

Game Master Basics

by Larry Babb

I ran my first role-playing game in April 1980. It was the introductory adventure module "B1 In Search of the Unknown" that came with Dungeons & Dragons Basic Boxed Set (the classic blue book, arguably the best \$10 I ever spent). I've been hooked on playing RPGs (in general) and game mastering (in particular) ever since. I can't say I've arrived at some pinnacle of GM perfection, but I have been on both sides of the GM screen for a while now and found there are some general rules of thumb that seem to work pretty well no matter what the game or what the genre.

The first five are Rules that I feel are essential for a great GM. The last five Tips are just my personal preferences, presented for your consideration.

GM Rule #1 - - Make It Fun!

I could tell you that everything went perfectly with my first attempt at running a D&D game, but I'd be lying. Truth is, I'd only had the game for a day and didn't understand half the rules. I didn't possess graph paper or even a set of polyhedral dice - - laminated cardboard chits came with the D&D Basic Set and you had to draw them randomly from a cup. Ranks right up there with mammoth skins and stone knives. Yes, a lot of mistakes were made, but it was also a lot of fun.

In my mind, that's *the* most important job of the GM - - making the game fun! All the preparation, props, clever plotlines, devious traps, and interesting villains won't matter squat if your players don't have a good time. Conversely, your players will likely forgive a whole host of GM shortcomings if they are having a blast.

You will need to keep your finger on the pulse of the players' interest during the game. If they are daydreaming, doodling on their character sheets, or engaged in other non-game activities, that may be an indication that they're bored. Look for ways to draw them back into the game. These events should offer a quick break in the monotony, but shouldn't supersede your main story. Consider throwing in one of the following activities when a character starts drifting:

- An impromptu bar-fight. Nothing gets a player's heart pumping like a little mayhem.
- A noblewoman caught inside a runaway carriage. She could provide future assistance to a rescuer.
- A mysterious stranger appearing with a cryptic message. He could be used to pass along a clue in the current scenario or provide a hook to a future adventure.
- A recurring street urchin who provides comedy relief.
- A challenge from a friendly antagonist (game of cards, throwing darts, drinking game, arm-wrestling, friendly sword-duel, etc.).

Don't underestimate the use of the cliffhanger - - some dangerous, surprising, or ominous ending to the game session that leads into the next game. If the players leave the table wanting more, you will have succeeded as GM.

GM Rule #2 - - Cater to Your Players

Knowing what your players like and don't like is the biggest asset you have in achieving Rule #1. If a player craves intellectual stimulation, be sure to have a riddle or puzzle for him. If another player just likes to show up and bash monsters, factor in a bit of combat somewhere along the line. And don't forget to tailor the scenarios to the "characters", too! If one character is a money-grubbing thief, allow for the eventual request for a little bit of larceny - - something small and low risk that won't threaten your storyline if he gets caught. If a mage is always looking for curious trinkets, finding a mysterious rune on a cheap necklace in the city market may provide a few minutes of entertainment or perhaps lead to a nice plot hook later on.

Be sure every character has some skill, talent, or power that nobody else possesses. It's sure-fire frustration for a character to be second-best in everything. Even if three players want warrior characters, they should each be unique in some way. Without revealing the other players' abilities, you can suggest alterations to a mediocre character that really make him stand out from the rest of the party in a certain area. It's not a bad idea for you to encourage the players to share with one another the general sort of character they each intend to build. There's less chance of winding up with a group that has no wizards or too many rogues.

I require players to provide a short, one-page character background - - where they come from, personal preferences, hobbies, parents/siblings, jobs, education, travel, etc. I'll use details from these backgrounds to customize the scenarios in order to better integrate the characters into the campaign. There's nothing wrong with plugging characters into a

generic adventure module every once in a while, but it's pure storytelling gold to weave the characters themselves into the very fabric of the campaign.

One important note to keep in mind - - the players and their characters are the stars of the show. Try to avoid promoting your favorite non-player characters (NPCs) ahead of the player characters. Although the storyline may contain special NPCs that are close to your heart, remember they are just set-pieces in the story and should not upstage the player characters. I can't tell you how many games I've played where the GM's pet NPCs made a last-minute appearance to save the day. There is nothing that incites homicidal urges more quickly than having PCs work for hours, days, or weeks to reach the climatic battle with the villain, only to have the thrill snatched away by some Johnny-come-lately NPC. Strive to keep your NPCs interesting, allow them to help and support the PCs if necessary, but don't let them hog the spotlight.

Also, beware of pushing your players and their characters through the storyline in the specific way you envision it should go. Be flexible and allow them the opportunity to play out your scenario their way. You are not a tour guide that drives the players around on a bus so they can "ooo" and "aah" at the wonderful setting you have devised. Instead, think of yourself as an outfitter during a wilderness safari. Your job is to prepare and support the players on their journey by telling them about their surroundings, clarifying their options, and letting them know where to find the most interesting things to do and see. You want them to be immersed in your setting, to get involved with the NPCs they find there, and to develop a vested interest in the story.

GM Rule #3 - - Know the Game

You don't have to memorize every aspect of the game system in order to GM an adventure. With some game systems, learning the rules is like getting a college degree. Case in point, a couple of years ago I played a D&D 3rd edition game where the character sheets were 4 pages long. One of the players actually brought along his laptop to look up game mechanics on CD during the game. What a change from my humble 1st edition D&D upbringing!

While some game systems may be very complex, a GM ought to be reasonably familiar with the rules of whatever game he is running. Any GM who knows less about the game mechanics than his players opens himself up to endless arguments from every rules-lawyer that comes along. Familiarity with the game will come with time, but be sure to devote sufficient effort to get comfortable with the rules.

Having to stop game play to dig through a rulebook breaks the flow of the story and can be distracting if done too frequently, so look for ways to reduce the time it takes to get your hands on the material. Put Post-It notes or Post-It flag tape along the edges of frequently-used pages in your rulebook. Mark the Post-Its with a permanent marker so you can find topics quickly with the cover closed. Make your own GM screen or cheat sheets of gaming information you need often. The proliferation of copiers and computer printers makes this effort a lot easier than it used to be.

Consider making up similar cheat sheets for your players with information they use a lot, especially if they do not own a copy of the rulebook. Help your players customize their own cheat sheets - - combat options for fighters, spell lists for wizards, thieving tables for rogues, etc. If everyone has ready access to the information he needs, there will be less time wasted while several players wait their turn to consult the rulebook before deciding upon a course of action.

Don't be afraid to modify a rule, add a rule, or drop a rule entirely if it suits your game. The rules are there to provide guidance, not obstacles to game play. Just be sure to inform your players beforehand. If you don't remember a specific rule and it can't be easily found (30 seconds or less), just make up a best-guess and move the action along. When in doubt, roll them bones! Give the player an opportunity to succeed (easy, moderate, or tough) and let the dice decide.

GM Rule #4 - - Be prepared

GMing is like any pastime - - you need to train if you are going to get good at it. Professional athletes exercise their bodies, practice basic skills, learn new strategies and tactics, and watch film of opponents to become better at what they do. Those concepts can benefit GMs, too. As a player, I find a GM who is articulate in speech, is comfortable speaking in public, has a rich vocabulary, is well-read on a variety of subjects, and carries himself in a confident (not arrogant) manner is generally going to run a good game. These traits don't come naturally to most of us, but they can all be developed over time if we work to build them up.

Good communication skills pay big dividends at school, on the job, in personal relationships, and at the gaming table. Remember, the GM is the fountain from which the players gain all their information. Not only is the GM a writer, he is also a director. A great film director brings out superior results from mediocre actors and a poor director can stifle the performance of even the best actor.

I have played under GMs who had their entire campaign world mapped out. No matter where you went, they knew what you would find. That is an ambitious undertaking - - one I could never do myself. It works if you have a large amount of reference material like D&D's Greyhawk or a GURPS sourcebook, but most of us don't have the time to devote to a project of such magnitude.

But the truth remains - - your players will eventually go places you never intended and do things you didn't expect. For you to tell them where they can and can't go gives them the feeling they are being led by the nose. Whether or not they are being railroaded is unimportant. The fact is they perceive that they are merely going through a pre-determined script. That is something you want to avoid for your players.

The key here is to get ahead of the players before you get to the gaming table! After your adventure scenario is written, read through it as if you were a player in the story. Look for things that catch your eye, things that *you* might like to do or see. Then go back and add to your scenario - - either fleshing out some more details of what the players might encounter or (better still) plant a hook that ties their side-trip back into your main storyline. Play to the characters' goals and players' preferences so that they *want* to pursue the plotline you have worked up.

It's a good idea to keep cheat sheets handy with setting details you might unexpectedly need. These are great tools to have ready at your fingertips when the players "wander off the map," as it were. A well-written scenario will not likely need such a cheat sheet, but it's like having medical insurance - - it's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it!

The following list contains some examples of material useful in a fantasy swords & sorcery setting, but you could compile a similar toolkit for any genre:

- Riddles and logic puzzles (easy, moderate, and hard).
- Simple traps (poison gas, arrows, darts, small razors, pitfalls, etc.).
- Minor NPCs of various support professions (barkeeper, local hermit, blacksmith, stable boy, alchemist, etc.) Be sure to name them! Nothing says "well-prepared GM" like having individual names for throwaway NPCs.
- Generic conflict-oriented NPCs (city guard, street thug, pick-pocket, beggar, haughty nobleman, snooty politician, etc.) Again, give them a name. You can use the same stats over and over; just change the names for next time.
- Names of local towns, rivers, forests, mountains, and other geographical features that can be found nearby.
- List of colorful and memorable names for taverns, thieves' guilds, secret societies, wizard councils, royal bodyguards, orc tribes, etc.
- Generic maps of outdoor terrains (complete with streams, rivers, ponds, ravines, thickets, merchant roads, etc.).
- Generic maps of indoor locations (temple, tavern, mad scientist's lab, throne room, burial crypt, seedy apartment, etc.).

GM Rule #5 - - Improvise

As the antiperspirant advertisement says, "Never let them see you sweat!" Even a well-prepared adventure scenario can fall apart like wet tissue paper through no fault of the GM. When this happens, don't panic. The players may have overlooked the main clue to solving the crime, prematurely killed off a villainous henchman before the big finale, or smashed the computer console they would need later to deactivate the doomsday device that threatens the city. Is this annoying? Yes. Inconvenient? Definitely. A show-stopper? Hardly.

The players are always capable of throwing you curve balls, but it is to your advantage to keep the players from knowing they have messed up your plans. Put on your best poker face and don't let on. Players can be like sharks - - once they sense weakness or smell blood, they might frenzy and then a GM could be hard pressed to restore order. Every GM, no matter how experienced, will eventually be caught unawares. The key is to not appear flustered.

The solution is to quietly redirect those busted plot elements through another avenue. Did the players miss a critical clue? Look for an opportunity to work that information into the players' hands from a different source. Did the players whack the major henchman you were counting on for the climatic battle? Decide he has a brother (of identical attributes) who works for the criminal mastermind as personal bodyguard. Did the paranoid players destroy the control panel an hour ago "just in case" and now they can't stop the death ray? Allow them to discover that the mad scientist who built the device has a handheld remote control stashed somewhere in his laboratory, if only they can find it in time.

Remember to preserve the “what happens” in your story and don’t get hung up on the “how it happens.” Every important element of your plot should have two or three ways in which the players could achieve the desired results. Don’t allow the chance for success to fall to just one player. If one character misses it, be sure another character has a different opportunity later on, in a different way.

Big GM secret revealed here - - over the years I have occasionally constructed scenarios with cunning traps and dangerous situations that I didn’t have a solution to. The players would discuss all sorts of ingenious plans that never came to my mind, while I calmly observed the proceedings with a look of wizened consideration etched upon my face. I then assigned a difficulty rating to their plan and let them roll the dice to see if it worked. And they never knew that the solution they devised wasn’t already detailed in my scenario.

This also works well if you goof up and accidentally give out conflicting information during the course of a campaign or if you mess up the continuity of your storyline in some way. When the players point out the inconsistency, put on your best devious smirk and respond, “Hmmm... Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?” The players will smell a mystery, some fiendish plot that they just discovered, and they’ll try to solve it. Let them chase down the explanation that seems to hold the most credibility with them and voila - - the players will have tied up your loose ends and had a blast doing it. Who says GMs can’t have just as much fun as players?

Improvisation is a great safety net when the bottom falls out of your preparations, but only as long as it doesn’t look like you’re winging it.

GM Tip #1 - - Event-Based Scenarios vs. Dungeon Crawls

I like dungeon crawls. I grew up on dungeon crawls. They tend to be simple and straight-forward adventures with little back-story where the main goal is to kill monsters and collect treasure. Dungeon crawls generally contain many of the following elements:

- Natural caverns that somehow map to easy right-angles.
- Monsters that conveniently wait in a room until you find them.
- A standard marching order that has the thief in front scouting for traps/ambushes, followed by the fighters, then the wizard, and the cleric bringing up the rear guard.
- Time-tracking for torches and food rations, but never a bathroom break.
- The whole listen-at-door-then-check-for-traps routine with archers/wizards covering from a distance.

Dungeon crawls were a hoot and I still play them occasionally. The problem I found with scenarios based on the dungeon crawl scheme is that they tend to be rigid and time-consuming. Dungeon crawling wasn’t so bad when I was gaming every week in high school and college. Once I hit the working world and started a family, my gaming opportunity went to once a month. My gaming group became motivated to squeeze more quality playing time out of that 6-hour window than a standard dungeon crawl would allow.

We changed over to more of a storytelling approach, as found in the Amber Diceless RPG and the many fine White Wolf games, and one of the main themes of the FAST RPG. This plays out in event-based scenarios: instead of going into a certain room and finding a specific monster and specific treasure, I write about certain events I want to take place. I detail all the important “what” elements, but leave “how” it gets accomplished up to the players. As they pursue the plot hooks I’ve lain out, I reveal the information they need as they successfully pursue leads and resolve the conflicts that ensue. As long as the players proceed in a direction that does not directly contradict the story elements, I give them free rein to undertake the mission as they see fit.

This style of play tends to be a lot less effort on the GM than mapping a bunch of rooms, populating them with monsters and treasure, and writing a lot of flavor text to make it seem interesting. The GM’s challenge with event-based scenarios is preparation and being ready to improvise (GM Rules #4 and #5 above) because there is less concrete “go here, do that” than with the dungeon crawl. But it also gives the players more freedom to explore and come up with innovative ideas to accomplish the mission. This doesn’t mean success will come simply, easily, or without personal risk, but they won’t feel they are being herded along like cattle.

By adding a storytelling flavor, the personal goals of each character get written into the scenarios. Some characters’ goals will be more prominent in a particular scenario than others, but every player should see some activity as it relates to his character - - that keeps everyone interested in the campaign. In a nutshell, dungeon crawls build character stats, but event-based gaming actually allows the characters to grow.

GM Tip #2 - - Optional Encounters, Not Wandering Monsters

I'll be honest here - - I detest random encounters. As a GM, I found "wandering monsters" chewed up a lot of time and did nothing to move the players through the story. As a player, I found they were a drain on party resources and yielded very little in the way of important information or useful treasure. And there was always the embarrassing question the players would ask, "We just cleared that corridor 10 minutes ago - - where did that band of goblins come from?!?" Any explanation the GM makes is going to sound lame, and rightly so. It just wouldn't make sense.

I once ran a D&D game where the players faced and defeated their very first dragon (it was a young blue dragon, if anybody cares). What a rush! But a few minutes later, a random encounter with a few giant centipedes and several unlucky dice rolls led to the party being decimated. The players and GM alike were all shaking our heads in disbelief over that one. It took a large portion of the remaining game time for the surviving characters to find a way to neutralize the poison and heal the wounded characters.

Wandering monsters were built into the rules of the game and the characters were ultimately restored to health, but it was a colossal waste of time. Even worse, there was a very real danger that some of those fine players could have lost their hard-earned characters to GIANT CENTIPEDES! Now I don't mind if characters die in the pursuit of adventure - - that's part of the thrill - - but to get bumped off by a wandering monster is frustrating and disappointing.

Clearly, a different strategy is needed here. While wandering monsters do not easily or logically tie into a storyline, "optional encounters" can! Using event-based scenarios, I write up a number of optional encounters that I can drop in at any time, but which do not affect the story if omitted. They are designed to be simple, but with a specific purpose in mind - - ready if needed and easily discarded if not.

If I want to soften up the characters before meeting the main villain, I can insert an optional combat encounter with an orc patrol. If the party has already taken a beating and is too weak to face the main villain, I insert an optional encounter with a sympathetic cleric or traveling potion peddler so the characters have an opportunity to recover a bit before the climatic battle. Rather than rely upon random chance, I plan ahead for the eventual need to provide the characters with greater challenges or a little extra assistance so they can get to the real meat of the scenario.

As GM, you should always maintain control of who or what your players encounter and when the encounters occur. Leverage that control to advance the plot and don't be a slave to wandering monster tables or allow random encounters to disrupt your carefully-laid plans.

GM Tip #3 - - Manage the clock

Not only should you control the encounters, you should also control the pace. Many professional sports teams rack up impressive winning games by managing the clock - - using the time available as they see fit, while preventing their opponents from doing the same. It is beneficial when a GM learns to do the same. If the players are blazing through your planned encounters, then toughen the subsequent encounters by adding an extra monster or two. If players are struggling in the encounters, then reduce the numbers or strength of the next encounter to speed things along.

Plan optional encounters that you can drop in if you need to stretch out the time, but which are not vital to the core elements of the story. These optional encounters can be for combat, information-gathering, character-oriented goals, or just plain, quirky fun. And the beautiful part is that any optional encounter you don't use in a particular game session can be saved or recycled for a future encounter. Work smarter, not harder, as the saying goes.

Another aspect of time management - - beware the single player who tries to monopolize your attention. There are some players who will insist that their characters get involved in every little detail of the adventure. You know the ones. They appear to believe they possess some special power that enables them to be everywhere at once.

A player like this will head off to the local alchemist's shop (to identify a magic potion he recently found), then suddenly decide to break into the conversation the party cleric is having with a crazed hermit (at the other end of town), and then jump in on the tavern brawl started by his dwarven companion. These folks may be very good players, just overly ambitious and competitive. Let them pursue one course of action and be firm in insisting that they allow the other players have a chance to do something on their own.

Also, every player needs the opportunity to contribute to the game and have a fair share of “screen time.” Keep an eye out for the quieter and more subdued players to be sure they can participate without getting overruled or bullied by the stronger-willed or more assertive players.

When players go off on wild tangents (always possible with the event-based style), gently and subtly guide them back into the story elements you prepared. Use red herrings sparingly -- it can be amusing to send characters off on a wild goose chase occasionally, but it consumes a lot of time and is frustrating to players if used too often. If players flounder (and this can happen to even the most experienced player on occasion), let them make a skill roll to discover a heretofore unknown clue or allow them to consult with a wizened sage (for a price!) to get some advice or direction.

I've played at gaming conventions where a 4-hour scenario was over in 2 hours because the GM didn't plan enough for a quick-thinking and efficient party to do. I also spent 4-hours in another game that never came close to reaching the conclusion because the GM allowed each player to go in a different direction and chase all kinds of dead ends without ever attempting to bring us all together. Clock management is an important concept at home and abroad.

It's a good idea to determine how much time you want each planned event to take out of the time you have allotted. If I were running a 4-hour superhero game at a convention, my basic timetable might look something like this:

0:00-0:20	Introductions, hand out character sheets, and explanation of game mechanics (if necessary).
0:20-0:30	Scenario setup, present story hooks, and initial character actions.
0:30-1:00	Discover clues, investigate crime scene, research suspects.
1:00-2:00	Encounter major henchman and minor agents of the villainous mastermind.
2:00-2:45	Heroes placed in death-trap or forced to break off combat to save innocents in burning building.
2:45-3:45	Track henchman/agents to villain's lair and confront mastermind in a climatic battle.
3:45-4:00	Game resolution and wrap-up.

You can bet I'll have a couple of those optional encounters ready in case the players progress too quickly early on. I would also cut the death-trap/save innocents-event short if the battle with the agents took too long. Time management can sometimes be difficult to do -- a GM gets caught up in the excitement and action as easily as the players. This certainly isn't a bad thing, but as GM you should strive to discipline yourself so that the pace of the game remains steady and the scenario completes in a reasonable amount of time.

GM Tip #4 - - The Magician's Choice

We've all seen it -- someone working a magic card trick asks a willing participant to pick between two piles of cards. Unknown to the participant, the magician has already determined which cards he is going to use. If the participant picks the pile on the right, the magician announces that those cards will be used to continue the trick. If the participant picks the pile on the left, the magician announces that those cards will be discarded. The participant is given the illusion that he is in control when, in fact, the magician is moving the trick along in the way he wants. This is called the magician's choice and, as you can see, it is really no choice at all.

A GM can utilize this concept to great affect in his event-based scenarios. You can give the players all the choices they want, just make sure they wind up where you want them to be. But like any good magician, it is important that you properly “sell” the trick and maintain the illusion. The players must believe they are masters of their own destiny or they will perceive the choices you give them be just another form of railroading. Use the magician's choice sparingly, but employ it when necessary to advance the story of your scenario and keep the players on track.

Remember -- like a good magician, a good GM never reveals his secrets.

GM Tip #5 - - The GM's Secret Weapon

While Duct Tape and WD-40 belongs in every repairman's toolbox, there is one item no GM should be without -- clear Contact Paper. This is the inexpensive plastic film used to line kitchen cabinets and drawers. It comes in long, wide rolls that you cut to fit whatever you need to cover. Just peel off the backing and stick the adhesive side to a smooth, flat surface, carefully laying it down a little at a time and pressing out the wrinkles and air bubbles. Contact Paper comes in all different colors and designs. There are some nice wood grains and stone textures that look good for certain RPG props, but the transparent (clear) kind is most versatile.

This is great stuff! Put it on your rulebooks to protect the covers and spines from wear and tear. Use it on GM screens that see a lot of action. Cover your maps, artwork, or other paper props if they are too big for a plastic page protector.

You can write over it with wet- or dry-erase markers and it's cheaper than lamination. It may take you a couple of tries to get the hang of using it, but the results are well worth the effort.

The adhesive is generally weak enough to be lifted and repositioned without damaging the surface of books and most cardstock, but strong enough to hold securely once in place. Cheap Contact Paper can yellow or become brittle over time, so buy a decent brand (I prefer "Con-Tact" brand myself). Be warned - - some types of ink (like ballpoint pens) will bleed into the surrounding adhesive over time, but I've never had this happen on professionally printed rulebooks. I can't vouch for all types of computer printer ink - - it's a good idea to print out a test page from your printer and apply some clear Contact Paper to it, then wait 2-4 weeks to see how the ink reacts to the adhesive.

That's All, Folks!

GM advice could fill whole volumes and these are only the tip of the iceberg. I hope you can glean some small nugget of useful information from the concepts presented above. Good luck and happy gaming.

