

ROBIN'S LAWS OF GOOD GAME MASTERING

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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

The Great, Immutable, Ironclad Law

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

This Is Not a Primer

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

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

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

What really makes a difference in the success or failure of a roleplaying session is you. Your participation, whether as GM or player, has much more influence on the fun your group has than all of the game products in the world. Rule books are not roleplaying games, any more than a screenplay is a movie. The

reams of material game companies produce provides but a blueprint for the real thing. The roleplaying game doesn't start until a bunch of people sit down, open up their dice bags, riffle their character sheets, and wait for the GM to clear his voice and say, "Okay, last week you'd all gotten into the escape pod and ejected yourselves into the heart of the Glanjiri Nebula . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The rest is mere detail.

Knowing Your Players

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

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

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

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

IN-GAME PREFERENCES

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

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

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

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

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

Player Types

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

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

The Butt-Kicker wants to let off steam with a little old-fashioned vicarious mayhem. He picks a simple, combat-ready character, whether or not that is the best route to power and success in the system. After a long day in the office or classroom, he wants his character to clobber foes and once more prove his

superiority over all who would challenge him. He may care enough about the rules to make his PC an optimal engine of destruction, or may be indifferent to them, so long as he gets to hit things. He expects you to provide his character plenty of chances to engage in the aforementioned clobbering and superiority.

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

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

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

Player Goal Chart

<i>Player</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Emotional Kick</i>