

# GM-ULTRA

## How to supercool your tabletop role-playing game

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*dedicated to the Gamma Worlders,*

*and to Herbie Brennan, Master of Masters*

*With help from Gurth, Doug Gunter, and CKL*

*“...In harvest time, a great many of the reapers come to drink here in the heat of the day, and he that can read best among us takes up one of these books; and all the rest of us, sometimes thirty or more, sit round him, and listen with such pleasure, that we think neither of sorrow nor care; as for my own part, when I hear the mighty blows and dreadful battles for those knights-errant, I have half a mind to be one myself, and am raised to such a life and briskness, that I frighten away old age. I could sit and hear them from morning till night.”*

The Innkeeper,

Miguel De Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*

## INTRODUCTION

Ever desperately wanted to do something you were rotten at? Tabletop role-playing was like that for me. I loved the concept, was entranced by the colourful possibilities, hungrily devoured the rules and accumulated as many new books as my teenage finances would allow, joined the club, got invested with the Gamemaster's (GM's) robes, lured in some unsuspecting players, and starting running games...and I sucked at it.

This isn't a surprise. Role-playing games are notoriously difficult to run well, albeit less so to play. If you're a player, you can get away with showing up, grunting and rolling some dice, but the office of the Gamemaster (herein GM): that's where the players look to for the glamour, and that's where it almost always falls apart.

The problem behind the problem, is that GMing is a Sith-like art. There needs to be a master and a student, and the student has to get it in his mind that he's going to be better at it than the master is. There's no need for acrimony or bitter rivalry, but it's good if the student has a spark of “I can do that better!” in him when he participates in the master's game. Then he pays attention, then he starts writing up his own stuff, and then he learns what it means to be a fully paid up, two-headed werewolf GM.

If you love role-playing games, want to run them, and suck at them, I want to give you this book as a substitute for a master. I've successfully run a campaign involving nine players over about ten years (with lots of gaps in between I'll honestly add), and the whole thing turned out smashing. This is the book I wish I could have found when I was fourteen. It wouldn't have solved all my problems, but it would have given me a foundation. Hopefully you at whatever age you are, will profit from it and make your games even

better than my best have been.

Shall we begin?

## **THE ABSOLUTE PRINCIPLE: STUFF**

Running a game is primarily about shoving stuff at your players. Characters, details, kingdoms, treasures, costumes, artworks, intrigues, riddles, romances, animals, plants, spells, monsters, weapons, technologies, poems, dungeons, potions, wars: you're under pressure to deliver the goods, to shove stuff from your mind into the minds of your players for them to deal with and delight in. If you've got no stuff, the game goes dead. Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-sh, hear that, that's dead air. Dead air means your players' minds go blank, and we all take a trip to the White Room of absolute blankness and boredom, which is the opposite of fun. Too many trips there, and your players will be voting with their feet and disappearing over the hills and far away. So, the goal is to have stuff to give your players. Bear that in mind as we progress.

## **THE AWFUL THREAT OF FAILURE**

It's not failure that is the problem. Of course you're going to fail as a GM, here and there, now and then. Sometimes you might even botch a whole session, or, worse, a whole campaign (see Going Gonzo, below). The problem is *coming to love failure*, because failing can have a thrill to it. Instead of cultivating that, learn to love learning from failure. Don't wallow in failure; say, "That was a mistake, that was stupid, but I see the mistake now, and in future I can do better." A core idea of play is that if you fail at play it's not the end of the world. You have to be able to deal with not succeeding in order to actually succeed.

For example, twenty years ago I tried running The Lawnmower Man, a near-future game about the potentials and intrigues surrounding the technologies of virtual reality. The players had made their characters, I had a rudimentary plot about a cybernetically enhanced bank robber, the players started to plan their investigation...and then I froze. I couldn't think of a damned thing...and told them so...and my players waited for me to get my act together, and when I didn't, they left, disgusted. The lesson? Visit the library and make notes to rely on! Don't just "wing" the whole thing extemporaneously.

## **GOING GONZO**

Going gonzo means throwing everything you've got into an overly ambitious setting. I tried this three times and it never worked. Basically gonzo is a huge cheque you write that your players are going to try to cash and you've got to have enough imaginative money in the the brain bank to pay up.

The first time was running Chill, a monster-hunting game. I set it in 1995 in Nevada in a planned desert suburb, like an integrated circuit. I watched the film *Parents* and decided it would be better to set it in 1955. So we had six or seven players, in this town, where there were going to be three different monsters plots at work and an evil corporation to boot. Doesn't sound like much but try it when you're 14 and have about one clue on how to run the system. Didn't work, I chalk it up to system and general ineptitude, but it was ambitious and started out impressing everyone.

The next game was Kult, a road-trip campaign called the Roads of Ruin, when I was 21. This ended up being over a hundred pages of encounters, dozens of detailed NPC's (I was even rolling dice to find out what change was in one girl's pockets, what T-shirt she wore, etc.). Well, it all ended up in the garbage, to be frank. I couldn't hack it. There was this opportunity, and I had system crankiness again, and didn't know how to create the sorts of plots from the movies that I liked, so there was no way to allure the players. I didn't know how to run a good game. Thus, ironically the game was a ruin.

The last gonzo game I tried was online when I was 32, a homebrew called Z0Z0 or “2020 AD”. I had cultists and high technology and bizarre monsters of mysterious origin and cats and a runaway banking system and the unbreakable code and staircases into the centre of the Earth and the discovery of a new colour of the rainbow and...it might have hung together long enough to get its sea legs, but the system was an over-simplistic one, and the game was being played by email and in my experience PBEM games suck. They drain you and there's no social reward, nothing even approximating face-to-face interaction, and there's too much need for flavour text, and soon you run out of flavour text and it gets sparse. Skype or other online videoconferencing networks can work, but not PBEM. So it didn't work.

If you're going to go gonzo, which is fun to try, you've (1) got to get your system clear and ready, that's one thing I've learned. I've tried a heavy system – Phoenix Command, of all things – and while I loved it enough to make it mostly work, it's the kind of thing that needs a serious tune-up if not an overhaul. And that's good. You're more of a master if you can tailor your system to fit your desires. I recommend getting a good grip on your system, snapping off a lot of the extraneous junk so it can proceed smoothly through the medium of gaming thought (See All Systems Check, below).

And, (2) you've got to divide the campaign into chewable chunks that prevent the PC's from roaming everywhere and involving themselves in everything (see Master of Space, below). Cut it up into bite-sized bits that hold clues to the larger mysteries. This means coming up with reasons why the PC's stay still. That can be space (physical) or motivation (mental). Motivation is the harder one to come up with, in my experience. Find what the party as a whole wants and let them know there's no use looking outside the area you've described.

With proper system and parcelling, you have a fighting chance.

## **DOG'S BREAKFAST**

When designing your scenario, you may be tempted to include EVERYTHING you can think of. While this seems good, it can be bad. Some ideas just don't go, even in a gonzo setting. Lizardmen should not have laser guns (soy sauce and ice cream), don't give the Byzantine wealthy woman a pet oyster to produce pearls for her (a 19<sup>th</sup> Century joke), that kind of thing. You may find it wise, to be discriminating in what you include because some stuff will be better served—will be more fun—if you save it for its proper venue, for a future campaign. Keep the lasers in the sci-fi setting, and the pet oysters for the industrial revolution, is my recommendation.

## **WINGING MECHANICS**

Mechanics break games. In a heated session, it can be hard to keep everything straight, and so a cheap but effective safety valve is to get answers to pressing questions by rolling a single die. 1,2,3, the grenade went down the well, 4,5,6, it didn't. Simple yes or no question answered by a die roll. As long as you roll behind your GM's screen, who's gonna know?

## **ALL SYSTEMS CHECK**

Okay, this is where it falls apart about 50% of the time: system. It's a contraption that pretends it's going to make your life easier by somehow answering questions that crop up in the game, but oftentimes it makes things harder because it becomes a quagmire you sink into during the game, flipping pages and trying to find rules and meanwhile your players are refastening their eyes onto their cellphones.

To be optimal, system should be something you're so familiar with you just roll dice and proceed apace with. Occasionally you look something up, but mostly you just tell what happens and answer questions and roll dice as needed. So I'll tell you how I filed the useless bits from my system of choice and you can do likewise.

Part of the problem here is that when you're younger, just starting out in the GM-ing business, you're going to be looking at the system as a teaching aid, as something which teaches you about physics, measurement of intelligence, how a melee works, that kind of thing. Now, there's nothing outright wrong with this, but it means you're going to view your System like a student views his mentor, and that means you're going to have a hard time questioning your System and chopping and changing your System. It's better if you read (read read read) and learn about life somewhere else, wherever possible, and then *import* that knowledge into the game.

When that happens, you start to have a fuller view of the world that you use the system to evoke, instead of trying to summon the world *using* the system, like the system is a spell you're casting to make you see reality.

So, the first step is to find a system you like. This will probably be a system attached to your favourite game, but it doesn't have to be. There's no law saying you can't rip the system out of one game and graft it surgically into another game's setting. That's what I did years ago: I took Living Steel's system (Phoenix Command) and decided I'd use it for everything: Call of Cthulhu, Kult, D&D, everything. It appealed to me, it helped me tell the stories I wanted to tell, and I settled on it and that's good, that's step one.

Step two is getting to the fundamental WHY of the system, which is always, "answers to questions". And in particular in these sorts of games it revolves around "do I kill the monster" and "did I crash the car/climb the rope/slip the poison in their drink?" So you need a mechanic, or mechanics that will answer these questions. Now, that mechanic, you should have DOWN, you should be able to do it while seated upside down. For the latter question, "did I crash," for example, Phoenix Command comes down to a 3d6 task resolution system where all you need to know is the basic chance of success, which is found in the skill tables. For the former question, "how do I kill the monster," there are a few weapons, hit location, and medical aid tables. And that, pretty much, is all you need to run that game.

Step three is knowing where to look up whatever, so: design a folio that contains printouts of the need-to-know rules and tables. In this postmodern age you might be using tablets or other such hand-held computers to do this, so if that works for you, great. As you run games, you'll find some stuff in your gaming folio never gets used, so periodically either rip it out or keep it for colour. Just don't colour yourself to death.

Step four is dealing with the other stuff. Spell lists for instance, can be a lot of fun for people into magic, but there's no need to memorise it, just consult the spell listing as needed and figure it out on the fly. If there's a wizard, get familiar with a few of his or her favourite spells just to keep things moving. The same goes for monsters with special powers like venomous fangs, entangling attacks, magic resistance and the like.

Step five is ceremoniously dumping into the garbage can all the rules you will never need. As you start out, as I've mentioned, rules can be comforting, but as you age, rules become redundant as you know better how to jury rig situations on the fly. A separate missile weapon odds of hitting table? Junk it. Rules for precisely how long scenes and sessions and campaigns are supposed to be? Junk it. Vehicular chase rules? Mmm, that might be interesting, keep that for colour. Dropped oil-lamp break chance table? Junk it, just wing it if it comes up. These role-playing books can be thick, with thousands of rules. If you're judicious,

if you want to, you can pare that down into a compact set of all-terrain answering tools that you can take everywhere you go.

## **THE BRIEFEST NOTE ON NOTES**

Any prose you plan on reading to yourself during play, **make sure it's in a large font**. Statistics are easier on the fly, but I've found during play the excitement makes it hard to read prose well. You may not have this problem, but if you do, having large font will help.

## **USING THE INFINITE INTERNET**

The Internet is a Godsend to GM's. There's an inexhaustible infinity of good stuff there, including, importantly, (1) message boards where you can ask questions and get a score of good answers about any logjam or hangup your game is experiencing. And (2) beyond that there's the great knowledge factory of articles and videos, so pretty much whatever your subject, you can find out about it to your game's benefit. And (3) you can find visuals and maps, which is great if you suck at drawing and mapmaking.

And all of this wealth can be an embarrassment, because you can be overloaded. I used to feel this way entering a library: too many books! But that's a happy complaint. *The key is to keep focused*. If you're running a Call of Cthulhu game set in the 1920s, just focus on a few things: costumes, cars, and music, say, and that's it. Don't try to become an all-knowing god, just dig up a few things you can throw your players' way. Next week you can dig further to find new things to throw at them.

## **A CHEAP WAY OUT OF THE NPC PROBLEM**

Just give each significant NPC one freakish characteristic, whether physical or mental. Look up “personality disorders” and select one disorder for each NPC. That makes them memorable and distorts their personalities in ways easily role-playable.

## **PLAY AS WELL AS GM**

Playing under a GM, any GM, can stir your thoughts and feelings about how you want *your* game to be run. There was one fellow I played with under a mutual friend GM, and the fellow wanted to try his hand at GM-ing. He asked if I'd like to play, and I thought about it, thinking that he was too inexperienced and would make a botch of it, and so declined. He didn't show it, but he dropped out of my game soon after. That was an unfortunate thing for me to do. Give him a chance! If no one ever plays in his games he'll *always* be inexperienced, and even playing under an inexperienced GM can be fruitful. You might learn something, he might learn something, and it's still gaming. If it's terrible and wasting your time, you can always drop out. So, play, and give people a chance.

## **PSYCHOTIC CREATIVITY**

“How do you think of this stuff?!” is, if you're in any way creative, a question you'll get. And the answer is very simple: You think like a crazy person. The kind of creativity useful to a role-playing game, in large part is the kind of creativity associated with a psychotic mental state.

In a state like that, you might look at a run of ice down from an outflow port in the side of your house,

and think it is Thulsa Doom's Mountain of Power, replete with snakes, orgies and concubines. You might look at the soft brown sand at your feet while swinging at the local playground, and think it is brown sugar—so why not have it be the hoard of a race of brown-sugar-eating intelligent ants, hoarded the same way dragons hoard gold? Or, you happen to be holding a feather duster, a clipboard, and a wristwatch all in one hand...and realise that together they really are a spaceship of exotic design—or horribly mundane in the future universe—and you begin noticing its features: a fluffy propulsion unit based on negative gravitation, a flat anti-Chaos shield, and a banded circular area where the bridge, quarters, and exercise rooms are held.

Or with personalities, you take someone you know, and you put them behind carnival glass, so they look different. You can do with this actors or people you know or people you don't know. To prep one for play, do two things: (1) ask yourself one question about them, like where do they live, where they are going, what sinister thing they're up to, what their scam or their scheme in life is, or what noble thing they are holding on to against an evil world, and (2) give them a disability or disfigurement or an exceptional talent. If you want, keep on adding things to make them more and more different—voice, religion, whatever—to become a funhouse mirror echo of the original you started from, but often it's easier and fine just to take a subject, alter them a little and then let them loose in your game. This is a cheap way of thinking up NPC's instead of feeling like you have to invent them ex nihilo.

Get into a state like this on command, and everything becomes gaming material, because you can twist and reinterpret everything to conform with your story. Some things are easier to conform to a given story than others: better to get your maze, perhaps, from a crossword puzzle than from the coffee pot. And the more you expose yourself to intriguing novelty—including looking at old things in a new light—the more opportunities you will have to use your (controlled) psychotic mentality in coming up with details, terrains, architecture, clothing, languages, and personalities for your game. So go crazy!

## **MASTER OF TIME**

Game-time is plastic, going fast and slow. It works in intervals of choice. If your players want to travel from Aquilonia to Zethuria, which is 3,000 leagues away, you ask them what they do to prepare, what they bring, who they talk to for advice and so on, and then you ask if they're done preparing, and then they set out. Now, from that point you don't ask them every ten feet if they keep on going or stop or whatever, you ask their intentions, and they'll say, “We ride to Zethuria,” and so the ball's in your court, you just tell them when something interesting happens like an ambush or a fork in the road or an approaching slave army or whatever. And when that's taken care of, they tell you what they're doing, and it goes back and forth. You pick up on when they've put themselves on “autopilot” so to speak, and “wake” them when something happens.

Or, you have them encounter bandits. The PC's have an archer, so you ask him if he wants to shoot. Yes or no, the bandits advance, you ask him again. He either tells you exactly when he'll shoot, or lets you advance the game incrementally. Eventually either he shoots or the bandits are upon them, or both. It's a balancing act, but it's good to think in threes: The bandits are far away, they're middling-near, or they're imminently near. The only other situation would be for them to be in close combat range. When your players understand how you run things they'll conform their decisions to your rules, and all will be well.

## **MASTER OF SPACE**

Game-space is compressible and expandable. It has an effect on play. The original RPG's like Dungeons & Dragons sent the action into a dungeon, where space was at a premium and you could control, somewhat, where your party went. It's easier on you when you limit your PC's' options, or else they're

going to go hog wild over king and country, off the edge of the map and into the great white unknown that blows your preparations into nothingness.

In many ways, close quarters are more interesting, because that way you can ration out information, items, NPC's, and monsters, so that everything doesn't happen at once. It's also an excuse to get your players mapping, which can be great fun. I remember playing D&D one time and I made a quill out of a goose feather (look it up online) and bought some India ink to use on some butcher paper, mapping as we went. There was also the fun, added suspense of whether or not I would spill the ink all over the Dungeonmaster's kitchen table, which fortunately didn't happen.

Another consideration is that monsters have their own space—i.e., territory. They can be locked in cages, in awkward caves, in holes in the ground (like a trapdoor spider), up in trees, flying about, patrolling the wilderness on foot (or tentacle), lurking in an abandoned cottage, hiding in rivers, swimming in oceans, festering in a grave, pulling the chariot of Helios, whatever. Give them reasons for being where they are, and they won't all wander about at the same time and start to eat each other. This also gives the PC's something to discover, which they can use to their advantage; e.g., “Harpies only hunt during the day, so if we travel by night we can save our arrows.”

If you do set a game out-of-doors, then you have to prepare some intriguing terrain or the game is going to get boring. I've found it works to treat scenery like an encounter, to throw in small details here and there—birdsong coming from a gum tree, a log overrun with tiny grey insects (harmless)—to complement when you situate important features. Also, you can take photographs of terrains whether urban or rural for you to use. Take inspiration from miniature scenes, too.

Not all spectacular or remarkable scenery needs to associate with key features like artefacts, NPCs, magic circles, monoliths, or monsters, but as a rule don't waste time describing in loving detail every mountain your PC's climb.

## **MASTER OF DISASTER**

Things have to go wrong in the story of your game or else you're not running it right. Seriously, if your game consists exclusively of a walk in the park from A to B without a single problem cropping up in between, you're not giving them enough stuff.

You can force trouble or you can invite trouble. Inviting trouble is when the PC's stop at a village where few people are around, most of the houses are boarded up during the day, and there's a creepy vibe around. Do they stay? The game is inviting them to stay, to find a reason to stick around and find out what's happening—viz., the village is addicted to hypnotic magic gourds, the seeds of which have mutated a pair of common boars to great size and which come at night to seek food, whether gourd-flesh or human. Invitations can be a flop, they depend on cooperative players, or, at least, players who are playing out their characters' curiosity, cupidity, lust, honour, stupidity, and so on, so you entice them into the plot, into trouble.

Forcing the PC's can be simpler. They've chosen to enter the Swamp of Sorrows and are attacked by giant toads. Okay, a forced battle. But they win, and then you want them to enter the terrible Temple of the Toads, so you have thousands of giant toads croak and ribbit and hop towards them, driving them into this queer, pillared marble building in the middle of the swamp. Inside, there are traps and monsters, but all of a more invitational nature, including the demented little old lady monster acting as majordomo to the toad spawn and conducting the sacrifices—including of the PC's once she can trick them into drinking the magic soup that will shrink them down to a third their size, making their struggling bodies easier to handle.

It's not always easy to set up disasters. Some disasters can be premature, as when a villain is introduced and bested before he has a chance to be hated. Some disasters are built into the PC party, like having a monarchist and an anti-monarchist with no compelling reason not to kill one another on sight. That's probably something you should correct during character creation, unless you fancy time-bombs.

## **PUZZLING**

So you want to pose a puzzle, trick, or trap for your players. The problem is: where do you draw the line between PC ability and player ability? The game would get very dull if every puzzle requires an Intelligence test by the PC's rather than the players thinking about it, but it could be said the players are there to do the thinking and the PC's to do the acting. The players think up the general way to solve a puzzle, the PC's perform the actions necessary to do so. Well, then, what if the players suck at lockpicking in real life when their characters have lockpicking skills and tools?

Give them both ways. If the players solve the puzzle, they solve it. If they can't, they get a skill roll as a saving grace. If the players solve part of it, give them a bonus to their dice roll. This works for general-knowledge puzzles. Puzzles requiring special knowledge such as demolitions disposal are skill rolls only. You could rule, however, that it doesn't work in reverse: if they fail their skill roll, they've failed and cannot try to solve it themselves. So it adds tension to the game as they realise it's better to solve things "for free" rather than risk the dice all the time.

## **PARTY CREATION**

Everyone knows about character creation, which in my time has been the most fun, with the actual gaming ranking second because of the difficulty to pull it off. But there's a part of gaming between character creation and play proper that is almost always ignored, and that's party creation.

A party is not merely a collection of individuals, it is greater than the sum of its parts. A party is formed of individuals *and* their relationships *and* their shared history. Together these things form the party. So, the obvious first scenario of the game should be telling the story of how the party was formed.

To do this is slightly tricky (see Master of Space, above). In my Gamma World game I defined an area, bounded by natural obstacles like a perilous forest to the North, a mountain range to the West, hopeless mazes of roads to the East, and an impassable swamp to the South. Then I let the created PC's loose without any knowledge of each other or the area.

The first two PC's were Joseph Hunter and Ross Duncanson. They met while both exploring an abandoned amusement park. There they found a hexagram made of living green ants underneath a suicide hanged from a roller coaster, and Ross ran off in fear. Joseph decided it was his mission in life to protect this vulnerable fellow, and they teamed up.

Freddie Deanson and "Gizmo" Willums were both badly injured and captured by a gang of cannibalistic bikers, who took them to their gas station dedoubt. Meanwhile, Joseph and Ross encountered the automated trucks. They unwittingly got in one, the doors locked and trapped they were brought to the gas station. The truck proceeded to try to gas them with diesel fumes. Joseph went berserk and ended up killing himself while lighting the gas station on fire, while Ross escaped into the diner area where he was captured with Freddie and Gizmo.

Now they've all got a reason to work together and stick together, and they do, until they realise that the



area they're in is being hemmed by the automated trucks and their construction machine cousins, creating an impassable electric fence. So they realise they have to get out of there, and they start meeting NPC's who help them or whose loyalty they doubt, and so on, so now they've got a history together, that binds them. Then there's less of a chance of them fissioning whenever a scenario gives them the option. There's a species of love that exists between them, a kind of loyalty, that "you all meet in a bar" doesn't have. "You all meet in a bar" can be fun, but it's risky because it's depending on your players not playing roving individualists.

Try it and you may find party creation is almost as fun as character creation, if not more.

## **THE GREATEST REMEDY TO YOUR GAMEMASTERING PROBLEMS**

Experience. You need experience points, like you get x.p. in D&D. Not just experience running RPGs, though—that's like training to be a driver without ever filling the gas tank. The best remedy to GM-ing problems is to become more experienced in life itself. Know people, love people, fight people, earn money, read, write, take up a hobby, struggle against nature, laugh and cry. This is a depressing answer, I agree. You don't want to run games fifteen years from now, you want to run them now. So did I. Consider this a disability you're stuck with. There are ways around it. Let's consider some of them.

### **WAY #1: PEOPLE WATCHING**

A good game can take place in a jagged wasteland or a dank, dripping dungeon or on a blue alien jungle planet—some place with few or no people, just monsters and magic and obstacles and treasure. And if that works for you, fine, there's nothing wrong with it. But if you want a great game, you need non-player characters (NPCs), in order to create a plot. There has to be people opposed to what the player-characters (PCs) want to do, and potential allies, and mysterious neutral characters, and romantic interests and powerful people and humble people and self-serving people and good people and wicked people, and extras who fill in the background. They're actions, speech, and relationships will bring your game to life.

You make NPCs from your experiences. Even if you think you're inventing an NPC completely out of nothing, you're still getting the elements for her from your memory. So you can make up NPCs this way. And if that works, again, fine.

If you're running low on ideas, though, and you've run out of premade NPCs from whatever gaming material you've acquired, you need to start ripping off: become a people watcher. Keep a notebook and a pen or mechanical pencil (not an ordinary pencil because the tip will break when you don't want it to), or else buy a tablet. Take characters from fiction, or people from your factual experience, and turn them directly into NPCs. Or take one's voice and add it to another's body. Or shrink them by a foot, or enlarge them by 80lbs. Or change their profession. Or their sex. Or use the appearance but change the personality and the costume. Characters are the lifesblood of a great game, and every person you meet can be used as is, or chopped and changed, screwed and tattooed to turn them into someone for your players to have fun encountering.

Note that this works for thinking up PCs, too. There's really no difference, except that PCs tend to be laboured over more than NPCs.

For example, I played in a modern-day Mage game one time, and had to think up a character. I simply picked my old math teacher, all 400lbs of him, renamed him, invented a new background (from Soviet Russia), and proceeded with the rest of character creation to make my math-professor/crime-buster character.

In another instance in the same game, when said math prof was caught by (and met a horrible fate at the hands of) mysterious black-suited agents, I had to make up another character. This time I modelled him after an old, gangly, comical friend of mine whose voice I remembered and whose personality seemed a little wacky. So I gave him a ridiculous plush white top hat and some personality flaws like Short Attention Span. Not Pulitzer material but what the heck, he was fun to play.

## **WAY #2: PILLAGE THE MEDIA!**

Someone once said, “Creativity is hiding your sources.” This game is your game, not anyone else's, so you should feel free to do whatever you want in it, including ripping off other people's works. All of us for all our lives have had media images, characters, situations, and ideas thrust at us from books, comic books, televisions, magazines, newspapers, audioplayers, radios, Internet, and films, and these images, characters, situations, ideas have colonized our imaginations and engaged our emotions. They've live inside you already, so exploit them back! Don't let them hedge round the lush fields of your dreams, forcing you to try to be totally original, take these things for yourself.

You like James Bond? Have him show up in your game. Have that trillionaire industrialist be Tony Stark. Have that ball-busting Lieutenant be Ellen Ripley. Make a scenario based on Mad Meg by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Plan a kingdom by Soldiers At Rest by same. Confront your PCs at the scenario climax with Saturn Devouring His Son by Francisco Goya. You can change their names, their location, their behaviour, their looks and costumes, their histories and friends and foes, at your pleasure. There are no rules here. Can't think of a spaceship to use? Use NC-1701 Enterprise torn right off the screen. Give it a paint job and a new name. Or use the Sulaco from *Aliens*, or the rocketship from *Forbidden Planet*. What if you set your game in Iain Banks Culture novels, or in Piers Anthony's Xanth? Or the Forbidden Planet rocketship crashlands *on* Xanth? Or take the plot from a comic book. There is nothing new under the sun—except when you recycle media stuff in your game, it will *become* new, because you've blessed it with your own perspective and context.

I did this in an all-too-brief Time Lord scenario where I used my old geography teacher as the Dr. (Dr. Hughes), played myself as a companion, and had the TARDIS meet the Next Gen Enterprise with Chief Engineer Geordi LaForge. The point isn't to cram everything into one box, but to shake up these old paradigms and do something fresh with the old building blocks.

So, if your players recognize where you got an idea from, wink at them. And then say, no, this isn't the Enterprise, this is the Endeavour, and that's not Ellen Ripley, that's Bethany Price (a name you got from the telephone book). And this planet is called Nth, the third planet of Canopus, and, yes, there is a Magician Humperdinck there. A little window dressing can work wonders, letting you walk the line between being a complete hack, and being a 100% original visionary auteur (if there is such a thing) Of course, if your players like you being a complete hack, or you think you can pull off being a visionary auteur, go for it. Mostly though you'll probably have to steal to survive.

For example, in Gamma World, I wrote up a pair of brothers, about 11 and 13 respectively, who had lost their family to the marauding bikers and were forced to live by their own resources. And I decided they had become resourceful indeed, learning how to hunt, trap, and kill the ferocious mutated hairless cat packs that roamed the wilderness. They had spears and catskin capes and one had a pot-helmet on his head (a helmet given a handle to turn it into a pot, then reused as a helmet). When the PCs encountered them, someone commented, “Is anyone getting a Lord of the Flies feeling?” which I took as a compliment. I wasn't directly thinking of Lord of the Flies, but I'd read it a few times when I was younger, so those ideas were in there and surely related to my cat-bagging brothers.

### **WAY #3: RESEARCH**

If you're setting an adventure in Scotland, read up on Scotland. If the adventure takes place inside a submarine, read about submarines. If you want the crusty old man in the mountain shack to have a mental illness, flip through the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) or a book on abnormal psychology and find one for him. You don't have to exhaust the subject, just get some key phrases and some facts to spice the game up with. And if your players pursue the adventure more deeply, you can always use the time in between sessions to do more research. You really only have to stay five minutes ahead of them and they'll be none the wiser.

One thing: remember that there is a lot of information that isn't on the Internet, but is found in books. A book will often be more comprehensive than the Internet, and more likely to be better edited. And remember you're on a looting expedition, not a mission to read the thing cover to cover. Take what you need and go.

### **WAY #4: LEARNED IGNORANCE**

Recognising your own ignorance is a good thing. Try to become aware of what you don't know, and then tell your players where the limits of the dream is. If they are good sports they will be respectful of this and not try to break your game, and they'll know when to ease off the questioning.

For example, in Gamma World's climactic episode, the PCs infiltrated an old underground Army base and serendipitously found themselves in the Security hub. They moved from room to room asking names. After about the sixth random name I gave, seeing me exerting myself, Albert asked me if I would prefer to skip naming absolutely everyone they meet (there were thousands in this base). Thankful, I assented.

Your players will test you, you will run out of ideas, and you need to be okay with that. Work to overcome it, sure, but don't puff yourself up for your players pretending you know all. Unless they're very dense, they will home in on your weaknesses and call you out. And if they don't, the game may just quietly fall apart.

For example, running a modern game set in the underworld of organized crime, a player wanted his character to have a Z26. Okay, I said. "Is this scenario going to be like Easy Rider?" he asked. Despite not having seen the film, I lied and said, yes. Mistake: I should have asked him *about* Easy Rider and then told him yes or no. If I had have, I would have been better prepared to deliver the kind of game he wanted. I consider him ending up for whatever reason never playing a session of the game a kind of "calling out" punishing me for my arrogance.

### **WAY #5: MIND-READING**

Everyone has a secret self, and with role-players that self is associated with fantasy characters. And they make PCs in order to let a bit of that inner secret self out—one reason why players can become really attached to their characters. But no character is complete, everyone needs a complement. Even God created Man. So on the outside your friend might be a little slouching and shy and not great at school, but inside his head he's Gandalf or Trinity or Conan the Barbarian or Captain Kirk. Now who would make a really juicy opponent for someone like that? Who would Conan like to cut down to size?

If you can reach into your player's mind, by paying attention to his character choices and actions, to see what his secret self is like, then you can find what he really wants as a complement. It can be a romantic interest, or a romantic or political rival, or it can be a Goliath to their David, a Moriarty to their Holmes, or the Klingons to their Federation. One way or another there needs to be conflict, to give the player a chance to really live lustily in the game and not just pose.

## **WAY #6: INVITE IN YOUR PLAYERS TO HELP CREATE THE GAME-WORLD**

Just because you're the GM doesn't mean you have a monopoly on creativity. Your players are expressing their creativity through their characters, but it doesn't have to stop there. Inviting them to help create a portion of your game-world will ease your burden, and give them pleasure.

For example, in Gamma World, the PCs found their way into a glassworks exhibition at an ancient Materials Exposition site. Much of the glass items had been smashed, but there remained a lot that was intact. They asked what was there. Instead of telling them, I asked them what they wanted to be there. One by one they said their wish, and I told them to roll a die: on a certain result the thing was smashed by vandals, otherwise it's theirs to keep. They had fun coming up with a perfectly clear handheld glass sphere (intact), an exquisite coloured glass chess-set (intact), a glass dollshouse (smashed), and the like, all lying amid the debris of decades of abandonment.

Similarly you can grant a player temporary control of an NPC. In Gamma World, Albert took control of Uther who was acting as a spy from the Flower Lands on the Road Barrens to the North. He ended up having a blast doing a lot of damage to the good guys, even burning down their village at one point with a gasoline-set forest fire sweeping through the tropical forest that hid their home base. At one point after a particularly evil act (his fifth and final Black Skull—see Player Character Evil, below) I informed Albert that Uther was no longer human. “You mean he was still redeemable?!” he asked in amazement.

You can also enlist your players in creating or even running the monsters in your world. In Gamma World, Jacob, using a list I made for him, designed a pack of mutated hairless radioactive wildcats, with poisonous quills and advanced intelligence, with which to spring on the PCs later on. It was a bungle, the cats' ambush led to their total bloody annihilation, but half the fun had already been had merely anticipating the carnage.

Players are wonderful, they can make up fortress villages, new monsters, new villains, help with plots, you name it. Try collaborating with them one-one-one, in secret, to maximize the surprise.

Don't overdo it unless you want everyone to be a co-GM with you, but used sparingly you can liven up their lives and ease your own.

Or, if you feel it's stepping on your GM's toes, I'll give you an even better way: don't invite them, but listen to them when they're discussing the adventure, the problems their characters are facing, and/or solutions to those. Quite often, the players will come up with explanations or situations that you hadn't thought of at all, and sometimes they're too good to not steal. Just give the stolen idea a twist so that at first, it seems like they had it right all along, but then goes off in an unexpected direction after all. In case this seems like dirty pool, ask yourself, why shouldn't you take ideas out of the air you might have thought up yourself if given enough time? View your players as a labour saving idea pool.

## **WAY #7: RUNNING GAMES BY CLOCKWORK**

Running a game is less difficult if you treat the whole thing like a giant mechanical clock. If you have a terrain, whether physical, social, or psychological, have fun mapping it out with various features, avenues, and important locations. Then, deposit your characters onto your map, giving them a disposition, a direction, and a rate of travel. Some might wander randomly according to the dice, others might have maps and goals in mind. Your job is to track the movements loosely or finely as is your pleasure, and notice conjunctions when the NPCs meet each other or the other PCs. Then, sparks!

I did this in Gamma World by keeping track of where the Ministry cannibal motorcycle gang was at any given time. Sometimes the PCs heard the sputter of bike engines in the distance—a sound they learned to fear.

## **WAY #8: INCLUDE REALISTIC DETAILS**

Realistic detail is a good thing. It's one mark of a good comic book artist, and it's one mark of a good GM. It makes the game more immersive for your players. Too much realistic detail will swamp your game, too little will make it feel like a featureless white room, but just enough will let your players take the game seriously because they know there's care and logic put into it.

The art is in applying realistic touches here and there—a barkeep with a big mole on his forehead, a black sapphire set in a Baron's bronze goblet, a blue sash on the noblewoman's dress, a Moorish arch into a Dreamlands palace, a horse twist hanging in the blacksmithy.

You can't know all the realistic answers, but you can ask yourself realistic questions to answer in order to generate interesting detail. What kind of noise does the dragon make when it dies? Not a realistic question but a verisimilar (looks true) one—death doesn't generally come easy to living beings, they often make noises when they die, so what noise would a dragon make? Is it loud, or soft, a gurgle, or a sigh, a horrible screech or cry or moan or an almost theatrical wail of misery and death? Or maybe it recites a poem?

Suppose there's this village haunted by monsters, ghosts, and godknowsies in the woods. Where do the villagers gather firewood? In the woods of course, but when? In the day! How many wells do they have? One. What about the monsters, suppose they come at night—not a good idea to let monsters near their only well, so they have their blacksmith make a metal cover they lock onto the well at night. It must be a very important job, so there's a well-master, who might have a special hat or other identifier. What about religion, magic, or culture—the three might meet with a special decoration put on the well—crossed cobs of corn with alfalfa sheaves and garlic. Where did they get the metal to forge the well cover? How old is the well and what would they do if it ran dry? What kind of trees or edible berry bushes are in the forest? Why don't the monsters eat the crops? How do they guard their houses? Do they fear to bury their dead?

These kinds of details can either be decorative, or plot-relevant. If one of the player-characters is secretly a vampire with a ring that lets her walk in daylight but offers no protection against garlic, then the garlic bouquet at the well, and elsewhere, will pose a problem. She might have to spend the night outside in fear of the monsters—ironically enough! If the player-characters are all from a distant county with a queer dialect, they'll have to test their skills to communicate successfully that they are well-meaning folk from the same kingdom in order to gain any information or lodging for the night. And that well-cover, it might be a recycled Chaos shield—which might explain the unusually high infant mortality among the villagers who drink the well-water, which in turn might mean a village that is slowly depopulating for lack of new children.

And one other, important thing: regarding realism it is vital to be consistent. If you give inconsistent

answers, there had better be a good reason for it (like playing Paranoia) else players will catch on and the world will feel unrealistic. This give you a good reason to take notes on the fly, so you can regroup later and remember, “Oh, right, the snake is in the left box now,” and so on.

*Come, my friends  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.*

*It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.  
Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are:  
On equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Make weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

--Alfred, Lord Tennyson, from Ulysses

## MUSIC

Music almost never works out in my experience, if it's used as a continual background flow. The tempo is wrong: a fight scene might seem to match with an aggressive song, until we see the fight scene lasts an hour while the song only five minutes. Music stirs up emotions differently in differently people and when the come together at the table it almost always creates a muddled effect, coming across as ungainly and distracting.

If you must have background music, go for ambient tracks, like vague easy industrial music for an exploration into an ancient machine citadel filled with shadows and mantis-like robots. Or the sound of the wind--there are plenty of "sounds of nature" recordings available that can help set the scene without trying to steal your game's thunder.

That's said, music can be used to good effect as a scene-setter. Imagine the session opens in a stylish dance-club set with “There's More to Life Than This” by Bjork, with a shady negotiation between underworld characters being conducted at the same time. Or we're going to visit the Dreamlands and we're first treated to “Orinoco Flow” by Enya. Or the characters get into a fiddling contest and you play “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” by the Charlie Daniels Band. I remember one player commenting that this type of effect felt like “virtual reality.”

Music can also cap a session, serving as the opening credits, ending credits, or even cap a campaign. For example, the best use I made of music was at the end of my decade-long Gamma World campaign, where, after the final scene had done, I switched off the lights to create total darkness, and played the apocalyptic “Grace” by Ministry, at the end of which I had arranged with one player to have him switch on a lighter

and say “But sometimes there's a light”. THE END.

Music is magic, and using it sparingly and judiciously will save it from becoming an irritating joke. It may even win the hearts of those whose characters you are ostensibly working to destroy.

## **THE PRICE YOU SHALL PAY FOR GODHOOD**

Becoming a GM means you become the God of the game. Your word is law. You'll find that it pays to be a reasonable God, but one you will remain, and for all the perquisites of Godhood, you'll find that there is a price to pay as well. Many prices, in fact.

The first price is in time. Sloppily written out, crudely diagrammed, but fun, detailed and appealing scenarios take time to write. Properly typed up and edited and arranged scenarios take even more time, but I find it better to just write up something only you can understand—who else matters? And if it's not fun at all, then forget it, but if it is fun, know that whatever you write into your homemade scenario is not wasted, so feel free to go overboard. Even if the characters never encounter what you've written, it still enriches your world—your players will get the feeling that there's something cool around every corner, even the ones they never investigated, a feeling of microscopic detail—and you can recycle these unused elements into another game later!

The second price is in alienation from your own work. As a GM you never get to play in the ideal fantasy world you have created. You spend all this time, and you're stuck knowing all the tricks and seeing through all the illusions and pulling all the strings, and the mystique of the play falls to pieces in your lap. The compensation here is that you are all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-powerful, and when you see this mighty little machine you've created set in motion by your own hand and actually existing in your player's minds, it can be a delicious trip—all the spicier when you're the one who has to navigate the incorrigibly frustrating, fiendishly inventive (not to mention anachronistic!) machinations of your players.

The third price is the shift from wonderment and play to action and purpose. It'll happen to your players, too, but as a God you're more prone to it. It's that the more you've seen the magic behind the game, the monsters, the spells, the rules, the maps, the motivations, and the memories, the magic will lose its luster. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, like a book bleaching blue in the Sun. When you were a child you wondered as a child, at a green leaf with a Monarch caterpillar on it, or at a yellow incomprehensible toy you grasped in tiny hands, or in the inexplicable smiling face of your father, but the increasingly less slow passage of years faded those colours. There are two answers: The unwanted answer again, is life experience, and taking hiatuses from gaming. The wanted answer is that the preparation and thought you put into your games buys a gift you give to your players, and their satisfied faces rejuvenates your colours, and brings you back your caterpillar, your toy, your father's loving face, at least for a little good while.

Or, a good solution is switching games: if you've become jaded with a game, get the group to try something very different. For example, you might be into Shadowrun, but every couple of years or so you might switch to something much more mindless, like a D&D campaign. Then after some months to half a year or so of that, if you grow bored with the simplicity of hack-and-slash you can return to Shadowrun-like games with intrigue, investigation, proper problem-solving, and all that. A good time to do this is when most or all the player characters have gotten killed — though it may not be a good idea to kill them off on purpose just to switch games.

## **ALPHAS, BETAS, AND GAMMAS**

Now, there are four types of players: Alphas, who take role-playing seriously and delight in its successful

doing, Betas, who are just along for the ride; Gammas, who are all business and no art, and Deltas, who are really evil and just want to break your game.

Alphas aren't necessarily actors, but they have "quality," so to speak. They're intrigued by the game, are willing to make even a token effort at role-playing their characters by designing motivations or funny voices or whatever, and want to hear what you as the GM have to say as you spin a tale together.

Betas are just goofs. They might roll dice and show up, but they're apathetic about the game, don't care about their character, generally don't want to be there but haven't found anything better to do.

Gammas are power-players, so-called min/maxers; they care about the game, but only about winning, and bat aside any artistic descriptions given by the GM as "fluff" in favour of the business of winning treasure, increasing their character's power, and generally kicking your artistic butt as GM.

The thing is, unless you're desperate and have no friends, you don't want Betas in your game. If you've got a good thing going, a few Beta hangers-on (the boyfriend or girlfriend of a player, etc.) won't hurt, but if you're struggling, too many Betas will make a psychic clash that drowns out whatever music you as GM are trying to play.

But here's the good news: a lot of "Betas" aren't Betas at all, but are Gammas. And, believe it or not, Gammas are among the best players you've got. A Gamma isn't apathetic about the game, he loves the game: he's a challenge for you as a GM, keeping you sharp. The key is to make everything in the game potentially relevant: the style of dress a lady wears, the inscriptions on the flat archway, the lack of cobwebs in the corridor—all are clues to something: that the lady is a courtesan, that there be monsters within, that someone comes by regularly and sweeps the spiderwebs away. This way, there's a good reason for him to pay attention, and immerse himself in a world he will otherwise view as a statistical exercise. Gammas challenge you to show them, entangle them in a meaningfully-detailed world—a world whose detail's aren't mere tinsel or "flavour text" but demand attention and learning. Gammas are the beasts you must tame with the sweet music of complex rational consequence.

And some "Betas" are actually Alphas who just haven't found a GM who speaks their language yet. Sometimes a reticent player surrounded by good gaming will bloom, becoming more active in the game and more enthusiastic. Don't be too quick to judge: the best test of a player is seeing them actually play.

If you prefer, you can interview your prospective players in a neutral setting beforehand (coffeehouse, the park): ask them what kind of game they want to play in, what is their favourite character, favourite game, and if they come up with something that crosses your grain, thank them for their time and tell them you'll think about whether they'll fit in the game or not.

Deltas are those players who smash the crystal forest, who urinate in the desert oasis, who laugh at the king in the presence of all. These players are ruinous because they know that there are no "real world" consequences to doing any of these destructive things, and haven't the imagination needed to pretend there are game world ones. So the crystal forest curses them, so the Sultan has him staked out for the ants, so the king orders the entire party beheaded—the Delta simply shrugs and says, "Who cares?" And that's the answer you need to get out of him or her when you eject them from your game.

## **MISTAKES**

Maybe you can learn from my mistakes.



The great mistake is not paying attention to what your players want. They want a good time, of course, but you have to do a little mind reading and tell what type of good time they want. If you don't, the game will get boring in a bad way.

I had a friend, call him Marvin. We were playing Call of Cthulhu with some other friends and Marvin's character finds his way into a hidden skyless cave with a placid pool and an altar to Cthulhu. I ask him what does he do, he says he worships at the altar. Okay... Tentacles emerge from the water and a voice in his head asks what does he want? I want to know it everything, he says. Very well, the tentacles say, and wrap round him, dragging him into the water to knowledge?--and death. It was the best I could do at the time, but was unsatisfying.

The better idea would have been to have the tentacles say to his desire, "Kill your friends and you will have the knowledge you seek." That spices it up, because now he's a serial killer in waiting and the other characters have no clue. This is certainly more in keeping with the ideas of the game, of human depravity and the emptiness of the soul in contact with the Cthulhu Mythos.

Another friend, Calvin, was playing a humanoid tiger in a Gamma World game set in an underground giant mutant insect nest. He asked me if he could find a tiger-woman to be his girlfriend. I flatly said no. Ah, what a drag! (I was thirteen.) The proper response would have been, make a smelling roll to smell her. If that succeeded, they could find their way to her, turning a loot-and-exterminate into a more rousing rescue mission. If the smelling roll failed, make an intelligence roll to sense her general presence. If he made that, then he knows she's in there but is flying blind,

Of course, I hadn't planned on having a humanoid tiger-woman in my game for Calvin's character to meet, but then, I hadn't explicitly decided against it, either. So it's not really cheating, it's just embellishing the game by having it. His character learns he has a new ability—detect girls using his nose—the plot gains, and he's having more fun.

Same game, Reggie's character finds a laser pistol. He fires one shot with it and the gun promptly melts into a puddle of slag. Bemused and surprised, Reggie says he'll use his mutation of time reversal to bring the gun back to a point when it was whole and fully charged. I flatly say no. The rules let him reverse time on the gun, but only if he knew what was wrong with it internally that caused the meltdown. The proper thing to say, of course, is yes, but because you don't know the cause, it'll cost you one point of Mental Strength. Thus the game is improved by giving him an option. And later on you can tell him the point cost is recoverable with time, though you don't have to tell him right then and there.

Ron, Darren, and Larry were playing in a hipper, more Mad Maxian version of Gamma World where they're investigating an "ancient temple"--a military installation filled with mutant snakes and robots and what-have-you. A couple of misfires happened here. One is Darren's character, armed with a 10-gauge shotgun, encounters a guard dog sitting upright by an entranceway. What do you do, I ask. I shoot it, he says. Ron and I were appalled at this animal cruelty, and so I told him no he couldn't do that, he should fire a warning shot above its head. Stupid! Of course he can do it, it's his character. Remedy: warn him about wasting ammo! Give him a darkside point, anything, but don't just say he can't do it when he obviously can.

Same game, the characters find their way right next to the armoury. They managed to blow away a major laser-equipped levitating security bot to get there. They know, they just *know* there are laser rifles and powered armour and ultragrenades and all the rest in there, heaped up and gleaming, just for them. I told them it was impenetrable and they didn't have the code. The end. They go home and hang themselves because this game was such a drag?

What do you do in this situation? It's a big reward, make it a big challenge. The perfect answer came to me years later: get one of those slidey puzzles, a collection of square and rectangular tiles set in a frame, where the pieces can slide horizontally and vertically. The object is to slide a key piece from one end of the frame to the other without removing any of the tiles. Nowadays you could almost certainly find one such online. So just hand this game to them and say, if you can figure it out, the 18" thick shiny ceramosteel door eases open in a hush of high-technology, and inside you find...

Another game, Jacob expressed his dissatisfaction with ballistic-oriented combats. Things were more honest or engaging back in the days of swords and armour, he said. I should have picked up on that, but I didn't. How hard would it have been to incorporate some kind of Thunderdome in the game? Probably not too hard. Just make the enemies willing to surrender a MacGuffin only on pain of melee combat with their champion. Or set up a gunpowder vibration field that cooks off any live ammo coming into it, leaving them to fight hand-to-hand with whomever.

Listen to the desires of your players. Don't grill them on what they want--they probably won't be able to formulate it. Just pay attention to the clues and turn the problem over in your mind in your spare time.

### **PUT THE PLAYERS IN DILEMMAS**

Real life is full of binds. When you're already dating a plain-looking girl, do you jeopardize what you have by asking a good-looking girl out on a date? Do you speak a compliment to a lady and risk seeming too forward, or do you stay silent and risk seeming aloof? Do you crack the bully across the back of the head with a hammer (and end up in prison with even worse bullies), or do you get beaten up daily?

The more dilemmas you can put your players in, the better. It's another mark of a good GM. Doing so will give them a real fist-in-the-face view of how harsh life can be. It will get them more *there*, in the game world, and less in the real world. Realism does that: it's quasi-hypnotic.

For example: In Gamma World, the PCs attain the summit of Mindkeep mesa, and they find a warehouse with a big hangar door open. They hear noises from within. They peek around the corner, seeing a few men in military fatigues in a Jeep near a body. "We jump around the corner and shoot them," the player said. "You don't know they killed that guy," I replied. The player's face changed; he was not prepared for murder. "Oh, I hate morality!" So they advance openly to bargain with the men.

Another example: At Saladar port-city, a ship is loading good and making ready to sail. Your character is helping load, and a huge piece of war machinery is loaded, and you grab it to help, but the roper failed his Seamanship roll and the thing turns on its ropes giving you a bad grip. Do you hold on and risk a strained or even broken wrist, or do you let go and risk the machinery hitting and hurting your mates?

Or another: You're defending your Duchess's castle when a stray blow strikes one of her prize white pussycats. After concluding the fight, you notice the cat lying there, dying and in pain. Do you dare put it out of its misery, becoming responsible for actually harming the Duchess's cat, or do you leave it to suffer?

### **MORE MISTAKES**

In Gamma World, we had a party travelling through the Flower Lands, filled with giant flowers and mutated monsters. They pitch camp for the night and in the morning they notice some (ordinary sized) bugs crawling about. "I use my battle-axe to kill the bug" one player said. I said okay, you kill the bug. "Do I get experience points?" No, I said, you don't. And that snuffed that. What I should have said was,

roll to hit the bug. And if he made his to-hit roll, I should have said, you get 1 xp. And I should have let this go on, instead of whining and worrying and dragging them by the hand to get them to go where the plot was. They can spend all day battle-axing bugs for experience for all I care. They can make a semi-permanent camp and spend weeks at it. What do I know? Couldn't you become a master-at-arms by hacking beetles to death? Eventually they'd've run out of bugs and would have to go on a bug-hunt, involving search rolls. And then maybe, just maybe, some of those bugs would be under telepathic control of a ginormous mutant asparagus plant that is luring them into its demesne so it can devour them alive. Or whatever! Let your players have fun, and juggle the consequences.

In Call of Cthulhu, my solo player's Investigator character was a private eye. It was the Great Depression in the US, so I told him he gets up, eats a breakfast of lard on toast, and goes to his office. He said no way, I'm not eating lard on toast, I want butter. I said no, he said yes, he buffaloed me and got his butter. How to handle it: make him make a Credit Rating roll. If he makes it, he gets his butter. If he doesn't, it's lard for him, tough bananas. Don't be buffaloed, but offer a way. Players like making rolls, it's like getting free money if they succeed, so a good way to handle things is by making a roll.

In Monster Horrorshow, the PCs find themselves at the very beginning of the adventure, at the sandy-coloured stone walls of a merchant port town. Entering by the gate, they pass a jail cell. They look in. There sits a ragged prisoner. What do they do? "We spit on him" they say. This is not kosher, this is wrong, they're not playing the game, they should befriend him or something. Wrong attitude: tell them to make a spitting roll to hit. Then after a few rounds of this and the prisoner hurling abuse, he starts spitting back, so they have a spitting fight. And maybe this guy has a cold, so he can hoark up some good ones. And when he runs out of phlegm, there's always the chamber crock, and... The point is, let your players have their fun, and maybe those soft targets aren't so soft after all. Let the world they bite bite back.

In Call of Cthulhu, an Investigator is in the basement of a city house, and gazing up the stairs sees a knife floating as if by invisible wires on the landing above. It slowly turns towards him. "Is this a dagger I see before me?" he said. What a great thing to say! We were studying Macbeth at the time and that was perfect. And I squelched it, telling him that's not how he would react. Lesson: Don't crush delicate flowers. Let your players have their cool moments.

Also in Call of Cthulhu, a fungoid alien spawn from beyond known space seized an Investigator who was inspecting its ring of standing stones, and carried him away into the sky...whereupon it unceremoniously dropped him to the rocks below and killed him. Bo-o-o-oring. Stu-u-u-upid. I mean, such things might happen now and then, but way to miss an opportunity. What if the spawn instead analysed his screaming and decided he was worth conducting diabolical medical experiments on, so it carried him back to its lab in the deep dark hills. Later, his friends investigate an old colonial farmhouse where they find metal cannisters of living human brains, which they find they can talk to using an interface device...and the cannister they speak with contains the brain of the Investigator who was dragged into the sky! What do they do? What do they say? How fearful, what awesome technology, what human emotions would be drawn out! Where possible, draw out the suspense and create poignant moral dilemmas for your players.

In a Basic Roleplaying scenario based on John Carpenter's The Thing, the very last scene was of the Thing—a PC FBI Agent dispatched to Antarctica to investigate strange goings on there—uses an Ingram MAC-10 submachinegun to take an NPC helicopter pilot hostage and compel him to fly to civilization. Not wanting the Thing to win, I ended the game by pronouncing that the helicopter pilot had crashed the chopper on the ice just short of the Antarctic Ocean, burning crew and passenger to cinders. The End. Except this circumscribed the best part of the game: what a scene, this pilot knowing he's bringing about the end of the world by shuttling this monstrous Thing to its destination. I should have given the NPC to one of the players to control—make them roll dice to decide who gets him, and then let them work out out.

Does the pilot have the willpower to commit suicide? Does he bargain? Does the Thing talk to him? Do they fight? Who knows what will happen, but at least give the Thing a chance to work out its own destiny. Don't cut your players short.

## **DEVISING AN AGENDA**

A scenario or campaign doesn't need an agenda; it can be run as a lark (pure silliness) or a romp (a light-hearted adventure) or even a serious tale, but to be an epic you need an agenda. An agenda means you as GM are including a conflict of forces, whether religious, ideological, biological, or physical, which are vying for power over the game world. When you do this, keep in mind that these powers can be like tectonic forces, building up tension in secret before violently erupting, or like weeds and rust, gradually creeping and growing. Devise an agenda only if you feel like doing a fair bit of fantasising about the outcomes, since it's like running a parallel game to the ones your players are playing in.

For example, in the post-holocaust Australian wastes, including the region of giant mutated flowers known as the Flower Lands, there are three contesting forces: One is the spiritual force of Radioactivism, the evangelical radiation-worshipping cult. The second is the fascist army of Oskarton, preparing to conquer the flower lands under the ladybug flag. The third is the Controllers, a secret Northern military base of scientists who are plotting to destroy all potential for civilization's regrowth using mercenaries and VX gas. This is the agenda: to see who will win out, based on their various natures and the nature of the imaginary world's situation they occupy. The Radioactivists are primarily peaceable but demand the right to spread. The Oskarians oppose any threat to hegemony but are not too stupid to make deals. And the Controllers as smart as any of them, with the advantage of secrecy. And, the wild card? The PCs themselves, who may well go on to form their own power group, given luck and care. Who knows what will happen, but if things work out better than you could have planned, you know you have imposed a good agenda.

## **ALIEN THINKING**

The third mark of a good GM is plunging her players into a very different world from our own. When the PCs arrive at a strange town or cross a border, much less when they are dealing with non-humans, there should be real differences in how they are perceived by the locals and in the motivation of those locals. Why play a generic medieval world with magic and 21st century ways of thinking when your game can be so much more?

To illustrate this point, look at the Eastern Mediterranean during the Classical Greek period. The Greeks themselves had a fairly coherent culture, but there were incredible differences between the militaristic Spartans and the democratic Athenians, who lived only a few days travel from each other. Or look at the nearby Middle East, where Greek travellers often interacted with Phoenicians (more mercantile, more class conscious, women had more freedom, often sacrificed their own infant sons to the god Baal) and Egyptians (very obsessed with the afterlife and very distrusting of outsiders anywhere but in the port towns). Not to mention that all three cultures practiced some form of slavery!

In a fantasy world you have cultures that KNOW their gods and goddesses exist and whose influence should be stronger on that culture; you have non-humans who should think in fairly alien terms but who should also vary from area to area in their local culture (dwarves who are more trickster in one location, more bluff and hearty in another, and attempting to imitate Elven culture in a third, for instance). The

local culture should reflect their history, legends and myths about past wars, villains, conquests and clashes of their gods with outsider gods, and should all affect how they react to outsiders.

So when your party enters a seedy inn in a new town, they shouldn't assume their welcome will be basically the same as at any other seedy inn. Maybe the locals really don't like elves or even humans from a particular nearby area; or perhaps they are generally more distrusting of strangers, or they have peculiar taboos about how one should eat and drink. Perhaps the ne'er do well sons of nobles hang out in such establishments, or perhaps they wouldn't be caught dead being seen there; perhaps females are welcome, or welcome just as the companions of males, or not at all.

What is it like to be a slave? To live in fear and rage and humility all at once? Or what's it like to be a wizard, full of knowing and arrogance?—or to live in his shadow, fearful and envious of magic? What's it like to live with deep superstition, or in a world of overabundant wonders—magic might be mundane at that point, and our mundane world would be seen as magical!

Fantasy role-playing gaming is meant to stretch the mind and allow the players to experience a very different "reality". Don't self-limit this experience by sticking to what you "know" and by oversimplifying the fantasy to fit your preconceptions and the standards of your historical time and place; try playing where you have to adapt to different mind-sets and have your character reflect the mind-set of the group of sentients he or she comes from.

Alien morality can challenge your PCs. Do they smash the impure idol and rescue the sacrifice to Baal—though they have worshipped Baal? Do they help the injured man lying in the ditch—even though he is an outsider? Testing human compassion against another world's morality can put the PCs in interesting binds.

## **CONSEQUENCES**

This is the fourth mark of a good GM. The real world is very consequential; eg, by and large, people are polite to each other not out of goodness but because they fear their neighbour will retaliate for any indignity, or injury committed against him. People have memories and they have friends and families and circles they move in, and these circles intermesh to form balances of power later veneered with expressions of human goodwill. Tick off someone and your action will ripple out throughout their society and sooner or later come back to you.

For example: The PCs meet a man on the street and get into an argument with him over the local sports team. It devolves into an insult-shouting match and they end up beating him over the head until he flees. Little do they know he is an agent of the Archbishop whom they are to have an audience with in an hour's time.

Or another, as a dilemma: Old Farmer Graf is a gruff, businesslike man who tells the hard truth. At a barn dance social, he remarks, "She'll make a good wife and cook, though she ain't much to look at". This is overheard by the woman's brother. Does he (try to) punch out Graf, or does he consider that Graf has been useful in the past to his family and might aid them again? If he punches him out, there'll be no favours in the future. If he doesn't, he'll lose standing in his family.

In the wild, even, there are consequences. For example, ecologically, in Gamma World there roamed these vicious pack of hairless mutated wildcats called ferines. They were a terror weapon from the Black Years and were adept at clearing out the wildlife from any given area, devouring everything in their path. Consequentially, in a few short years every bit of wildlife would be gone, the ferines would all starve to death, then the animals would come back, the ferines would come back, and the cycle would start again.

Another example: Jacob's character was adept in archery, and took aim at a wanderer from the wastelands parleying with the other PCs. He thought about killing him, then decided not to. That wanderer was Uther, who ended up causing them substantial trouble later on.

And another: Albert's character was travelling with a group through some dark, dense woods in Australia. At one point I called for a Logistics roll, which he failed. Unbeknownst to them, Albert's character forgot a blanket in the woods...which was later smelled by a terrifying monster...which began hunting for the owner of the blanket!

## **CREATE YOUR OWN TOMES & GM SCREEN**

Unless you think you need and can handle the whole rulebook, photocopy important tables and put them in a binder or duotang for easy reference. Or, download PDFs and put them in a tablet. Type or hand-write out key rules and specific tables for your game that aren't in the rulebook, such as weather or a random animal table based on animals you read about from Australia. This way you have a book that is 100% relevant to your game.

A GM's screen is easily fabricated from old cereal boxes and packing tape. Some of your key tables you can paste or tape onto the inside of your screen. On the outside you might wish to draw a picture if that's your pleasure, or print a compelling photo or painting. I prefer to put on the Role-Players Bill of Rights (see below).

## **CAN YOU OVERPREPARE?**

A great GM once told me something great in regards to game preparation,

“Don't spit, puke. Don't bleed, hemorrhage.”

I took that to heart and wrote a 100-page campaign for Kult called The Roads of Ruin. I made up non-player characters, I drew a huge map on a ten-foot butcher paper roll, I researched stuff at the library and designed locations and cut out magazine articles and everything. I ran one (good, little) scenario for a single player, and then dumped the entire thing in the trash. I had despaired of acquiring the gaming skill that would allow me to turn this monster campaign into a viable game. So, no, it's not possible to overprepare—you can always reuse excess material later—but preparation isn't everything. If you have no skill, your preparations will become an embarrassment of riches.

But never mind that, invest yourself in your game! Effort is gold. This doesn't mean planning the exact route from Mecca to Timbuktu for your PCs to take, but just having an abundance of NPCs, objects, settings, motivations, spells, monsters, preplanned events, and the like, so that you always have something new to throw at the players when they're not expecting it is worth a lot. Write backstories, run games for yourself where you fantasize about what happens behind the scenes, draw characters and inanimate objects like accursed trees, flags, and crowns. Invent a religion, fall in love with a character in your game—be passionate! The skill will come in time.

## **KNOW WHEN TO POWER DOWN**

Sometimes gaming sessions can go on too long. When you've got that tired aching chest and sore throat from speaking, and you're having trouble playing NPCs, or working with the system, or you find yourself getting cranky, it's best to wrap the session up. If you can do so on a cliffhanger, all the better, but close it

down before you end up getting silly with fatigue. Thank them for coming and tell them to tune in next week!

## **PLAYER-CHARACTER EVIL**

Sometimes, players have their characters do evil things. This can bring the whole game to a stop, and give everyone a bad feeling in the pits of their stomachs. Sometimes the player responsible is oblivious to the insult to the game they've committed, sometimes not. Be careful about this—don't let it slide, but don't censor it either. The PC has free will and can do as she pleases. The thing to do is to show the consequences of evil.

Evil is like leprosy: contagious, numbing, disfiguring both body and soul. And like leprosy, evil in your game is curable in most cases. Short of ejecting a hopeless player from your game permanently, here's how:

First, institute a morality system in your game: I used the Black Skull system: every time a PC committed a heinous act, she had to draw a little black skull on her character sheet. A minor evil act like larceny or unprovoked assault might net a quarter or half of a black skull. Three black skulls and that's it—I take the character sheet away and the PC becomes an NPC. This shows the consequence to the PC's soul.

Second, show the consequence to the PC and his environment. I'll give you an ugly example:

Gamma World: after the Bomb where a band of PCs trek through the wastelands looking for food, water, and a way home. They find a clumpy forested area and investigate. One character, Uther, played by a somewhat loose cannon and slightly mentally impaired player, locates a tiny farm house. Does he report back, or offer to trade with the farmer? No, he sneaks in and takes the family's *baby* hostage at riflepoint, holding it up by the scruff of its neck, shouting incoherent demands. An unaccounted for older brother coming home from hunting rabbits heard the commotion, aimed through the window, and sniped Uther in the right elbow with a .22 caliber round. The mother safely caught the baby as Uther crumpled to the floor. The shaken family debated what to do with this wounded criminal, whether to kill him or let him go, they hit on an idea. They took Uther out to the scarecrow, took the scarecrow body down, and crucified Uther alive as a warning to others. Hours later his former friends found him, deciding to strip him of his pants and leave him on the cross.

We felt bad after that incident. Pictures of guns, formerly fun things, looked evil, sickening. The player of Uther had gone too far. We kept on playing, but with a new appreciation of the value of showing the consequences of evil, and how loving, human order was desirable and hateful, inhuman chaos was not. Uther amazingly went on to survive and even prosper as an evil NPC who showed up to bedevil a different group of PCs years later.

In other words, this is the problem of a player having his character commit obnoxious numbers and degrees of evil acts and who is just clever or lucky enough to keep on getting away with it. Then the game sacrifices its humanity on the altar of ugliness. Always play with the morality system in the wings as a safety catch, limiting how far a PC can go before becoming an NPC.

## **THOUGHTS ON ROLE-PLAYING**

Why do I role-play? Why should you role-play? Not insignificant questions if we find ourselves thinking of investing time and effort into the hobby. My short answer is, “searching for essence.” That is what everyone, in their own words, will give. Here's what I mean.

Role-playing is like reading. Both use words to sculpt mental images and evoke emotions. No images, no emotions, no reason to read or game. Although their words may be someone else's, the images are drawing deep from your own memories, and it is this drawing that is like a macrocarpous tree. The fruit of the tree are selfish emotions, compassionate emotions, thrilling emotions, golden emotions, mysterious emotions. Eating these fruits brings you closer to essence.

Essence itself is mysterious, but it relates to the creative play of children, like that of a child first learning to use a puppet. See how the puppet's head is down, puppet is sad, or puppet spreads its arms wide and hopping up and down, puppet is ecstatic. The play may move on to plotting and conflict and questions. There's a creativity there, and creativity is the essence of mankind.

Creativity here particularly means, making your own fun. Video-games and movies can be fun, but they're someone else's images, they're a very guided, ersatz kind of fun. I'm not bashing them, they can be a good thing, but they're leading the senses first, imagination second. And a steady diet of video-games and movies can feel deadening and wearisome. Role-playing offers the chance to experience the joy of a handmade entertainment that is both fun and offers a sense of pride, whether one is the GM making the world, or one is the player, making a character and gingerly guiding him or her through the story.

Without this sense of creativity, of searching for essence, of tapping into treasured emotions—or, at least, the impulse to find emotions worth treasuring--a role-playing game becomes a pale and lame ghost compared with the brightness of imagery-based entertainments—or music, or sports, or model railroading--and the reason for role-playing vanishes.

That's why I role-play, and that's why anyone role-plays as such, rather than thinking of doing something else or thinking of doing something else. The specific *preferences* might differ. One might like the thrill of the fight, another the wonder of magic, a third the suspense of intrigue, the fourth the mechanical interplay, and so on. But the fruit of the true tree is always produced by planting the inkling seeds of the literate imagination.

## **AND IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE**

If you make a mistake in rules (Bobo should've gotten a +3 to hit because of his amazingness), or logic (Bobo can't be here because he is there), or characterization (Bobo wouldn't tell you that information, even though he just did), admit it up front, correct it, rewind time if necessary, and move on.

If correcting it disadvantages someone, make it up to them by giving them some kind of token in-game bonus.

If your mistake ruins the game (investigators of some grisly animal killings are in a woodshed and you say, "It's just like that scene in the movie Silver Bullet...") calmly fold the game and play checkers.

## **HOW TO RUIN YOUR GAME LIKE A MASTER**

Do not let your players deploy any creative solutions to problems.

Criticize anyone who says something witty as not taking the game seriously.

If they start infighting, stealing from each other, etc, tell them they're not taking the game seriously. Don't let them have competitiveness or personality clashes they can act out in the safety of the game.



Make sure there are distractions like rambunctious little sisters and activated televisions and electronic doohickeys in their eyes and hearts. Play in the middle of a busy street if possible.

Don't use candles or tidy up before play to give the play area a cultured and tasteful appearance.

Never take breaks, whether washroom, drink, smoke, whatever. Just don't. Have them swear by their gamers' honours not to interrupt.

Create a Gamemaster Player-Character (GMPC) to be the avatar of your awesomeness.

Encourage impoliteness. Never stop them with an upraised palm and ask nicely them to speak in turn. You want to be sure you're role-playing with savages with no breathing control and ants in their pants.

If a player has a concept for her character, a way to develop it, so she's styling herself as something she really fancies, ignore all her effort and just try to pound her character like a square peg into the round hole of your own magnificent milieu.

Break their favourite gun.

Cheat them. If they announce they've figured out Shylock is the evil banker responsible for the Cult of Hades lurking in yonder "abandoned" keep, change reality and pretend Shylock was virgin white all along—it was the *Prince* who was responsible!

Don't bathe.

Carve the following words into tablets of granite and take them with you to every session of your game:

**DON'T LET YOUR PLAYERS HAVE ANY FUN!**

# ROLE-PLAYERS BILL OF RIGHTS

## **Article 1**

The GM shall not abridge a player's rights to interpret her character, or the right of players to break context in order to discuss relevant non-trivial game matters, or petition the GM for a redress of grievances.

## **Article 2**

The right of the players to bear dice shall not be infringed.

## **Article 3**

No player shall be assigned a character during a game without consent.

## **Article 4**

The right of a player to possess a character, character sheet, and writing implements, free from unreasonable seizure, shall not be violated, and no Warrant against a character sheet shall issue, but supported by the rules describing the acceptable conditions of such seizure.

## **Article 5**

No player's character subject to a ruling shall be twice put in jeopardy of life, limb, property, or sanity; nor shall a player be compelled to make a ruling or provide an opinion; nor shall a character suffer any grievous penalty without due process of rules.

## **Article 6**

In all rules applications, a player shall enjoy the right to equal consideration, and to access to the rules used; a player also reserves the right to employ the counsel of other players in her petitions and contestations concerning a ruling, provided this is done speedily.

## **Article 7**

Very uncomfortable playing areas shall not be mandated, nor excessive waits between washroom, metabolite, and sleep breaks required, nor persecution be inflicted on any player.

## **Article 8**

The enumeration herein of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the players.

*Come the Dawn in all its Glory  
Perish now the Winter's Night  
Vanquish all the Monsters gory  
Carry us away from Fright*