

Game Mastering 101

(GAME MASTERING FOR BEGINNERS)

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Tips for New Game Masters

The Basics

- THERE IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG WAY TO GAME MASTER
- EVERYONE IS SUPPOSED TO HAVE FUN, INCLUDING THE GAME MASTER
- ROLE PLAYING GAMES ARE COOPERATIVE STORYTELLING
- THE GAME MASTER DESIGNS THE PLOT AND THE STORY UNFOLDS AS THE PLAYERS PLAY
- YOU DON'T HAVE TO MEMORIZE THIS DOCUMENT. USING SOME OF THESE TIPS WILL MAKE THE GAME MORE FUN, THOUGH.

Vocabulary

GM / GAME MASTER: THE NARRATOR/DIRECTOR OF THE ROLE-PLAYING GAME.

NPC: NON-PLAYER CHARACTER. THE GAME MASTER WILL FREQUENTLY VOICE THE NPC.

ROLE-PLAYING: PEOPLE ACTING AS FICTIONAL CHARACTERS IN AN IMAGINARY SETTING.

ENCOUNTER: MEETING NPCs (NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS). THIS USUALLY MEANS EITHER A CONVERSATION OR A FIGHT.

SITTING: PEOPLE GETTING TOGETHER TO PLAY A GAME. MANY ADVENTURES REQUIRE MORE THAN ONE SITTING.

ADVENTURE: A COMPLETE EPISODE WITH A BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END. IT MAY TAKE MORE THAN ONE SITTING.

CAMPAIGN: A SET OF RELATED ADVENTURES.

BATTLE MAP: A VINYL OR LAMINATED MAP WITH EITHER SQUARES OR HEXAGONS FOR DRAWING A BATTLE SCENE OR AERIAL VIEW OF THE LAYOUT. THIS MAKES FIGHTS MUCH EASIER TO MANAGE.

STANDUPS / MINIATURES: SMALL STATUES OR CARDBOARD ON STANDS THAT REPRESENT CHARACTERS, MONSTERS, AND NPCs ON THE BATTLE MAP.

Gaming groups

- A GM AND 4-6 PLAYERS EACH SITTING IS OPTIMUM. 3-8 IS WORKABLE.
- 2-3 PLAYERS TAKING TURNS GMING WORKS BEST.
- ONE SITTING EVERY TWO WEEKS IS USUALLY BEST, BUT ONCE A WEEK IS OK. IF YOU DO ROLE-PLAYING GAMES TOO OFTEN YOU GET A BURNED-OUT GROUP AND IF YOU DO NOT MEET OFTEN ENOUGH PLAYERS LOSE MOMENTUM AND INTEREST.
- KEEP THE PLAYERS INVOLVED (THIS IS ROLE-PLAYING). THEY SHOULD BE DOING STUFF, NOT LISTENING TO THE GM READ STUFF.

Preparing for a game

- YOUR FIRST ADVENTURE SHOULD BE A SIMPLE ONE, PERHAPS AN INTRODUCTORY ADVENTURE THAT COMES WITH THE GAME.
- IF THE PLAYERS ARE NEW TO ROLE-PLAYING GAMES, GIVE THEM ARCHETYPE CHARACTERS TO GET STARTED MORE QUICKLY.
- EVERY GAME SHOULD START WITH A GOOD ADVENTURE. CREATE AN ADVENTURE, USE ONE THAT CAME WITH THE GAME, PURCHASE ONE FROM A COMMERCIAL SOURCE, OR REUSE A FRIENDS WITH THEIR PERMISSION. HAVE A LOOK AT [RR_Adventure_design_101](#).
- REREAD THE ADVENTURE BEFORE THE GAME.
- HAVE MINIATURES OR STANDUPS FOR NPCs THEY MAY FIGHT READY AHEAD OF TIME.
- IF YOU CAN PRE-DRAW AREAS WHERE A FIGHT MAY OCCUR ON A BATTLE-MAT, DO SO. HAVING SEVERAL BATTLE-MATS CAN BE HELPFUL FOR THIS.
- START WITH SOMETHING HAPPENING, NOT WITH CHARACTERS HANGING OUT.
- WHENEVER POSSIBLE, DO MUNDANE BOOKKEEPING OFFSTAGE SO NOBODY HAS TO WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO SHOP FOR EQUIPMENT OR MAKE A CHARACTER. *Exception: The first game will have everyone making characters at the same time and getting standard equipment.*
- IF SOMEONE SHOWS UP LATE WITHOUT A CHARACTER, LET THEM USE A LOANER CHARACTER FOR THAT SITTING. HELP THE PERSON MAKE HIS/HER OWN CHARACTER AFTER THE GAME. LOANER CHARACTERS COME WITH THE GAME (REX HAMMER & VIOLA STARR). IT IS OK IF YOU HAVE TWO OR THREE LOANER CHARACTERS THE SAME GENDER, JUST GIVE THEM UNIQUE NAMES.
- EXPLAIN WHAT EQUIPMENT DOES IF THE PLAYER DOES NOT KNOW.

General principles of game mastering

- KNOW THE RULES. THERE ARE ONLY 16 PAGES. READ THEM.
- KNOW THE GENRE. ROARING ROCKETS GAME MASTERS SHOULD READ [RR_Genre](#) AND [RR_GM_guide](#).
- THERE IS A LOT OF SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL, LIKE THIS ONE. KNOW WHAT IS IN THEM SO YOU CAN CONSULT THEM WHEN USEFUL (BETWEEN GAMES). YOU DON'T HAVE TO MEMORIZE THEM ALL, JUST KNOW WHAT IS IN THEM IN CASE YOU NEED THEM.
- TRY TO KEEP THINGS HIGH ENERGY. DO NOT LET THE GAME BOG DOWN.
- DO NOT BE AFRAID TO CHANGE THE PLOT TO MATCH THE PLAYERS AND THE MOOD.
- DO NOT FORCE THE PLAYERS TO DO STUFF THEY DO NOT WANT TO DO. IF THEIR CHOICES MEAN MOST OF THE ADVENTURE WILL NOT BE USED, THAT IS FINE. A WELL-DESIGNED ADVENTURE WILL HAVE MATERIAL THAT DOES NOT GET USED.
- GIVE PLAYERS OPTIONS, BUT DO NOT BURY THEM IN TOO MANY OPTIONS.
- IT IS OK IF THE PLAYERS CLEVER THEIR WAY AROUND YOUR TRICKS, TRAPS, PUZZLES, OR OTHER OBSTACLES. DO NOT TRY TO FORCE THEM TO DEAL WITH IT. REWARD THEM WITH THE EASY PATH THEY DISCOVERED.
- THE PLAYERS WILL ALWAYS DO THINGS YOU DO NOT EXPECT. GO WITH IT BUT STEER THEM AWAY FROM THINGS THAT WILL DERAIL THE GAME. IF PLAYERS DO SOMETHING THAT SHORTCUTS HALF YOUR ADVENTURE, THAT IS FINE. BUT IF THEY WANT TO GO ON A WILD GOOSE CHASE TO THE WRONG PLANET WHILE THE BAD GUY DESTROYS THE GALAXY, ADVISE THEM THAT THEY ARE ON THE WRONG TRACK SOMEHOW.
- SOME GMS USE A SCREEN TO HIDE THEIR NOTES AND DIE ROLLS FROM PRYING EYES. PUT KEY INFORMATION ON YOUR SIDE OF THE SCREEN. A SCREEN COMES WITH ROARING ROCKETS (SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED).

- This is STORYTELLING. SOMETIMES IT MAKES THE GAME BETTER IF YOU ROLL THE DIE BEHIND YOUR SCREEN FOR APPEARANCES AND THEN ANNOUNCE THE RESULT YOU WANT. THIS CAN BE REALLY IMPORTANT IF THE BAD GUY MAKES A SUPER LUCKY ROLL THAT WOULD WIPE OUT THE CHARACTERS ON THE EVE OF THEIR VICTORY (THE PLAYERS HATE THAT). SOMETIMES THE ADVENTURE CALLS FOR A PRETEND DIE ROLL WITH PRE-ORDAINED RESULTS.
- PROPS CAN BRING LIFE TO A SCENE BUT CAN ALSO BE OVERDONE.
- BACKGROUND MUSIC OR SOUND CLIPS CAN HELP SET A SCENE, BUT CAN BE DISTRACTING IF PLAYED TOO LOUD OR NOT CHOSEN WELL.
- WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES. ADMIT THE GOOFS SOONER RATHER THAN LATER.
- LOW DIE ROLLS MEAN THE BAD GUYS HIT. HIGH ROLLS MISS.
- THERE IS NO STAT FOR LUCK IN ROARING ROCKETS. IF YOU WANT TO SMITE SOMEONE WITH SOMETHING BAD, PICK THE ONE WHO USES THE MOST IMPOLITE LANGUAGE.
- ALTERNATING GAME MASTERS IS A REALLY GOOD IDEA. INSTEAD OF ONE PERSON HAVING TO GM ALL THE TIME, IT DRAWS OTHER PLAYERS INTO THE CREATIVE PROCESS.
- TEAM GAME-MASTERING CAN WORK WELL. IN ONE COMBINATION A STRONG STORYTELLER/ROLE-PLAYER IS IN CHARGE OF STORY AND A MATH-GUY/RULES-LAWYER IS IN CHARGE OF FIGHTS. IN ANOTHER A TALENTED ADVENTURE-MAKER MAKES THE ADVENTURE AND ACTS AS ASSISTANT TO A STRONG GAME-MASTER.
- IT IS SOMETIMES A GOOD IDEA TO OFFLOAD CERTAIN THINGS ONTO PLAYERS. A MATH-GUY CAN HELP RUN COMBATS. ARRANGE FOR A CERTAIN PLAYER TO RUN A CERTAIN NPC.
- DO NOT RUSH THE WRAP-UP AT THE END, EVEN IF IT IS GETTING LATE. THEY NEED FEEDBACK FROM THE GM AND THE CHARACTERS SUPERVISOR. THEY NEED AWARDS AND REPRIMANDS. THEY NEED TO SAY WHAT THEY ARE DOING DURING WRAP-UP. THEY NEED TO RECEIVE AND SPEND EP.

Character development

- THERE SHOULD BE BOTH RISK AND REWARD FOR ALL PLAYERS IN EVERY ADVENTURE.
- GIVE EVERY CHARACTER THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE A HERO IN EVERY ADVENTURE.
- CHARACTERS MUST BE ABLE TO MAKE PROGRESS TOWARD THEIR GOALS, GAIN SKILLS, ACCUMULATE THE EQUIPMENT THEY WANT, BE DECORATED, AND SO FORTH.
- CHARACTERS SHOULD NOT ACCUMULATE MORE STUFF THAN THEY CAN CARRY. HOW MANY MOVIES SHOW ACTION HEROES GOING EVERYWHERE WITH AN EQUIPMENT CART?
- DO NOT RECORD MONEY, EXPERIENCE POINTS, OR DECORATION POINTS ON THE BACK OF A CHARACTER SHEET. USE A SPECIAL FORM OR A SHEET OF LINED PAPER FOR THAT. THEY CHANGE EVERY GAME AND IT IS HARD TO PLAY IF THE CHARACTER SHEET IS A MESS.
- NAME PLACARDS OR BADGES WITH CHARACTER NAMES ARE HELPFUL. THERE ARE LOTS OF WAYS TO DO THIS.
- SHEET PROTECTORS ARE GOOD FOR PROTECTING A CHARACTER SHEET BETWEEN GAMES. THEY HELP KEEP THE SUPPLEMENTARY SHEETS, NAME PLACARD, AND CARDBOARD STANDUP WITH IT.
- HELP THE PLAYERS DEVELOP THEIR CHARACTERS PERSONALITY BETWEEN GAMES, OR SEND THEM TO SOMEONE WHO IS BETTER AT IT THAN YOU.

Setting a scene

AN ADVENTURE USUALLY UNFOLDS AS A SERIES OF SCENES. AS GAME MASTER, YOU SET THE SCENE AND THE PLAYERS TAKE IT FROM THERE. FOR EXAMPLE:

YOU SEE A GRASSY SAVANNAH WITH NO TREES OR BUILDINGS IN ANY DIRECTION. A HOVERCYCLE IS APPROACHING YOU AT A GREAT RATE OF SPEED.

GIVE THE PLAYERS TIME TO REACT, SPEAK, AND TAKE WHATEVER ACTIONS THEY WISH.

THE HOVERCYCLE IS CLOSE, NOW. IT IS SLOWING DOWN. THE RIDER HAS A RED HELMET AND IS DRESSED ALL IN RED.

GIVE THE PLAYERS TIME TO REACT, SPEAK, AND TAKE WHATEVER ACTIONS THEY WISH. THE CHARACTERS HAVE LESS THAN A MINUTE UNTIL THE HOVERCYCLE ARRIVES.

THE HOVERCYCLE STOPS AND THE RIDER DISMOUNTS. THE RIDER IS A TIGERWOMAN. SHE REMOVES HER HELMET AND SAYS "EARTHMEN, THE MOTORHORDE WILL COME OVER THAT RISE IN MINUTES. GET US ALL OUT OF HERE AND I WILL SHARE INFORMATION."

GIVE THE PLAYERS TIME TO REACT, SPEAK, AND TAKE WHATEVER ACTIONS THEY WISH.
ET CETERA.

This is cooperative storytelling and you are the director

- ALWAYS PLAN WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF THE CHARACTERS FAIL, THAT WAY YOU CAN KEEP THE ADVENTURE MOVING.
- DO NOT INFORMATION DUMP ON THE PLAYERS. GIVE ENOUGH INFORMATION TO SET THE SCENE AND MOOD, AND ENOUGH FOR THEM TO MAKE DECISIONS. INFORMATION DUMPS CAN BE IN HANDOUTS BEFORE OR AFTER GAMES. HANDOUTS ARE ALSO A GOOD WAY TO GIVE LEADERS AND TRAVEL AGENTS THE INFORMATION THEY NEED.
- ROARING ROCKETS ADVENTURES CAN STALL OUT IF THE TRAVEL AGENT DOES NOT DO HER JOB. SHE HAS ALL THE INFORMATION EVERYONE NEEDS AT HER FINGERTIPS AND EITHER HAS NOT LOOKED AT IT OR DOES NOT SHARE IT. YOU MAY NEED TO PROMPT HER TO SHARE OR EVEN HAVE AN NPC SHARE THE INFORMATION.
- A STORY NEEDS DIALOG. CHARACTERS SHOULD TALK TO NPCs INSTEAD OF THE GAME MASTER NARRATING.
- SHOW, DON'T TELL; THIS IS STANDARD STORYTELLING TECHNIQUE. BE THE NPC THE PLAYERS TALK TO. PUT THE TACTICAL SITUATION ON A PRE-DRAWN BATTLE MAT. THE CHARACTERS FIND A NOTE: INSTEAD OF SAYING WHAT IS ON IT, GIVE THE PLAYERS A COPY. ET CETERA.
- DO NOT LET THE GAME STALL. DO NOT LET THE PLAYERS SIT AROUND FRUSTRATED, UNABLE TO SOLVE THE PUZZLE THEY NEED TO MOVE ON, OR GET HUNG UP IN ANY OTHER WAY. DO WHAT YOU NEED TO, GIVE THEM AUTOMATIC SUCCESS IN A DIE ROLL, OR GIVE AWAY INFORMATION IF NECESSARY (SUGGESTIONS FROM AN NPC IS A STANDBY SOLUTION).
- WHEN THE PLAYERS APPEAR TO BE GETTING STUCK, ASK THEM WHAT THEY THINK IS GOING ON. THEN FIND A WAY TO PUT THEM BACK ON TRACK. OFTEN WHAT THE PLAYERS THINK IS GOING ON WILL BE MORE INTERESTING THAN WHAT YOU HAD IN MIND; ALTER YOUR ADVENTURE ON THE SPOT IF SO. OFTEN THE PLAYERS MISCONCEPTION WILL BE THE SPARK OF AN ENCOUNTER THAT GETS THE GAME MOVING AGAIN (IF THEY ARE EXPECTING SPACE PIRATES, HAVE SPACE PIRATES SHOW UP. THE PIRATES CAN SPILL VITAL INFORMATION TO GET THE GAME MOVING).
- DO NOT GET DISTRACTED, CHECK YOUR PHONE, START SERVING DINNER, ETC. IF YOU ARE BORED, THEY ARE MORE BORED. GET THE GAME MOVING AGAIN.
- NO SENSELESS FIGHTS. YOU ARE BORED SO MONSTERS POP OUT OF THE GROUND. THE CHARACTERS WON THE FIGHT EASILY, SO TWICE AS MANY BAD GUYS COME

- rappelling from the rafters. Senseless fights are not storytelling and get old fast. Players get mad if their character dies in one.
- Red herrings and random-seeming events are standard plot devices, but distracting the players with lots of unnecessary events and plot detours is not good storytelling.
- Encourage role-playing. The character's likes, dislikes, values, speech patterns, and point of view will be different from the players.
- Enforce some elements of role-playing: The characters know things the players do not know (*like how to hotwire a spaceship*) and the players know things the characters do not (*this GM likes to use a second wave of bad guys*).
- Roaring Rockets may be an unfamiliar genre to younger players. Do not neglect setting, description, culture, or genre-building.

The GM acts as the referee

- Know the rules. This game has short rules.
- All phones off. Phones are game-killers. Remind everyone at the beginning of every sitting.
- The players are a social group like any other. Insist they curb their misbehaviors while you are GMing. They should treat everyone else with respect and show common courtesy, not disrupt the game.
- Do not let a player argue with you. Nobody came to watch that. If it is important to the player, offer to talk to them later. If the player is right you can fix it later.
- You cannot make everybody happy all the time.
- Sometimes something significant will be forgotten and nobody will realize until later. The usual solution is to ignore it and keep playing. Sometimes you should compensate. If a character was killed by a tiger while wearing tiger repellent, upgrade him to wounded instead of redoing the fight.
- Try to be consistent with rules interpretations. Players expect this. It is OK to find out the right way to do something and change, but do it that way from then on.
- Do not halt the game to read rules. Wing it and do things right the next time.
- Do not allow people to shout/talk over each other during a game.
- Make each turn cycle clear to players. Go around the table in order. A common technique is to make the player seating order be the character turn order.
- Role-playing is the most effective teaching technique known. Players slowly become a bit like whatever they role-play. Do not permit people to role-play doing things that are morally wrong. Encourage them to be heroic instead.

Continuity tips

- MANY ADVENTURES TAKE MORE THAN ONE SITTING. TRY TO END THE SITTING AT A GOOD STOPPING POINT, LIKE THE BEGINNING OR ENDING OF A DAY, A JOURNEY, OR AN ENCOUNTER.
- SPEND A MINUTE OR TWO RECAPPING WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PREVIOUS SITTING OF A MULTI-SITTING ADVENTURE.
- A MULTI-SITTING ADVENTURE CAN HAVE SUDDEN CHANGES IN PERSONNEL. SOMEONE WHO WAS THERE LAST TIME IS NOT THERE THIS TIME, AND/OR SOMEONE NEW IS THERE. THE USUAL WAY TO HANDLE THIS IS FOR EVERYONE TO PLAY LIKE THE NEW PERSON WAS ALWAYS THERE.
- IF THE ADVENTURE REQUIRES CERTAIN SKILLS, AND THE CHARACTER WITH THOSE SKILLS IS NO LONGER THERE, JUST AWARD THOSE SKILLS TO SOMEONE AT A MINIMAL LEVEL. AWARD THEM TO THE MOST APPROPRIATE CHARACTER, AND WHEN IN DOUBT, AWARD THEM TO THE NEW PLAYER.
- MANY ROARING ROCKETS ADVENTURES REQUIRE A MALE CHARACTER PLAYED BY A MALE PLAYER, AND/OR A FEMALE CHARACTER PLAYED BY A FEMALE PLAYER. IF A KEY CHARACTER IS NO LONGER THERE, LEND A MALE OR FEMALE LOANER CHARACTER TO A PLAYER. ONE OF EACH COMES WITH THE GAME (REX HAMMER & VIOLA STARR).

Campaign tips

- TAILOR THE GAMES TO THE PLAYERS. SOME GROUPS WANT TO BE GOOFY; SEND THEM ON LOW-RISK ADVENTURES WITH PLENTY OF GOOFINESS OPPORTUNITIES. SOME WANT HIGH-STAKES ADVENTURES; GIVE THEM PLANETS TO SAVE FROM DANGEROUS BAD GUYS.
- WHEN USING ADVENTURES YOU DID NOT MAKE, ALTER THEM TO MATCH THE PLAYERS. RAISE OR LOWER THE STAKES, MAKE IT MORE OR LESS DANGEROUS, ADD OR SUBTRACT OR CHANGE BAD GUYS, ETC.
- A SECRET RUNNING PLOT THAT UNFOLDS OVER MANY ADVENTURES CAN BE FUN.
- FORESHADOWING IS FUN. IF APPROPRIATE, WORK SOMETHING ABOUT AN UPCOMING ADVENTURE INTO THIS ONE.
- GIVE EACH CHARACTER SOME RUNNING GOALS OR AGENDAS.
- DO NOT BE A CHEAPSKATE WITH REWARDS. DO NOT OVER-REWARD EITHER.