, I am not advocating harming real children. As a GM, it is important to realize that all of your carefully crafted plotlines and impressive NPCs are all imaginary and do not really matter compared to other, more important things. If the Party just does not understand a particular plotline or has no interest in it then let it go. When the Party kills the NPC that you lavished detail on and gave life to, that is OK, the NPC is not and never was real. This is one of the hardest lessons for new GMs.

On the killing of NPCs, sometimes there are consequences. One of the most memorable plotlines from the classic *Princess Bride* was Inigo Montoya who would say, “you killed my father, now prepare to die”^{xxiv} Like spices, when used appropriately and sparingly, these kinds of emergent plotlines can add interest and a sense of history to your adventure. If used too much, the players are left with the idea that everyone in your world is a homicidal maniac. (Generally, that is not the idea that you want to come

across, unless you are playing a system based on murder hoboes or vagabonds; see Root the Roleplaying Game.^{xxv})

In one session in my long running “Defenders of Ivy Shade” campaign, the players came across an imprisoned leprechaun. The Party recognized that this older leprechaun had more than a passing resemblance to a pair of younger leprechauns that the Party had killed several sessions earlier. The Party needed this leprechaun to cooperate with them because they needed a special item that only he had access to. So, when the leprechaun asked the Party if they had run across “his boys,” things turned tense. The Party was evasive, and we used the gaming system (DnD 5ed, in this case) to make the appropriate skill checks and saving throws. Eventually though, the Party had to confess to this now grieving dad that they had killed his sons. This turned out to be one of the more memorable encounters in a campaign that spanned five years.

Epic Campaigns

As a GM, one of the greatest joys is creating and running a long running campaign that players talk about for years afterward. I have been GMing since 1977. One of my campaigns took place in Stuttgart, Germany, 1984-86, while I was assigned there as an Army lieutenant. Recently, I received an email from one of the players from the Stuttgart campaign 47 years later, and he asked if I was currently running a campaign and if he could join. He remembered his time in the campaign so fondly that he wanted to be part of my campaign world again. He has been a great addition to the current Party. The other players love him, and his experience, knowledge of the gaming world, and levelheaded approach to in-game problem solving has been a huge boon to the Party.

Epic campaigns are the key to creating situations where the players remember your gaming sessions decades later. In this section we will explore how to use the gaming Principles in concert with the steps laid out in the Hero's Journey^{xxvi} and some supplemental information by John Truby^{xxvii} to create epic campaigns.

One quick caveat, you do not have to be the greatest fantasy writer of all time and come up with wholly new, breathtaking plots to create a campaign. At the end of this chapter, I have a section on using random tables to help fire your imagination. It is also wholly acceptable to steal plots, NPC archetypes, and other bits from existing stories and literature. Television and movies often provide a rich source of inspiration. One of my tricks for fantasy role-playing campaigns is to hijack plots from old westerns. My players are not likely to be familiar with plots from radio dramas in the 1940s and 50s, and they work very well.

We will look at the Hero's Journey in detail. It is a tried-and-true method for structuring a great story. I am presenting it in a linear fashion, but your creative process can be highly non-linear. As ideas occur to you later in the process, you will want to modify the earlier scenes and plotlines to fit the final structure of your campaign.

The Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey has been around as long as human beings have been telling stories. The steps will seem familiar because most works of fiction use the structure. There are three major sections: the Departure, the Initiation, and the Return. We will take a brief look at the sections and then go into detail later.

The Departure sets up the rest of the story. It establishes the context and introduces the world where the story or the campaign takes place. The Departure establishes the central conflicts, and it

identifies the major characters. Think about the first ten minutes of a movie when you see an establishing shot that tells the viewer when and where the movie is taking place, and then you meet some of the key characters. Soon after that, you learn about the major challenges facing the character.

The Initiation is generally the longest part of the story and has a lot of the core plot elements in it. The main character will undergo trials. The players, readers, and viewers will see a deepening of relationships. This is the section where you learn about the conflict. Sometimes GMs are afraid of allowing their PCs, their parties to fail, but in the Hero's Journey defeats are normal. The key is that the characters learn from their defeats. The Initiation is also where the characters achieve the obvious goal.

When the hero achieves the obvious goal, the story is not finished. The Return to the world of the Departure is where the story emotionally finishes. There is almost always a scene where the hero must face and overcome death. Also, the hero learns something about the world that was not obvious before the journey. You often find out that the obvious goal is only a step in a larger challenge. The Return almost always involves significant and sometimes unexpected character growth, and the tale comes to a close when the hero brings treasure back to the home shown in the Departure.

Now we will look at each of the major sections in detail.

Departure Steps

The first step is the call to adventure: Something, or someone, interrupts the hero's familiar life to present a problem, threat, or opportunity. This is a critical step that many campaigns skip. It is important to establish a base, someplace familiar that the PCs care about and supports the PCs. If you want to really use the whole Hero's Journey then the GM should establish a good reason for the

party to come back to this beloved point of departure at the end of the journey.

In my campaign, the Defenders of Ivy Shade, see Fig. 3.2, the PCs start in a community called Ivy Shade.

<Insert Figure 3.2>

Figure 3.2 is a map of Ivy Shade

Part of the coming-of-age process is that everyone in Ivy Shade has to spend two years as “an adventurer.” That means that these young adults spend time dealing with minor annoyances and threats to the town. Because every adult in town went through the same initiation, there is terrific support for the PCs. Townspeople do things like lend them special weapons, bake cookies for them, and provide hints and tips. The PCs formed a great affection for Ivy Shade.

When the call to adventure came, the PCs felt conflicted about leaving Ivy Shade and that leads to the next step in a great story.

In many stories, initially the hero refuses the call to adventure. Think about Luke Skywalker when he is initially challenged to leave his comfortable life on the farm and become part of the rebellion.^{xxviii} The hero is unwilling to step out of his comfort zone or face his fear. The hero initially hesitates to embark on this journey, and, if the hero’s initial situation and home are properly established, the audience sympathizes with this reluctance.

Note that in a campaign, the players have to decide what the PCs do. The GM cannot dictate the refusal, but the GM can set up a situation where running off and leaving what the characters value is not necessarily the first choice.

The hero baulks. He or she is going to need some additional persuasion.

This brings us to the supernatural aid step, where a mentor figure gives the hero the tools and inspiration he or she needs to accept the call to adventure. The tools can be physical tools, keys, or capabilities, but they can also be context and knowledge.

Finally, the hero either makes up his mind and elects to go on the adventure, or there is a precipitating event that makes refusal impossible. In the Ivy Shade campaign, several of the PCs' friends in some outlying farms were killed. Something had to be done, and off the PCs went.

Major shifts should be acknowledged and when the hero crosses the threshold into the adventure, it should be marked somehow. Maybe you give your PCs an identifying article of clothing or jewelry. Maybe they receive a new title or a document that identifies them. Maybe there is a ceremony in town commemorating the PCs' departure with the blessing of the village elders: Whatever it is, make it memorable and special.

The final step in the departure is called the belly of the whale. This is a reference to the Biblical hero, Jonah, who refused his adventure, and was eventually swallowed by a whale and physically taken to and vomited up on shore at the place where the adventure was supposed to start.^{xxix} (Hopefully your players are less reluctant to become heroes.) For this step, the hero crosses the point of no return, and encounters his first major obstacle.

Initiation Steps

The Initiation is the meat of the campaign. It consists of the road of trials: The hero must go through a series of tests or ordeals to begin his transformation. In a great campaign, your PCs will not only accomplish some major goal, the characters will change as time goes on. A great GM can provide encounters that challenge how a PC and a player view some aspect of your campaign.

leading to more enlightened and capable views as the PCs progress through the campaign.

In an epic campaign, the party is going to need a lot of support. The party members have already met one supporter in the Departure. In the Initiation, the party meets more supporters. Often the best time to introduce these new allies is after a set-back. These new allies dust the party off and help them continue on their journey.

Caution, these new allies are part of the campaign. You plan on introducing them all along. If they come across as a *deus ex machina* then it will likely upset the party rather than be a positive emotional experience. Think about what allies might join the party later and drop hints and give information about them earlier in the campaign. Maybe the mentor from the Departure mentioned a few groups that might aid the party later.

The next step involves the hero or party being tempted to abandon or stray from their quest. In my role-playing worlds, I frequently offer the party opportunities to do things other than the main quest line. My players have come to recognize these for what they are, temptations to desert the quest. These temptations always come with consequences. In one campaign, the PCs received an item called the Disc of Worlds.

<insert Figure 3.3>

This is a picture of the Disc of Worlds

The Disc allowed the group to travel to another realm. The party knew that they needed to use the Disc to proceed with a major quest, but despite some hints from NPCs, the party was sidetracked several times. When they eventually used the Disc, the main quest was much more difficult because of their delay.

The next step is where the hero confronts the reason for his journey, facing his doubts and fears. This might be an adventure within the campaign where the hero or party gets a glimpse of what will happen if they fail either because they are ultimately defeated or because they abandon the quest. This is a good point for the party to suffer a setback and learn from the experience.

In the Hero's Journey, the next step is called Apotheosis. After confronting the reason for the journey, the characters gain a profound understanding of their purpose or skills.

The Initiation ends with the ultimate boon. The hero achieves the goal he set out to accomplish, fulfilling the call that inspired his journey in the first place. Perhaps the party defeats the dark lord, gain the crystal of wisdom, or learn how to stop the plagues affecting their homeland.

In a great campaign, the party is not done yet.

Return Steps

The hero succeeded in accomplishing the obvious goal. Now, he may be reluctant to return. Some successful stories and campaigns end at this point. Think about the victorious Conan sitting in his throne room.^{xxx} This might be a fine time to end the campaign.

This legitimate reluctance is the next step in the formal Hero's Journey. There has to be some inciting event that persuades the hero to return home.

Next is the magic flight. The hero has decided to take the treasure and return home, but even if the Big Bad Guy (or Gal) BBG has been eliminated there are still others who might covet the treasure or want to prevent the hero from returning home.

This is a great step to introduce the virtuous betrayal. Some ally or friend who has been extremely helpful now sees moral reasons for

not allowing the object of the quest to return to the home. This only works if you have set up the moral stance of the character before the betrayal. Maybe they asked the PCs if it was right to have such an object. Maybe they waxed eloquently about their moral code. You do not want to present the betrayal as a random event.

The reason this step is called the magic flight is that often in traditional stories the hero uses some mythical means of escaping the potential foes that he would not have had access prior to completion of the quest or adventure.

Allies and friends make an appearance in the next step. Generally this involves either helping the hero and his band get home or in better understanding the nature of the treasure gained during the quest and how to effectively use it.

Now, the hero crosses back into the mundane plane and heads home. This can be an actual magical transition in a fantasy story, or this can be the arrival back in the city or homeland that the hero left in the Departure.

The hero has changed. He grew, gained abilities, gained wisdom, and learned about himself. He might also have brought back some great boon to his people. The hero lives in two worlds now, the home he left and the world of adventure he lived in to complete the quest.

The final step in a classical Hero's Journey is the hero reconciling his two halves and learning to be at peace with himself and his worlds.

Truby's Addendum

John Truby takes the Hero's Journey and adds one critical aspect, the moral and character building journey that parallels the physical and spiritual journey.^{xxi} This is easier to do in a movie or

novel as the writer has total control over the characters. It is harder in a role-playing setting, but not impossible.

If you would like to add a moral aspect, I have found the key is ensuring that actions have consequences. If the party acts like a rogue band of “murder hoboes” then eventually the authorities are going to take a notice. Better than just being eventually caught is if someone takes an interest in a PC and suggests a way for him or her to redeem themselves.

Sometimes when the players are exposed to difficult situations based on their characters’ actions it causes the players to modify their approach to play and you see growth in the character.

Using Random Tables as a GMing Aid

My friend and former work colleague, Mike Shea, has published a series of books with the same theme, the use of random tables to both make things easier for the GM and to add some variety.^{xxxii} I am a big believer in using random tables to help keep your campaign fresh. We all need to be honest. None of us is an infinite source of new, creative ideas. If you play long enough, eventually you will start recycling ideas. If you are aware of it, you can work around it, but too often, the first person to know will be one of your players. You thought you were being clever, and then, suddenly, one of the PCs points at the serving girl and states loudly, “she is no mere serving girl! She is a priestess of Lochaniglan! Seize her!” You are shocked. They figured it out. How? Oh yeah. You used this exact same plot three years ago.

The whole hobby really started based on players and GMs using random dungeon generators. The original Advanced Dungeons and Dragons: Dungeon Master’s Guide^{xxxiii} had dozens of tables to help create random encounters and dungeons.

I use random tables in several ways. When developing the plot and subplots, I will often create some random plot lines using resources such as Egloff's book of random tables or similar reference^{xxxiv}. (There are hundreds of these resources available online, free of charge.)

When the Party does something wholly unexpected, and I need to flesh out an adventure, I will often turn to random encounters.

When the Party is traveling across country or in a large city, I use resources like Chaosium's Cities^{xxxv} to create encounters that both fit within the mythos of the world and are interesting and engaging.

It will take time to master everything in this chapter. You will make some mistakes. Embrace them. As long as you keep learning and you and your players are having fun, it is all good.

Check on Learning

Time to test your knowledge!

Please describe the differences between sessions, adventures, and campaigns.

Can an adventure take more than one session?

Which of the GM principles applies to the following situations?

Please explain why that particular principle applies.

- The GM keeps detailed notes on table decisions and frequently references them during play.
- The GM prepares a meal for the players for each session and frequently works the meal in the role-playing situation.
- The GM composes music for dramatic encounters in the campaign.

- One of the players is really into clothing and fashions. The GM makes a real effort to integrate clothing and fashion trends into the sessions.
- The GM uses tropes, but the motivation for the main villain was unlike anything that the players had ever experienced before.

Why is it important for the PCs to have a base of operations that is essentially peaceful and safe?

A popular science fiction series has the saying “in the future, there is only war.” What might make it difficult to create a blockbuster campaign around this concept? How would you work around that?

Principled Parties

Recruiting and Retaining Excellent Players

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This chapter provides general strategies and helpful hints for creating and maintaining fantastic gaming groups that are fun and rewarding for both the players and the Gamemaster. Part of that is knowing where to find and how to recruit players. The chapter covers how to screen potential players and what to do when players are not working out.

Chapter Objectives

- Learn where to find and then recruit excellent players
- Learn what motivates players to spend time with you in your imaginary world
- Learn to prevent issues within the Party and what to do when issues arise

Introduction

It is great fun to create worlds, to develop intricate plotlines and amazing NPCs, but you cannot play, you cannot be a GM without players. Role-playing campaigns are shared creative experiences. The best games occur when there is a healthy creative tension between the GM and the players.

The key ingredient is players, and as the GM one of your main functions is to find, recruit, and retain those players.

The good news is that most people have heard of role-playing, and many have tried and enjoyed it. It is easier to convince people to play than it was in the early days of RPGs.^{xxxvi} The bad news is that there is a lot of competition for players.

In this chapter we will cover where to find players and how to recruit them. One important caution, as a younger GM I took great pride in saying that I could run a campaign that anyone would enjoy and could work with any player.

That was pure hubris and is the wrong answer. We will cover the details of why that is the wrong answer later in the chapter.

We will start by putting the Petersen principle front and center. *Your goal as a GM is to create and maintain a playing group that is fun for the players and fun for you.*

The strategies and techniques are presented in the chapter in a linear fashion, but this is not a linear process.

We will start by looking at what good looks like.

What makes a gaming experience attractive?

This section could be an entire book by itself. There are three main motivations for players to game. ***Social connection*** is the most important. The players are choosing to interact live with the GM and the other players to get something that they cannot get from solo sessions and video games. Collaboration and sense of community are keys to live RPG sessions.^{xxxvii} So, why not card or board games? What is special about an RPG? ***Escapism and immersion*** are key factors for making a gaming experience attractive. The players get to embody a character, shaping their personality, backstory, and actions within the game world.^{xxxviii} The players escape the mundane world of work, study, and real-world responsibilities for duration of the session. Finally, ***intellectual challenge and self-improvement*** motivate many

players. RPGs provide the players with complex problems to solve, requiring strategic thinking, planning, and resource management. The game can also provide a safe environment to explore different ways of handling situations and making decisions. This can be particularly beneficial for developing skills like resilience and adaptability as players learn to cope with unexpected twists and turns in the story.^{xxxix}

I want to highlight this last reason. We will spend some time in chapter ZZZ talking about non-gaming applications of role-playing, but I want to emphasize what a positive influence RPGs can be on a player. I raised three gamer children. The kids played in my RPG campaigns since the time they were four years old. My son later became a US Marine Corps Lance Corporal and led a squad in the thick of fighting in Kandahar, Afghanistan. He told me that the lessons he learned around the gaming table saved his life and the lives of his squad on dozens of occasions in combat.^{xl} Fighting monsters, solving puzzles, and negotiating with difficult NPCs was more than fun. It taught my son life skills that literally saved lives later.

Taking the players' motivations for playing one at a time, we can come up with a good set of criteria for an attractive gaming experience.

Positive social connection implies that the players should be in a safe, mutually supportive environment. It means that the GM and the players should support an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Escapism and immersion means that the GM should create an adventure that feels real and has enough detail that the players can suspend disbelief. This is a combination of Stafford and Perrin principles. The adventure should have a sense of wonder about it, and the setting and the game play should be consistent and logical.

Intellectual challenge and self-improvement means expanding the GM's and the players' apertures on knowledge and challenges. As a GM, you can find yourself research astrophysics, plate tectonics, and calligraphic styles. One of the draws to George RR Martin's *Fire and Ice* series is his realistic and detailed look at heraldry.^{xli} Like Steve Perrin, one of the co-creators of RuneQuest, I spent some time as a young man in the Society of Creative Anachronism. The Society puts an emphasis on medieval knowledge including heraldry, and I have used those skills to good use in my campaigns, and players notice when things like crests and emblems are used consistently, and the players are able to glean information from a brief description of some banners and shields. "Ah! Phineas, those troops have markings and emblems indicating that they are from the House of Leng from the Northern Reaches. What would they be doing here?" A great reference as a starting point for broad medieval, technical knowledge is the SCA's Known World Handbook.^{xlii}

Understanding player wants and needs

In the last section, we described common elements that make a gaming environment pleasant for everyone. In this section, we will briefly touch on individual player wants and needs. In chapter three, we described players as four archetypes: bards, historians, warriors, and jesters. As a GM it is important to understand what your players are looking for in your sessions and campaign and do your best to meet those needs. The bard players are going to want a chance to roleplay with a capital "R." Historians are going to need you to supply some legend and lore along in the session. Warriors want to fight things and prove their mettle, and the jesters just need a chance to cut loose with their friends and joke around a bit.

As a GM, you can get this information through discussions, questionnaires, carefully watching the players interact during

play, and by asking the players directly what their desires are. I use all four methods. As mentioned previously, even after GMing for over 45 years, I still end every session asking for the players' feedback on what went well, and what they would like to see more and less of in upcoming sessions.

The three body problem (player dynamics)

As the name of this section implies, it is not always going to be possible to either accurately plan for or accommodate every player's needs at every session. You should do the best you can, but in an imperfect, human world, sometimes players are going to be disappointed. Feeling a little disappointed is different than feeling murderously angry towards another player. We will talk about dealing with significant issues and problem players later in this chapter.

Discretion is the better part of valor, and the best way to avoid large issues between players during sessions is by picking players that are compatible to be part of your campaign.

Before you can screen players, you need to find potential players.

Sources of players

Many of you started your role-playing while in school. There was a ready source of potential players all around you. If you are still in school, enjoy that time. One of my best gaming experiences was being a GM for my players while doing my graduate work at MIT.

Once you leave school and you must navigate the responsibilities of work, family, and other societal requirements, it can become more challenging to find players. There are two major sources for finding players, *on-line* and at *physical locations*.

On-line sources include social media sites, sites dedicated to gaming, and on-line ads. Some general discussion sites such as:

Discord, MeetUp, Reddit, and Facebook have dedicated groups, subgroups, and discussions with the main purpose of linking up players and GMs. If you are a regular on one of these sites then the chances are that you might have a lot in common with the potential players you are trying to recruit.

Some sites dedicated to games and gaming might have discussion boards, articles, BLOGs, or other areas that cater to GMs trying to find players. The portions of the sites dedicated to specific games can be a fertile area for finding players.

There are thousands of news sites on the Internet. The ones that are focused on a particular area or region often have an ads page. Many of these are free if you are not trying to sell something.

For the past 30+ years, the on-line sources have been my mainstay for finding players for my face to face sessions.

If you are looking for on-line players, the Internet is even more likely to be your best source to find players.

Physical locations can still be a good source for finding players. Your Friendly Local Gaming Shop (FLGS) might have a bulleting board where you can post “GM looking” or similar things. Libraries, churches, and other physical gathering locations frequently have public use bulleting boards.

Some of you are regular gaming convention attendees. You can find potential players at local or even national level gaming conventions. I have met many collaborators and gamers at conventions.

Screening potential players

“The only thing worse than wanting to play and not having players is playing with the wrong players” – Exasperated GM, 1994

It is extremely helpful to screen players when you recruit, and sometimes it is best to have help screening. We all have our blind spots, and you might miss a red flag that another player or friend might see. It is better to sever the tie with a potential new player early on if they are going to be a potential problem.

Screening can take place in phases. The phases are prior to meeting the group, meeting the group, and probationary gaming.

Prior to meeting the group might be a phone call, a video call, or meeting for lunch or dinner. It is useful to have specific criteria going into that first meeting. Here are some examples of criteria.

- What type of role-player (bard, historian, warrior, or jester) is the player and does that fit with your GM style?
- What elements do they enjoy in a session (puzzles, role-playing encounters, combat encounters, traps, mysteries) and is that a good fit with the Party?
- Are there any red lines (allergies, debilitating personality issues)?
- And, while very subjective, are they fun to be around?

If the prospective player makes it through that first in-depth meeting, it is often useful to have him or her meet a small number of the gaming group in a non-gaming session. A group lunch or dinner or a non-gaming activity provide great chances to interact with the other players and for those players to get a feel for the recruit. The same criteria that you used for the preliminary meeting are useful here too. It is a good practice to assign each gamer one or two of the areas to evaluate during the meeting.

Then, get together either live or virtually with the gamers and get their honest opinions.

Sometimes you can safely welcome the new recruit to the Party if they passed both screenings. For a variety of reasons, it is

beneficial to bring the player into the Party on a probationary status. A good technique is have the player take on the role of a henchperson or Party helper that is normally a Non-player Character (NPC). This lets the group see the new player in action, and it also gives the new player an orientation to your GMing style and world. It helps the new player determine what would be the best role for him or her in the Party if they become a permanent member.

On-line vs in person

Some standards of behavior are the same for on-line vs in person, and some are different.

The common elements are: being reasonably on time for sessions, being actively engaged in the game, treating the other players and the GM with respect and compassion, and avoiding disruptive behaviors.

In person, you also want the player to be respectful of others' persons and property and to have acceptable personal hygiene.

The on-line/virtual players have a higher risk of doing other things than engaging in the session. Some players are better at hiding this than others. It is not the role of the GM to try to catch players who are distracted. Unless it is disruptive to the group, you can have a fairly high tolerance for outside activities while gaming.

Generally, a private word to the distracted player sometime between sessions is enough to bring the player's behavior into line.

Redaction, dealing with issues before implosion

Sometimes players leave campaigns and groups. That is a part of life and gaming.

The key is to recognize the situation early on and deal with it. Some times are predictable, and the GM can gracefully arrange for

the player departure or the campaign to end. Some things occur unexpectedly. Still, they need to be dealt with quickly and effectively.

Real-world situations can be the cause for the player to leave. Players or the GM might move. There can be changes in social or life status. For example, the players might all graduate from college. That is a good time to end the campaign. If you have a married couple playing in your campaign and they get a divorce, it is probably best to have both players leave your campaign. (You do not want to “play favorites” or bring the outside hostility to your gaming table. I might have learned from a bad call in the past on this particular issue. Maybe.) There maybe real-world crises and challenges. A player might have to move and take care of sick parents. A spouse can become terribly ill and require constant care. A player can go bankrupt, or there could be any one of a million other, legitimate, real-world challenges that affect the gaming table.

There are also issues surrounding personality and in-game actions that might necessitate removing a player. I collectively label these circumstances as “She took a bad, bad turn.”^{xliii} Often these changes in the player behavior are influenced by non-gaming events, but, while you can be a compassionate GM, you need to make a realistic call about how the problem player is affecting the rest of the players and you. It could be that the player starts to make the other players uncomfortable. The player’s sudden interest in real-world necromancy, joining a cult, or becoming involved in white collar crime are all examples of changes that could make play difficult. The player could become disruptive or a bully. Even if the player has been in the campaign for years, it does not change the fact that this is not appropriate and might be causing unneeded stress for the GM and the other players.

Occasionally, the player becomes an unsafe person. This could be physically or emotionally unsafe.

It does not matter why. What matters is that you as the GM need to take a direct action to remove the player from the group.

So, how do you handle it?

First, you need to act swiftly. Bad news does not get better over time, and a bad player's actions can affect the whole group and ruin the campaign for everyone. Once you realize what is going on, you need to take swift action.

The meeting or discussion should be private. The player's bad actions or personal situation should be treated discretely and privately. After the departure, just inform the group that so and so has left the group. Do not go into the reasons. Do not be a gossip. Most of the members will figure it out or already know. Morale in the group will go up.

You should handle the removal professionally and definitely. Make it clear why you are asking the person to leave and absolutely ensure that he or she knows that this is not negotiable. You are defending your group.

Occasionally, you might need to take a hiatus from play for a period to prevent the bad actor from showing up uninvited.

While difficult to let a player go, if it is for the right reasons, it is a necessity.

Tolerance versus terrible

Tolerance and acceptance are good things. Being tolerant of unsafe behaviors, bullying, or purposely disruptive behavior is a bad thing. If you privately talk to the player about his or her actions and they modify their behavior, all is well. If they persist then you need to take action. It is not intolerant, it is leadership.

Check on learning

Time to test your knowledge.

List three places you have access to potentially recruit excellent players.

Describe what the phrases social connection, escapism and immersion, and intellectual challenge and self-improvement mean and some things that you can do as a GM to motivate players using these concepts.

Think of the saying, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” How does screening potential players fit with the saying?

How are some ways you could determine that a player is making the other players feel unsafe or uncomfortable?

Principled World Building

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This chapter describes two techniques for world building, bottoms-up and top-down. The chapter is full of helpful hints and advice based on the author’s 45+ years of world building experience.

Chapter Objectives

- Understanding the purpose of world building
- Understand bottoms-up world building

- Understand top-down world building
- Learn some techniques for organizing your world building assets

Introduction

The term world building covers every activity involved in creating the environment where your games and stories take place. Some of the great writers and game designers created worlds that influence us for years after playing in or reading about the settings.

A well designed world is a critical part of conducting a memorable campaign.

There is a lot to cover in this chapter and do not be discouraged if you have to refer back to its sections on a regular basis. (When you see a particularly useful section, bookmark it either physically or virtually.) This chapter has some repetition in it. That is intentional. Garvin's law says that you need to hear a new fact six times before you internalize it.^{xliv}

Throughout this chapter, the terms player, PC, and Party are intricately connected. The players' interests are a combination of what their PCs' interests are plus the areas that the players are interested in as individuals that might only be tangentially related to what their PCs might be interested in.

For example, one of my players, we will call him Kel, has a special interest in fabrics and fashions. His PC would not necessarily have any interest in those areas. That said, I spend some time before every session working out the fashions, colors and fabrics that the Party will see in the upcoming adventure. Interestingly, the rest of the players have taken an interest based on Kel's questions. So, if Kel does not ask about it, now, one of the other players will. It has

motivated me to become much more interested in and knowledgeable about these topics.

Party interests are the sum of PC interests, and like PC interests, Party interests are a subset of the collective players' interests.

We are going to cover two broad methods for world creation, bottoms-up and top-down. *Back when I first started conducting seminars on world creation at MIT, those terms were not widely used. Now, they are terms of art.* I did not invent the Internet, but I may have been responsible for coining those terms.

Applying the Principles

All the principles apply to world building. Think of the first three principles, the Stafford, Perrin, and Petersen, as being the spokes on a wheel. If you want your wheel to roll well, the spokes need to be in balance. It is the same with world building. The Stafford, Perrin, and Petersen principles need to be in balance.

The Stafford principle is all about creating a sense of wonder, of creating something unique. When you ask why would a player choose to be part of your campaign rather than another GM's, the answer often comes down to your application of the Stafford principle. Think about your application of the Stafford principle as being on a spectrum from zero to one. Zero is our present day world. One is so wildly fantastic, creative, and different that you can scarcely imagine it. The closer you are to zero in your world building, the more intuitive and understandable the world will be. It is very easy for a player to suspend disbelief at zero. The more you increase the unique aspects, the further you travel from the real world the players are used to, the more interesting the world becomes, but it also becomes harder to understand, harder for the players to suspend disbelief. If you think about your favorite settings, your all time favorite worlds, many of them are likely to be fairly close to the real world with a few exceptions. Every GM

has to decide what the right level is for the GM and his or her players.

The Perrin principle brings a sense of science and engineering to the world building process. It imposes rules and consistency. Ultimately, this makes it easier for the players to suspend disbelief. As a GM this might motivate you to learn about cosmology, astrophysics, and plate tectonics among other topics. There are some useful references in the bibliography for the aspiring world builder. I have used every one of the references in the bibliography at one time or another in GMing.

The Petersen principle drives us to creating worlds that are fun. The world is fun to run with enough challenges and room for creativity while not being so dark as to be utterly dire and oppressive. The Petersen principle is named after Sandy Petersen, one of the core members of the Chaosium team. Sandy tells a story that illustrates the Petersen principle in world building.^{xlv} Sandy was running a campaign set in an Africa like part of the gaming world. It had most everything you could want in an African-esque setting, but Sandy was adamant that his world did not have elephants. Of course, players being players, they pestered poor Sandy unmercifully. "Where are the elephants?" "We spend the day looking for evidence of elephants." And so on. Finally, because Sandy is "Mr. Fun," he relented and created a special adventure, "the Last Longnose," where the PCs met a baby elephant who was seeking a way to join the rest of the elephants ("long noses") in the spirit plane. The party had to figure out how to get the elephant to the portal, how to open the portal, and how to protect the elephant in getting from point A to point B. Fun was had by all.

The principles need to be in balance like the spokes on a wheel. If the Perrin principle is heavily used and you are light on the Stafford and Petersen principles then you are going to create an

unimaginative, boring place that is neither more interesting or engaging than a real-life simulation. If the Stafford principle is focused out of proportion to the other principles, you get a wildly imaginative, but unpredictable and ultimately unplayable world. (Just say no to drugs, kids.) If the Petersen principle dominates, the Party can have lots of fun, but you run the risk of large amounts of inconsistency, and there is not the special draw that comes from appropriate application of the Stafford principle.

Purpose

The goal in world building is for the GM to create a world where the players can suspend disbelief and everyone can have an *enjoyable time playing*.

At its core, suspension of disbelief is an unspoken agreement the players make with the GM. The players agree to temporarily set aside their skepticism about unrealistic elements in order to enjoy the game. In return, the GM agrees to maintain a consistent and believable world within its own established rules.

Ultimately, suspension of disbelief is the mental magic trick that allows us to become emotionally invested in fictional worlds, whether we are just visiting them through the pages of a book or actively shaping them with dice and friends.

The condition for everyone to have an enjoyable time playing is not optional. The GM needs to be careful to select elements to include in his world (and to leave out elements in his world) to maximize his and the players' enjoyment.

Cost vs benefit

World building is both one of the most direct creative efforts that you can make, and it can also take a tremendous amount of time and emotional energy. Before you embark on the journey, you should think about why you are world building and what the

costs of that effort are. One of my friends, LtCol(retired) Richard Oarr used to ask, “if you died and went to hell, would you know it?” It is humorous, but it makes an important point. It is easy for creative efforts to become obsessions if you are not careful. You do not want to get so wrapped up in your world building that it inappropriately takes away from your time doing other, equally worthwhile things.

The first question to ask is why do you want to world build? Depending on the reason for doing it, your cost benefit balance is different.

Maybe you are trying to create a lasting work of art. It could be for you alone or it could be for others. With a work of art, you are going to be most concerned with the presentation and the feeling that it leaves you or the audience with. Gregg Stafford wrote some wonderful poems and short stories that were explorations in his role as a shaman. They were beautifully written. They did not have to be completely logically consistent, and they could contain remarkable imagery that would be hard to reproduce in a mass market product.

Maybe you are creating a palette for marketable endeavors. This is a different situation. In this case, the world you produce needs to be approachable and understandable. The reader and potential co-creator must see the hooks to produce his or her own work based on your world. The flowery and the poetic must give way to the practical and accessible. In this case, less is more. You want to leave gaps for the user to insert his or her own material. The formatting is often as important as the content.

You might create a world as a cathartic expression of creativity, because you must. If you talk deeply with very creative professionals, writers, composers, artists, and others, they will often say, “I create because I must.” All of us have a creative spark

inside of us that needs some form of expression. The nature of the expression can vary. If you are creating for this reason, it is often deeply personal. Sometimes it involves emotions that are too hard to just put into words. World building can be a method of expressing feelings that could not be share otherwise. Many of my musical composition and gaming adventures have been acts of catharsis for me. Interestingly, some of my most popular and enduring fan favorite compositions. One of them, “the Night cannot hold You” was a Classical piece composed in a single night after learning about the death of a dear friend.^{xlvi}

So, how do you measure the balance?

The first thing to ask is how much is your time worth and how much time are you spending doing world building? If you are trying to create a publishable world for monetary gain then you need to at least estimate how much money you are spending in terms of your time. If you are looking to create the “great work” that will be your legacy in this world then you might be willing to spend a lot more time on it. You should always consider the law of diminishing returns. (See figure 5.1.)

<Insert Figure 5.1>

Figure showing the diminishing return curve

Lavishing more and more time, talent, and treasure on something gives you smaller and smaller returns on your investment if you continue long enough. Sometimes engineers call this “polishing the diamond” and historians call this “gilding the lily.” What it means is that you have probably reached the point where more work on your project will not improve it in a measurable way.

Something you that you need to consider is how much do you care about the opinion and acceptance of others? As a creative producer, you will get critiques by others, and not all of them are

constructive. This is especially true on the internet.^{xlvi} Negative feedback should not stop you, but you need to be aware that there are people (and even bots and bad actors) that will seek to tear you down when you produce, share, and publish creative works. You should prepare yourself mentally for receiving the criticism. The key is maintaining a sense of balance. Even if phrased in hurtful ways, some negative criticism may have useful elements of truth in it. Do not assume that every criticism is accurate. You should carefully consider the input. One way I find helpful is using AI to filter remarks. Just take the entire comment, feed it into your favorite AI chat program and ask, “what are the key points and constructive aspects of this comment?”

Finally, think about how many resources are you willing to invest. It is best to set boundaries before investing. It might be that you will only allow yourself to spend 200 hours on a project, or maybe you give yourself five months of real-time to complete something. Whatever your reasonable limit is, try your best to stay under the constraint. At the very least, when you have reached the limit, stop working on the project for a bit, and then come back to it when you are fresh and see if it is worth continuing, or maybe you need to wrap it up and give to a friend or colleague to review your work and give you some feedback. (We will cover feedback towards the end of this chapter.)

Let me tell a story as a way of demonstrating what it means to spend more effort than is prudent. I love props, and back when I was a GM for an MIT group, we were playing twice a week. I enjoy doing calligraphy. I created a 24”x36” scroll on vellum that contained six different colors of inks using four different nibs on my pens. The scroll had maps embedded in the flourishes, ornaments, and swirls. There were encrypted messages and riddles. It was my intent that this one scroll provide information to the Party for the next six months of real-world play time. I spent at

least 80 hours working on the scroll over the course of a couple of months. It was an act of love. If you had seen the scroll, you might have wept with joy. The players were significantly less impressed than I would have hoped. In fact, ten minutes after presenting the scroll, some pizzas showed up. One of the players quickly pointed out that they did not want to stain the tablecloths with the greasy pizza, and he quickly pulled out the scroll to put under the sopping, grease laden pizzas.

Then, I wept.

The point of this (now) humorous story is that despite my best intentions the amount of time, talent, and treasure I lavished on the scroll far exceeded its value to the players and to the campaign.

If you are not deliberate about how you spend your time and why, you might find yourself in a similar situation.

You have been warned. :-D

Bottoms-Up world creation

We will parametrically define the bottoms-up method. Bottoms-up is the most common method in practice of creating a role-playing world. It is a natural outgrowth of campaigns. Of the two methods, it is the “easiest.” Easiest is in quotes because if done thoroughly, it can still take a significant amount of time and effort. The method produces results that are potentially inconsistent. If you have ever used a “Pre-Fab” campaign (e.g., Ravenloft, Dark Sun, EarthDawn, etc.) you used a bottoms-up approach.

So, what is the bottoms-up method?

Overview of the bottoms-up method

I call it the concentric circle world design method because you are building the world on a need-to-know basis. See figure 5.2.

<Insert Figure 5.2>

Figure shows the concentric circles, PC area of influence, area of concern, and the areas that the GM develops enveloping the first two areas

In your world, the PCs have a certain area that they can exercise direct control over. Exercise control means that they can relatively easily influence what happens there. They are concerned about a broader area that they think about, but they cannot control directly. In a bottoms-up world design, the GM develops plots, NPCs, and details in an area that is slightly larger than the area of the PCs' concern. Note in the diagram that some areas are more developed than others. Use the Pareto principle^{xlvi} (a business principle) when determining where to spend your time, talent, and treasure in world design. This is also called the "80/20 rule." You should spend at least 80% of your time developing and fleshing out the areas where the Party will be spending 80% of its time.

What are the advantages of the bottoms-up method?

Advantages

The development of the campaign is natural. The World grows and matures as the campaign grows and matures. The GM can directly see which areas of the world need more development based on the actions of the characters.

The players are an intimate part of the world creation process. The actions of the PCs affect the part of the world "seen" by the characters; so, the players help define the world by determining what needs more detail and what does not. For example, if the players are very concerned about clothing styles in the world, the GM is likely to spend more time in that area, but the referee might

be able to get by with a minimal description or examination of artistic styles or religious customs.

The referee does not devote "wasted" time in world development. Because the world is shaped based on the characters' sphere of influence, the referee knows that most of the details he creates will be useful to the players.

From a Petersen principle standpoint, your players will help guide you to areas that they enjoy.

What are some shortfalls of the method?

Disadvantages

The GM has less control in the world design than in Top-Down world creation. The additional creative control you give to the players directly decreases the creative fiat that the GM has.

There is a large potential for inconsistency in the world creation. This is especially true when the GM is mixing and matching "modules" into his campaign. Since many of the details in the world are being created more or less ad hoc, some of the details may be inconsistent with each other.

The GM takes a big risk of being caught "off-guard" if the players ask questions about details the referee did not anticipate or if the characters travel to some area of the world which has not been examined in advance by the referee. Tom was a friend of mine at West Point, and he was also an early GM. Tom told the story of how his Party at the time had just finished a long, hard dungeon delve, and Tom wanted to move them quickly on to the next portion of the adventure. To facilitate this, Tom had placed a one-use item in the "boss room" of the dungeon. It was a device that would teleport the entire Party the exact distance needed to reach the next major area in the adventure. Ominously, the party leader asked Tom, "exactly how far can this teleport the party?" Tom

replied initially that it was just far enough to go to the next part of the adventure, but the party leader persisted and asked the distance. Tom told him, and then, the Party said, "Tom, we want to go north to where the ice bears live!" Apparently, Tom had thrown in some barbarians from the northern wastes as flavor only a few sessions before, and that minor detail stuck with the players.

Tom was caught completely flat-footed and had to stop the session prematurely.

The relations between portions of the world can be artificial. For example, if the referee decides to use both portions of Krynn and Arkham in his campaign, the connections between the two areas may be contrived at best.

Bottoms-up process

The process is summarized in Figure 5.3.

<Insert Figure 5.3>

The figure outlines the process for bottoms-up world creation.

We will discuss each of these steps. The first step is to *gather your information for creating the world*. This can be modules, existing plotlines and NPCs, your notes on PC areas of interest, or any resource that will help you define the world that allows the players to suspend disbelief and all of you to have fun playing in the world.

Then, you will want to *define the key elements*. This includes both key groups (think of these as intelligent actors) and key regions. In the bottoms-up method, we always structure our analysis and characterization in terms of what we need to further the plot and address the PCs' area of interest. What do you as the GM need to define and understand in order to advance the plot. What aspects of the region are important for the Party to understand and

interact with? What is the Party interested in? What is already defined in your resources, and what needs to be bolstered? Think about the Stafford principle during this step. What would make the world and the adventures there unique and interesting? Are those aspects already defined in your resources, or do you need to create or expand them?

As you compile and integrate your resources into a consistent world, you will *develop relationships between the key elements*. Are the groups in the modules connected? If so, what is the connection? How is their relationship characterized? What are the dynamics? What are the limits? How are the regions connected? How will the Party travel from one region to another? Will the Party need to prepare or have special equipment to traverse or survive in the regions? Is there key information that would be useful for the Party to know? How can the Party obtain this information? The Perrin principle is key here. You want to ensure that the connections are logical, consistent, and lead to predictable results.

As we saw in Figure 5.2, you will be *developing the information one level past player interest*. Look for directions and patterns in the Party's actions and inquiries. Pay close attention to what questions the players are interested in. The major plot threads helps guide some of that direction. To be transparent, the GM has a lot of influence on which direction the Party takes. As the GM, you provide much of the information about your world to the players.

One important note, you are not compelled to copy and use the information verbatim from published sources directly in your world. It is important that you highlight key differences to your players. You do not have to give specifics, but broadly the players should know that you are not using all of the intelligent species,

the newest items, and the chicest musters from the latest supplements.

During the process, it is more effective to use “open ended” NPC motivations. Open-ended motivations are things that can go on indefinitely like gathering wealth or knowledge, gaining power, or trying to improve the lives of those around you. Close ended motivations involved ends and aims that can be reached such as find your keys, accumulate fifty dollars, or collect twelve rocks. Open-ended motivations allow you as the GM to react as the players change aspects of the world through their PC actions. We will spend a whole chapter discussing NPCs and useful tricks for developing and running them.

The Perrin principle guides us to be consistent. As you flesh out your regions, the connections between regions, and the relationships between NPCs, frequently go back and do a logic check to ensure that those connections make sense in light of the whole world you are creating. Sometimes a relatively minor detail can unravel another key fact.

In wrapping up your preparations, you will want to *define key group motivations*. Published modules are often very good about describing what specific NPCs want or will do in a particular encounter, but often you will have to provide or at least embellish what the groups’ motivations are. Ask yourself why is the group operating in the region? What would make them leave? Are there ways that the Party could operate in a constructive, positive way with the group?

Finally, shamelessly place Maguffins, or temping plot treats that will help motivate your Party to undertake particular missions and adventures.

Helpful hints

This section has a few helpful hints for the bottoms-up method.

You should be willing to discard material. It could be that the material no longer makes any sense. It could be because you simply do not need that information anymore. It could be because the material will make someone in the group uncomfortable, or for any of a myriad of reasons. You should not try to keep and integrate everything. The more streamlined your world is, the easier it will be to remember the key facts and run a tight, consistent adventure.

We have talked about this previously, but it is worth emphasizing. You will need to supplement light material and weak motivations. If you think that it is likely that a player will ask a question about a particular event, area, or NPC and your material is lacking in this area then you need to supplement it. If you have a significant NPC, but you have no idea what his or her motivations are then you need to develop them.

If you are not careful, this easily becomes a rabbit hole without end. Use the Pareto principle, if you realistically think that there is an 80% chance that a player will ask about the specific area at the next session then you need to prepare. If it is much less likely or the question will not come up for several sessions then there is not pressing need to develop the answer now.

Do not be afraid to ad lib, but if you want to be consistent over the mid-term, you will need to write down decisions and ad libs. It is also useful to keep a good campaign journal. By the by, the GM can be the person who maintains the journal, but a player can often be persuaded to keep the journal, and it has the advantage of being done from a player perspective.

One of the key benefits of the bottoms-up method is that it is player driven. To capitalize on that you will need to actively solicit and accept suggestions from the players.

Ensure that you are create interesting characters and plot lines. In chapter seven, you talked about how to create interesting plot lines, and we will cover interesting NPCs in more detail in the next chapter.

Now that you have a good grasp of the bottoms-up method, we can move onto the top-down world creation method.

(Question for Ed., should I include an example of bottoms-up creation here? For my seminars, I generally give an example.)

Top-down world creation

Top-down world creation or the deliberate world creation method starts with the cosmology and ends with the size, shape, and color of the sand grains in the hobbit princess' sandals. The first thing to note is that top-down world creation is time consuming. It can be difficult. All that said, it is also incredibly rewarding. It creates a very consistent world, but it is generally not for a first-time GM.

This is the “calculus textbook” approach to world creation. You start with the basics, and every portion added is logically consistent and flows from earlier decisions.

Before we get into the specifics, we will look at some of the advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

The referee has total control over the development of the world. Something motivated you to create the world using the top-down method. Often this is driven by the desire to create something that uniquely matches your view of what the world should be like. This gives you the opportunity to up your Stafford principle level. You can be wildly creative.

You get bonus points for application of the Perrin principle too. Just as the bottoms-up world can be logically inconsistent, the top-

down world is created to be logically consistent. (More accurately, the world is as logically consistent as the GM can imagine.)

The GM runs little risk of being caught off-guard with respect to details or background in the campaign. This is huge. It frees you as a GM to run sessions with less preparation and ad lib more freely.

As a creative person, top-down world creations is one of the most direct creative processes possible. When you are finished, your world will be a direct reflection of your creative energies.

Disadvantages

There are several *potential* disadvantages. Forewarned is forearmed. By recognizing these possible disadvantages, you can mitigate them.

The players have less input in the creation of the world. Application of the Petersen principle shifts from the world creation process to developing adventures and running sessions.

The process is very time consuming. Always keep the cost vs benefit balance in mind.

Finally, if the campaign is not a long one, the referee runs the risk of spending large amounts of time on detail which the players will never directly experience.

Top-down process

If this is your first top-down world building effort then I recommend you follow the steps relatively closely. If you are an old hand then just use the steps and descriptions as a rough guide.

Note that I am presenting these steps in a linear fashion, but world building is not an inherently linear process. My advice is initially go through the steps in order, leaving notes at each step, and not

necessarily completing each step. Then, go back through the steps and firm up the details once you have an idea of what the whole will look like.

(Originally when I developed the course at MIT, I published an outline for deliberate world creation that you can find here:

<https://zhalindor.com/wcreate.pdf>)

The first step is to ***select a gaming system***. Then, you can focus on the world building rather than game mechanics. Pick a game that has comfortable, feel, workable mechanics that fit your general world view.

Is it possible to develop a game and build a world? Sure. Mark Rogers and I published Khymir in 2006^{xlix} and worked both the gaming world and the gaming rules in parallel. That was not our first run at either designing a game or building a world.

Next, you want to ***determine the scope of your world***. This is a very important step to avoid the trap of never finishing. Once you have fleshed out the essentials for your original scope, it is time to stop.

What factors influence the size? (While I am talking about the world as if it is a planet, these same steps and considerations apply to developing a space opera, planar travel, or many other world types.) If you and your players like grand quests you will want a larger world. If you love and need lots of details then you will have to restrict the size. If you favor exploration and travel then the world will expand. If your world has a higher tech level then the size of your world will tend to increase.

There is a balance. As you are determining the scope of the world, think about these conflicting aspects. The scope of your world feeds back to what the Party can do later. If you decide for your first world to limit it to a single encampment on an isolated world,

at least initially, there will be limited exploration. (Later you could use a bottoms-up approach to expand the world to encompass nearby star systems, and eventually, your world could become an interstellar empire.)

The third step is to *develop the cosmology*. This is where you get to determine what is myth vs what is reality. I follow the general rule that all mythology says something about the reality of the world. There are three fundamental questions that your world needs to have an answer for your PCs. How was the world created? Why is the PC here, or what is the purpose of the PC's life? What happens when the PC dies?

Part of the cosmology is determining what are the physical laws? Does magic or psionics in your world? How (roughly) do they operate?

Time for an expert tip. All great worlds have a secret embedded in them. For example, George RR Martin's magnum opus, the world of Westeros has a secret. He revealed this at OddCon 2008¹. The comet brings magic to Westeros. When the comet is close, magical things become possible and magical beings prosper. Dragons can be born. White walkers and shambling dead can venture in force, and mighty spells can be cast.

That fact, that secret, affects every aspect of the world, the stories, and the characters, but none of them are aware of it.

This is the step where you should figure out what your world's secret is.

In applying the Stafford principle, remember that the weirder you make your setting, the potentially more interesting it will be, but it will potentially be more difficult for the players to envision.

One note, science and religion can coexist peacefully in your world. Stephen Jay Gould wrote a wonderful book called Rocks of

Ages^{li} that explains that science covers the empirical realm: what the universe is made of (fact) and why it works the way it does (theory) while religion answers questions about ultimate meaning and moral value. According to Gould, these two domains are distinct and do not overlap. In my own gaming world, the gods are real and interact through rituals and magic with the mortal inhabitants, but science plays a significant role in keeping the world believable and logical. Players ranging from highly religious to sworn atheists have played in and enjoyed their time in my world. My paternal grandmother used to say, “macht Ihr kein Sorgen,” which roughly translated means do not cause trouble that you do not need to. Gould would argue that only religion can adequately answer the three fundamental questions. As a theoretical physics guy with the vitae to show it, science can only answer the fundamental questions by saying we cannot empirically prove a hypothesis, which to be honest is pretty unsatisfying.

The next step is to *develop the physical world(s)*. (We will focus on a single world for the rest of this section.) Make heavy, heavy use of the Perrin principle here. This is the time to use the Internet or break out books on the science of weather, plate tectonics, and physical geography. (There are accessible resources in the bibliography on some of these topics.) For your first few worlds, I highly recommend making the physics, chemistry, and astrophysics as close to Earth normal as you can. You can substantially change things like the size and shape of land masses, the size and location of large bodies of water, etc. But, try to use real physics and chemistry to describe the interactions between the mundane elements of your world.

Start by looking at the geography. Draw your oceans, your continents, your islands, and the rest of the world. Which way does the wind blow in various parts of the world? Why does it

blow that direction? What are the effects of the geography on the climate in various regions of the world?

Now it is time to apply the Stafford and Petersen principles. As you are creating your world, there are some special things that you want to develop. You are proud of those unique aspects. Do not bury them. Find ways of highlighting the peculiar features and exceptional areas of your world. Be deliberate about placing and then ensuring that your players get to see them.

The fifth step is to *populate the world with intelligent creatures*. Assign those species of intelligent creatures to general geographical areas. This is driven by the Stafford principle. What creature races do you want in your world? Where do you want them to live? Which ones do you want in close proximity to one another? You might feel that steps five and six are out of order, but you will tweak the next step to help support your placement of the intelligent creatures.

Step six is to *develop the eco-structure*. This is a critical step, and it is one that the players will eventually notice if you do not get it right. This step includes the food chain (energy cycle). It will determine where are the fertile/waste areas? When you are working through this put in the base of the chain first. Then, work your way up from the energy absorbing entities through the ones that consume them up through the chain to the predators, and at the top of the chain are the intelligent species.

From a Petersen principle standpoint, populate your world with some fun creatures, creatures that you would like to see in your world.

As with the geography, for the eco-structure ensure that you deliberately place your exotic/unique areas. You are proud of your world and your work. Show off a little bit.

As with the physical aspects of the geography, I recommend you stay close to Earth normal for this. On Earth, 99.97% of the energy for life comes from the Sun. (The .03% comes from geothermal energy.) Plants absorb sunlight, store the energy and convert carbon dioxide and water into oxygen and biological materials. Herbivores eat the plants, and then various predators and omnivores work up the food chain.

The biological systems in an enclave need not depend on conventional solar and carbon-based Adenosine Triphosphate (ATP) energy cycles, but introducing radical deviations increases your chances for logical inconsistencies.

If you want to add creatures that live off of some other energy source, add them sparingly. This is an area where you can start small and then build up as your and your players' comfort levels in the world increase.

Step seven is to *develop the cultures*. What is culture? In this book, culture is defined as a shared set of beliefs, behaviors, language, and expectations that govern personal conduct and interactions between members of the culture and people from other organizations.^{lii} A single intelligent species can have multiple cultures in your world. Conversely, a single culture can embrace multiple types of intelligent species. As the Party traverses your world, it is the cultures that will mediate the interactions with the NPCs. First, a culture has a place in world. This means that it has a defined geographic locations that can include multiple non-contiguous areas of the world. Place also means that the culture figures into the logic of and adventures set in your world. In other words, the cultures you develop should have a purpose, and that purpose should align with the reason you are building your world.

Time for an expert tip. If you are building your world just as a personal cathartic experience then feel free to include whatever elements you want in it. In fact, you can almost turn off the Perrin principle if your principle reason for creating the world is to vent. However, in the case that you are planning on *playing with other humans in your world* or *presenting it for public consumption*, please try to tamp down your personal political beliefs and potentially alienating viewpoints. Later in the chapter, we will talk about getting others to review and critique your world. During this step, it might be extremely useful to get someone who has opposing worldviews to do a logic check on your world. (It turns out that it is possible to disagree with you politically without being disagreeable.) Just knowing that someone with an alternative view is going to do a review of your world could be enough to help you filter your basest impulses.

Decide what races will be included in the culture. Cultures are products of intelligent races and cannot exist independently of living creatures.

Decide the key Items of interest for the culture. What are the valued resources? What are the subsistence patterns for the culture? Is it populated by hunter/gatherers? Is the culture supported by fixed agriculture, e.g., farming or fishing? Does the culture rely solely on trade and barter to survive? What are the religions that are common in the culture? Are there renegade or outlawed religions? Is there a prevalent, consistent tech level for the culture? What are the accepted and existing social structures? Who governs? Who selected them? How do they maintain power? Why do the other members of the culture tolerate their control? What are the common symbols and accepted ideals in the culture? What is the common language? Are there written as well as spoken forms? What are the culture's views on education? Is the rule of law commonly accepted? Are there casts or levels of

protection in the culture? Is everyone equal under the law, or are some more equal than others? Given the resources of the culture, what are some common forms of trade and currency?

Step eight is to *tie the cultures together*. What kinds of things bind cultures or at least force them to interact in interesting ways? A critical one is resource competition. If you have two hunter/gatherer cultures that both hunt large herbivores then there would be resources competition. If both cultures live along the same river that is the main source of fresh water for both groups then there is potential for competition over the water.

The laws of economics tell us that most of the time organizations can benefit from trade, even if one of the groups is better at everything. It is the economic law of comparative advantage.^{liii}

One of the areas that a lot of world builders get wrong is the effect of reproduction rates. Reproduction rates drive a lot of what happens within and between cultures. When there is a vast, unsettled, fertile world, the culture may benefit from the edict “be fruitful and multiply.” That same edict could lead to conflict in a severely overpopulated, under-resourced world. In many Tolkienesque worlds you have humans (moderate reproduction rates), elves with very limited reproduction rates, dwarves who are similar to the elves, and hobbits or halflings that reproduce like bunnies. The Perrin principle tells us that after a very short period of time there would be no elves or dwarves, and the humans would be leading a slow march to extinction at the hands of voracious (evil) halflings.

You need to justify your world's population balance. This means prioritizing the Perrin principle—that the ecosystem must make sense—over the Stafford principle of adding races just because they're cool, or the Petersen principle of adding them just for fun.

Of course, growing populations can lead to the next area of cultural interaction.

Conflicts are vital for interesting adventures. Cultures living in loving harmony are nice places to inhabit, but they make for boring role-playing. We talked about this in chapter seven. Conflict in gaming is like spices in cooking. The right amount makes for something memorable, interesting, and fun while too much ruins it. What kinds of things cause conflict between cultures? We already mentioned competition for vital resources. It could be politically driven based on differing philosophies or religious differences. It could be that like the Orks in Warhammer^{liv} the culture just advocates and prefers fighting. Conflict can arise over jealousy, perceived insults, greed, lust, or it could be for any of a nearly infinite reasons that we see for conflicts on Earth.

Over the course of GMing for over 45 years, I have learned that, while conflicts make campaigns interesting, it is very important to make sure there is some type of stable base for the party to work from. We talked about Ivy Shade in chapter seven. Every safe base does not have to be as nice as Ivy Shade, but it should be some place where the PCs and by extension the players can relax a bit. It is also a bonus if the Party is invested in the safety and well being of that area.

Step nine is to *create the nations*. A nation is a large group of intelligent beings who are associated with a *particular territory* and are *conscious of their unity*, often seeking or possessing their own government. A single culture can span several nations, and a single nation might encompass parts of multiple cultures. The key things to define for a nation are what are its geographic limits and what form of governance does that nation embrace?

You already did some of the nation building when you created the cultures, but here are a few things to consider when creating your nations. What are the social strata and how are they determined? What duties and responsibilities come with being part of a particular strata? This can range from extremes like the Society in *Red Rising*^{lv} to very benign as in the *Fisherman* series^{lvi}. What is the racial make up of the nation? Is there a common language or an official language? Are some languages reserved for specific uses? What is the history of the nation? How did it arise? Who are some of its well-known heroes? Are certain religions practiced? Are some legal and some illegal? Who are the current, major NPCs? What are the notable laws and customs? How are the laws created, promulgated, and enforced? What are the main holidays? Are there specific customs associated with the holidays? What kinds of clothing do the citizens wear? Are there special badges or styles reserved for certain social functions, positions, or duties? (Think of the military and police in our world or the various social groups in the *Planet of the Apes* series^{lvii}.) What is the education system? Are there common courses that all take? Is some knowledge restricted to certain groups? (Think of guilds in medieval Europe.) What are the economics of the nation? Who controls production? Is the nation known for particular goods and resources? Holland and tulips and ceramics are good examples. Does the nation have a military? Who controls it? What are its functions? Have there been recent wars? What impact did they have on the nation? If there is magic in your world, what are the attitudes in the nation about its use? Are there restrictions? What other fun things have you been just waiting to put into your world?

There is an old saying, “talent imitates, and genius steals.” If you are creating a commercial product then you have to be respectful of intellectual property, copyrights, and the like. If this world is

just for your personal gaming group, feel free to use external sources for some of the awesome things in your world.

The final step in the deliberate world creation process is to *consciously place people, places, and things that highlight what makes your world unique and special*. This has been mentioned previously, but here is one more chance to help put your unique stamp on your creation.

Consistency Check

Put your world aside for some time. Some time means weeks, not hours. Then, have someone else who has not been involved in the creation process do a review for you. One of the people that look at your world with a critical eye would ideally be a non-gaming friend or relative. If you are prone to political rants (you know who you are) then it is a good idea to pick at least one person you respect with a differing set of political views to review your world.

Pay attention to what the reviewers say. It is hard to be objective with your creation, but do your best to really listen to the constructive criticism.

Then, you should re-work any major logic flaws. This might drop you back into any earlier stage. Once you make the proposed change, see what the ripple effects are on the rest of the world. Make sure you keep copies of the world before the changes. Although it does not happen every time, sometimes when you change something it makes the world less logical.

Helpful hints for top-down world creation

You lovingly created your world. You are justifiably proud of your work. Then, those loathsome PCs kill your favorite NPC. You

lavished hours and days of time on that NPC. You poured your soul into that NPC. Now the PCs will suffer!

Wait!

All those NPCs and "schtuff" – they are all imaginary, really! NPCs live, grow, die, and become forgotten, and that is OK.

Be willing to modify part of the world later if it proves to be inconsistent. Always, carefully consider the effects of doing so before you dig out the eraser! Items in a created world just as in the real world tend to be connected in ways we poor mortals cannot hope to see without very deep thought. Unfortunately, you, a mortal, will not see all of the interconnections right away. But, fear not! If there is an advantageous connection for the PCs, they will spot them at the worst possible time!

Make lots of notes in the creation process. Writing down your thoughts tends to organize and crystallize them.

I have said it before, but it is important to remember that the more different your world is from Earth, the more exotic and interesting it will be, but it will also be harder to visualize for your players.

Start small! Do not go out and develop a Jupiter sized planet as your first project.

Humans are multi-sensed creatures. Be willing to use visual and audio items to help suspend disbelief and draw the players into your world as well as using good dialog.

Expert tip: develop the cosmology and physical world to completion or near completion, but only develop outlines or skeletons for cultures which the gaming group will most likely never encounter. Spend 80 percent of your time developing things that the party is likely to spend 80 percent of its time interacting with!

(Question for Ed., should I include an example of top-down creation here? For my seminars, I generally give an example.)

Organizing your creation

You will much happier if you organize your creation and make it easy to find references when you need them.

Here are several sample organizational schemes:

- By geography...
- By historical era...
- By culture...
- By race...

Any combination of the above...

Index your world early on, or it will become an insurmountable task later on.

Always include a brief description of what a binder/virtual folder/etc. contains. Ten years from now, you are unlikely to remember it contains "samples of Overmannish wedding garb from the Huvis-Kanine era."

Congratulations GM! You have just learned about the hardest and most rewarding process in GMing!

Check on learning

Time to test your knowledge.

What are the Stafford, Perrin, and Petersen principles? How do they relate to world building?

What happens if you over-emphasize the Perrin principle? Will your world be dull?

How do you personally ensure that you keep the Stafford, Perrin, and Petersen principles in balance?

Why are you going to create your world?

How will you personally know when it is done or “good enough”?

Dr. Linton Wells is fond of saying, “better is the enemy of good enough.” What does that mean? How does it relate to world building?

Pre-release, Review Copy, Do Not Copy

Principled Non-Player Characters

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This chapter describes how to create and play memorable Non-player Characters (NPCs) using the acronym, VAMPIRE. NPCs are the principle source for your players to learn about your world. It is important to create interesting ones that help you achieve your GMing objectives.

Chapter Objectives

- Understand the components of the acronym VAMPIRE and how the components are related to creating memorable NPCs
- Understand the synergies between the components
- Learn to apply the GMing principles to the creation of memorable NPCs

Introduction

This chapter explores how to create new and interesting NPCs that will further your plots while being fun for the PCs to interact with and for you to play.

NPCs have a major role in helping your players understand your gaming world and in helping them suspend disbelief. If your NPCs are done well, your players will create positive emotional bonds to some of your key NPCs and help invest the players in your gaming world.

There is a simple acronym to help you remember the basics of memorable NPC creation and how to run them effectively, VAMPIRE. We will explore each letter in the sections below. See Figure 6.1.

<Insert Figure 6.1>

This figure shows the meaning for each of the letters in the VAMPIRE acronym.

How do the GMing principles apply?

The application of the Principles to creating and running memorable NPCs is straightforward. You want your NPCs to make sense and to fit logically within the rules governing your world. This is a direct application of the Perrin principle. You want your NPCs to be interesting and memorable. That is the Stafford principle in action, and finally, you want your NPCs to be fun to interact with and for you to play; that is the Petersen principle personified.

An important caveat

This next point will be repeated a number of times in this chapter, and it is important. Be careful not to lavish too much attention on NPCs that are not critical to your plot. NPCs come in two varieties, *incidental* and *deliberate*. They are defined as exactly as they sound. Incidental NPCs are the average denizens of your world that should interact with your Party without becoming major plot points. The city guards, the wandering hunting band, the deckhands on a ship that the PCs are using for transportation are all potential incidental NPCs. Deliberate NPCs are the ones that are important to your plots, the adventures, and your world. You will be lavishing attention on deliberate NPCs, and this detail will draw your players' interest and encourage meaningful interactions.

If a simple, incidental NPC has too much detail then the players are going to assume that this NPC is critical to the plot. Of course, it is possible for an incidental NPC to become deliberate and vice versa. In the Star Trek series the Next Generation, there was a character that supposed to be incidental, Chief O'Brien,^{lviii} Initially, the character had a single line. The fans loved him, and soon the character had a first and last name, and eventually, becoming a deliberate character, the Chief had whole adventures that centered on the character. There is a lesson in there for GMs everywhere. If your PCs latch onto an incidental NPC, strongly consider adding a bit more substance to the character and turning it into a deliberate NPC. Conversely, if you simply cannot get any interest in Roget Maxmillion, Baron of the Wastes, then you would be wise to write this deliberate NPC out of the plotline.

Applying the VAMPIRE Method

In this section we will explore each of the letters, and then in the next section we will talk about the synergy between the letters.

V is for Varied

Varied means that each deliberate NPC should be unique and easily identifiable. There are many ways to accomplish this. The NPC could be identified through his or her physical characteristics and appearance. It could be that the NPC has unique mannerisms. Everyone has a personality, but the memorable NPC has one that your players will remember, good, bad, or indifferent.

Here are a few helpful hints with creating interesting variations. First, this is a great place to augment your natural creativity with some random tables. To be honest, we all have limited short term memory space, and if you rely solely on being inspired in the moment, eventually some of your NPCs are going to be unintentionally “twins separated at birth.”

Another important thing is to write down the details of the variation. Ensure that you know what the deliberate NPCs look like, what they sound like, what unique personality aspects they have, etc. It is easy to forget details, and, when you get those details wrong, it will disrupt your players suspension of disbelief. People that do a lot of voice acting for animations tend to record voice samples of key characters so that they remember the nuances of their performance. It leads to consistency.

On the topics of unique voices, here is some hard-won advice. If you are not good with accents and voices do not use them at the gaming table. It is hard to consistently do a credible accent, and you do not want to confuse the players as to who is talking with them. Instead, use more emphasis on diction, choice of words, tone, pauses in speaking, and catch phrases.

A is for Affect

An NPC can be interesting, but, to be memorable, the Party must feel that the NPC has some bearing on the Party's goals. That NPC must affect the Party and its goals.

The ability to affect can be subtle: It might be through political manipulation. The NPC might have vital information, a useful item, or a key item or a component that the Party needs or wants to accomplish its goals.

Authorities over the Party's area of interest almost always have the ability to affect the Party. There are three parts to this. There is the *actually ability* to cause changes that impact the Party. There is *the desire, the will to do so*, and finally, for the NPC to be memorable that ability to affect *should be clear to the players*.

If an all-powerful NPC sits in the shadows, is never mentioned, and the Party has no knowledge of the entity, that NPC is **not** memorable.

M is for Multifaceted

Poorly done characters are sometimes called mono-dimensional or cardboard. Multifaceted means multidimensional. Well done NPCs have goals. These goals can shift over time, but most of the time the NPCs have a logical motivation for taking the actions that they do. By the by, not all, or perhaps not even the majority, of those goals revolve around the Party.

Goals come in two flavors, closed and open ended. We talked about this in the chapter on adventures. Closed ended goals are goals that have a clear end state. Walking five hundred miles is a closed ended goal. It might be difficult, but if the NPC is able to walk then eventually the NPC could reach this goal. Open ended goals are goals that can never be reached. Accumulating power or knowledge are open ended goals. Realistic NPCs probably have both kinds of goals. The King might want to plan and execute a wildly successful birthday party for his pride and joy, sixteen-year-old daughter. He might also want to amass arcane knowledge.

If the memorable NPC is going to be recurring or a long-time part of an adventure or campaign then you should consider giving that NPC some open-ended goals.

Well-constructed NPCs have strengths and weaknesses. You should select these to be meaningful. If the NPC is an opponent of the Party then the strengths should challenge the Party's weaknesses. An opponent's weakness could be a secret, and it could range for embarrassing and inconvenient to debilitating.

Expert tip, think about using weaknesses for allies of the Party that allow the Party to help that NPC overcome some personal limitation. In the movie, *the King's Speech*^{lix}, the King has a speech impediment, and the protagonist in the film helps the King with this challenge. The weakness could be anything, and it might be a

secondary plot, but the act of aiding a character overcome a personal challenge will endear that NPC to the players.

Hobbies make for interesting additions to NPCs. Imagine that the eeeeevil blood baroness actually loves puppies. The Party breaks into her stronghold to find a cellar full of cute poochies. What will the players think? Hobbies can give all kinds of additional levers for clever players to use. Maybe they can win the Baroness over to do something noble with the promise of a rare dog? The Party finds out that the dread necromancer is having all sorts of rare insects sent to his fastness. The Party could assume that the Necromancer is brewing some terrible potion to unleash untold anguish on the local population, but he might just be rounding out his collection.

Have some fun with multifaceted.

P is for Point Out

One of the main ways that the players will learn about and understand your world is through your NPCs. Point out means that you take care to have an NPC either use or aware of some aspect of your world that is unique. If you are really proud of your druidic magic system then the Party should interact with an NPC that uses that system. If the land of the shining pink is a special place in your world then the Party should meet an NPC that knows about it, or perhaps even came from there.

Think about what makes your world or GMing style unique. What are you proudest of? If your players would only remember one thing about your Campaign twenty years from now, what would that cool thing be? The challenge is how to highlight that awesome element through your NPCs.

It is always important to show not tell. You want the NPCs to point things out, but you want this to affect the current adventure and further the plot.

Rather than have a sage wax eloquently about the shining pink, have the Party run across someone that was there that needs some help based on the unique aspects of the place.

I is for Intersect

We talked about affect, but affecting can be sterile and impersonal. Intersect means that the Party's and the NPC's goals either complement or compete with one another. Intersect makes it "personal."

The NPC and the Party can intersect on a variety of planes. It could be a social interaction. It could be a plot driven intersection. It could be competing moral imperatives.

Whatever the intersection is, it should be reasonable and logical in the context of the world. There can be cooperative intersections, and there can be competitive intersections. The bandits want to rob from people with no interference. The Party might want to prevent this. On the other hand, both the local road guards and the Party might want to fight crime along the King's road. There could be alliances of necessity introduced that could shift.

Relationships could change over time. You might introduce the NPC early in one context and bring him or her back in another. We will talk through some fun examples later in the chapter.

R is for Reasonable

The Perrin principle applies to reasonable. Your NPC's actions and motivations should make sense in the context of the world. For every cause there should be some effect. It might take awhile for

the effect to take place, but there is a karmic debt created somewhere in your world.

The action might be reasonable to you, but you only succeed with reasonable if you make it obvious to the players – at least after the fact.

If your players are going to suspend disbelief, your world has to have an element of predictability to it. If the players cannot predict what will happen, your world goes from interesting to frustrating.

Remember, the actions that NPC takes need to be reasonable to the NPC. If the NPC firmly believes that sacrifices to the Rat God of the Dump of Ten Thousand foul odors will aid that NPC then it is logical that the NPC would make extraordinary efforts to make those sacrifices. Reasonable for your NPCs is not necessarily logical in the context of our current day, real-world.

We talked about this in the chapter on world building, and it applies to NPCs too. Do not fall into the temptation to bring current, controversial political views into all your NPCs as a hammer to beat your players with. If your world is well constructed then there will be a set of beliefs and logical actions that flow from it. Strongly using the Stafford principle means that often that logic is quite different than our real-world, and a good thing that it is too. Remember that one of the reasons that people play role-playing games is to escape the real-world for a time.

E is for Exist

If you have played one of the fantasy computer or console games from early 2000s and before, you probably met NPCs in the game that were frozen in time between PC visits. The Party might have been out of town for five years, but nothing in the town changed, and the NPCs had the same concerns and challenges that they did the last time the Party was in town.

That makes it challenging for the players to suspend disbelief.

Memorable NPCs have lives outside of sessions and interactions with the PCs. They have goals that do not center on the party.

If there is a sufficiently important issue or challenge then eventually the NPCs will take actions whether the party does or not.

The world is dynamic, and NPCs affect one another.

One caveat, the players need to always feel that the Party is special and needed. It makes sense that the village will not let the buildings all burn down if the Party refuses to help, but the village might not go off and defeat the demon lord if the Party is taking a pause.

Synergy in VAMPIRE

The various elements of VAMPIRE are more than the sum of its parts. Exist breathes life into multifaceted and reasonable. Think of the NPCs as intelligent agents each with their own goals, strengths, and weaknesses. For your memorable, deliberate NPCs you should map out what those NPCs will do if the Party does not intervene. For your incidental NPCs, just doing their jobs, guards, farmers, merchants, etc., will be enough.

For example the friendly, but scatterbrained wizard, she might continue to research new, unique spells, and that might lead to interesting complications. Lawrence Watt-Evans put this idea to good use in his story, the Spriggan Mirror.^{lx} The minotaur lord might continue to work towards merging the beastmen into one army capable of driving the humans from their lands once and for all. The Blood Baroness will continue to collect cute puppies.

Again, remember to take notes on your deliberate NPCs. You might not remember that Ivan the Obese collects stamps, but the players will.

Some fun examples

This section contains some fun examples that show how the aspects of VAMPIRE work together to create interesting, reasonable, and fun NPCs.

Imal the Innkeeper: My world has a long history with many ruins and artifacts from ancient civilizations waiting to be discovered by the industrious or the unlucky. One of my adventuring groups was exploring a particularly dangerous and vast area called the Great Waste. The Waste was the result of an empire that was destroyed through the use of powerful magics. The Waste has many secrets buried just beneath the surface of its shifting sand dunes.

The Party knew that it was going to be spending some time exploring the Waste, and the nearest town to its area of interest was called Lei Taibor. There was an inexpensive inn in town owned by a earnest innkeeper, Imal.

The Party liked Imal. He was friendly and took reasonably good care of the Party. He provided reliable service and some information. The Party figured out that Imal knew an above average amount about the Waste.

While out adventuring, the Party found an ancient container with twenty-three golden colored, large coins with unusual markings on them. We were using a skill based system for role-playing at the time. The coins, Krin, were the equivalent of 500 gold pieces in value and used to be a means for organizations, landowners, etc. to settle debts back when the Wastes was a thriving area. The players made the requisite rolls for their PCs, and not a single one

was able to discern what these coins were. (Just to context this, the average worker in my world makes about two gold pieces a year.)

The Party headed back to Imal's Inn. When the Party arrived, the Party leader approached Imal and asked if it would be possible for Imal to maintain a room and stable space for the Party indefinitely until its work in the Wastes was done. Imal, as a good businessman demurred and said that he would need some kind of deposit.

The Party produced the bag of Krin and asked if that would be sufficient. I rolled for Imal's knowledge based skill openly, and the players saw a very good roll. Imal's eyes lit up, and he said, "well, certainly, but this is probably too much." (Yes, by five orders of magnitude.) The Party said, "we know that it is probably more than you need, but you are a good guy." Imal did not ask twice, happily pocketing the windfall.

As the Party came back to town from time to time, they saw that Imal was improving the Inn, new furniture, new wall coverings, eventually an addition. The players commented that Imal sure must have been a good businessman.

Eventually, the Party left that area of the Wastes and went on to bigger and better adventures. It was six months of real-world time later and about ten years later in gaming time. The Party was coming into Resserlin, a large city hundreds of leagues north of Lei Taibor. There was a crowd gathered in the city center, and if you ever want to pique the interest of a gaming group tell them that there is a crowd.

The Party shoved its way to the front of the group to discover Imal involved with the city governor cutting the ribbon on a new Imal's Inn. The Party and Imal were delighted to see each other, and the story came out that this was the 100th Imal's Inn that he was opening.

When the players finally heard the story of the bag of Krin, they laughed and laughed. Imal clearly knew a bit more about the Wastes than they had, and his actions were logical and consistent with his goals.

Now, 25+ years later, those same players still ask me how Imal is doing.

The Cleaning Crew: Adventuring parties do not always do a good job at cleaning up all the chaos they create. I ran a Party that turned down some minor policing and protection missions to focus on other quests. The local nobleman hired another group to take care of these things. The Party observed this group being rewarded for missions from time to time, and this created a friendly competition. The Party started to play pranks on the group and mocked them from time to time.

One day, the Party comes back to Schmeple's Tavern to see the other group sitting at a table looking quite dour. One of the more empathetic players sent his PC over to talk to them. The group relayed a tale of how some group has released a minor demon and failed to track it down. It fell on their group to do it, and the group lost one of its members.

There was silence around my gaming table when I relayed this as the Party had been the ones to release the demon. The Party bought the other group's drinks and even attended the memorial service.

The two groups became fast friends, and the Party adventured alongside that other group for years in game time.

Eowyn, I miss me lads: Even the best parties can sometimes attack first and ask questions later. My group ran into a surly leprechaun who was taking no grief from the Party. One thing led to another, and discussions turned to blows. When the poor fellow tried to

escape, the Party used extraordinary means to prevent the escape and dispatch the mean fellow. Some time later, the Party ran into the fellow's twin brother who wanted justice. He met the same fate.

Fast forward to a time when the Party is sent to get an item they desperately need from an NPC. The NPC is an older Leprechaun, Eowyn. The Party makes the appropriate skill rolls and realizes that there is a clear familial resemblance between this NPC and the two younger Leprechauns.

Things go from bad to worse when Eowyn says, "you lads come from so and so, and my twins are living in that area. Did you ever run across them?"

Eventually it came out that the Party had dispatched the twins, and the dad was heartbroken. Eowyn did give the Party what they needed, but his grief was deep and heartfelt.

One of the players said that he had never felt so bad in his life playing a game as he did at seeing Eowyn's grief. (I did put on quite the performance for emphasis' sake.)

Bob, the friendly? dragon: The Party had just advanced to a new level of competence and was sent off to the west to explore an area that was known to house some nasty creatures. After a few sessions of exploring the general area, the Party has set up a camp when suddenly a flying creature comes wheeling into their camp. I pulled out the model of the green dragon and had the creature talk very slowly using extremely simple diction, and it laughed foolishly from time to time in its conversation. As you can see from the picture of it in Figure 6.2, it looks relatively harmless.

<Insert Figure 6.2>

This is a picture of friendly, somewhat goofy Bob the Dragon.

The Party decided to call the dragon Bob, and he frequently came into the Party's came to discuss tactics and their progress in the valley. Of course, Bob was not apparently all that bright and occasionally his attempts to help the Party led to worse situations for them, but the Party liked Bob and all was forgiven. (How can you not love a face like that.)

Sadly, the reality is that a better picture of "Bob" is shown in Figure 6.3.

<Insert Figure 6.3>

This is a more accurate picture of a Bob that might not be so friendly.

Bob had fooled the Party and was actively working for the Big Bad Evil (BBE) the entire time. This was revealed at exactly the wrong time from the Party's perspective. As with the movie, the Usual Suspects^{lxi}, suddenly all of the hints and coincidences fell into place. While Bob was memorable, it is fair to say that the players did not appreciate Bob as much as they did other NPCs in the world.

These are just a few examples from the hundreds of deliberate NPCs covering 45+ years of GMing. You can see how each of these NPCs was memorable and demonstrated the value of the VAMPIRE approach.

Check on learning

Time to test your knowledge.

Which of the concepts in VAMPIRE apply most closely to the Perrin principle? The Stafford principle? The Petersen principle?

How are Affect and Intersect related? How are they different?

Why do my players call Exist the secret sauce for making NPCs believable?

What were two surprising things that you learned in this chapter?

Pre-release, Review Copy, Do Not Copy

Principles to get from Good to Great GMing

Richard C. Staats

Abstract

This chapter talks about approaches and activities to take your gamemastering from a good, competent GM to a truly great GM that is positively regarded throughout the whole community.

Chapter Objectives

- Understand behaviors that great GMs demonstrate
- Understand what it means to “give back to the community”
- Learn how to apply the GMing principles to situations outside of gaming

Introduction

Now you understand how to create a world that is logical, interesting, and fun to play in. You know how to create and run memorable NPCs that your players will remember for decades to come. You know how to structure adventures and campaigns that will live on in your players' campaigns long after you have faded away.

This chapter goes the next step and talks through the things that you can do to make the gaming community a better place and potentially apply what you learned around the gaming table to the most important game of all, real-life.

What does it mean to be a legendary Gamemaster?

There are two aspects to being a legendary GM, internal to your gaming table and external – facing the outside world and the larger gaming community.

The great man himself, Gary Gygax, described the former, legendary GMing at your gaming table in the book, Role-Playing Mastery^{lxii}. Gygax said that legendary GMing was the application of eight aspects.

Fairness and Impartiality: Gygax said that the GM must be absolutely fair and impartial. The rules should be applied consistently to all players, and the GM should not show favoritism or malice. The world should react logically and believably, not arbitrarily.

Preparation and Organization: Gygax also emphasizes the importance of solid preparation: knowing the rules, having well-developed adventures, understanding the setting, and being organized enough to manage the game flow smoothly.

Understanding and Adapting to Players: The legendary GM understands their players' motivations, preferences, and play styles. The GM can adapt the game to challenge and entertain *that specific group*, whether they prefer combat, role-playing, puzzles, or exploration.

Improvisation and Creativity: The legendary GM must be ready to improvise on the fly. Players do the unexpected, and the legendary GM can weave these actions into the narrative seamlessly, making the world feel alive and responsive.

Storytelling and World-Building: The GM is the primary storyteller and the architect of the game world. Gygax talked extensively about creating a rich, detailed, and believable setting, populating it with interesting NPCs, and crafting engaging plots and subplots.

Adjudication and Arbitration: The GM is the ultimate arbiter of the game world. When rules are unclear or situations arise that aren't explicitly covered, the GM makes the final decision, always

striving for consistency and what makes the most sense within the game's reality.

Pacing and Tension: The legendary GM knows how to control the pace of the game, building tension when necessary, providing moments of relief, and moving the narrative forward without rushing or dragging.

Challenging but Not Punishing: The legendary GM creates meaningful challenges that test the players' ingenuity, tactics, and role-playing skills. These challenges are not insurmountable or unfair to the point of frustrating the players. The goal is to create a sense of accomplishment.

The rest of the chapter will address the external aspects.

Giving back to our community

A simple definition of this is actively contributing your time, talent, and treasure — to improve the well-being and address the needs of the broader gaming community beyond your direct, personal gain.

There are some important aspects of this definition. First, you are actively contributing. This is the positive definite form. You are now and will continue to contribute to the community.

Time, talent, and treasure mean that you are providing your most precious, non-renewable resource, your time, to the gaming community. Talent means that you are using your experience and skills to help other gamers out. Treasure refers to any material item from money to other tangible resources.

You are doing it out of a sense of altruism, to aid the well-being of others without direct, personal gain.

These are lofty words, but each of us has likely come across people in our communities that embrace these ideals and actively live them.

I am not suggesting that you take a vow of poverty and become an indigent GM providing mendicant services to all who need.

Your ability to aid your fellow gamers will vary throughout your life. Sometimes you will have more time and more available resources. Other times, you will need to carefully manage what you have based on your life situation.

That said, if you have the goal of becoming a legendary GM then you will see opportunities to give back to the community. It can range from things like creating informational videos to volunteering at conventions to our next topic, publishing.

Publishing

Gamers tend to be readers and video watchers. There are many venues for publishing.

If you have been to my YouTube site, thedrgames, then you see that there are hundreds of videos that relate to gaming and have aided many gamers over the years. Right now, you are reading a traditionally published book, and that is certainly a good way of getting your word out, but there are other ways.

Amateur press publications provide a great way to help other gamers. Online fora and social media can provide outlets for creatively answering questions and providing support to others in the community. There are many sites that will allow you to publish blogs and vlogs. Your imagination is the only limit in ways to reach out and give back through publishing.

Applying role-playing to non-traditional settings

This section could easily be an entire book, but I will just hit some highlights here.

Gaming has been a big part of my life since I was a boy, and I have continued to use gaming, role-playing in many applications. Sometimes those applications spelled the difference between success and failure, and sometimes it spelled the difference between life and death.

Here are just a few examples of how I have seen role-playing applied to non-game settings.

Medical Training and Simulation: Medical students, nurses, and even experienced doctors role-play patient encounters, emergency scenarios, and complex surgical procedures. It improves diagnostic skills, communication with patients (especially in difficult conversations), crisis management, ethical decision-making, and teamwork in high-stress medical environments. This directly leads to better patient care and fewer medical errors.

Psychotherapy and Counseling (Psychodrama/Role-Playing Therapy): Patients re-enact past traumatic events, practice new behaviors, confront fears, or explore interpersonal conflicts in a safe, therapeutic setting. This helps individuals develop coping mechanisms, process trauma, improve social skills, resolve internal conflicts, and achieve personal growth, leading to better mental health outcomes.

Military and Emergency Services Training: Soldiers, police officers, firefighters, and disaster response teams engage in highly realistic simulations and role-playing exercises for combat scenarios, hostage negotiations, disaster relief, crowd control, and emergency medical response. This use of role-playing enhances preparedness, tactical decision-making, team coordination,

leadership skills, and the ability to operate effectively under pressure, ultimately saving lives and maintaining public safety. (I have some stories that I will share at the end of this section.)

Business and Management Training: Employees and managers role-play customer service interactions, sales pitches, conflict resolution, performance reviews, negotiations, and leadership challenges. This improves communication skills, problem-solving, empathy (understanding customer/employee perspectives), ethical decision-making, and leadership effectiveness, leading to more productive workplaces and better economic outcomes.

Conflict Resolution and Diplomacy: Diplomats, mediators, and negotiators often engage in role-playing exercises to simulate international crises, peace talks, or complex negotiations, playing the roles of different nations or factions. It helps to develop strategic thinking, cross-cultural communication, and negotiation tactics, which are crucial for preventing and resolving international conflicts, promoting peace, and fostering global cooperation.

And, the list goes on and on.

During my military assignments, I used role-playing frequently to increase my folks' ability to think strategically and react favorably to stressful situations. Before Key Leader Engagements in combat zones, I would always do role-playing exercises with my personnel. I can recall three situations during my combat tours in the Persian Gulf where role-playing preparation saved the lives of myself and my subordinates.

In one case, I was a brigade commander working with the US Department of State's Provincial Reconstruction Team to help improve the local economy and foster good will between the US and its allies and the Iraqi people. This was in the toughest place in Iraq at the time, Saladin province, Saddam Hussein's own home

territory. Two weeks prior we knew that an important political person had orchestrated the killing of two dozen US servicemembers. My team tried to talk me out of going to visit him, but I felt strongly that it was important to show that I had the moral courage to continue with our mission and that love and good-will could prevail over hatred. My brigade had worked very hard at creating a positive relationship with the local population. I frequently visited major families, farms, and the local university to participate in events. I hired over 1,000 of the local men to work on our installation. My team had a very good reputation with our Iraqi colleagues.

Before we went to visit, I gathered my brigade leadership and did a role-playing session of the meeting to come. At one point, one of my majors said, "Sir, we are going to be surrounded by his armed men, and he is going to look for a way to incite an incident so that he can kill us. What will you do if he tries to upset, insult, or provoke you?"

I thought about it and said, "I would try to respond in a humorous, but accurate way that emphasizes that I am an ally, not someone to be hated." Honestly, that was pretty weak given the gravity of the situation.

We drove up to the location, and we were all having lunch. His men were armed to the teeth, fingers on triggers. He looked over at me and said in a loud voice (in Arabic), "I could kill you now."

My subconscious had been working overtime since our role-playing session, and I was inspired to smile and say (in Arabic), "Sir, you could kill me now, but you know that everyone would hate you for killing Dr. Staats."

There was a very long pause, and he laughed and said, "Naam, naam." That essentially translates to, "yeah, that is a good point, enjoy lunch."

As stated earlier in the book, my eldest son said that the lessons he learned around the gaming table saved the lives of him and his Marine squad mates on numerous occasions in Afghanistan.

I cannot guarantee that role-playing will save your life, but it is an extremely valuable tool in your toolbox for a whole variety of potential applications.

Applying the gaming principles outside of gaming

By this point, you are an expert at applying the Perrin, Stafford, and Petersen principles to GMing situations.

It probably comes as no surprise that these principles can also be applied outside of the GMing environment.

While the principles are slightly restated, the core meaning is the same, and I have applied them in leading and managing organizations from large military combat formations to \$100M civilian organizations.

Here is the version that I used in a large civilian organization that worked directly with the senior most people in the US Defense establishment.

Perrin Principle: be an expert in your job.

- Know the key information for your position
- Understand how best to use the tools you need for your job
- Be reliable and credible
- Be a team player, create solutions not challenges

Stafford Principle: be value-added; look for the solution that is needed, not the same as the one assigned.

- Apply your personal genius
- Challenge assumptions and constraints

- Ask the right questions
- Be creative and take reasonable risks

Petersen Principle: create an environment where others legitimately want to work with you

- Visualize the positive
- Organizations are families
- Find ways to make work fun

Staats Principle: reward people for jobs well-done.

- Use frequent random rewards
- Surprise those around you with positive reinforcement

My challenge to you is to develop your own set of principles to guide you in your life and career.

Please feel free to use the GMing principles as a starting point.

If you want to read more about applying principles to managing and leading, look for my upcoming book, Principled Organizations.

Thank you for reading this book. I hope that it is useful for you for years to come.

[Check on learning](#)

Time to test your knowledge.

What are some things that you can do this week to help support the gaming community?

If you really set your mind to it, what could you do in a month or in a year?

Imagine that it is twenty years in the future. What would you want to be remembered for? What can you do starting today to make that a reality?

If you had to develop 3-5 principles to guide your work by, what might they be?

Pre-release, Review Copy, Do Not Copy

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Richard C. Staats

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Gamemastering Principles

Richard C. Staats

1. **Stafford Principle:** *maintain a sense of wonder in the campaign.* Make sure there is always some surprise or something special that makes a session, an adventure, a campaign and your whole world unique.
2. **Perrin Principle:** *be consistent.* If you do something once, it becomes a precedence. The players will remember it, and count on it being the same next time. If it's not the same later, have a darn good, obvious to the players reason that it's different.
3. **Petersen Principle:** *make it fun.* Don't be afraid to change a plot to go with player enthusiasm. Try something crazy or goofy, even (or especially) in serious settings. Roll with the mood and make it happen. Be high energy!
4. **Staats Principle:** *reward the players as well as the characters.* Handouts, riddles, music, etc. that can be experienced by the players' senses directly or challenge the players' creativity reward the players. The players are the ones that come to the sessions every week, and ultimately, it is the GM's goal to reward the players. Some folks are just fine vicariously being rewarded through their characters, but it's oh so much more fun to be rewarded as a player during the course of a session.
5. **Sandy's Axiom:** *involve at least three senses in every scene.* These can be described or experienced (e.g. props, incense, etc.). People have five senses, and adding details about weird sounds, the

unusual smell or the texture of something adds to the gaming experience.

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