

GM Toolkit  
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## **GM Toolkit**

### **How to GM without going insane**

I've been running RPGs for a long time. Without sounding too pompous, over time you begin to appreciate that there's a certain way to running games and preparing for them. So here's my thoughts on running a campaign or even just a one-shot game.

I'll use the phrase GM for Games Master, but it also means Judge, Referee, Keeper, or DM (Dungeon Master). Players are the real world group of people that you'll game with. PC, or Player Character, refers to their character in-game. NPCs, or Non-Player Characters (the beings and people that PCs interact with) are the province of the GM.

### **Preparing a game**

Okay, so you're pretty certain that you can run a few games and somehow fit it into your schedule. Here's some suggestions:

**Leave yourself some time to relax!** Whilst RPGs are fun they can be hard work, and can be pretty taxing mentally – make sure that you are not living and breathing your game. It shouldn't run your life, and you should definitely make time for friends and family (even if they don't game). Also, a break will probably help you gain a clear perspective too.

**Don't overload yourself.** This means both physically and mentally! RPGs are notorious for large heavy rulebooks: make sure that you're not carrying more than you can comfortably carry. Remember that some players will likely bring their own books too, so you may not need to load up. No game should require you to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of every single rulebook; and nor should the players!

**Advertise your game.** There's a number of ways to do this: at its simplest, put an ad in your local game shop asking for players. However the power of the internet may be your best bet. Nowadays most gaming clubs/communities have their own websites (such as ORC and GEAS in Edinburgh) so they're the best places to visit, either online or personally. Alternatively, large scale global forums such as [ENWorld.org](http://ENWorld.org) can assist in the search for new players. If it is a new system, run a one-off game, and see what interest you get. Make sure you've got enough players before you begin running. If you're new to GMing, 1-4 players is a good start if you are all unfamiliar with the system. 7 or more is only for very experienced GMs, likely with player rules help! 4-6 is usually comfortable enough for most GMs, space-wise and organisation-wise.

**Create stock NPCs.** You don't need to create stats for every Innkeeper and grunt, but a stock set of stats can be very handy, like when the PCs start a bar fight or do something involving a large group of people! Having generic stats on hand, maybe in your **Campaign Book** (see below), can be useful. It also helps if you suddenly find yourself "Winging it" – you can throw in a random encounter. Also keep a list of names that might be handy if you need to come up with a name quickly! For a fantasy RPG, I'd suggest: watchman, tavern brawler, magic user, bodyguard, cultist/cleric, assassin, thief, and adventurer of all classes (similar to PC party of same level or lower). Also, give your NPCs accents or mannerisms that PCs remember – e.g the tavern brawler oftens runs a hand over his broken nose when he speaks.

**Pace yourself.** If you are a player AND a GM, then you may quickly find yourself short of time. This can be for a



number of reasons. Many campaigns fizzle out after a few months – the GM has lost interest, players can't make it, or the GM has run out of ideas. Give everyone time for players to do other things – either run weekly on a particular night (midweek is good), or stagger your game to run every fortnight. However, a GM will likely spend at least one night a week planning their game. Don't try and run several campaigns at once – it can be done, but it is very hard work as I know only too well!

**Manage your time.** As mentioned above, you're going to need to spend at least a few hours preparation before you run a game. It's not much fun trying to come up with an idea 30 minutes before the players arrive. Also avoid GMing when you're ill or hungover: you won't enjoy it, and you'll suffer more! In regards to alcohol, GMing when everyone is a little squiffy is all right, but you don't want to run anything too serious! At the end of the day, do you have time to run a campaign? Ideally most games should run 3-6 hours, at which point a GM's voice will likely give out and their brain will go pop :).

**Expect the unexpected.** Players always throw GMs a bit of curve – they do something that the GM didn't plan for during an adventure or miss the Significant Clue(s). It's usually more common in published adventures, where the writer doesn't know the group that the GM runs for, but still can happen in a self-created game. There's a few options that you can take, and it depends on the game: you can go with it (see **Winging It** below), or use an NPC or event to bring them back on track. Winging it is usually more fun for everyone, GM included, and can often help pad out a fairly linear adventure. However, rail-roading the PCs can be useful if you need to get them to a specific place – but be subtle. Forcing the PCs into a course of action can be a fine art!

**Winging it.** If the players kill a major NPC, then have that NPC come back as undead, a vengeful family member, or clone. If they miss a clue, an NPC mentions it in passing. Improvisation (winging it) is a very useful skill for GMs to have. NPCs are often used to impart information but rather than read out a passage in a flat monotone, try reading it in an accent or declamatory fashion (or military speak for more modern games). Keep a few ideas for sub-adventures should the PCs choose something that jars with your current adventure. If the party splits up, spend equal time on each party (see **Pick no favourites**). It's actually quite easy to wing it – especially if you have stock NPCs.

**Keep a Campaign Book.** This may not be a book as such, but ring binders are very handy for this, as are spiral-bound notebooks. Ring binders can also be used as a GM screen. It's a good idea to have the following:

- A copy of the Player Character Sheets, as players can forget theirs.
- Maps that you have created, for both player and GM.
- Notes on your campaign.
- Stock NPCs.
- Floorplans.
- A plot summary.
- Notable NPCs and their stats.
- Monsters and creatures that you need for the adventure.
- Scribble pad where you write down events that happen in the game and what could lead to further adventures.
- A folder/ring binder that you can stash the above and use as a GM screen, if you don't have a separate one.

## Running the game

Righto. Your game is planned, your rulebooks and campaigns notes are all stashed in your rucksack, now you're actually going to run the game.



**Be on time.** If you are running a game, try and be there early so you can answer any questions players might have. You can also organise the playing area. Although this doesn't sound like much it can save time: having the floorplans and maps laid out, the miniatures and handouts all ready means that when the players are all there you can start. If you are running late or can't make it, let your players know as soon as possible.

**Be a player.** As stated above, it's a good idea to step back from running a game. It's very easy to "burn out" creatively, but having someone else run a game can be therapeutic. It also gives you a much better opportunity to interact socially with your players.

**Don't panic when it goes wrong.** Adapt. Even the most skilled GM will find themselves surprised by their players occasionally. See "Winging it", above. If the game isn't going well, take a break for a 15 minutes – clear your head, get some food and figure out what's going wrong.

**It's not a competition.** Despite what console games and computer RPGs encourage (as well as some RPGs), it's not Players vs. DM (see **Don't abuse your power** below). Remember that RPGs are a cooperative effort: if you act like it's you vs. your players, then you should probably be playing a wargame and not an RPG.

**Be fair and pick no favourites.** Always tough this one: some players get overexcited and believe that the loudest voice is the one that carries the most weight. Others are easily distracted. However, the most important thing is that everyone enjoys the game. If you have a very quiet player, make sure that they are included in the discussions. If a player is new to the game, take some time-out to explain things to them (it can be about the setting or the game itself – another reason why you should **Be on time**). New RPGers do need some "hand-holding", but one of the other players can often help with this (ask them first though). Either way, try and spend equal time on all the players.

**Don't abuse your power.** One of the first mistakes that new GMs make is to get heady with power. Don't kill PCs for no reason other than they messed up your plot. A lot of players invest considerable time in their characters, and it's pretty bad to waste a PC just because you are having an off-day. Don't hold grudges: as GM you're supposed to avoid such things



– and if a player has killed your PC in the game they run, then you shouldn't invoke *Kanly* (vendetta from Herbert's *Dune*), and kill off their PC.

**Don't get carried away:** both yourself and your players. No matter how excited people get about their PC or game, there's no excuse for invading people's personal space. RPGs are a non-contact game and no one should feel uncomfortable while they play a game. No hitting, OK? Also, if you are gaming in a public place, remember that you need to keep in mind that other people are nearby. Keep the noise manageable and don't be a nuisance.

**Don't lose your temper.** Remember that it is just a game. Always be civil and considerate of your players as they should be with you. Don't swear at your players unless it's in-game as an NPC. Even so, remember that some people can take things personally so make it clear that's not you as GM. Addressing them by their character's name in an accent (see **Create stock NPCs**) usually helps. If the game is going badly, don't throw a tantrum, scream at everyone then storm out after throwing all your books in a bag (this goes for players too).

So that's it really. I may come back to add to this article in the future, but I hope it's given folk some food for thought.

## RPGing on a budget

With everything that's going on at the moment, we're all feeling the pinch financially: so here's some suggestions to help you save some cash when it comes to RPGs.

In the suggestions below, many involve the internet: if you are using Mobile Broadband, you may want to check your Mobile Broadband Terms & Conditions as downloading lots of material may quickly expend your data transfer quota.

**Recycle** your adventures, and reuse maps when you can. If you run games for different groups you can likely re-use maps from another game. One of the maps from the **Call of Cthulhu** adventure "The Haunting" has put in an appearance in both my games of **Ashes of Freedom** and **Cthulhutech**. I found a load of old school jotters that I ripped up for scrap paper. If you've got a pile of old games and miniatures, get rid of them on eBay. Metal miniatures can make a lot of cash for you especially if they're the old lead ones and are unpainted.

**Raid your boardgames** for dice and tokens: the dice you and your players can use and the tokens you can use for monsters and NPCs, especially if they are in a variety of colours.

**Miniatures can be expensive** if you're strapped for cash. Players may want to bring their own figures anyway – you can always use counters to represent monsters or NPCs.

**Use squared paper for floor-plans** and draw them so that they can be reused. The backing paper from tackyback (the plastic used to cover books in libraries) is very useful for this. Again, old school maths jotters are useful for these.

**Borrow rulebooks** from anyone that already has them. Nowhere is it written that a GM must own all the rulebooks! If they're playing in your game so much the better – they can bring the books with them when they come along. Just make sure you ask permission before you borrow them :).

**Go shopping for second hand games.** Conventions like [Compulsion](#) and [Claymore](#) usually have a lot of second-hand stuff for sale, including miniatures. You can also check eBay for old games and supplements, but watch out for the delivery costs that can be levied by unscrupulous sellers – a 128-page softback supplement should cost less than £3 to send in the UK – check the Royal Mail [website](#) for some idea of basic prices. If you order from overseas it can cost considerably more. You can also get cheap RPG materials in PDF form from places like [DriveThruRPG](#), rather than shelling out for a dead tree edition.

**Be frugal with your printing.** Avoid printing in colour, especially if you have an inkjet printer: they expend cartridges so quickly that you'll shell out a small fortune. If you're lucky enough to have a laser printer with a duplexing unit, make sure you print both sides. Print in draft mode which will save ink/toner. You could also email/PM your maps to your players rather than printing them. Finally you could photocopy, rather than print, your maps, handouts, character sheets, etc.

**Free PC tools and adventures are out there**, from PC generators to mapping tools such as [AutoRealm](#). Of course, you need to have an internet connection although you could use a library. The internet is your friend when it comes to finding materials for your games. For instance, the [ProFantasy](#) mapping viewer will allow you to view and print the large number maps in their archive. There's also various collections of adventures and other materials created by the RPG community online, such as my own [wiki](#).

**Use Skype or other IM tools** if you can't get your group together to play. One of my friends runs a weekly RPG session using Skype together with a mapping tool/virtual whiteboard and it has been working well for quite some time. With Skype allowing you to make free VoIP calls, it probably works out cheaper than a subscription to *World of Warcraft*.

**Use SRD documents** rather than expensive rulebooks if you can't afford it. Both D&D and Pathfinder have their own SRD documents that are at least usable – they may not be pretty, but who cares? Many games also provide quick-start rules that you can use to run the first few games, usually along with pre-generated PCs.

**Write your own.** Either write your own adventures or come up with your own system. It's a lot of work but may not cost you anything, except time. You can also pad out published adventures with your own encounters and NPCs.

**Host your game.** If you're really skint, host the game in your own home, saving you the travel costs. You might even get free snacks from your players!

And finally, \*SIGH\* there are PDFs out there of scanned books. I DO NOT CONDONE THIS. In fact I strongly discourage it – and it is the reason Wizards of the Coast no longer distribute their D&D books in PDF format. Go figure.

## **The World is not enough: RPG Settings**

My recent planning for the new [Against the Odds](#) D&D setting got me thinking: I've created so many settings now that I'd like to think that I'd developed a certain flair for it. It's pretty straightforward really: creating a decent setting takes some thought, but it's fairly easy to do. I'm going to talk about a pseudo-medieval setting here but it applies to any game.

**Summarise it.** Get a basic idea for the setting in your head – think about the style of game you want to run. It's easier for some people than others, but give it some time. Your setting will be different no matter how long you take.

**Write down your ideas.** You've got some ideas – write them down, then think about how they relate to each other. Sometimes they don't work, so discard any that don't. It's a good idea to carry a little notebook around, then you can write them down: it's amazing how easy it is to get random thoughts and inspiration!

**Who are the bad guys?** This is one of the major stumbling blocks for a lot of people creating a setting. If you're wanting to start a campaign where the major antagonists are demons, undead or other powerful beings, then your 1st level PCs are going to find it hard to survive. On the other hand, even epic level PCs can be swarmed by Kobolds... customise the challenges accordingly.

**Sketch it.** Draw a rough map: you don't want to be too detailed, but you want mountains, coastlines, rivers and any cities. You can add the smaller settlements later along with other terrain like deserts, hills and forests or jungles later. This also gives you a chance to create adventures sites later such as dungeons and ruins.

**We're all friends here.** Given the variety of PC races available, think about the different races and how they may react to each other. For example: if dwarves and elves have been at war with each other for years, they will react very



differently to parties containing their enemy. Tieflings are unlikely to be welcome in a city where Paladins rule.

**Get political.** Now you've got a rough idea as to what the country is like, you can start working out who the major political factions are – remember that neighbouring countries should also be considered: a warlike empire on your doorstep is very different to a benevolent kingdom. How fortified are the borders?

**Movers and shakers.** Create a list of the major NPCs – don't necessarily stat them up, all you want is a list of them and their motivations (and their "demon" if you use my idea from my previous blog).

**Add a twist.** What makes your setting different? For example: is magic illegal? Is the kingdom run by vampires? Think about clichés and how to reverse them or twist them. Dungeons ruled by Red Dragons are unlikely to be situated under the capital city – unless the city is the dungeon!

**Apply logic.** Take a step back: if there's anything that doesn't feel right, or seems far-fetched, ditch it and go back to formula. Think about where everything is – most cities are built near water (or a water supply of some sort), for example. How does the country finance itself? Do they have a state religion?

**Bend the rules.** It's all too easy to consider stereotypes as canon. Paladins may not be as strait-laced as they appear, tieflings aren't evil. By modifying an existing race you can create a truly memorable nemesis. For example: the [Orogkz](#) in [Ashes of Freedom](#) have a few more hit dice and slightly better saves than normal Orcs, but they proved a lot tougher than the players thought! The Lizardfolk of the [New World](#) became a lot more formidable when their civilisation was fleshed out.

**Create a pitch.** You should be able to describe your setting in a few paragraphs. If you want folk to play, you need to sell it: how is the setting different from any other pseudo-medieval one? What do they actually know?

**Don't micro-manage.** You can't predict what your players will do, and should avoid creating the kind of campaign where you lead them around by the nose. You don't need to create a map of every single area. Keep areas free to expand upon in future games – sometimes players can give you ideas for future games without even realising it.

**Don't give it all away.** So you've got a cool setting: resist the temptation to give it all away! Don't give away the secrets too early: make the PCs peel away each layer of the onion slowly.

**Pace yourself.** Make sure you end a game with a bang – or a cliffhanger! If your players are discussing the game when they go home, your job as a GM is done. A game should end with an epic fight or a new twist. In my experience, it's good to leave the players wanting more: ending just before the epic fight, or when the villain unmasks his/her self.

So those are my thoughts: hopefully they've provided some insight into what went into the ideas for my settings.

## Designing a fantasy city

Designing a fantasy city for an RPG setting is quite a challenge, even for those GMs that have been running games for years! While I've described much of a mediaeval-style city or settlement, the ideas here can easily be applied to any setting.



## Defences

This is the easiest place to start for many GMs. Depending on the environment and ruler-ship, a settlement may have a number of possible defences. Whether it is a castle in the mountains or a village in the wilds, the importance of security is the same: keep the people safe and enemies out (whether they are animals, opposing countries, whatever). If a settlement is constrained by the walls, there will be an overspill of the population into the surrounding land – perhaps needing further walls to be created as a city grows.

The most basic defence is the wall, whether it is made of stone, living plants, wood or adamantium. This may be simple stockade where a village is concerned, or a huge stone construction with battlements and guard rooms. Magic, if available, may have been used to strengthen the walls with wards and other augmentation. If you're feeling really nasty, the wall itself could be alive...

Depending upon the regime in power, access to the city may be restricted to only one or a few gates. Do all visitors have to produce identification papers or sign their names? Does a cleric cast *Detect Good/Evil* on all visitors? Does the city have only one heavily-guarded gate?

However, there is more to the defence of a city than just walls – does the city have a standing militia? Do all the citizens get some military training? Are there muster points and choke points throughout the city? Are the streets narrow? Do magic users regularly train with troops?

One final point: strongholds and castles. Every city will have some form of reinforced area: a castle, fort or armoury where the ruler can feel safe. Whether they allow the citizenry to shelter there during times of war is largely dependent on the ruler. If you can find it on eBay, the old AD&D **Castles** Supplement is a marvellous source for designing and building castles.

## Housing

Everyone needs somewhere to live: from a palace to a hovel, every city will have its own distinctive architecture. Are the city streets clean? What are the buildings made out of? How many storeys are they? Are the streets narrow and dark with closes and alleys or are they large buildings with open grounds? Are they built with mud/marble/wood/mortar? Are the roofs flat or thatched?

Most cities have a variety of zones that correspond to social standing – the nobility and priesthood usually remain close to the positions of power, be they palaces or castles. The poor and disenfranchised usually end up in slums. Those in between comprise the majority of the city buildings – shops, inns and other dwellings.

Depending on the regime and climate, the houses may be large and airy or small and cosy. They may be built to fill the visitor with a sense of wonder or terror, or they may be functional and stark. If you pick up a book on architecture you'll find a number of styles that may be of use.

## Economy

Cities don't spring into being overnight – usually they form where business is conducted, or for strategic military reasons. Either way, it brings money to the settlement – and those seeking money.

The economy of a city may be as simple as a market for livestock or goods, or a garrison town. A livestock market town is likely to have large open areas where the beast are sold and auctioned. Crops are stored in large silos and warehouses. If the city is an administration centre or capital, there will also be academical institutions and temples/cathedrals/mosques, etc.

Even when the city has one source of income, there are still support mechanisms for this. In a livestock market town livestock needs transportation, the beasts need fodder, and the farmers need to stay somewhere. Large sums of gold may change hands and both banks and thieves may flourish in such an environment.

Garrison towns usually have a large military presence. Blacksmiths and weaponsmiths may be commonplace, fixing soldiers gear, horse traders selling mounts to officers and the army, seamy bars and other establishments catering to the soldiers vices. At the end of the day, apply a little logic: try and make something stand out about the town; even if it is just “the finest pipe-leaf west of the Misty Mountains”.

## Magic

First off, decide whether magic is legal – this in itself can provide you with a few ideas. How are those who practise magic viewed? Are they valued as professional members of the community or burnt at the stake?

If they are valued, are there academies? A wizards quarter? An Unseen University? Do they have any power within the city itself (see **Guilds & Power Brokers** in part 2)?

If wizards are a power bloc of their own, what magic is permitted? Demon summoning and necromancy may well be frowned upon, but spells that damage property or goods may also be banned. Do the wizards have their own process for dealing with rogue spellcasters? For instance, from the PC game, [Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn](#):

“Spellhold is an insane asylum located on the island of Brynnlaw, one of the Nelanther Isles, off the western coast of Amn, under the command of the Cowled Wizards of Amn. They use the asylum to house the ‘deviants’ they have found in Amn, practicing magic without an official license.”

How do the local temples view magic and clerics of other orders (see **Religion** in part 2 of this article)?

In a city where magic use is commonplace, the citizens are less likely to react in fear to a magic users powers. However, in those where magic is outlawed or feared, there may be literal witch hunts – and a strong religious doctrine.

## Food

According to some literature, civilisation is only a few meals from anarchy.

Unless the city is under siege, food will vary depending on climate, as will the abundance. A city will often buy in their food from nearby market towns, or acquire it from the sea. If the crops fail, it can be a famine disaster on a national scale.

As a GM, you can actually have some fun creating local delicacies and foodstuffs such as vegetables. Consider the humble potato – it didn't exist in Europe until it was brought back as a curiosity in the 16th century. Just by altering some of the basic ingredients you can give a city a whole new flavour (if you pardon the pun!). In the [New World](#) for example, there are no cows or pigs: the local meat comes from dinosaurs. Spices also are a good way to enrich the setting: they can be expensive and can be used as an alternative treasure.

Cities also need to keep grain and other staples usually in granaries or similar storage. There may be large cold-stores for keeping meat but remember that there are no hygiene standards or refrigeration facilities (unless magical).

## Water sources and drainage

Water, like food is critical to the survival of a settlement. It is also one of the settlement's greatest vulnerabilities: it can be poisoned and contaminated, either by intent or accident (see **Sewers** below). No siege can be withstood without the defenders having access to fresh water.

In most fantasy settings, fresh water will likely come from subterranean wells or nearby sources of water. Wells would often be located in communal areas, such as market places. In many desert cultures, large catchment pools or cisterns will be created to collect water from the rare rainfall. More advanced civilisations may have large underground cisterns, and will also have drains, leading to the sewers (see below).

In a high-magic environment, gates to the Elemental plane of Water provide water sources, bound Water Elementals sweeping the streets clean on a nightly basis. One of my favourite monsters, the Cistern Fiend (from the **Dark Sun** D&D setting) actually purifies the water it lives in – it is a big bad-ass guardian monster and water treatment plant in one. Also, imagine the value of a *decanter of endless water* to a desert nomad.

One final thing to consider: does the settlement get flooded in heavy rain? Do the rivers burst their banks? If the undercity floods what are the ramifications – what gets driven to the surface?

## Sewers

It's almost a cliché now, but any city adventure will likely see your PCs in the sewers. Which just happen to be tall enough and wide enough for them to walk, fight and spell cast in. At some point one of your PCs will fall in the sewer where they will likely get munched upon. Don't forget the luminescent moss in case the players haven't brought illumination.

Oh, please. Unless you're running a modern or Steampunk/Victoriana game, the sewers are likely to be much smaller. For those games, subways are also cool – see the film [Mimic](#) for some ideas on how to create these kind of tunnels.

All is not lost though – many city areas are often built on the ruins of others (Mary Kings Close in Edinburgh for a real life example), post-apocalyptic or not. These forgotten buildings and ruins can easily be turned into their own city below, may be leading to the Underdark or other buildings long-forgotten. [Neverwhere](#) is also a good source of ideas for an undercity (London Below).

Subterranean sewers aren't new. The Romans used them, but in fantasy they're often far too elaborate (often based on a modern point of view of what sewers are like). Sewers are probably only a few feet wide and likely tall enough for

however much water is expected – PCs will likely be stooped over with standing water in low areas, possibly with some nasty critters living in the muck that lies everywhere. In most cases the channels will empty into a nearby river, possibly contaminating a water source. Most sewers may flood during heavy rain or if the city has expanded without taking account of the drainage (see above).

What you want to go for with sewers is claustrophobia. There's barely room to fight. It is dark, wet and cold. It stinks and you don't want to touch the walls or be fall over in the filth. When the players emerge, they should be tired, wet, and stinking – and longing for a dungeon crawl.

One final point, consider how other fantasy races may deal with refuse: Elves may recycle theirs, as fertiliser where possible. Dwarves may burn it their forges. Orcs throw theirs in the street :).

## The Regime

Many fledgling GMs find that it's very easy to come up with the city of the Dark Lord: human sacrifice is common and everyone lives in fear. However, there's only so far that a ruler can push his city – and a city is the sum of its parts, notably the people. If the ruler is an evil despot, the people will find a way to work around them.

In a city where law is valued (whether good or evil), there are likely to be levels of bureaucracy that require paperwork for everything. In chaotic cities, gang warfare and whichever faction has the greatest power rules – overtly or otherwise.

Consider how your city is run: is it a democracy? A theocracy? Ruled by a Prince? A dictatorship? How much power do the guilds and other factions have?

Port Blacksand, Ankh-Morpork and Lankhmar are all very different cities but they are all Lawful Evil when you consider the city's "alignment". Think about how your city is ruled: are the citizens taxed to the hilt? Do they love or hate their ruler?

## Religion

Many cities have more than one religion. Usually the primary deity is the patron of the state, with other religions having a presence because of circumstance or environment: military garrison towns may have more warlike deities as their predominant deities, but any religion with healing powers is likely to be well-regarded as well. The people tend to worship whatever gods are relevant to them at any time. If it is a large city, there may be many local religions if a large number of races dwell there.

The best way to approach religion is to consider the regime in power: if it is strict and unforgiving, certain religions will be persecuted. Whether this persecution takes the form of paladins or the Inquisition is up to you: the end result may be the same!

Try looking at real life examples: for example, Christians were a persecuted cult in Imperial Rome, and the Romans deified their Emperors. However they also had the habit of integrating religions into their own, such as the sun god Mithras: it also allowed them to absorb local religions into their "state" religions as it were.

In my own settings ([Ashes of Freedom](#) and [Against the Odds](#)), [Volkraad](#) and [Thulemar](#) are very different: Pelor and

Bane being the state religions. They may tolerate other religions so long as they are not inimical to their god's goals, within certain parameters. Thulemar tolerates Undead (in the form of the Gheribeian Legion), whereas Volkraad destroy undead and rule their creation as blasphemous.

## The Dead

Most settlements will dispose of their dead in a certain way, according to the appropriate religion. Do they cremate, bury their dead? Is it carried out with a celebration of the deceased life or a sombre occasion? Do they practice sky burials or mummification?

In warmer countries, bodies are more likely to be cremated due to the possibility of pestilence. A city that fears undead and necromancy (whether state sanctioned or otherwise!) are more likely to burn the bodies than inter them in the ground.

In those cases where a body is buried, are they buried in a catacomb, tomb or graveyard? The graveyard is pretty much like the sewers in fantasy RPGs – they are usually home to so many undead and necromancers that graves are pretty much like revolving doors.

A large city may have many graveyards, but if it only has large one then you can really go to town (if you'll forgive the pun). Undead have a society of sorts – Ghouls feed on the dead and may construct tunnels so they move around unseen beneath the surface. Vampires may rule sections of catacombs, patrolled by their minions – not necessarily zombies or skeletons either, vampire spawn may be trusted with their own areas. Carrion crawlers nest there, close to a plentiful food supply. It can also be a hiding place for necromancers and also thieves and other ne'er-do-wells.

Even those cultures that practice sky burials can have beings haunting their grave sites – predators such as werewolves and ghouls seeking an easy meal. More mundane creatures such as bears may also smell carrion and come scavenging if the site is in the wild.

Finally, cities are often built on older sites – not all undead may be of the modern era as it were. A human city built on an elven ruin may have some very old elven undead still resident.

## Climate

Whether the weather has changed or not, most cities are built to withstand whatever weather is common to that area, be it broiling sun or icy winds. Cities provide shelter to their citizens, and unless the weather has changed vastly, will be built along those lines.

Cities that are in colder climes will likely be constructed of thick walls (stone or wood, whatever is more commonplace), with many fireplaces and chimneys to keep the citizens warm. Smoke from torches on the streets likely hang over the city, and stain the walls. Floors are likely to be cold stone, with rushes or sawdust on the floors that may or may not be changed regularly. Richer homes may have rugs or drapes (often imported at great cost) to remove the chill, or fur rugs. Doors tend to be thick and sturdy.

Warmer or more humid climes may tend towards whitewashed open buildings to reflect the sun. They may be larger, more open-plan buildings with water features such as fountains and mosaics. Internal doors may not exist, with curtains or veils used to separate rooms. It may be that there are no buildings as such – just tents or marquees in some

cases.

Also consider the water table – does the city have a high water table and have canals like Venice? Does it flood regularly – if so, the more wealthy will likely live on the higher ground – and how bad do the floods get? In warmer climates, large cisterns are likely to be used to catch some of the water for later use. Are there such things as tidal bores or hurricanes that regularly hit the city?

## Law & Order

No matter how chaotic or anarchic a city, there are always those seeking to impose order, be it for their own good or that of the city. They may be an organised police force like the Watch or a gang of street toughs protecting their territory. Either way, they maintain a form of *status quo* within the city.

When designing a fantasy city think about how the population react to their rulers. If the city is occupied by a foreign military force, soldiers will likely patrol the streets, with a curfew imposed to restrict those plotting sedition and rebellion. If riots and fires are common place a city Watch likely exists.

Watch members may be paid or not. They may be volunteers with some training that allows them to be militia in times of war. Depending upon the regime, some may be corrupt while others work to the book. The justice system may not exist – the City Watch may be similar to the Judges in Judge Dredd: judge, jury, and executioner. This sort of system, “The Judge” usually requires a certain strength of character as well (not necessarily a moral one) – such characters are usually far better trained than the militia. Judges should be pretty dangerous to normal PCs – from Judge Dredd to bounty hunters like Boba Fett!

Think about how the legal system works in your city. Does the nobility get away with murder? Are trials by combat permitted? Does the legal system permit lawyers or legal counsel? Or do local magistrates administer justice at the rulers whim? Does it use bail?

At the end of the day consider the flip side of the coin: in a town where the Thieves Guild holds a lot of power, many of the Watch will be on the take. How does crime and punishment work in your city: do pickpockets lose their fingers if they are caught? Do murderers get executed? Where are criminals incarcerated?

## Guilds & Power Brokers

Even if your city’s ruler is Supreme Overlord of the Life, Universe and Everything; he’s not alone. Whether it is the Galactic Empire and Rebel Alliance, or Mordor and Gondor, there’s always going to be more than one faction in politics.

It should be the same within your city: there’s always someone wanting more power. Consider how the city’s economy works. Merchants do have power and they always want more power and wealth. Money flows: whether it is called bribes, grants or incentives – it can buy nobles and influence, even kings given time.

It is not just merchants that cultivate power: thieves may have their own power bloc, whether crime is organised or not in the town. They may also have access to assassins and other skilled killers, along with a great deal of information – including some that can be used for blackmail. They may also know the homes of the Nobility better than the nobles themselves.

The Nobility jockey for position at court and elsewhere: it may be outright warfare between Noble House (like in Herbert's [Dune](#)), or more genteel where a cutting or barbed remark can cause a House to lose face. Read Machiavelli's [The Prince](#) for some ideas about how to bring this level of intrigue to a court. Vendettas and blood feuds can add to the mix.

When it comes to creating power blocs I find it useful to create a sort of mind map which shows how each bloc relates to another. Sometimes you can have a lot of fun with your players as they try and figure out just how they are being manipulated into something larger than themselves...

## Current Events

No matter how strong a city walls are they can't keep out time and chance: a fire in a bakery caused the Great Fire of London. Some people believe that it helped stop the Black Death. This brings us to the last part of the article: whether it is costumed vigilantes tearing up a city block or the bar room brawl that became a riot, there are always repercussions: rebuilding or repairing.

Has the city been involved in a siege? Or a military *coup d'etat*? Does something stalk the streets like Jack the Ripper? What rumours are there of foreign lands? Has the city had a large influx of new visitors?

However you do it, there should be something that makes the city feel more dynamic: that it is alive. Whether your PCs get caught up in a riot, the city comes under siege, or plague breaks out, you need to breath life into it. It is all very well to read a dusty history book; it is something else to live it!

## PC groups - how PCs meet in RPGs

A human thief, dwarf fighter, and an elven mage walk into a bar. The barman goes: "What the hell is this – a cliché?"

I was recently asked by an ORC member about how I thought groups of PCs (Player Characters) should get together. To be honest, it is a lot easier than people think. Consider your own situation: how many people do you know (let's leave Facebook out of this, OK!) and how did you meet them?

Anyway, here's a few suggestions for how a group of PCs may get together. It is perfectly possible for some of the PCs to be acquainted with one another using these methods, but at the end of the day it is down to your players. Note that some of these suggestions place the PCs in a hierarchy – these can also be used to springboard the PCs into adventures as well – they're ordered to reconnoitre a nearby cave system for instance.

- Defence – maybe the PCs are part of the local militia, or even a military unit, fresh out of basic training.
- We are the law – the PCs are part of the city watch/local law enforcement, perhaps all based in the same station, fort, etc.
- School friends – the PCs know each other from school or university or an orphanage.



- Faithful retainers – the PCs work for a sponsor or employer (an NPC, or even a PC), as bodyguards, servants or similar. Whether or not they are still employed is up to the player.
- Street gang. The PCs are part of some group that has banded together for mutual protection – they may also have come from rival gangs (which can make for some interesting situations).
- Guild members – the PCs belong to the same guild, be they merchants, thieves, or similar. Remember that magic users and fighters are also valued in Thieves Guilds as muscle and magic, so they may not necessarily need to be members of a rogue character class.
- Secret society – the PCs are members of the same cult or society, e.g Knights Templar. This can either be openly admitted to, or something darker. Such details are best worked out between the players and the GM.
- Conscripts/press-ganged – the PCs have been forced into service, possibly as part of a levy or local navy recruitment drive. It is also possible that some of the other PCs may have been responsible for their indenture.
- Prisoners – the PCs have been imprisoned together. Their escape may make an adventure in itself. I used this myself in the first few games of [Against the Odds](#).
- Friends through adversity. The PCs face a common threat: the place they are staying comes under attack, e.g. the dead rise and lay siege to the manor; the Orcish forces attack the city, etc.
- Employees – rather than faithful retainers, the group is employed to carry out something, such as a specific task. This works well in games like Shadowrun, but can easily apply to fantasy RPGs. It's also one of easiest ways to get a group together: be it assassination, theft, or simply mapping a dungeon
- Meet in an Inn. Possibly one of the more clichéd ways of getting a group together: the group meets for the first time in a pub, possibly during a brawl. However, it can be used with any of the other methods given here.
- Relatives – the PCs are members of the same family. This can work well in intrigue-intense games. The PCs may be part of a criminal family e.g. the Corleones in the Godfather series, or the nobility e.g. Borgias or the Medicis. If the PCs are non-human, they may belong to the same clan or Noble House e.g. the Drow in Menzoberranzan, for example.
- The enemy of my enemy is my friend – while some of the PCs may be of different and opposing viewpoints (or even alignments), they work together to a common end, usually the defeat of a specific enemy.

To summarise: as a GM, your best plan is probably to let your players come up with some ideas before the game starts: it might save you some work but can actually give you some ideas for adventures!

## Joining the Dark Side

The shadows just got a little darker. Evan “Diamondback” Hogan is a Shadowrunner in the Bangkok of the future. He's what they call a Street Samurai in the Shadowrun RPG, a cyborg that makes their living as hired muscle and enforcers for Shadowruns. They usually have a lot of cool upgrades, such as cybernetic limbs, smartguns and other techno-wizardry. Evan is not a nice person; he is cold-blooded, experienced and thoroughly without remorse or much of a conscience. He'll do whatever it takes to get the job done. And he's my new Shadowrun PC.

And that's what this article is about – being the Bad Guy in an RPG. From the outset, I'm not extolling the virtues of a life of crime or violence. Let's be clear on that.

For years, alignment has been a tool in games such as D&D. More often than not, it is also used a blunt instrument. Unfortunately for some GMs, there's also a high incidence of munchkin players who think being evil means killing everything, including other party members. In 4th edition D&D the alignments concepts are largely revamped from



earlier editions, making them less of a strait-jacket.

It's very difficult to apply alignments to populations or countries: a cruel and unforgiving nature god may still be worshipped by good communities for example. A lawful good society may have oppressive rules and regulations, along with a harsh regime for crime and punishment.

Here's some suggestions for evil characters, be they PCs or NPCs.

## **It pays better**

Sometimes people are in it for the money: they're paid hirelings, or otherwise employed in the service of evil. They look upon it as a source of income, be they a hitman or spy. They can turn good for a price, and are likely to swayed by cash incentives – they are more likely to be mercenaries than zealots.

These characters often treat others as assets or obstacles. They may kill out of hand, but to them it is just a business, and rarely let their emotions colour their perceptions to this extent.

## **Evil has the best tailors**

Sometimes, evil is just fashionable. Maybe its the uniform, or the fact that everyone else is doing it. Maybe the character's friends have all joined a cult, one that proves popular. They may have been brainwashed or willingly complicit, and may or may not be aware of their actions. They may not be morally bankrupt, but they're quite willing to further their own ends.

Some characters with this aspect may be living their lives in fear of discovery – others may openly flout the fact that they're evil. Everybody loves a villain.

## **Society's fault**

“I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way” – Jessica Rabbit, Who Framed Roger Rabbit

As we know, sometimes society has its underdogs. It may be a vocation, caste, or class, or even a community – but for some reason these underdogs are despised, or persecuted. Naturally, this makes them want to hit back – and the underdogs may see themselves as justified in their actions – they are only defending themselves after all. Half-orcs, for example, are often the subject of race hatred by both humans and Orcs; but they are quite capable of hitting back!

These characters may see themselves as freedom fighters or liberators, or blame a corrupt or unfair society – they may be pacifists, demagogues, or ruthless terrorists.

## **Whatever it takes**

Sometimes the end justifies the means. These characters are convinced that no matter what happens they serve a greater

good. The Imperial Inquisition of wh40k (Warhammer 40,000) is a very good example of this: they wipe out whole worlds to prevent them falling into enemy hands (such as the Tyranids or forces of Chaos), and ruthlessly hunt down psykers (beings with psychic powers) – those they catch are then turned into Astropaths, recruited, or drained of their life energy to fuel the Astronomican. However, if they did not do this the Imperium would have fallen to Chaos and all warp travel would cease.

## **Twisted by technology**

“He’s more machine than man now, twisted and evil.” – Obi-Wan Kenobi, The Empire Strikes Back

In Shadowrun, the more body parts you replace the larger the Essence cost. Magic users need high Essence scores to use magic. With more machine parts it seems likely that some of your humanity would be lost, including the ability to feel emotions or to relate to other beings. Maybe the character is/was a brain in a jar and something got lost in the transition, or the technology amplifies certain emotion like hunger or hate.

Note that by technology we don’t just mean cyborg enhancements: magic weapons (such as Stormbringer), or even the atomic bomb can make people act in ways contrary to their nature, or intensify certain elements (like the Go’auld sarcophagus in Stargate). Certain characters may welcome their changes; others may regret it every single day.

## **Power corrupts**

“You don’t know the power of the Dark Side.” – Darth Vader, Return of the Jedi.

Sometimes, the path to evil is taken in tiny steps. You turn a blind eye here, justify a decision there. When the character is in a position of responsibility, there may be that temptation to use that power to serve themselves, or enforce their will upon others. After a time, it may become second nature to use their power, never quite noticing the stains on their character.

For instance: the planetary governor who chooses to allow a Chaos cult to flourish in return for an extended lifespan in wh40k? The D&D liche whose quest is to triumph over death? The monster hunter who becomes a worse monster than those he hunts?

## **Because it is FUN!**

“Because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.” – Alfred Pennyworth, The Dark Knight

Chaotics or anarchists, this is the sort of character that fills most GMs with worry when a player says they want to play an evil PC



– they do everything at a whim or follow some grand scheme of their own making. They may be completely unaware that their actions have consequences or know exactly what they are doing. Either way, they are unpredictable and may have their own twisted code of honour, morals or quirk (Batman villains, I'm looking at you!).

This type of character is far more difficult to play in a structured game, and may quickly wear out the patience of GMs and players. Unfortunately many new players tend to drift into this chaotic-evil PC archetype as it gives them a chance to kill other PCs and then justify it: games where PCs are killing other PCs quickly lose their attraction for players and GMs. If you want to do that, go play Mortal Kombat or WoW.

## Doing the right thing

For whatever reason, the character believes that they are doing the right thing – they may be under a some form of compulsion, have been deceived, or simply believe that they are right. Unfortunately at some point they lost their way: their cause became all-consuming.

For instance, in the wh40k universe, the Primarch of the Thousand Sons Chapter, Magnus the Red, believes his sorcery has expunged the genetic taint from his Space Marine Chapter. Although warned against using sorcery by the Emperor himself, Magnus becomes aware of the imminent treachery of Horus and the Horus Heresy. While attempting to warn the Emperor, Magnus accidentally destroys the Webway that the Imperium would use to take the fight to the Eldar. The Emperor fails to heed the warning of Magnus, but the Primarch's use of sorcery and the Warp leads to the destruction of Prospero and the fall of the Thousand Sons.

## A GM's Duties

GMs put a lot of effort into running an RPG – some more than others. All too often, folk regard GMs as the ones that should be doing EVERYTHING for a gaming group. So I started think of what we, as GMs, are responsible for; before, during, or after the game. And a few a misconceptions people have about a GM's duties – from both players and GMs. This is probably going to turn into something of a rant!

Finding, and booking a venue should be a group activity, not just relying upon the GM (who may be too busy during the week). If the venue charges to play then the cost should be shared among the group. In the same way, clearing up afterwards should be done by both GM and players – especially if it involves moving furniture or clearing tables!

Getting a group organised often falls to the GM. There's a certain amount of practicality involved in that, but it can also easily be accomplished through a meet-up (ORC Edinburgh, the [Pathfinder Society](#), the [ENworld](#) forums are some examples). Ideally the GM should have some of the contact details of all his players – if the game is cancelled or he's running late, he can let them know.

And that brings me on the next topic: timekeeping. Unlike Gandalf, GMs should be punctual. Turn up at the arranged

time, or earlier. Don't keep your players waiting, and be realistic about start and finish times – not everyone can play for 12 hours for example (nor should that be expected). Four hours is best, but a window on either side is a good safety margin – usually to take care the tardy players, rambling conversations, displaying of cool stuff just bought, etc.

Providing rulebooks, miniatures, and food is not down to the GM. They have already invested a certain amount of time in planning the game. Even the most basic of games require a GM to at least read ahead and perhaps anticipate what the players may do (good luck with that). The GM shouldn't have to carry a ton of books, and the players should have access to their own books (or on tablet etc), especially if they're constantly being referenced during the session (Pathfinder!).

Writing up the session is not just a GM's task. Session write-ups are not something I do any more – instead I give XP rewards to players who write up the session. There's a number of reasons for this:

1. It is incredibly time-consuming.
2. Your players (in committee) usually have a better memory than you do.
3. The players were there.
4. Writing it from the PC's perspective can really add to a game's sense of inclusion.

I look at session write-ups as something of a vanity endeavour on a GM's part as a result. Actually planning the gaming session and/or writing are far better uses of my time. The players (those who turned up!) will largely remember what happened. There's probably those who'd say "But it keeps the group immersed in the game!". And that's the problem right there. Immersion. Or the perception of it. RPGs are, by nature, already "immersive". Part of being a GM is to keep the players "immersed" in the first place!

The GM has a duty to keep everybody involved, even the quieter players. Letting everyone have their turn and occasionally getting the more excitable players to calm down and let the other players (and possibly the GM) get a word in edgeways. Being a GM means being an adjudicator and referee, but be fair. Don't sideline a player simply because they're not doing what you want as GM.

Poor player attendance is a tricky one that all GMs have to deal with at some point. There's no easy way to deal with a player who frequently fails to turn up or cancels at the last minute. There's no hard and fast rule to deal with this. You take the player aside and find out if there's an underlying issue regarding the game (but see below!) or the group. The GM (or another player) could also play the PC. With that in mind no player's attendance should be critical to your game – if you haven't got enough players, and have enough time to prepare, run an [Interlude](#) – perhaps featuring [The Other Guys](#). I usually aim to have 6 players for my games, as there are usually two who drop out later or decide the game isn't for them. If your game is running with 50% players every session you may want to get some more or look at your game schedule (weekdays are especially bad for many regular games).

People can get excited during games, and often players can lose their tempers (as can GMs! A GM should **never** lose their temper and shout or berate their players.). As such a GM, should be prepared to step in and try and defuse these situations – you don't have to put them in a "time-out", but should be adroit enough to ask them to calm down. Remember if you're in a public venue such as a cafe or pub, local staff may get complains or become concerned enough to intervene. Any physical threats should be treated seriously – it's rare, but has happened in some groups I know. If it gets physical – give them a verbal warning and call the police if need be. If you have to, get the arguing players split up, and come back to them when they've calmed down.

GMs and their players are often friends, but some GMs just want to turn up, run a game, and go home. They don't want to obsess about the game they run or be stalked by their players during their lunch hour. Respect their boundaries; and as GM, respect your players. If one player is making inappropriate suggestions or making other players uncomfortable, have a private word with them. If they make you uncomfortable, chances are the players are feeling it too.

Gamers have the reputation of being socially awkward. This is completely wrong in my experience – six strangers meet in a pub for the first time, with no idea as to who the others are. The tradition of adventurers meeting in a tavern holds true in real life. Relationships can be formed in games, not just friendships! However as a GM, don't abuse your position, and don't play favourites. Seriously. Or a player and GM have an epic falling-out mid-game due to their actions in real-life or in-game. I've also seen GMs hit on players in the past during games. Their interest isn't always appreciated and it usually makes ME uncomfortable. You're a GM, not a cult leader, so let people have private lives outside your game.

Well, that was something of a rant. Hopefully I've not offended any of my players past or present – no one should be harmed by the reading of this post.

## GM Burnout

“It's better to burn out than fade away!” The Kurgan, Highlander

I think there comes a time when everyone “burns out”, creatively speaking – be it storytelling, writing or GMing. I feel it every few years when I'm running RPGs, and I reckon I'm not alone in experiencing it. Creativity isn't like a tap – you can't turn it on or off as needed. I've often found myself in the position where I'm completely stumped for an idea, only to have an epiphany later on – sometimes its better to take a step back from a problem or project and just rethink things – I'm not just talking about RPGs: sometimes in IT you can create additional problems by over-thinking something (a PC may not be connecting because of a dodgy cable not a TCP/IP stack)! I've also found that my mental state also has some bearing – unsurprisingly, if you're under a great deal of stress or feeling down, your problem-solving and thinking processes tend to suffer as a result. At the moment, I'm thinking of just taking my time and not rushing things: I've a lot on at work and it can be difficult to concentrate on some of the other stuff I need to sort out at home, gaming or otherwise.

To be honest, RPGs are a good way to relieve stress. In the past I've had what one of my friends calls “Black Moods”, where I feel pretty rotten, and depressed. That's depression with a small D: clinical Depression is no joke – however I think it is too often abused as an excuse (often misdiagnosed and drugs are over-prescribed by GPs who can't be bothered). I'm not denying that at some point I may have been Clinically Depressed, but that was a long time ago. Sometimes these moods hit me (not for a few years though) but I've learned to ride them out – if you look back through my blog entries you'll spot some of the times when they hit me! RPGs and the creative process help considerably with these moods I'm not one of these people who post their mental status on social networking sites (at least I hope I'm not!), seeking validation through cryptic comments; or playing for sympathy, so that everyone is compelled to ask what's wrong.

Enough of my psychobabble! The main focus of this RPG article is the phenomenon known as GM Burnout. I've been an occasional victim of this, as mentioned above.

## Recognising GM (and player!) burnout

Once you reach a certain age, or level of experience as a GM, it becomes difficult to find the time to either create new adventures or settings. Certain game systems become too advanced, or too simplistic. You just go through the motions sometimes. This is what happened with me and D&D: I don't like 4th edition as it's just somewhat basic and seems geared towards using a battle map and miniatures. 3.5 is too munchkin now: there's very little "role" involved in what is essentially a paper version of a PC game (feats, etc.).

As a GM, you'll spot the signs of burn-out in yourself by these:

- You're having trouble coming up with new ideas.
- You regard the game as a chore rather than a leisure activity.
- You've lost your enthusiasm for the game.
- You become annoyed at the slightest thing during your games.
- Player/PC antics no longer amuse you.
- You find yourself cancelling games as you have other things to do.
- You want to run another game but don't know which one.
- You have to regularly cancel games because players can't make it.
- You're running multiple games and are finding it difficult to concentrate.
- The game just doesn't work for you.

You can usually notice it in players too, with much of the same "symptoms", for want of a better word. Often they're committed to two or more games – possibly as a GM too.

### “Case Studies”

Here are some of my own cases of burnout, or other failures (and what went wrong!).

[Against the Odds](#): I used D&D 4e for this. Looking back upon it this was a mistake – I didn't think about how the game would pan out using a system that focuses heavily on combat, rather than investigation or intrigue. Consequently I got frustrated and ditched it.

[Ashes of Freedom](#): again D&D, but 3.5&4e this time. However, the first time I ran AoF (when 4e came out), I got a bit sick of the system (and one of the players threw a bit of a hissy fit too when he couldn't get his own way), plus I had two groups and one lot changed nearly every week. However a little later I returned to AoF using D&D3.5. I did overcommit myself to creating a 3.6 version as well, but it WAS a popular game. It reached a natural end, with some pretty good action sequences, and I was needing a break anyway – I realised I was getting close to burnout.

[Babylon 5](#): great idea, crap implementation, rotten PR. The d20 edition of the Babylon 5 RPG doesn't work as it stands. Unfortunately, I thought I could craft this great campaign, with a story arc that could match JMS. Unfortunately it was not to be: other popular games were on that day; the setting required too much metagame knowledge/series background; and the system was pretty poor and didn't really run well. Looking back, I could have done something

with it I guess, but I was feeling a little restless: wanting to run an RPG, something other than D&D. I think I was definitely burned out as a GM at this point.

[The New World](#): despite this setting being incredibly popular since, the first outing proved to be an unmitigated failure. In its first incarnation, it was designed to be an ORC shared campaign. A group of DMs worked over several months to hammer out a setting and plot line, and on D&D day we had three different DMs running a game. Then the other GMs lost interest (or couldn't be bothered), and I was left carrying the game – I got pretty sick of that so the New World was put on ice for a few years – it's still used frequently by other DMs at ORC and elsewhere (including some of my ideas



so its not a total loss. After this event I didn't run anything for a while, as I was pretty hacked off. I felt vastly disappointed. It was a game where there were plenty of folk wanting to play, but few willing to run.

**PBM games:** I definitely suffered GM burnout with these. [Shadows Lengthen](#) took so much of my time that despite the fact that it made some small amount of money that I just got tired of running it. [Ties of Blood](#) looked really good on paper, but failed to garner enough interest. I just gave up on it as a result.

## What to do

The best thing to do is take a break – the time involved depends upon the individual. If you're running an existing game, tell your players that you want to take a break for a while. Maybe let someone else run, and you can relax and actually be a player for a while.

Try running a different game and keep it to a short series i.e. a mini campaign. If you're short of ideas, it can be a good idea to carry a small A5 or smaller notebook everywhere. You'd be surprised when (and where) you can find inspiration!

If the game itself isn't working, that's more difficult: it's best to give some serious thought to if you can see it continuing in its current form. If you can't, give your players an ending to remember! If there's no way you can see the game going on, be as dramatic as possible in the game's conclusion – all the gloves are off: PCs die, NPCs change loyalty, the villain(s) die(s), the world ends, etc. Aim for a whammy!

**NOTE:** I know this is kinda written like a medical crib sheet, but I thought it might be fun to write it like that. Obviously RPGs are a leisure hobby – treat it that way!

## The Art of "Winging it"

Improvisation isn't *really* an art as such but it can work extremely well when your players go off on one of those tangents that they love to do so often... and I know some players love doing it to games. The secret is: don't let them know that you're winging it. Or give them enough rope to hang themselves. Whatever works



Some of my most fun games have been run off a few notes and maps, and both myself and the players have enjoyed them immensely. It's actually quite straightforward to run an improvised game, although you paradoxically need to plan ahead to a certain extent. Make sure that you've got a pile of stock NPCs or monsters to use and that you've a few encounters that you can throw in to break things up.

Among the improvisation techniques I've used, the application of "imminent peril" is probably one of the best. It puts PCs in a situation where they have to keep moving as they are being chased or are up against the clock. It worked very well in my first game of [Ashes of Freedom](#) as the group are pursued across Volkrania by the Mandragora, trying to avoid their forces and warn the capital. Encounters with heavily armed patrols and unrelenting attacks meant that the PCs (and players!) had little time to rest. The game was almost entirely improvised – as long as you've got the stats for some stock characters/encounters you can have a great time!

Another of my favourites is the total improv(isation) campaign – all your plot is centred upon the PC actions and their consequences. This can be hugely difficult to plan for obvious reasons, so it's pretty heavy work for the GM and can be difficult to run. Take away the toys. PCs thrown in prison or going undercover are not going to have much more than their own wits to help them out. [Against the Odds](#) was built upon this premise, with the group being escaped prisoners: no armour, food, weapons, or gear. The players would have to rely on their wits and creativity – particularly since they escaped into an area known as the Hellswamp. I'd planned to make the campaign about toppling the ruler, and creating a resistance force/rebellion.

Superhero/spy games are a great fun to improvise in, where you can wing it freely and give the players free rein as it were. I remember playing in a Marvel Superheroes game many years ago that basically focussed on us opposing the robotic Sentinels (long before the X-Men movies!). Oh, the elaborate schemes we came up with...

Anyway here's some basic thoughts when improvising:

- Be consistent – treat anything you improvise as part of the game "canon" from that point on. Keep some NPC names and stats pregenerated.
- Let your players create their own encounter - "This looks like a great place for an ambush!" or "There's going to be undead"



- Don't railroad the players – gentle encouragement is better than forcing them back onto the original plot.
- Keep your cool – don't get discouraged or annoyed when the players do something unexpected.
- Adapt the ideas into your game. In *Ashes of Freedom*, a chariot race originally intended as a background actually provided a number of sessions that were fun!
- Roll with it – enjoy yourself! If your players ignore the dungeon you've spent weeks designing and decide to go on an ocean cruise let them do so. Then maroon them on a mysterious desert island. With non-euclidean geometry.



- Don't be too "out there" with your improvisations – try and keep the flavour of your game intact. Humorous side quests can be fun – in moderation.
- Don't indulge individual players too much – remember, RPGs are social games. Give each player enough of their own air time, returning to individuals afterwards.

## Epic plot, epic campaigns

Epic campaigns are tricky to run at the best of times. I think its safe to say that most RPGs are character-driven or location focused. When I say "character driven", I'm talking about systems like FATE where PCs can pretty much do anything with their character in return for some kind of trade off or disadvantage. It's not an easy concept for those new to RPGs, or even those who have been playing for years. I found the Aspects of the Dresden Files RPG confusing for quite some time and still aren't totally clear on them. It also encourages players to create a decent back story. On the one hand it very easy to create an epic plot, but difficult to create an adventure beyond a basic framework, as the PCs can go off on huge tangents from the plot. It can also lead to accusations of favoritism (sometimes quite rightly) on the GM's part if players aren't given their own chance to shine.

Location focused is more old school D&D. A dungeon or city is the focus of the campaign, and in itself applies restrictions to what a group can do. The characters are still important but much of their development is the result of a background created earlier, or expanded upon during session downtime. This is the easiest for a GM to run as most players can relate to it from computer games, or personal experience.

I'm planning to go back to running some old AD&D soon at ORC, which includes some higher level games – I also got in on the Rise of eh Drow Pathfinder series too -so I've been thinking a bit about things. Whether your game is character-driven or location focused, when the players become seriously powerful then the entire game changes. In D&D, it's called Epic or Paragon tier – that's a good enough name for it. It's when your PCs can go toe to toe (hoof?) with Orcus, Vecna, or the other Bigger Bads. Wizards can warp reality, and fighters can cut through hordes like butter.

So when it comes to epic campaigns, sometimes it helps to do some of the following.

## Challenge Rating

Dr. Evil: You know, I have one simple request. And that is to have sharks with frickin' laser beams attached to their heads! Now evidently my cycloptic colleague informs me that that cannot be done. Ah, would you remind me what I pay you people for, honestly? Throw me a bone here! What do we have?

Number Two: Sea Bass.

Dr. Evil: [pause] Right.

Number Two: They're mutated sea bass.

Dr. Evil: Are they ill tempered?

Number Two: Absolutely.

Dr. Evil: Oh well, that's a start

– Austin Powers



Ditch it. I've mentioned it before but I really hate Challenge Rating (CR). It should be used by GMs as a tool, not a crutch or other impediment. It doesn't balance the game – especially when they started assigning CR to traps! PCs should know that running away is definitely an option; sometimes the monsters win! This outcome doesn't always factor into player thinking as a result of CR, and the “fight or flee” option is definitely one to bear in mind for Epic Campaigns.

## The Astartes Effect

“They shall be my finest warriors, these men who give of themselves to me. Like clay I shall mould them, and in the furnace of war forge them. They will be of iron will and steely muscle. In great armour shall I clad them and with the mightiest guns will they be armed. They will be untouched by plague or disease, no sickness will blight them. They will have tactics, strategies and machines so that no foe can best them in battle. They are my bulwark against the Terror. They are the Defenders of Humanity. They are my Space Marines and they shall know no fear.” – The Emperor, the Horus Heresy Bk.1: Betrayal.

Adeptus Astartes, or Space Marines, in the wh40k universe are the genetically-engineered warrior elites of Humanity. They are so powerful that they can gun down or cut through dozens of opponents faster than their human counterparts. I call this the Astartes effect: when a small group of hugely powerful characters are under attack from a numerically superior force; a horde in effect (its as good a name as any). In the Deathwatch RPG (and Black Crusade), there are rules allowing for hordes and for Astartes facing off against them. It helps prevent the game being bogged down with individual damage rolls. In games like D&D, try using narrative combat – unless the PCs are in danger of being overborne or swarmed under. Narrative combat means that players and GMs don't have to keep account of every single Kobold they hit, but still get a feel for the battle. They're killing a number of opponents when they hit not one per attack.

## Epic battles

“... like giants in the playground ...” John Sheridan, Babylon 5

Any Epic Campaign should have epic battles. If your PCs can plan and lead the battle even better – but remember to keep it simple initially. Keep in mind that your players perspective is that of their PCs – make them the focus, than the battle as a whole. Don't have NPCs rushing up and saving the PCs every 5 minutes, and try and make it clear that is pure chaos on the battlefield – whether a fantasy world or the void of space. Watch movies like *300*, *Zulu*, or the various *LotR*, to see how movie directors deal with this sort of thing – they focus on the characters. Don't fall into the trap of describing the whole battle: let the PCs think they are pivotal to events.

## Epic moments



“NOOOOOOO!” – Luke Skywalker, *The Empire Strikes Back* AND *Return of the Jedi*

Epic moments or “White vest moments” are those moments in films that usually have a stirring tune or strong motif. Luke giving in to his anger (*Return of the Jedi*), John Mclane leaping off the roof in *Die Hard* (which is why I call them white vest moments). Any time the character has been beaten down, to his last healing surge, and has one last witty rejoinder to say. That’s a white vest moment. The bad guys can have them too, but that’s a bit of an action movie cliché these days. If the PC is dying then let them have them one final moment to pull the trigger, disarm the bomb, hold back the enemy etc.

## Plotting blocks of stories

I always have a basic plot outline, but I like to leave some things to be decided while I write. – J. K. Rowling

If you’re planning an epic campaign, make sure it can go the distance. If you’re starting your PCs off at a low level, then its worth taking a leaf out of *Babylon 5*’s book and create a long-term story arc or meta plot. Maybe the setting has some meta plot already. Perhaps the villains from the beginning of the campaign gain new powers or advances as the players do, there’s clues to major event that will happen. Or the PCs are in the wrong place at the right time (maybe not right for the PCs!). Also get some ideas from your PC backgrounds and weave them in. Perhaps the best way to do this is write down your ideas and see how they could be made to work together, rearranging them as needed. Just remember, more a few long-term plot lines (3-5 is safe) and it all goes *Wheel of Time*. ARGH.

## Avoid Monster of the Week

If you don’t plan your campaign you’ll likely find yourself stumped trying to find new opponents to challenge your PCs. usually this manifests as Monster of the Week, when a GM throws powerful monsters at a PC party to fill the time. There are plenty of ways to keep your PCs busy: Politics; planar travel; building their castle! In sufficient numbers, even low-level monsters are dangerous to PCs – or their sidekicks. The PCs are the top of the heap at this point, but there will be others out there who will be the “Next Generation” and might be looking to get ahead.

“Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.” – Inigo Montoya, the Princess Bride

Other adventurers are always good opponents! Not to mention enemies looking to get even – tribal vendettas, demonic vengeance, and undead retribution can all be used to rain down some payback for the PCs earlier actions. When you’re feeling really evil, one of the PCs becomes an evil NPC. That’s tricky to do as you’re pretty much killing off someone’s PC (whether they are still playing or not).



## Imminent Peril

“No sleep till Brooklyn!” – Beastie Boys, No sleep till Brooklyn

Players love their PCs to have magic items, equipment, feats, and powers. They scream blue murder when you take them away – especially if an NPC uses a spell like [Mordenkainen’s Disjunction](#) upon them (a spell that strips items of their magic PERMANENTLY). That’s a bit extreme but there’s a strong reliance on these to balance the game at higher levels, providing buffs to the character’s stats. Feats and Powers are nearly staggering in their complexity and variety at higher levels in epic campaigns. Unfortunately this can slow things down immensely (D&D 4e can be very slow sometimes), but when you’re running a epic campaign there’s one thing you can do: use imminent peril.

Imminent peril can be anything from the PCs being hunted, a constant running battle, or being unable to sleep or recharge their powers. An encounter that continues with reinforcements flooding in means that you’ll likely have your players getting worried as their Healing Surges creep down, their powers are used up, and their ammunition depleted... At some point one of the PCs will fall, possibly fatally and at that point you can give the PCs their way out if they committed themselves to hanging around! Sometimes, surrender or fleeing is the only option.

Location-focused games can add another facet: the environment. Places like D&Ds Ravenloft or the Abyss have a lot of magic-resistant creatures who also use magic items themselves. In the Dark Sun setting, the world itself can kill the PCs through dehydration or exposure.

## Epic Campaigns & Failure

“A very small man can cast a very large shadow.” – Varys – Game of Thrones

Sometimes things go wrong for the PCs. This should be a fact of life at high level campaigns: the actions of one individual can sometimes have a huge affect. Londo Mollari (Babylon 5) stops caring. As a result the galaxy is plunged further into war by his actions. What about Isildur choosing to keep the Ring of Power in Lord of the Rings? In the latter example, that’s a very good illustration of what can happen when things go wrong for PCs in a epic campaign. A simple choice to keep the Ring after the Dark Lord had fallen, like the PCs looting the fallen



– what if

they fail to destroy (or decide to keep) a cursed item like the *Hand* or *Eye of Vecna*?

Would Elrond have attempted to kill Isildur for the ring to destroy it? He was a “party member”, and we know Boromir and Galadriel were tempted by the ring too – it’s not uncommon that former NPCs, allies or even PCs may turn on their former comrades (in fact that’s common practice in games like PARANOIA or BLACK CRUSADE.



Of course the most spectacular fall from grace is reserved for those who hold themselves to the highest moral standards: Paladins and Jedi, I'm looking at you. For them to fall from grace really is the stuff of epic campaigns. Whether its for love, revenge, or the fact that they doubt themselves: their fall and possible salvation really can be rewarding to run.

## Hail to the King

“A new power has arisen” – Saruman, Lord of the Rings.

Even if your PCs have got lands and titles they still need to hold onto them. Politics can be subtle intrigues, a knife in the dark, or it could brutal civil war if the lands and titles were held by someone who does not look kindly upon the PCs. The Nobility may regard them with contempt or fear and the PCs will find themselves involved in some form of politics. It's not unlikely that a PC could end up as royalty or even married. As we know from Game of Thrones, wedding feasts are great fun for plots! It also possible that the PCs become the new tools of oppression, setting up another Dark Lord (possibly even one of them). All the time spent fighting the establishment and they have become the establishment.

## Death is not the end

Despite the reluctance of many GMs to kill off higher level characters, there's a possibility that the PCs may reach some form of apotheosis or ascension in an epic campaign. They may even become some form of demi-god or aspire to be one – consider liches or even Raistlin Majere in DRAGONLANCE, or the Ancients in STARGATE SG-1. The journey to the point of apotheosis should be full of trials, and should not come easily. It's also possible that a party can go walking the Planes, *Kung-fu* style on their own Long Walk. Planar journeys can be a lot of fun for epic campaigns!

So there's my thoughts on epic campaigns. I hope you've found them useful or thought-provoking at least.

## Narrative Games

In this article, I'm going to try and provide a few hints for GMs about actually running an RPG (whilst its written for D&D perspective it holds true for all RPGs).

## Combat

Whether its the figures on a board or just keeping track of what is going on, combat is one of the most frustrating tasks that a GM will face when running an RPG. The best way to handle combat is to make it as fluid as possible. Certain games take an age to deal with combat.

- Let the player take the strain. If they want to use a special attack that's mentioned in the rules, let them find it. They want to summon a monster? Let them find the monsters entry.

- Don't let the rules get in the way – you don't have to roll initiative for every Kobold in the group.
- Don't dwell on mistakes. If there's a problem with a ruling during a game, don't get caught up in a debate about it.
- No takebacks! If a player forgets about a special attack or defence they had, that's unfortunate but that's the way it goes – you shouldn't need to rerun the combat as a result.
- Keep it going. During combat, your players need to be decisive – they shouldn't spend ages trying to figure out what their character is going to do: move onto the next person and come back to them.
- Keep the dice confined! If you're using miniatures and a map, make sure your players are rolling on a tray or something to stop them rolling into and through your miniature melee.
- Be descriptive – you don't “hit for 5 damage”, instead describe it “the monster's claw slashes through your defences, causing 5 damage”.
- Keep it simple – don't describe an entire room if the PCs are then attacked. The players only need to know that they are being attacked: they can admire the fancy carvings later.

## Time and Motion

It can be difficult to pace a game, especially when you have a lot of players.

- Let's face it, you don't want to have to describe every journey your PCs make, sometimes time just passes. They may have an eventful journey next time, but this time it went without a hitch. You do not need to play out every rest stop and bathroom break by the PCs.
- Make sure that your plots leave enough events for you to enable a break or end. Never – ever – start a combat just before you want to finish: roll for Initiative by all means, but leave it on cliff-hanger. It is far easier doing that trying to remember who was where, what buffs the PCs had, etc. It also gives the players something to look forward to.
- When your PCs are doing their own thing, and have split the party, don't concentrate on one party for a long time. Switch between the groups so that each player still feels included, breaking off to engage the other groups when appropriate.
- Don't let the loudest player dominate – its very easy for some players to dominate a game, make sure that everyone has a turn.
- If a player is absent for some reason, let another member of the group play their character, rather than the GM. If not, writ them out of that session: as GM, you need to be flexible enough to try and come up with some reason the PC has gone – knocked unconscious, on a quest of their own etc. – as well as their reappearance.

Anyway, thank you for reading and I hope this of use to you GMs out there.

### RPG Meta-plot: is it needed?

Meta-plot is one of those concepts that you either love or hate. Basically, the term is often used in RPGs and elsewhere to describe an over-arching plot-line or extended storyline. You can see examples of meta-plot in the media too – the Shadow War in **Babylon 5**, Lucifer rising in **Supernatural**. **Game of Thrones** is one huge example of epic meta-plot, with lots going on and not all of it related to specific characters.

Yet RPGs often have a problem with meta-plot. Sometimes, even the sheer weight of meta-plot material can kill a



product line. This is roughly what led to the White Wolf “reboot” of the World of Darkness (**Vampire, Werewolf** etc.) – they had loads of supplements and source-books that had largely bled (for want of a better word) the creative opportunity for GMs. Wizards of the Coast had quite a history of doing meta-plot resets, e.g. **From the Ashes** and the **Greyhawk Wars** series that rebooted Greyhawk for A&D 2nd Ed. Sometimes it is easier to start afresh and might also generate fresh revenue and invigorate a product line I suppose!

Players only appreciate meta-plot when they are active participants to some extent. It also often assumes some prior familiarity with a setting on the part of your players – and that in itself can be hard work for someone new to a particular setting. Here’s some examples.

## Babylon 5 RPG setting

Gods, where would you start with Babylon 5 for someone unfamiliar with the series? Even watching a couple of episodes wouldn’t really bring someone unfamiliar with B5 up to speed with 5 years of plot. You’d have to be really hard-core fans of the series to make it work, unless you set it before the formation of the ISA and coming of the Shadows. The sheer volume of plot and events make it inscrutable to anyone who hadn’t watched a season or more!

## Cthulhutech RPG meta-plot

You could say that the whole setting of Cthulhutech is one big meta-plot. I’m eagerly awaiting **Dead Gods** and **Burning Horizons** for Cthulhutech. One is likely to be a Storybook that features meta-plot and the events of 2086, the other “splat” book for the Rapine Storm faction (a cult of Hastur that purges/scours the earth for the arrival of the Great Old Ones). The Storybooks are interesting in that it gives your players a chance to participate in some of the major events/revelations of the year as part of the CT meta-plot. However, there’s a lot going on across the globe and it’s unlikely that your players would be at the Fall of Juneau or Shanghai. In my own Through the Looking Glass games, I’ve hinted at what’s to come, but can’t really bounce the players across the planet (or space in the case of Burning Horizons!) to a new location every session!

## Ashes of Freedom (D&D)

Contrary to popular belief at ORC, much of the meta-plot for the [Ashes of Freedom D&D game](#) at ORC did not come out of any long-term planning on my part as such. It worked as a result and I could tailor the plot toward the PCs actions. Yes, I did have a few ideas for the long-term, but fitting it around the players worked far better. Also as the world was my own creation it meant that I didn’t feel compelled to preserve it, or avoid any events. To be perfectly honest, some of the plot was derailed from the first session so I had to come up with some new ideas quickly!

To answer my original question: is meta-plot needed? No – never let it get in the way. If you want a simple dungeon bash, for instance, you might not need it. Live free, and only use meta-plot when you want to give the game some flavour, or involve the players in some new conspiracy! Kill off a significant NPC? No problem. The PCs thwart the invasion that might have led to the founding of an empire of a thousand years of peace and prosperity? Oops! The whole party gets wiped out? GMs, it’s your game: you can do what you want with it.

## Video Conference RPGing (VC RPG)



## Running a VC RPG

It seems to be a given these days that whenever an RPG session is planned, at least one player can't make it. It's a bit of a pain at the best of times, but many groups seem to cope. Others have turned to using technology to allow other players to participate, no matter the distance. Video Conferencing (VC) is a powerful collaboration tool often used in academic or other collaborative environments. Running a VC RPG session can be a bit of a challenge but it doesn't have to be, provided you make a few allowances. Although VoIP and other tools are also involved in many cases, we'll stick with calling it VC RPG.

I did a degree in AV Technology back in the 90s. Technology has moved on and evolved significantly since! The 'net was still largely unused at that time – most people had access through dial-up modems at the time. The speeds and technology available weren't really up to spec. Until the broadband “revolution”, the technologies required were way too expensive.

Nowadays it's a lot easier to run a VC RPG. All you need is a broadband connection, webcam, and microphone. You also need to consider whether you want to run it completely over a VC, or combine it with an actual “live” session with other players. When one or more players are remote it requires a little shift in the way a game runs.

## Equipment you'll need

Unless you can afford a device such as a Polycom HDX professional VC unit, you'll need a webcam, microphone and computer. At work I've used the Logitech and the C310 is superior, as it uses auto-focus and actually doesn't work too bad for the cheap cost – plus it is also High Definition (HD). The microphone quality will usually be pretty poor: if you are the only participant you might get away with it. I've also heard that the X-Box Kinect can also be used although I can't comment on how effective it is. You may not even need a video link, but it is recommended.

Where you might skimp on video quality, good audio is essential. If you are hosting a VC with multiple participants you should probably look at something like the or . These are pretty cheap and should pick up what the group is saying. If you've got some serious cash, the [Duet Executive](#) from OneVideo is a bit expensive but the audio quality is excellent.

Below are links to some of the equipment I've just mentioned.

## Running the VC RPG

At work, we use the JANET Access Grid software – this uses a piece of software called IOCOM VisiMeet. This works as a single collaboration tool that also allows multiple cameras, desktop sharing, etc. It's likely that it's too expensive for home users, but it might be worth considering if you got money to burn.

However, by far the best solution is Skype. It is designed for multiple participants and has a proven record. Microsoft's acquisition and their [recent faux pas with their WSUS update service](#), may tarnish that reputation somewhat though! The best tools for running the actual game itself is MapTools from [rptools.net](#). It may need a bit of technical know-how (requiring ports opened on a firewall) and uses Java. It can be a powerful tool, and also allows scripting as well.





No matter what you're using, the actual set-up can make all the difference. If you are the only participant it does not really matter. If there are others you may want to consider the following guidelines.

## Audio Setup

- Try and find a location that does not have sudden loud noises like doors slamming, sirens etc. These can drown out what people are saying. The human ear can filter out audio, most mikes can't.
- Make sure that your players understand that they shouldn't talk over each other, or carry on other conversations – microphones pick up everything.
- If you can, cover the gaming table with soft cloth (like a tablecloth). It will muffle the sounds of clattering dice and shuffling papers during a VC RPG.
- Run a VC RPG in a small room rather than a large hall. You can minimise echo with some soft furnishings like cushions or sofas. A carpeted room is better than a laminate or concrete floor.
- Place the microphone in a central location – closer to the GM than the players.
- Make sure that anyone remote from the session gets a chance to speak, and make sure the GM speaks clearly to the room during a VC RPG, not just a single player.
- Check that the audio is working and set it up before the VC RPG starts (both spoken and heard at both ends).

## Camera Setup

- Make sure that the camera covers the entire room and that all the group can be seen. This might need some furniture rearrangement!
- It is easier to understand people when they face you. Try and avoid people having their back to the camera.
- Point the camera away from light sources or windows. With most cameras, white balance will be affected by strong sources of light. It can lead a “flare” effect and the group may appear to be in darkness.
- Make sure the room is well-lit. Remember: avoid pointing the camera directly at light sources.
- Ensure the auto-focus doesn't continually reset – a lot of movement will set it off and readjust so again keep the camera pointed away from windows or areas with a lot of passing traffic or people.
- Make sure that any trailing cables are squared away for safety. It also stops the camera from tipping over.
- Check that the camera works and set it up before the VC RPG starts.

In summary: running a VC RPG for this first time isn't easy. It will get easier though. If you give yourself enough setup time and invest in a bit of effort initially, a VC RPG will run well.

## RSS feeds and blog publishing for RPG bloggers

RSS feeds like the one on the site [here](#) are probably one of the more useful tools for websites – they provide streams of articles and information, and are usually automatically updated when you publish an article. WordPress provides one straight out of the box and also filters it down by category if needed. For example, if I only want to publish and RSS feed for the RPG category I would use <http://themandragora.com/category/rpgs/feed/> rather than <http://themandragora.com/feed/>. It is pretty basic, but it works!

These category feeds make it quite useful for displaying specific information. For example, the ORC website uses a

number of feeds: one outputs events from the calendar, another tracks recent changes in the wiki. Both are provided by different Joomla modules or applications, but they provide a similar output.

I've put together some brief suggestions below for tools you might like to use with RSS feeds and RPG blogs.

- An on-line service called [TwitterFeed](#) allows the parsing of RSS feeds to Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn (although I hardly use the last). It's quite useful in that its very simple to setup and automatically add articles or events from an RSS feed to appear in your twitter and Facebook streams/time-lines. Unfortunately, **Google+** does not allow any third-party access of its API right now, so I'm afraid its still a manual link you'd need to do in your stream.
- [WP to Twitter](#) is a useful WordPress plug-in allowing you to choose any or all posts to output to a Twitter account. You can also use it to hash tag your posts, so if you tag a WordPress post with "RPG", **WP to Twitter** tags it with #RPG.
- [Wordbooker](#) allows your WP articles to be automatically published to your Facebook time-line/wall. There's a lot of options that you can use with this, and if you have a Facebook fan or group page, you can also choose to publish to these as well.

If you're blogging about RPGs, there's a number of blog networks you can use that cater specifically for RPGs, notably the ones below. Note that you will need to blogging about RPGs regularly and your content should reflect that, plus you'll need to provide an RSS feed so that they can publish your articles. They are also worth a visit as an RPGer, as they're a lot easier to search than combing the internet for materials or information.

[Image not found](#)The **RPGBA** is "a collection of Pencil and Paper Role Playing Game related websites that opt-in to be aggregated. Members benefit from having a relationship to each other and by having a unified place for people to look for RPG material. The RPGBA does not include the entire source material but rather includes the first 100 words and links back to the original source. In this way members get traffic to their respective sites while still getting the benefit of belonging to the Alliance."



The **RPG Bloggers Network** provides a similar service but is slightly more basic (being older). Note that you will need to "make sure you've been posting regularly for at least three months. I know this seems like a pain, especially if you are just starting out. But we need to see that you are a regular updater before we consider accepting your blog."

If you're planning to blog about RPGs, you might also find it useful to make sure that your site is using a proper Meta Description for each of your posts or pages. Bear in mind that RPG is a very common search term on the 'net so make sure you are as descriptive as possible! At the very list, tag your post with the proper RPG system, rules-set, or setting. It can be difficult to find stuff to write about at first but once you get into the flow of it, then it becomes far easier.

## Writing a Script - a new skill set



*Writing a Script* is an article originally part of a presentation I made years ago at [Stevenson College](#): most of it holds true today, when I do writing projects of any kind.

## **Introduction**

Every programme needs a script, even if it is a simple animation with no speech at all. The script is the basic foundation upon which a programme is made – be it audio, video or film. It is a guide to the sequence of events that transpire during the programme – without this the production would quickly fall apart.

Writing a script is one of the most undervalued abilities in the audio-visual industry, yet it is probably one of the most vital. Many of the large-budget Hollywood films of today utilise scriptwriters to a greater or lesser extent. It is important to define the roles of the writer and director from each other.

- The writer is the creator of the idea, the one who forms the characters and the environment. It is he who originally formulates the plot, and forms of speech. He also has to deal with any rewrites of the script that might be necessary.
- The director, on the other hand, is responsible for transferring the written text into the chosen media i.e. Film, video tape, audio etc.

It should be pointed out at this stage that many Hollywood directors write their own films (For example, James Cameron and Quentin Tarantino). Compared to this, many TV productions have a separate writer who collaborates with the director. Many first-time directors will find themselves in this situation.

What this presentation is intended to illustrate is the best – and easiest – way to write a script, from its inspiration, to it's final rendering onto paper.

## **What is a script?**

Script writing can be a nightmare for some people. They find the interaction of characters, scene details and plot construction to be incredibly daunting. This is a perfectly reasonable reaction considering that the script for a ninety minute production runs to between 100-130 pages. To create a script of this length requires a great deal of creative thought and a careful attention to detail. It is of little surprise that even proven scriptwriters occasionally suffer the famous, “Writers block,” while creating two hour programmes.

As mentioned previously, a production needs a script. The script is in essence a guide to events, speech and the characters. A poorly thought out script can lead to a poorly produced programme.

In the following pages, visual dramatic programmes will be used as the subject medium. However, the presentation can easily be used for other subject medium such as audio-only, animation, and documentary-style programmes.

A script should consist of the following components:

Plots and Sub-plots

Theme



Mood

Characters

Action

Scene

Dialogue

Interest

It should also follow a rule known as the, “Three C rule.” This specifies that a good script incorporates the following:

**CLARITY – CONTINUITY – CONSISTENCY**

It is important to understand that it is the variations of characters and, “Ingredients,” within a script that make such scripts individual. However, before a script can be written, the idea for a plot is needed. This takes us neatly into the first item on our list of script components, “Plots and sub-plots.”

## **Plots and sub-plots**

Plot is essentially the story line, defining occurrences, character movements, and events that happen within the programme. Although it seems unbelievable, there are in fact only 36 known plots with attempts to find a 37th having failed so far. The 36 known plots are beyond the scope of this presentation, and will not be entered into in any great detail here. These plot archetypes (as they are known) consist of some of the following: mystery, hunt, escape, rescue, attack, defence, siege, guard, betrayal, jealousy, conspiracy, love and injustice. All of these 36 plot archetypes include some or all of the following aspects, to a greater or lesser extent:

- Emotional premise: Basically, this is what the programme is about tying in with the theme, which will be mentioned later. The key word here is emotion, if you can affect the viewer’s emotions in some way, you are halfway to success.
- Key situation: Early on, establish a problem, dilemma or challenge for the characters to face and overcome.
- Motivation & Threat/Intention: The key situation must be able to motivate the leading characters to take action, to have a target, aim or goal.
- Conflict: Without this there is no story. It does not necessarily mean violence, it could simply mean a man’s struggle with his own conscience. or even a personality clash.
- Reversal: Something happens to make the character’s situation worse. They have to change and adapt to new circumstances.
- Narrative question: In essence, “What will happen next?” The audience must be kept in doubt about the outcome of the story until the very end.

A script has three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Think of the plot as a kind of W-shape, with the points of the W representing climatic events. The strokes of the W are the build-up, or slackening of pace.

Paradoxical though it sounds, every plot starts with a conclusion. What do you intend for the script to say? Is it



something you want to say to the world? i.e. do you have strong feelings about the subject? Will it be of interest? And finally, most importantly of all: Does it entertain and/or inform?

Plotting is a craft in itself, and getting the idea for a plot can be a struggle in itself. Carry a small notebook around with you, for you never know when you might get further inspiration for a scene may occur.

Setting is also a basic problem. Think about the time period or the place, since working the plot in with the setting could be prove to be a battle. For example, a plot that involves a battle in space between star ships would be difficult to create if the setting is Georgian England.

At the core of any plot is the idea of believability, or at least the suspension of disbelief. People shouldn't be able to fly unless there is some evidence in the script to suggest otherwise, such as through levitation, wings, or some kind of high-tech gizmo, for example. There is an old saying, "Write what you know," that still holds true today. If you don't know anything about a subject, research it and then write about it. Observation of real life can sometimes be the source of many plots, as the success of programmes such as "Neighbours," and, "Coronation street," can prove.

Sub-plots are an ideal way to sustain viewer interest, and again, soap operas are a good example of this procedure. Sub-plots are minor story lines within the plot that could range from a character's car being fixed at great expense, to several characters hating the sight of each other. Sub-plots enable a greater depth to be added to the programme, without affecting the conclusion in any great way.

## **Script planning**

Before you start writing the script, consider the medium that you are writing for. An audio programme, no matter how good the script, will sound terrible if there are a lot of moments when characters are silent.

Many people find it helpful if they write a resume of the script. This normally consists of an outline of the plot, describing the course of events.

As previously mentioned, setting is highly important. Think about when and where you want to set the script and why. Define this early on, as it could cause a great deal of problems later. In certain cases, setting your script in certain time periods or area can prejudice the viewer. Write a script about Vietnam and most people will immediately think of the Vietnam war. Write a script set 1945, and most people will think of the end of the World War Two. Also, as in any drama, there is a summary of the characters, in order of importance. Their roles, personalities, appearance, and motivations can also be incorporated, as this can be a useful reference when writing the script.

Having done this, it is now possible to introduce the themes. The theme is a word or phrase that sums up what the entire story is about. Examples of themes are love, hate, chaos, morality, leadership, society, and so on. For instance, take Shakespeare's play Macbeth. Macbeth's themes are ambition, power and corruption. On the other hand, the ones in Hamlet are those of revenge and tragedy.

When incorporating the themes, remember that they should be subtle, rather than blatant. A viewer dislikes getting preached to.

Having considered the theme, the mood of the script is also important. The mood is a surface feature. It is the prevailing emotions that are going to be running through the script. It is the feeling you want to create, e.g. madness,



erie, romantic, mysterious, excitement, upbeat. Taking Macbeth as an example again, the mood running through this particular drama is one that is brooding and somber.

A sample script resume follows.

### **Sample script resume**

Title: The Pick-up

Setting: 1970's New York

Theme(s): Corruption and Treachery

Mood: Gritty & Depressing

Characters:

CURTIS: A clumsy, but shrewd bruiser. A rough diamond who is liked by everyone.

MANSFIELD: A neurotic Mafioso crime boss, paranoid about his underlings trying to undermine his position.

LUPINI: An assassin with a liking for sharp suits. An old friend of Curtis.

Plot Outline:

Curtis receives a telephone call from Mansfield, his boss, telling him to pick up a package from the airport. However, unknown to Curtis, Mansfield has decided that Curtis has become too popular with his men. He has decided to have him killed, and sends an assassin, Lupini, to shoot him on the way to the airport. Fate intervenes however, when the assassin realises who his target is his old friend. Lupini reveals Mansfield's motives to Curtis, who immediately reports the treachery of his boss to Mansfield's superiors. In the ensuing fire fight both Lupini and Mansfield are killed. The film ends with attending Lupini's funeral, and the promotion of Curtis to Mansfield's former position.

### **Characters & Characterisation**

Characterisation is a major stumbling block to script writing. Without well defined characters, even the most well written script can be brought low by stereotypical cardboard cut outs.

Characters bring the script to life, they are in effect, "Story guides." Although a plot needs at least one central character, they need not be human e.g. Lassie, Bambi etc. As long as they are somehow affected to a greater extent by events, and have an identifiable personality, their shape or form does not matter.

A character's biography and personality is important, when creating a character. Ask yourself these questions:

What does he look like?

What has he done?



What does the character want out of life?

Where has he been ?

What is his lifestyle?

What is his function in the scheme of things?

Does he have any distinguishing actions or expressions?

What are his likes and dislikes?

What does he do when he's angry or happy?

What are his talents and abilities?

Next, think about the following points:

Is he necessary to the plot?

How often does he appear in the plot?

How involved will he become?

How does get on with the other characters?

Is he likeable or not?

And finally, most importantly of all, consider this:

Are they believable?

## **Action**

Action is central to plot. It says what happens in a given space of time, for example, a gun firing. Action can be defined as physical movement on the part of the characters, or the facial expressions, moods and vocal delivery and moods. When creating action it is important to remember about continuity. Characters shouldn't suddenly appear from nowhere, when the viewer knows that they are supposed to be dead, without good reason.

Another important aspect is that camera shots and movements are rarely mentioned. Zooms, tracks, and dollies have no place in the script at this stage. At the formulation of the script, you are doing only slightly more than writing a story, creating guidelines for the director and production crew.

## **Scenes**

A scene can be defined as any environment in which action takes place, be it a busy street, the control room of a



spacecraft, or a sprawling ranch in Texas. A scene change allows editing to become much easier. It also helps prevent visual fatigue on the part of the viewer, who can quickly become bored with the same scene.

When constructing a scene for the action, consider the following points. They all help to enrich the script.

What time of day is it? This can be used to heighten the mood – most horror movies take place at night, for example, playing on the fear of darkness.

What sorts of props are to be inserted? A busy street is all very well, but if you add burnt-out cars, graffiti on the walls, gangs of youths, and the sound of police sirens in the distance, many people will immediately equate it with Los Angeles, or the Bronx in New York. Perhaps before any action is taken place.

When in a room, what sort of furniture does it have? Is it opulent, moth-eaten, or non-existent? Are the walls painted or are they cracked, with water running down them? They can help to enhance the mood, and enforce the themes. But remember it is possible to create a cluttered and claustrophobic room if it's appearance is such that the characters can barely move.

Think about the weather next, and how it relates to the characters. Is it pouring with rain outside? Or is it incredibly sunny? The weather can be used to reflect the moods of the characters. When angry, perhaps there is a thunderstorm crashing around. Depressed? The sky is leaden, dull, or cloudy.

Next, consider the positioning of the characters. Do they suddenly stand out in a crowd of people walking along a street? Do they enter the room, or are they already inside? Are they sitting or standing? What are they wearing? This is especially important for the first impression of a character.

## **Dialogue**

Dialogue, or speech, is yet another script stumbling block. A poor use of dialogue can make a film, using the best actors in the world, die a death. Use of the voice and dialogue help put a character's status and personality across, so when writing speech remember that dialogue has four simultaneous functions:

- Establish characters.
- Provide information.
- Reveal emotion.
- Advance the plot.

These functions should be concealed in such a way that they influence another character's behaviour or intentions. It is important to avoid a great deal of nowhere talk without good reason, but try to incorporate a little. Most character's are human and tend not to talk about the same thing all of the time.

It is very important to try and vary the speech – try and make the vocal qualities of each character different. Think about the character's social class and status. Is he an upper class Victorian gentlemen? Or a cockney fruit-seller from the East end of London? Both would have far different methods of speech. Attempt to imagine your characters speaking, and remember dialect can be easily incorporated in to a script.

Setting is again highly important where dialogue is concerned, so it is wise to fit the speech around the setting e.g. New





York, Victorian England, Ireland etc.

Try and avoid repetition wherever possible, most people do not use the same words over and over again. It makes them sound like a stuck record, while poor punctuation can cause them to sound like they have let their mouths run away with them. Finally remember that, ungrammatical construction, cliches, and slang are habit to everyone and as such should be contained where human speech is used e.g. Try and use, “I don’t know about that.”, rather than, “I did not know about that”. Again, remember the setting.

## **Interest**

Is your script interesting? Well, think about it. Now that you’re writing it, is the script really going the way you want it to? Do you have enough plot hooks to make the viewer follow the story line? Be critical of your plot outline and your characters. Are there any glaring errors in continuity? Do you have enough challenging situations for the characters? Check your script for the plot aspects, mentioned earlier under, “Plots and Sub-plots”.

Finally, would YOU want to see the final version of your script on your chosen medium? If not, and you find the script boring... Well, back to work you go.

## **Format when writing a script**

There are certain ways to writing a script that is unrelated to any creative ability. Two of the simplest ways of setting out a script are as follows, again using a famous scene from Macbeth as an example:

### **Act one**

#### **Scene 1**

*An open place. Thunder and lightning. Enter the THREE WITCHES.*

FIRST WITCH: When shall we three meet again? n thunder, lightning, or in rain?

SECOND WITCH: When the hurly-burly’s done, When the battle’s lost and won.

THIRD WITCH: That will be ere the set of the sun.

FIRST WITCH: Where the place?

SECOND WITCH: Upon the heath.

THIRD WITCH: here to meet with Macbeth.

FIRST WITCH: I come, Graymalkin.

SECOND WITCH: Paddock calls.

THIRD WITCH: Anon!



ALL: Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

*The witches vanish.*

**Act one**

Scene 1

*An open place. Thunder and lightning. Enter the THREE WITCHES*

FIRST WITCH:

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In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

SECOND WITCH:

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There to meet with Macbeth.

FIRST WITCH:

I come, Graymalkin.

SECOND WITCH:

Paddock calls.



THIRD WITCH:

Anon!

ALL:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air.

*The witches vanish.*

If you manage to set your script out in these kinds of formats you are well on your way to getting a clear and ultimately readable script. Always check your spelling, using a spell checker if need be. When you've finished writing your script go through to check for spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and the like.

## **Conclusion**

Although you may be happy with your script, it may not be of much interest to any one else. Get some one to read over it for you, as they may spot continuity errors, spelling mistakes and other errors. If they have any suggestions, don't explode – they're only trying to help. They may not know you've spent the last three days and nights constructing your script. As a final note, compare the following two scripts. Which of these would you prefer to read?

### **Script 1**

A man sits in a room. It is dark. Suddenly the telephone rings. The man picks it up.

Mansfield: Good. You are finally in your home. I have been trying to reach you on the telephone all day, asshole.

Curtis: Sorry, boss it was because I had some things to do. I have been collecting a few gambling debts for you.

Mansfield: Oh right. Now then, I have a job for you. I want you to pick up a package for me from the airport.

### **Script 2**

#### **Scene 1**

*CURTIS sits at a desk, in a darkened room with peeling wallpaper. He sits illuminated in a dim pool of light coming from a naked light bulb, and we can see he is wearing a rumpled shirt, tie, and trousers. An unmade bed lies in a corner of the room. Through the cracked window, we can see it is raining.*

*A telephone, an ashtray, and a packet of cigarettes lie on the table. CURTIS reaches for the cigarettes and fumbles in his pocket for a lighter. He struggles for a while, before producing it with a smile. He lights the cigarette and then the telephone rings. CURTIS picks it up. It is MANSFIELD, CURTIS' boss.*

MANSFIELD:

*[Speaking on telephone, sarcastically]*



Good. You're finally in. I've been trying to reach you all day, asshole!

CURTIS:

*[Scowling]*

Sorry, boss. I had things to do. I been collecting a few gamblin' debts for ya.

*CURTIS puts the cigarette out, and leans back in the chair.*

MANSFIELD:

[Mollified]

Oh. Right. Now then, I've a job for you. I want you to pick up a package for me from the airport...

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## **The Other Guys - Supporting Cast (N)PCs in RPGS**

The Other Guys. The followers. The sidekicks. Red shirts #1-5. The science guys. The servants/followers who carry the adventurers loot. Sometimes they have names, more often than not, they won't. We all have them in RPGs.

The *Stargate SG-1* TV series once had an episode called [The Other Guys](#). It focussed on a group of scientists who were largely, em, well, inexperienced. It was from this that I got the idea about running spin-off games featuring "The Other Guys", normally NPCs that the players could run in one-off games.

Recently I'd planned to begin the WFRP adventure *Power Behind the Throne*, after completing *Death on the Reik* (see [here](#) for a description as to how that went). However, come the day of play only half the group can make it. I could have run the session and spent most of the next session catching the missing players up. However, in *Death on the Reik*, the party encountered a mercenary group, the Merry Bande. I had a problem: half the group could make it. So



instead I ran a one-off adventure featuring The Other Guys, members of the Merry Bande.

## The Merry Bande – The Other Guys Example

They were initially a generic band that the PCs could use for training or advancement (e.g. to Mercenary/Sergeant/Captain etc.). They're normally just supporting NPCs that weren't fully fleshed out, just a capsule description. They sort of existed as generic red-shirts (or a specialist like Chief O'Brien before he came a regular cast member in *Star Trek: The Next Generation/Deep Space Nine*). They consisted of:

- Captain Kowalski, tough guy. Hard-bitten, bit like Clint Eastwood. Usually chomping a cigar.
- Klaus Schmidt, Sergeant. Think Jason Statham and his character in the movie *Snatch*.
- Ostermann, Corporal. Sarcastic wise-cracker – forever a corporal. Dead-pan. Younger version of Dad's Army's Sergeant Wilson.
- The Norsican – only the band understand him. Easy going, speaks like the chef from [The Muppets](#).
- Maus, the sharpshooter. Small but tough. Ferrety-looking, usually up a tree or on a roof.
- Aristmann, cold killer. The kind of person that speaks (and listens) to sock puppets. Skips among opponents, stabbing them while humming the Smurfs [theme](#).
- Jaegerhalten, sneaky git. Check behind you and then check your pockets. Now you see him, now you don't.
- Dizeigeler, AKA *Die Scheissehaus*. The group's siege weapon, usually carrying a (excessively large) firearm...
- Hans Schup, Artillerist. Plays golf – with bombs. Makes the PCs very nervous.
- Brother Bada Boom, Dwarven Gunner. Crazy dwarf with a love of big guns, and disproportionate responses. Shock and awe!

Yes, I know some of these are pandering to stereotypes! WFRP has a long history of humorous NPCs (racially stereotyped and otherwise). The cover of WFRP 1e alone features GW owner at the time, Bryan Ansell, twice; and artist John Sibbick's head on spike. Even some of the book's internal illustrations are based upon then Games Workshop staff members. But I digress.

The Merry Bande are the Other Guys. They're nowhere near as experienced as the PCs, but they are there to support them in some way as NPCs.

## Why run an adventure with The Other Guys?

There's a huge variety of advantages to running games featuring The Other Guys – even if it's not the same group of players.

- They're expendable. If you're feeling particularly cruel as a GM.
- You can run adventures that your PCs would never get the chance to play. The PC group may never go to Lustria and the New World, but the Merry Bande might.
- They're not likely to have the same experience levels as the PCs so you can still go back to earlier more basic adventures.
- They exist in the campaign timeline, but can be inserted anywhere. For instance *Power Behind the Throne* follows a strict timetable, which may lead to the PCs being tied up elsewhere. Meanwhile, elsewhere in Middenheim...
- They can further the plot, without a GM having to rail-road the PCs. Perhaps running an adventure will



encourage the PC to investigate further.

- They can help “mop up” after the PCs. And blame them. Even better is when the PCs turn up, or have just left.
- It’s a change of pace and different, especially if your PCs have had a hard time, and everything is a bit too “Grim-dark”.
- It can help when the group has insufficient numbers, or as an introduction. Want to introduce someone to the system but don’t want to clobber them with an existing campaign or a highly advanced character? Then run a game like this – it’ll also give them a window on the game setting too.
- It goes the other way, too. Want the PCs to play their mentors or similar in a one-off? Use them as The Other Guys. A specific example of this is the Circle of the Eight (Greyhawk’s most powerful Mages) as used in the Greyhawk WGA4 Module [Vecna Lives!](#).

Ultimately, running NPCs as PCs adds a lot to the game world as well. Yes, you do have to stat them up completely but as a GM, it’s no big deal. In my case, the Merry Bande took on a new dimensions. Whether they’re side-kicks in a superhero game, the PCs mentors, or mercs in WFRP; it’s well worth running games featuring The Other Guys.

## Narrative Games

In this article, I’m going to try and provide a few hints for GMs about actually running an RPG (whilst its written for D&D perspective it holds true for all RPGs).

## Combat

Whether its the figures on a board or just keeping track of what is going on, combat is one of the most frustrating tasks that a GM will face when running an RPG. The best way to handle combat is to make it as fluid as possible. Certain games take an age to deal with combat.

- Let the player take the strain. If they want to use a special attack that’s mentioned in the rules, let them find it. They want to summon a monster? Let them find the monsters entry.
- Don’t let the rules get in the way – you don’t have to roll initiative for every Kobold in the group.
- Don’t dwell on mistakes. If there’s a problem with a ruling during a game, don’t get caught up in a debate about it.
- No takebacks! If a player forgets about a special attack or defence they had, that’s unfortunate but that’s the way it goes – you shouldn’t need to rerun the combat as a result.
- Keep it going. During combat, your players need to be decisive – they shouldn’t spend ages trying to figure out what their character is going to do: move onto the next person and come back to them.
- Keep the dice confined! If you’re using miniatures and a map, make sure your players are rolling on a tray or something to stop them rolling into and through your miniature melee.
- Be descriptive – you don’t “hit for 5 damage”, instead describe it “the monster’s claw slashes through your defences, causing 5 damage”.
- Keep it simple – don’t describe an entire room if the PCs are then attacked. The players only need to know that they are being attacked: they can admire the fancy carvings later.

## Time and Motion

It can be difficult to pace a game, especially when you have a lot of players.

- Let's face it, you don't want to have to describe every journey your PCs make, sometimes time just passes. They may have an eventful journey next time, but this time it went without a hitch. You do not need to play out every rest stop and bathroom break by the PCs.
- Make sure that your plots leave enough events for you to enable a break or end. Never – ever – start a combat just before you want to finish: roll for Initiative by all means, but leave it on cliff-hanger. It is far easier doing that trying to remember who was where, what buffs the PCs had, etc. It also gives the players something to look forward to.
- When your PCs are doing their own thing, and have split the party, don't concentrate on one party for a long time. Switch between the groups so that each player still feels included, breaking off to engage the other groups when appropriate.
- Don't let the loudest player dominate – its very easy for some players to dominate a game, make sure that everyone has a turn.
- If a player is absent for some reason, let another member of the group play their character, rather than the GM. If not, writ them out of that session: as GM, you need to be flexible enough to try and come up with some reason the PC has gone – knocked unconscious, on a quest of their own etc. – as well as their reappearance.

Anyway, thank you for reading and I hope this of use to you GMs out there.

## **Video Conference RPGing (running a VC RPG)**

It seems to be a given these days that whenever an RPG session is planned, at least one player can't make it. It's a bit of a pain at the best of times, but many groups seem to cope. Others have turned to using technology to allow other players to participate, no matter the distance. Video Conferencing (VC) is a powerful collaboration tool often used in academic or other collaborative environments. Running a VC RPG session can be a bit of a challenge but it doesn't have to be, provided you make a few allowances. Although VoIP and other tools are also involved in many cases, we'll stick with calling it VC RPG.

I did a degree in AV Technology back in the 90s. Technology has moved on and evolved significantly since! The 'net was still largely unused at that time – most people had access through dial-up modems at the time. The speeds and technology available weren't really up to spec. Until the broadband "revolution", the technologies required were way too expensive.

Nowadays it's a lot easier to run a VC RPG. All you need is a broadband connection, webcam, and microphone. You also need to consider whether you want to run it completely over a VC, or combine it with an actual "live" session with other players. When one or more players are remote it requires a little shift in the way a game runs.

## **Equipment you'll need**

Unless you can afford a device such as a Polycom HDX professional VC unit, you'll need a webcam, microphone and computer. At work I've used the Logitech and the C310 is superior, as it uses auto-focus and actually doesn't work too bad for the cheap cost – plus it is also High Definition (HD). The microphone quality will usually be pretty poor: if you are the only participant you might get away with it. I've also heard that the X-Box Kinect can also be used



although I can't comment on how effective it is. You may not even need a video link, but it is recommended.

Where you might skimp on video quality, good audio is essential. If you are hosting a VC with multiple participants you should probably look at something like the or . These are pretty cheap and should pick up what the group is saying. If you've got some serious cash, the [Duet Executive](#) from OneVideo is a bit expensive but the audio quality is excellent.

Below are links to some of the equipment I've just mentioned.

## Running the VC RPG

At work, we use the JANET Access Grid software – this uses a piece of software called IOCOM VisiMeet. This works as a single collaboration tool that also allows multiple cameras, desktop sharing, etc. It's likely that it's too expensive for home users, but it might be worth considering if you got money to burn.

However, by far the best solution is Skype. It is designed for multiple participants and has a proven record. Microsoft's acquisition and their [recent faux pas with their WSUS update service](#), may tarnish that reputation somewhat though! The best tools for running the actual game itself is MapTools from [rptools.net](#). It may need a bit of technical know-how (requiring ports opened on a firewall) and uses Java. It can be a powerful tool, and also allows scripting as well.

No matter what you're using, the actual set-up can make all the difference. If you are the only participant it does not really matter. If there are others you may want to consider the following guidelines.

## Audio Setup

- Try and find a location that does not have sudden loud noises like doors slamming, sirens etc. These can drown out what people are saying. The human ear can filter out audio, most mikes can't.
- Make sure that your players understand that they shouldn't talk over each other, or carry on other conversations – microphones pick up everything.
- If you can, cover the gaming table with soft cloth (like a tablecloth). It will muffle the sounds of clattering dice and shuffling papers during a VC RPG.
- Run a VC RPG in a small room rather than a large hall. You can minimise echo with some soft furnishings like cushions or sofas. A carpeted room is better than a laminate or concrete floor.
- Place the microphone in a central location – closer to the GM than the players.
- Make sure that anyone remote from the session gets a chance to speak, and make sure the GM speaks clearly to the room during a VC RPG, not just a single player.
- Check that the audio is working and set it up before the VC RPG starts (both spoken and heard at both ends).

## Camera Setup

- Make sure that the camera covers the entire room and that all the group can be seen. This might need some furniture rearrangement!
- It is easier to understand people when they face you. Try and avoid people having their back to the camera.
- Point the camera away from light sources or windows. With most cameras, white balance will be affected by





strong sources of light. It can lead a “flare” effect and the group may appear to be in darkness.

- Make sure the room is well-lit. Remember: avoid pointing the camera directly at light sources.
- Ensure the auto-focus doesn’t continually reset – a lot of movement will set it off and readjust so again keep the camera pointed away from windows or areas with a lot of passing traffic or people.
- Make sure that any trailing cables are squared away for safety. It also stops the camera from tipping over.
- Check that the camera works and set it up before the VC RPG starts.

In summary: running a VC RPG for this first time isn’t easy. It will get easier though. If you give yourself enough setup time and invest in a bit of effort initially, a VC RPG will run well.

## Playtesting RPGs

Over the years, I’ve participated in playtests for a number of games, often as part of ORC. It’s a good community to run such games in as we have a variety of different gamer age groups – from younger gamers just starting out in their first RPG, to those who first played D&D in the 1970s: we’ve playtested Runequest scenarios, Traveller adventures for [BITS](#) (British Isles Traveller Society), *Dogs in the Vineyard*, and *A/State* in the past. Most recently we’ve playtested: *Cliché: the Roleplaying Game of Predictable Horror* from [Drunken Badger Games](#), as well as [The Secret Fire RPG](#).

If you’re making a commercial RPG, you’re going to need to test it. To do that you’ll need to “playtest” it (or “beta” test as it is sometimes called – this term is loosely based on software development), which basically means running games in a test environment – usually a single session game, or over a number of sessions – often with a particular group or groups. The idea of these sessions are to destruction test every aspect of the rules: to see what works and what doesn’t. Local groups like ORC Edinburgh are great for this, or you can use your own group (however, see below).

With that in mind, I thought I’d compile a brief article about playtesting for those who are taking the plunge in designing their own RPG system (I hope it’ll help!).

## Publicise it

Seriously, if you want to run a game you’ve got to get players. The best way to do this is through the web although if you’re lucky enough to have a Friendly Local Gaming Shop (or FLGS) you can probably put up a flyer if they’re amenable. They might also provide you with the venue. Membership sites like [GPA](#) have their own press exploder, but this isn’t quite what you need for a playtest. What it is worth doing is visiting sites such as ORC or communities like [UKRoleplayers](#) and [ENWorld](#) and posting there.

Remember that if you’re looking for players you’ll need to find a GM as well, unless you plan to run the game yourself (see below). Make sure that you provide a clear link or method of communication, and make sure that you don’t post the same thing multiple times in the same forums. I’d suggest you ask them to contact you, either via web form or email – if you create a playtest pack later on, you can then send it to them. If you put it up directly on a website it will either be downloaded and never used, or (if its within a forum) taken down by moderators (and quite rightly too). Using email creates a immediate contact with a playtester and is far more personal than a download link. It also helps keep some control over what you may have spent years preparing, i.e. your Intellectual Property (IP), as well as providing a record of who has requested what. You can also set up a distribution list enabling you to contact all your playtesters easily as well.

RPG conventions are also great places to run games – you’ll likely get a bunch of people you’ve met (or have met each other before) and it provides a perfect control group. Make sure you watch the time though!

## Create a playtest pack

A playtest pack is essential if you’re running a playtest. Ideally this should be in the kind of format that any pc or phone can read – PDF format is usually best for this, but make sure the file(s) are a reasonable size: less than 5mb is best and shouldn’t clog up an email inbox.

- A form to list all of the playtesters names (including the GM). Contact details should only be used to keep them informed of the game, and not used for marketing, and you should check that they are OK about seeing their name appear in the credits as a playtester.
- Quick start rules – keep the fluff; e.g. setting and background information to a minimum, save it for the sell sheet. Make sure that you have combat and PC generation (and abilities) covered. The players may not have all the information of the final game but it is good to have as much detail as they may need.
- Character sheets (blank or pregenerated). If you want to test out character classes or PC generation, the best way to do it is have the players create their own characters. Make sure you factor this into your Quickstart rules though, along with any extra setup time!
- A sample adventure. If your game is very background-intensive, then this adventure should introduce the players to the setting, but be careful not to overwhelm them. An introductory game should run 3-5 hours, but remember to leave some time for feedback at the end.
- A brief summary of what is required of the playtesters.
- A feedback form asking what they liked/disliked, what could be improved etc. or in regard to specific areas.
- A Non Disclosure Agreement (optional), or NDA as it is known.

## Reward Playtesters

Mostly playtesters are rewarded with a name check at the start of the book, but if you are partnered with a specific company (like [The Secret Fire](#) and their partners: [LR Hobbies](#), [The Dungeon Alphabet](#), and [The Wilderness Alphabet](#)), you may be able to offer money-off vouchers or a discount on the finished product (or even a signed copy). At the very least, a name check is the least you can do. Remember that these people are willing to spend time testing your game, so treat them accordingly.

## Be prepared

I can’t emphasise this enough. If you’re not ready to run a game, then it isn’t suitable for playtest. You can’t create rules to cover every eventuality, be prepared to wing it, but make sure you have a clear idea about what happened or what you did with your rules. If you’ve found any errata, have it to hand or update any playtest materials ASAP. Carry a notebook to note down anything relevant during play – sometimes the most innocuous remark can have an impact on your view of the game, be an inspiration, or cause a moment of clarity.

## Listen to criticism and identify what works

Not everyone will think your game is 100% great. Don’t be a smartarse or arrogant about your game. Be prepared to listen to what people say and respond positively, even if the criticism is negative – remember that your game is being

judged, not you. If something isn't working, change or remove it – at the end of the day, you should be your toughest critic. Don't treat criticism as a personal attack (its not!) – if someone is overly negative find out why, without antagonising them.

Incidentally, one of the best ways to get feedback is to hang out with players after the game. You don't have to get trolled with them in a pub (although it does work), but just socialising with them can provide a very good environment to get their thoughts.

## Get someone else to run it

Just because you know your game inside out doesn't mean that anyone else can. If you're wanting people to pick up your game, you're going to need to be sure that someone else other than you can run it. Find someone (or several someones!) to run a game using your system and a playtest pack. You may need to do a little more work but you'll get a much clearer idea of what the problems are – as well a playtest pack you may also need to create a GM guide to running the game. its pretty simple to do – just think how you like to run the game: Light-hearted humour? Gritty realism? Make sure that any adventure includes staging notes for the GM, how to set the tone, etc. As with any players, feedback from a GM is just as important – they may also highlight rules that need tweaking and errors in your logic and rules set.

So that's it. My thoughts on running a playtest. At close of play, you should be your own harshest critic: what would you have done differently?

Hopefully this article has proven of some use to any would-be developers. As always, I welcome any feedback. If you'd still like to engage my services as a playtester (or developer!



), please contact me using the form

below.

Comments or questions are welcome. Please do not use this form to send Unsolicited Commercial Email (UCE). I am not interested in SEO placement, Facebook rankings, or the like.

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Acceptable file types: doc,pdf,txt,gif,jpg,jpeg,png.  
Maximum file size: 1mb.



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## RPG Meta-plot: is it needed?

Meta-plot is one of those concepts that you either love or hate. Basically, the term is often used in RPGs and elsewhere to describe an over-arching plot-line or extended storyline. You can see examples of meta-plot in the media too – the Shadow War in **Babylon 5**, Lucifer rising in **Supernatural**. **Game of Thrones** is one huge example of epic meta-plot, with lots going on and not all of it related to specific characters.

Yet RPGs often have a problem with meta-plot. Sometimes, even the sheer weight of meta-plot material can kill a product line. This is roughly what led to the White Wolf “reboot” of the World of Darkness (**Vampire, Werewolf** etc.) – they had loads of supplements and source-books that had largely bled (for want of a better word) the creative opportunity for GMs. Wizards of the Coast had quite a history of doing meta-plot resets, e.g. **From the Ashes** and the **Greyhawk Wars** series that rebooted Greyhawk for A&D 2nd Ed. Sometimes it is easier to start afresh and might also generate fresh revenue and invigorate a product line I suppose!

Players only appreciate meta-plot when they are active participants to some extent. It also often assumes some prior familiarity with a setting on the part of your players – and that in itself can be hard work for someone new to a particular setting. Here’s some examples.

### Babylon 5 RPG setting

Gods, where would you start with Babylon 5 for someone unfamiliar with the series? Even watching a couple of episodes wouldn’t really bring someone unfamiliar with B5 up to speed with 5 years of plot. You’d have to be really hard-core fans of the series to make it work, unless you set it before the formation of the ISA and coming of the Shadows. The sheer volume of plot and events make it inscrutable to anyone who hadn’t watched a season or more!

### Cthulhutech RPG meta-plot

You could say that the whole setting of Cthulhutech is one big meta-plot. I’m eagerly awaiting **Dead Gods** and **Burning Horizons** for Cthulhutech. One is likely to be a Storybook that features meta-plot and the events of 2086, the other “splat” book for the Rapine Storm faction (a cult of Hastur that purges/scours the earth for the arrival of the Great Old Ones). The Storybooks are interesting in that it gives your players a chance to participate in some of the major events/revelations of the year as part of the CT meta-plot. However, there’s a lot going on across the globe and it’s unlikely that your players would be at the Fall of Juneau or Shanghai. In my own *Through the Looking Glass* games, I’ve hinted at what’s to come, but can’t really bounce the players across the planet (or space in the case of *Burning Horizons*!) to a new location every session!



## Ashes of Freedom (D&D)

Contrary to popular belief at ORC, much of the meta-plot for the [Ashes of Freedom D&D game](#) at ORC did not come out of any long-term planning on my part as such. It worked as a result and I could tailor the plot toward the PCs actions. Yes, I did have a few ideas for the long-term, but fitting it around the players worked far better. Also as the world was my own creation it meant that I didn't feel compelled to preserve it, or avoid any events. To be perfectly honest, some of the plot was derailed from the first session so I had to come up with some new ideas quickly!

To answer my original question: is meta-plot needed? No – never let it get in the way. If you want a simple dungeon bash, for instance, you might not need it. Live free, and only use meta-plot when you want to give the game some flavour, or involve the players in some new conspiracy! Kill off a significant NPC? No problem. The PCs thwart the invasion that might have led to the founding of an empire of a thousand years of peace and prosperity? Oops! The whole party gets wiped out? GMs, it's your game: you can do what you want with it.

## Ronin GM! Getting a new group together

As a GM I've got a lot of games that I want to run and my time is pretty much limited. If I ever won the Lottery, I'd likely spend my time running or preparing games for my various gaming groups. The biggest frustration is often finding players for them – I'd love to run [Cthulhutech](#), [Shadows of Esteren](#), and the new RPG from Wildfire, [The Void](#). However way you look at it, Pathfinder and D&D are usually the first RPGs that many new tabletop RPGers play. Consequently that's what they want to play. Pathfinder and D&D are a staple (or junk food to carry the metaphor), and they often feel they encourage the “munchkin” perspective of players. We have a generation of players who have “grown up” killing other PCs online and taking their gear. As a result, many new players can often become adversarial with a GM (particularly when the GM pulls a surprise twist that the rules don't cater for). It's also all too easy for some new players to forget that there are others in the game, and sometimes they are indulged by new GMs (who perhaps fail to notice that no else in the group has had a chance to get a word in edgeways for the last half hour). My advice is to make sure everyone has a chance to speak, perhaps even asking more loud-mouthed players to shut the hell up (or words to that effect) so that your GM can hear...

Anyway... I've noticed that there are fewer GMs running basic entry level games like Pathfinder and D&D. I kicked off a thread on the [ORC Edinburgh forum](#) (you'll need to register to see it), and we've pretty much come up with a few reasons why. One is GMs don't want to run Pathfinder or D&D – they've moved onto other systems, and have their own RPG likes. Another is a lack of experience among those who would like to run games but up until now haven't had the chance to play (as a GM or player). A lack of venue or players is another. Timing can be tricky, players can be fickle as well. Also a campaign is very hard work, even if it is a published one – there's still a fair bit of work for a GM!

With that in mind, I've considered what might help us at ORC Edinburgh. My idea is to become a ronin GM (or roaming GM anyway). I run a few games of Pathfinder and D&D hopefully with those wanting to go on to running the games, possibly sort of mini-campaign or something from one of the Adventure Paths. They get a bit of experience playing an RPG, then I move on – “My work here is done” – starting again with a new group. Hopefully I'd be leaving some new GMs behind to continue with that group. Like the D&D Encounters series, but with a view to passing on GM skills and to give confidence to new GMs. It might also help new groups to form as a result.

This will be an interesting experiment to say the least, and would likely help the community to grow as a result. I'll see how it goes.

## RPG groups for under 18s

The times they are a-changin'

Bob Dylan

Back in the early 1980s, very few parents would have played RPGs, but now there are two, maybe even three, generations of gamers in some families. I'm not just talking about video gamers (although that is more common), I'm talking about pen'n'paper RPGs.

Pen'n'paper RPGs (PNP RPGs to save time) to me are far more beneficial to a child or adolescent than computer ones. Every kid plays make-believe, and RPGs are a great way for parents to engage their kids without worrying about their exposure to the "dangers" of the internet or computer games. If you are a parent and an RPG player then you're pretty much ready to run a game for them. The key points to remember in all of this is responsibility as a parent, and the need for supervision. There's always a few parental concerns about the RPG hobby, but Ken Walton does a fantastic job of allaying them on the [Escapist](#) web page.

Adult RPG groups are understandably wary about allowing younger players to join their group without parental supervision. In the current climate that is understandable, particularly since many groups meet in pubs or houses. There's also the unfortunate perception that younger players can be disruptive or immature – whilst this may sometimes be the case, no more so than any adult. I've played a few games with a father and son, and I have to say there was no problem: the group had a great time and there was little or problem with age.

From this point on, I'll focus on what parents and teenagers can do when they are looking for a game in their area. By far the easiest way is to muster your own group, ideally those of the same age. Whether you are a parent, or teenager, it can be pretty daunting; especially if you are assembling a group and you're under 18.

Without pandering to a stereotype too much, RPGs tend to appeal to the more withdrawn or reserved kids who are often outside the normal social circles. For parents, RPGs provide a kid with a social outlet, as well as human contact – computer games are all very well, but RPGs still provide human contact, often with those of a similar age, outlook, and interests.

School groups are one of the best ways for younger gamers to meet up and play. Obviously this requires cooperation from the school management and other parents, but it is a far more attractive alternative for parents than wondering where their kids are.

Wargaming groups and hobby game shops like Games Workshop also provide a good outlet and method of meeting other folk of the same age, many of whom will also play RPGs.

Youth groups are a great place for u18s (under 18s) to pick up RPGs and play, but time and a venue can make things difficult. However, with adult cooperation and understanding, kids can get together and play.

Finding a place to play can be tricky at the best of times – a decent game session usually requires a certain amount of seclusion from distractions, aside from the obvious mobile phone or TV! At the end of the day it's up to the responsible adult to make sure that the environment is OK for u18s to play RPGs – for example, if you're playing in the public area of your religious community, talk of blood, demons, bullets and explosions may raise a few eyebrows! The best place to play is somewhere like a hall or function room, where people can come or go to a public area for refreshments.

RPGs can be played anywhere. [ORC](#) started out in Cafe Nero, a coffee shop. u18s can also play games at a friend's house, or at their local church hall. As always, if you're a parent make sure you're OK with the venue.

At the end of the day, it's down to a parent to make sure their kids are safe. If you're under 18 try and engage your parents with your hobby – they'll likely understand, and might even want to help – especially if they are gamers! RPG groups for under 18s are some of the best ways to make new friends if you're of the same age.

## **RPGs - Cinematic Style!**

Bringing a cinematic feel to an RPG is something I've had a measure of success with in the past as a GM. By "cinematic", I'm not referring to games like *Toon* or *Cliché* (although what I'm writing here may be of use in these games), but instead the playing of the game using movie techniques and staging. Playing the game as if the PCs are characters in a movie. Even if you don't know much about movies the chances are you'll be familiar with what I'm talking about here. It can take some fine-tuning to get it right and it's not everyone's cup of tea.

So, what is "cinematic style"? Well, as GM you usually follow the plot of an adventure. Consider yourself a movie Director. Now consider breaking that plot up into "scenes", with PCs (and NPCs) as characters in that movie. From your Players' point-of-view they're the ones watching this movie; the audience. When running a cinematic game, you can use phrases like "Cut away to a Long shot of the Evil Genius revealing his plot to his minions".

Running a game cinematically is best illustrated with my old favourite, the *Star Wars RPG*, which encourages the GM to use cut-aways, camera angles and the like. In fact their published adventures often featured cut-aways and camera angles to either enhance the story or provide a plot point. Don't worry too much about the terminology right now – I'm coming to it soon enough!

One thing to point out is that your players may not like this style of game and it may not work out for you – but if you're new to GMing it can be quite a handy technique to help build up your game skills. Try it for a couple of games, but take feedback from your players – some games may not work well done this way. And the idea is to get your players (your audience) involved with their characters and to be on the edge of their seats. If they're getting bored, cut it down.

## **Cinematic Terminology**

There's a few phrases and concepts needed to run a cinematic game.



## Film Shots

If you're running a cinematic game, it's a good idea to get familiar with how cinematographers frame shots.

- Extreme Close-up Shot (XCU) – the subject (or part thereof) is framed to fit into more than the entire frame. Aside from the obvious *Wayne's World* notoriety it can be used to focus in on very small items like a barrel of a gun, or move across the surface of the *Batman* logo for instance
- Close-up Shot (CU) – usually used to show an actor's face or object. For example, the “KHAAAAAN!” moment in *Star Trek 2: the Wrath of Khan*.
- Medium Shot (M) – Usually the actor(s) are shown from the waist up e.g. while they have a conversation.
- Long (L) – The subject is framed to show themselves in their entirety (Head to toe for actors), usually the whole building or similar.
- Extreme Long (XL) – Often used with a zoom, the subjects are some distance away.
- Establishing shot – usually a Long Shot of a building or location to establish a change in scene after a cut-away or scene change.

You can then use phrases like “Cut to a Long Shot of the Star Destroyer Executor. The Imperial March plays ominously in the background”.

## Camera movements

As well as camera shots there's a few other techniques used in cinematic film to describe the camera movements.

- Pan – the camera turn from left to right or vice versa – like looking left or right.
- Tilt – the camera looks up or down – like nodding your head.
- Dolly – the camera physically moves closer or further back from the subject as if its on wheels
- Zoom – the subject appear further away (zoom out) or closer (zoom in).

They can be combined – e.g. the dolly zoom famous in [this scene](#) from *Jaws*. There's more than these too, see [here](#) for more information. An example “Close Up of Gandalf on the roof of Isengard zooms out to Extreme Long shot of the trees being cut down and Orcs burning them).

## *In Media Res*

A narrative technique called *in media res* (Latin for “in the midst of things) can be used for a variety of purposes, often avoiding the “How do we get here?” questions or “Why did we come here?”. It's a great way for a new group to get off the ground too, especially if they're thrown together suddenly against a common foe. It drops the PCs directly into a situation, and can be combined easily with **Scripts** and **Credits!**

## Montage

Montages can be used to compress periods of time like training (cf. those training sequences in [Rocky](#)) or fortifying a building, or building something like in the *A-Team* when they make a tank out of a loo roll and combine harvester. It's a sequence of (usually) single shots of characters involved in different activities, usually set to music.

## Plot Points

Plot points are like milestone or achievement markers used to move the plot along.

## Screen Time

Make sure that everyone has an equal amount of “screen time”. Meaning don’t focus upon a single character for the whole game when using cinematic techniques. Don’t get too carried away if the players are getting bored. They don’t need a shot-by-shot description of them setting up camp for the night (you could always use a **Montage!**).

## “Editing” your Game

When running your cinematic game, here’s a few things to help with the staging.

### Creating scenes

Scenes are usually a single room or location in which the characters interact for a while. If you can, go for big set pieces and locations when you’re staging battles cinematically. Think Michael Bay – think Baysian! – blow stuff up! NPCs are falling left, right, and centre to the Bad Guys. Everything is on an epic scale, and the PCs are at the heart of it (*Zulu*, *Lord of the Rings*). Chase scenes are great when they’re done right (*The Italian Job* – original, the speeder bike chase in *Return of the Jedi*).

A long time ago I wrote a bit about [Writing a Script](#). While not happy with the article itself (I wrote it at college), I do recall mentioning the M or W plotting model – you build up to a scene; or everything is normal, until POW! In cinematic terms constructing an adventure is no different if you split it up into scenes.

### Opening Credits

I’m serious. When the game starts, you can always begin with “Previously on.. “. Or the classic “Once upon a time”. There’s always the *Star Wars* scrolling credits if you’re playing over the ‘net. Ideally the opening credits should provide some form of summary, a plot point, or to update the players to their PCs situation. They can also be combined with **Scripts** to get the players straight into the action.

### Cut-aways

Cut-aways, where the focus shifts elsewhere for a short time is a fantastic way to heighten tension. It can shift the focus away to another scene. A GM can use it to advance a plot point or break tension. Here’s some examples:

- The Big Bad Guy grandstanding about only the fact there’s 60 minutes before Earth is destroyed. Getting the PCs to move faster.
- The party has been split – half are involved in combat while the other half disarm a ticking bomb. Heightening tensions and getting both groups engaged.
- One of the PCs is going *mano-a-mano* (one on one) with a Bad Guy. The GM can shift to the other players as they keep the minions off his back.

- The Bad Guy’s minions report that they are concerned that the shield is fluctuating around the bridge. They’ll be fine as long as no one hits their aft stabilisers. Obviously this can lead to a bit of meta-gaming in the case of the plot, but who cares?

## Special FX

Aside from making things Bayesian (BOOM!), there’s a whole slew of film effects tricks you can use in a cinematic game in scene transitions.

- Wipes – another scene moves across the current one replacing it. Often used in caper or kids shows. Usually they move horizontally, but can move vertically. Alternatively an animation is shown (like the 60s *Batman* TV show)
- Dissolve – the scene washes out slowly into another one. Usually to indicate a location transition. It is rarely used in action movies except in the aftermath of something.
- Slo-mo – the character appears to move very slowly, usually at dramatic moment. Like anime where someone appears suspended in mid air as they leap to attack. Also now famous as the Matrix’s “bullet time” shot.
- Fades – the screen darkens to black or white. In the case of fade-to-black it implies something ominous has happened or the scene is ending. Fade-to-white if often used to illustrate explosions like at atomic bombs exploding.
- Blur – the camera loses focus briefly. Often used in character POV (Point of View). It can be used to lose focus during high speed chases (Reaver ship chases after Firefly in *Serenity*), or if the character is losing consciousness.
- Lens flare- often used by directors to show how awesome space is or how hot the desert is.
- Split screen – as seen a lot in *24*. Multiple scenes are shown at the same time, usually in silence.

## Other Suggestions

These are all suggestions for how to improve your game when running it cinematically.

## Cinematic Music

If you do use background music in your game, keep it confined to specific sequences or vary the selection considerably. The *Lord of the Rings* OST on a continual play setting will just irritate everyone after a few hours. Music should be used to provide a background only, not to drown out the GM or players.

Be aware that the type of music itself can be an important choice. If you’re playing 1930s *Call of Cthulhu*, play some old Jazz, not Iron Maiden. Kasabian won’t sound good in a Fantasy RPG. On the other hand, if your PCs walk into a vampire night club and New Order’s [Confusion](#) (Pump Panel Reconstruction Mix) or [Lucretia My Reflection](#) (by the Sisters of Mercy) is playing... slightly clichéd, but perfect to get players in the mood.

Sometimes you can “cross the streams” a bit: I once played Queen’s [Flash](#) (from the movie *Flash Gordon*) while my AD&D party were attacking a floating castle. They were accompanied by birdmen against flying baboons(!) – the scenario was [Dark Clouds Gather](#) (for those interested).

## Scripts

Scripts were a single page insert into the D6 Star Wars adventures. Each player read out a different part as their character at the start of the game (see using **Credits**). It was a bit of fun. It also was a great way to provide instant information to the players and drop them straight into the middle of the action *in media res*.

Obviously if your players are reading the parts as their characters, it pays for the GM to know a little of the PC back story, or their personality. It's a little extra work for the GM, but does help bring the PC to life.

Keep the script relatively short – less than a page of A4. Each players should have a roughly equal number of lines, possibly with some bantering between them. Keep each line to maybe a couple of sentences. make sure that everyone will have their own copy as a handout too, rather than sharing it!

Bear in mind that not everyone will like this option. Some players may find it silly, and it really depends on your players.

## Summary

There's a lot of fun in running an RPG as if it were a movie, but it can take some adjustment for both GM and players. If you do decide to a game cinematically don't go overboard and make sure it suits your style of play. If your players don't like it, listen to them.

**Spy RPGs - keep them intriguing!**

## Spy RPGs – keep them intriguing!

Spy-related or espionage games are great fun, whether you're a player or GM. It's quite rewarding creating elaborate schemes and plots for such games. If you're going to do a spy RPG right as a GM, then you will probably need to do some preparation to an extent.

### The Characters

When you're running a spy RPG, it's a good idea to try and get as much info as you can from your players about their characters – who their contacts are, what their assets and drawbacks are, etc. Also, its often a good idea to find out more about PC family members and any secrets, whether its within the game rules or not. Most modern RPGs have some form of asset or drawback system that should then be fleshed out by the player ASAP. PCs are not largely machines (at least not in most spy RPGs): they may have home lives and their own dirty little secrets (see BBC TV's **Spooks** for just how this can work!). These can later be used as possible story hooks – or as leverage by the bad guys.

It's best to try and create character-driven games rather than shoe-horning PCs in to a specific scenario when it come to spy RPGs. For example, a Shadowrun game I played in involved a covert operation upon an oil rig. If there'd been a Decker or Rigger in the party they would have likely spent most of their time twiddling their thumbs – but the group of us worked well as a team because the adventure played to our strengths as a result.

You can also get considerable fun out of having some PCs being more than they appear – secret powers such as latent



para-psychics in Cthulhutech, telepaths in spy RPGs like the Necroscope RPG (or my own [eBranch](#) game). When you add the fact that spy RPGs usually foster a certain sense of paranoia in players, you can also have fun when the implication is that the PCs all have their own agendas!

## The Opposition (NPCs)

It is very easy to create a monolithic organisation – e.g. the Men in Black, Cobra, HYDRA, the Rapine Storm – but all need some kind of quirk that makes them different. Sometimes it's as straightforward as making their viewpoints and goals different in such a way that they oppose those of the characters' own – from financial gain and world domination (e.g. HYDRA and SPECTRE), to the complete destruction of the characters' way of life e.g. the Rapine Storm in **Cthulhutech**, the Borg of the **Star Trek** universe.

Obviously these organisations are composed of individuals – even the Borg have their Queen(s) – but it is sometimes worth coming up with something that symbolises the organisation: a symbol, uniform or method; something that will instantly “click” with your players. Significant NPCs of these organisations should also be distinct in some way from the others, with their own quirks and idiosyncrasies, to set them apart from the rank and file.

There's also the “Other guys”. Every organisation has them: the IT support staff, the accountants, science techs. not everyone has to be James Bond: where would he be without Q and his team? If you watch programs like CSI, most of their cases involve a lot of support staff – video techs, lab techs, etc. A Hacker or Decker can be a dangerous opponent when they are powerful enough to compromise your security: see films like **Enemy of the State** or the **Bourne Identity**. A few pieces of info changed and suddenly your spies are burned (like TV's **Burn Notice** – which is recommended for anyone running a spy game).

Here's a few other things to bear in mind (and that I've found useful) for spy-related games.

## Surveillance & Investigation.

In the real world, surveillance is long, arduous and gruellingly boring. Fortunately, you can compress time in RPGs, but you should feel free to embellish what the PCs see or do. You never know, they may miss the delivery, ransom drop, or hit, because one of them is too busy playing with the sniper scope or arguing with the other PCs: you don't need to play out the surveillance day by day. Also, investigations by PCs can take far less time than in RPGs when you compress it. Bear in mind that intelligence-gathering, monitoring, forensics, or lab tests take far longer if the PCs don't do it themselves – with the relevant skill rolls and successor failures relying on their expertise. If they decide to use a third party, it may take longer – but you can control the information that the PCs get as a result.

## The Plot

Spy games are all about bluff, deceit, obfuscation, and double-crosses. At the core of a spy game is information: who has it, the control of it, and the quality of it. A list of names can prove priceless in the right hands. The identity of a traitor or other individual, like Karla in **Smiley's People** and **Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy**, could comprise a number of adventure sessions. A GM could even point it towards the players themselves, one of whom is the Mole.

## Location, location, location



As a GM it falls to you to try and make your players aware of their surroundings and describe the setting. The internet is your friend in this case. Want to run a game in Malta? Use Google [Earth/Maps](#) and get some idea of the street level appearance, at least. [Wikipedia](#) will give you some idea of the culture and customs as well, but it's often a good idea to use locations that you yourself have visited – it is much easier to describe places from memory!

## The Gadgets

Computers, McGuffins, cybernetic implants, guns, players love 'em. Most games have some form of gear supplement that players will go through and drool over. They'll spend forever going through them: as GM, it doesn't really help the game if the players are looting bodies for their cybernetic parts every five minutes, or loading up with stolen assault rifles. It is sometimes worth creating a standard field kit that the PCs are given. If the game allows your players to requisition equipment, it bears thinking about how portable it is or how reasonable the request is – you don't necessarily take a tactical nuke on a diplomatic assignment! In fact, you can actually make an adventure out of acquiring the gear – such as stealing the equipment or smuggling it across the border.

## Psychic powers and mind-spies

Any game that involves PCs with psychic powers is going to take a bit of work on your part as GM. Telepaths can pull secrets from people's minds – the location of the villain's secret lair? The identity of the murderer? That's easy for a telepath to discover. It can play hell with your plot, but there's ways to work around it: the bad guys have mental shields, telepaths are not allowed to scan unwilling subjects (it is inadmissible in court etc.), line of sight is needed for their power to work, etc.

Despite the difficulties in plotting games around psychic powers, mind-spies and telepaths make for interesting games (as in Brian Lumley's **Necroscope** series). Telepaths are the ultimate espionage tool – they can look like anyone, don't require equipment, and can rarely be detected. Opponents may have their own psychics blocking out any mind-readers, and of course there are creatures that have their own mental powers (again, to use **Necroscope** as an example, the Wamphyri have their *mindsmog*).

### Cthulhutech - running CT campaigns

## Cthulhutech – running a campaign in the Strange Aeon

Cthulhutech can be quite a daunting game to run, especially if you're new to running an RPG. The sheer volume of background material can be quite off-putting for a novice GM, or even some more experienced GMs. At the end of the day, it should be a collaborative effort between you and your players.

Before I begin, a disclaimer: Cthulhutech is a pretty dark and disturbing game, and the setting has a number of themes that many may find disturbing. It takes a certain level of maturity to run or play in certain adventures as a player or GM, so reader discretion is advised.

## Know your players – choose a facet



The sheer variety of options available to player and GMs means that you (as GM) and your players should try and find some common ground. If your players prefer tearing across the landscape in huge robots and raining down hell, then an investigative game with para-psychics and Tagers probably won't work for them. Mecha and Engel pilots will also find much of their skill set useless in a investigative game. What I'm saying is: choose a particular style of game, and don't try and mix them up too much in a long-term game. You can do it, but it can be a bit of a stretch – it's best to try and avoid more than two or more of Cthulhutech's game "facets" below (see also **Running a test game** below):

- **Tager** – Tager games work best when the entire PC (Player Character) group are Tagers. Those without symbionts are at a huge disadvantage, especially when facing creatures like Dhohanoids. Tagers are hugely powerful, and normal mortals (Mundanes) can't really compete with them in combat – even less so than Dhohanoid attackers. This works best when GMs treat the games as a sort of unseen war between Chrysalis Corp and the Eldritch Society (similar to the *Guyver* TV series), known in CT as the Shadow War.
- **Private Eye/Government Agency (Mundanes)** – mortal characters assigned to intelligence agencies or law enforcement agencies like the FSB, OIS, or GIA. Para-psychics or sorcerors can easily fit into these games – Tagers will tend to overbalance any encounter – and they are the easiest to run for those familiar with *Call of Cthulhu* and similar games. For military types, mecha or Engels are unlikely to be a part of many of the games in this facet – however, soldiers can be found everywhere in Cthulhutech so they can easily be seconded, on leave (medical or otherwise), or just involved some how using their background. GMs can also find it easier to reveal various aspects of the game such as Para-psychics and sorcerors gradually using this facet, as well as revealing some of the game background and Cthulhutech metaplot.
- **Military/Mecha/Engels (MME)** are some of the easiest games for a GM to run, requiring fairly simple objectives. The PCs are given their orders and are expected to carry them out, often with the necessary equipment provided. In the case where PCs are simple soldiers, expect to deal with a certain amount of PC deaths: most **MME** games will likely revolve around battles, and combat in Cthulhutech is pretty deadly! The NEG faces a number of Integrity-scale monsters who shrug off machine gun fire: the Rapine Storm's Beast allies, Esoteric Order of Dagon (EoD) power armour and mecha, not to mention the Migou war machine. This doesn't require a huge amount of work by a GM on a setting, but it does require the PCs to work as a team. However, it's best to keep MME games using PC using powered armour and Engels/Mecha separate from those playing "grunts" – the average NEG soldier has poor survivability in games where Mecha and Engels are used.
- **The Weird Stuff** – this is one for those players that really love a challenge: there are rules in many of the books for playing some of the other beings: Ghouls, Dhohanoids, and Migou. This requires a lot of co-operation between the GM and players but it makes for a very unique, rewarding game – and pretty much restricts the players to a certain type of game.

## Sell it to your players

If your players have played *Battletech*, the Mecha concept will likely appeal to them, as will Tager games if they are big fans of Anime. If they've played *Call of Cthulhu*, it's likely that they would also like the chance to "get even" as it were! It's also worth showing prospective players some of the artwork as it really evokes the game, or directing them toward the Cthulhutech website and the quick-start rules.

## Running a test game

When I first ran Cthulhutech I ran a mini-campaign called [When the Ocean Wept](#), allowing me to try out three facets: Mundanes, Tagers, and Mecha. A test game or short series of adventures is the best way to introduce players to



Cthulhutech and the Strange Aeon, especially the *Framework* system and *Cthulhutech* setting. If you have a group of regular players, even better (especially if they've also played *Call of Cthulhu*).

## Build PC backgrounds

Building a Cthulhutech PC is pretty detailed (see **NPC Lists** below), with a large number of Assets and Drawbacks used to add to the PC build. A number of these like *Outsider Taint* or *Hunted*, can also create a fantastic opportunity for a GM to create encounters and even adventures based upon these backgrounds, as well as helping a player flesh out their PC background. I'd also encourage players to create their PCs, rather than pick the stock PCs "off the peg" in the books, although you can use these for a quick setup.

## NPC lists

Beasts and NPCs in CT are very detailed stats-wise – that can make it very difficult to keep track of during combat, especially with Vitality/Integrity scores. I try and keep lists of stats for NPCs and also break down the Health stats into their multiples to make it easier. Cthulhutech has a large number of sample NPCs – I now try and keep a list of them (or where to find them) so I know where to get details of gang members, para-psychics, soldiers, etc. It's also worth creating a stock list of your own NPCs, which you can then use as needed e.g. "Blank" Mecha Pilots, Human Cultists etc..

## Build in parts of the game

If your players aren't aware of, or have access to, a large part of the Cthulhutech background, you can introduce it gradually. After all, much of CT's background isn't really the sort of thing that a person on the street in the Strange Aeon would know: much of what they see on the news is sanitized and carefully vetted before release to the press. Don't expect to learn all the rules at once: as GM you may not need to know the rules on Mecha combat if you're running a Tager game for example. Take your time introducing it to your players.

## Prune the fluff

There's a lot of background to Cthulhutech, possibly too much. Don't expect you or your players to know it all. Alter the Cthulhutech meta-plot if it doesn't fit your plans – Scotland has fallen to the Migou in CT canon, but in my *Through the Looking Glass* games, Scotland is still in NEG hands. Sometimes it helps to reveal small parts of the meta-plot or background e.g. para-psychics and sorcerors are not commonplace: but if a player wants to bring a PC of that kind into the group that can springboard into other events such as awareness of the Arcane Underground.

## Drama points

I dislike the *Framework* Drama Points intently and have found it slows things done immeasurably. Unlike the core rules, I allow players to have one Drama Point, and they can spend it in a similar fashion to Fate Points in *Warhammer FRP* e.g. if your PC falls off a cliff, you spend a point and your PC's fall is broken by a tree before they hit the ground; your PC is caught in an explosion, but manage to hide behind a door, etc. If you do wish to use them as given, I'd suggest that the players can only modify their own rolls.





## Books you might need

And finally, I've summarised the Cthulhutech range of books and recommended what you need for each facet of game.

Cthulhutech also has a very nice that also has some of the game's fantastic artwork in handouts showing the various mecha, tagers, and beasts from the series. Along with these handouts are some of the more useful charts from the books.



The **Cthulhutech core book** is obviously what you'll need as a player or GM and contains much of the background and rules you need to play Mundanes, Mecha or Tagers. The [quickstart](#) rules on the Cthulhutech website may be of use to players as well. There are a number of adventures and story hooks included as well.

- **Availability:** as a [PDF](#) and also from .
- **Recommended for:** all players and GMs – if you're a GM, I'd thoroughly recommend getting a hard copy.



**Vade Mecum** is the companion to the core book and contains lots more information on Mecha, Engels, beasts and Parapsychic abilities, as well as those old Lovecraftian nasties, Ghouls as PC characters. I suspect that Vade Mecum contains the overspill of ideas from the core rulebook. It also includes a couple of adventures for different CT facets.

- **Availability:** as a [PDF](#) and also from .
- **Recommended for:** all players and GMs.



**Dark Passions** is a relatively slim volume compared to the other books in the Cthulhutech range,



and details some of the Cults in the Strange Aeon, along with details for running games involving cults and Cultist PCs. The hard copy version is quite expensive for the page count (although the material is useful), so I'd go for the PDF version.

- **Availability:** as a [PDF](#) and also from .
- **Recommended for:** GMs looking to run games focusing upon cults.



**Damnation View** details the major events of 2085 and also allows GMs to find out a little bit more of the metaplot. In game terms it's a pretty bleak year for the NEG, although there are triumphs. Damnation View has a range of scenarios for different facets and probably contains enough material and plot hooks for a year of games.

- **Availability:** as a [PDF](#) and also from .
- **Recommended for:** GMs wanting to run a variety of adventures using the CT metaplot, or use the core background.



**Mortal Remains** is one of the weakest books in the line and largely contains background fluff and information. It also contains an extensive section on the Migou (Fungi from Yuggoth), and how to use them as PCs. I'm not sure why this is so weak, but I don't think the Migou's intentions come across clearly – they should be utterly inscrutable and alien in my mind.

- **Availability:** as a [PDF](#) and also from .
- **Recommended for:** GMs wanting a bit more background on the Nazzadi and Migou.



**Ancient Enemies** is one of those books that was eagerly awaited and doesn't disappoint. It's a hefty hardback book detailing Tagers and Dhohanoids, and also features rules for creating Dhohanoid PCs as well as some



truly awesome Tagers via Metamorphosis. There's extensive background on Chrysalis Corporation and the Eldritch Society. It's worth buying for the artwork alone!

- **Availability:** as a [PDF](#) and also from .
- **Recommended for:** Players and GMs. Essential for those who want to run Tagers and games featuring Dhohanoids, as well games involving the Eldritch Society and Chrysalis Corporation.



**Unveiled Threats** is the pretty much a listing of arms and equipment. It's a pretty comprehensive list of firearms, armour, gadgets and arcane artefacts. There's some pretty nasty ideas as well that have a significant "Yeuch!" factor.

- **Availability:** as a [PDF](#) and also from .
- **Recommended for:** Players (and GMs) who like having lots of cool equipment and other toys.

## Conclusion

Cthulhutech is a very detailed setting and the metaplot makes it particularly dense content-wise. Hopefully this article helps clarify what you need to do to get a decent CT game up and running!

## Ronin GM! Getting a new group together

As a GM I've got a lot of games that I want to run and my time is pretty much limited. If I ever won the Lottery, I'd likely spend my time running or preparing games for my various gaming groups. The biggest frustration is often finding players for them – I'd love to run [Cthulhutech](#), [Shadows of Esteren](#), and the new RPG from Wildfire, [The Void](#). However way you look at it, Pathfinder and D&D are usually the first RPGs that many new tabletop RPGers play. Consequently that's what they want to play. Pathfinder and D&D are a staple (or junk food to carry the metaphor), and they often feel they encourage the "munchkin" perspective of players. We have a generation of players who have "grown up" killing other PCs online and taking their gear. As a result, many new players can often become adversarial with a GM (particularly when the GM pulls a surprise twist that the rules don't cater for). It's also all too easy for some new players to forget that there are others in the game, and sometimes they are indulged by new GMs (who perhaps fail to notice that no else in the group has had a chance to get a word in edgeways for the last half hour). My advice is to make sure everyone has a chance to speak, perhaps even asking more loud-mouthed players to shut the hell up (or words to that effect) so that your GM can hear...

Anyway... I've noticed that there are fewer GMs running basic entry level games like Pathfinder and D&D. I kicked off a thread on the [ORC Edinburgh forum](#) (you'll need to register to see it), and we've pretty much come up with a few



reasons why. One is GMs don't want to run Pathfinder or D&D – they've moved onto other systems, and have their own RPG likes. Another is a lack of experience among those who would like to run games but up until now haven't had the chance to play (as a GM or player). A lack of venue or players is another. Timing can be tricky, players can be fickle as well. Also a campaign is very hard work, even if it is a published one – there's still a fair bit of work for a GM!

With that in mind, I've considered what might help us at ORC Edinburgh. My idea is to become a ronin GM (or roaming GM anyway). I run a few games of Pathfinder and D&D hopefully with those wanting to go on to running the games, possibly sort of mini-campaign or something from one of the Adventure Paths. They get a bit of experience playing an RPG, then I move on – “My work here is done” – starting again with a new group. Hopefully I'd be leaving some new GMs behind to continue with that group. Like the D&D Encounters series, but with a view to passing on GM skills and to give confidence to new GMs. It might also help new groups to form as a result.

This will be an interesting experiment to say the least, and would likely help the community to grow as a result. I'll see how it goes.

## **Edinburgh Gaming**

### **Edinburgh Gaming - Gaming in Auld Reekie**

## **Edinburgh Gaming**

Edinburgh has a thriving gaming community, with three Universities and a fairly localised population. I spend most Saturday afternoons in Edinburgh gaming at ORC, the [Open Roleplaying Community](#), but also participate in a few games outside of there. Although Edinburgh is fairly small, there's a lot of Edinburgh gaming groups – and a lot of games/software companies. Computer gamers likely know that this is the home of Rockstar North, creators of Grand Theft Auto (their office is just up the road from me). I run my games at ORC on Saturdays. You don't need to have joined the ORC website to play, although I think it's worth joining (I'd likely say that anyway :), being the site admin).

## **Edinburgh Gaming Shops**

There's quite a few shops in Edinburgh that may be of interest to the gamer – whether they are visiting or have recently moved to the city.

- [Black Lion](#). Based at 90 Buccleuch Street, Edinburgh EH8 9NH (tel: +44 (0)131-667-2128) or via [email](#). A non-affiliated independent Edinburgh gaming store selling a wide range of miniatures, board games, card games and roleplaying games (RPGs). A map to the shop, near Edinburgh University, can be found [here](#).
- [Games Workshop](#) have a store at 136 High Street, Edinburgh, Midlothian, EH1 1QS (tel: +44(0)131-220-6540). They sell war games, miniatures, and board games, concentrating on their own brands – Citadel and Games Workshop. A map to the shop (near the Royal Mile) can be found [here](#).
- **Deadhead comics**. Independent comic and collectibles retailer (no RPG or miniatures), open from Monday to Saturday 10am 'till 6pm, Sundays 12am 'till 6pm. Found at . Tel: +44 (0) 131 226 2774 or by [email](#).
- [Forbidden Planet Edinburgh](#), the chain comic and collectibles retailer, can be found at , Edinburgh (tel:+44 (0)



131 558 8226).

- [Harburn Hobbies](#), 67 Elm Row, Leith Walk, Edinburgh, EH7 4AQ Tel. +44 (0)131 556 3233. “Well stocked with British trains ‘00’ and ‘N’ gauge, railway DVDs, Scalextric, plastic construction kits, lots of various diecast vehicles and dolls house furnishings, many models are on display, each with a label giving their description and price in smart illuminated cabinets. Harburn Hobbies has been instrumental in commissioning a large number of limited edition models, many representing Scottish subjects”
- [Wonderland Models](#) (next door to Illegal Jack’s). 97 & 101 Lothian Road, Edinburgh, EH3 9AN. Telephone +44 (0)131-229-6428 or +44 (0)131 229 0797 for mail order enquiries.

## Edinburgh Gaming Groups

Most universities in Edinburgh have their own clubs, as do some of the colleges and schools too. While most of the clubs accept members from outside the universities, there may be age restrictions depending on the venue and a membership fee. That said, there’s a lot of Edinburgh Gaming groups that have no web presence – sites like ORC are your friend here!

- [Open Roleplaying Community](#) (ORC, of which I am a member and run the website for) is more of a community than a club. It has a cosmopolitan outlook and runs a number of games, mainly RPGs. We usually run games on a Saturday afternoon in a local venue and at members homes on other days. Membership is free, and there are no membership age restrictions. We’re always looking for more folk to run games.
- [GEAS](#) (Grand Edinburgh Adventuring Society) is the Edinburgh University club. They run [Compulsion](#) every year, a large gaming convention.
- [Watt Gamers](#). Heriot-Watt University’s gaming club.
- [SESWC](#) is a war games club who meet every Thursday, from 7.00 pm until 11.00 pm in the Royal Navy & Royal Marine Association at 1 Broughton Road, Edinburgh. There’s space for up to fifteen 6’x4’ gaming tables and we have a good supply of scenery for miniatures games permanently stored on the premises. Other members play board or card games and there’s a bar on site for those who take their socialising seriously.
- [Edinburgh League of Gamers](#). Age 18+, and a £2 entry fee after the first visit. They are “a group of gaming enthusiasts; people who meet, converse and otherwise occupy themselves with shared interests gaming, be that with ‘toy soldiers’, collectable cards, or board games”. They meet on Wednesdays at [11 Hillside Crescent](#) and play 6-11pm.
- [FAQ](#) is the Edinburgh University Board games club.
- [Lothian Gamers](#). Livingston-based (West Lothian) group of gamers, not just RPGs.
- [Falkirk RPGers](#) – Falkirk based group.
- The [Edinburgh Gamers Guild](#) (EGG) is a place on Board Game Geek (BGG) which Edinburgh-based board games players can use to arrange games.

## Live Action Roleplaying (LARP)

- [Isles of Darkness](#) (previously Camarilla UK) run World of Darkness games (Mortals, Created: Promethean, Changeling: The Lost, Forsaken (Werewolf), Requiem (Vampire), Awakened (Mage). All games run at the [RAF Club on Hillside Crescent](#) from 7pm. [edinburgh.dst@gmail.com](mailto:edinburgh.dst@gmail.com) is the email address of the Edinburgh Domain Storyteller to find out more details on the games.
- [Embraced](#). An old World of Darkness LARP with multiple events each month.
- [Fools and Heroes](#) (FnH), is a “UK based Live Action Roleplay (LARP) Society, consisting of over 20 branches. Fools & Heroes is set in a medieval fantasy version of our own world (Scotland is re-named “Lirron”), where



knights and warriors clash with hideous creatures, priests do the bidding of their gods and mages wield powerful magics (when they are not running away). In this kind of world, the actions of individual adventurers do make a difference. Throughout the year, Edinburgh FnH run adventures on the 2nd Sunday of the month. The adventures are medium/high fantasy and focus on a local plotline, but can contain aspects of national plotline. National plotline culminates in a large weekend fest every year.”

## Edinburgh Gaming Conventions

- [Compulsion](#). This is Edinburgh’s regular gaming convention which is pretty big. It usually runs in mid-March. It covers a wide range of games from RPGs, CCGs and board games. It also runs a LARP (Live Action game), usually Vampire: the Masquerade.
- [Claymore](#) is a war games convention, usually held on the first Saturday in August. It is run by [SESWC](#).

## Gamer friendly venues

- The [RAF Club](#), 11 Hillside Crescent, Edinburgh, EH7 5EA. [ELG](#) and variousLARPs meet there.
- The [Meadow Bar](#), current home to ORC and FAQ – this bar is currently closed due to a recent fire that originated in their function room.
- [Illegal Jacks](#), a bar and grill in Lothian Road that also hosts board game nights.
- The [Cumberland Bar](#) 1-3 Cumberland Street, Edinburgh, EH3 6RT, frequented by EGG.

## Edinburgh Games Publishers

- [Box Ninja Games](#). The games of Gregor Hutton, creator of “Best Friends” and the award-winning “3:16 Carnage Amongst the Stars”.
- [Drunken Badger](#) is a joint venture set up in 2009 by Alan Hume, Benn Beaton and Marc Farrimond to find niches and gaps in the games market and offer quality products at very reasonable prices to the gaming public. Some gamer friends of mine have set up this company.
- [Rockstar North](#) is the award-winning developer behind Grand Theft Auto series, the (in)famous games.
- [Solipsist RPG](#) is a gaming company based in the heart of Scotland, owned by David Donachie, the creator of the Solipsist RPG.

## The city itself

Just a few notes about the city itself:

- Edinburgh is actually quite small for a capital city, but is quite populous nonetheless. The skyline is dominated by the volcanic bulk of Arthur’s Seat, and the famous castle that sits atop the volcanic plug. It has a very high student population – there are three other Universities other than Edinburgh: Napier, Queen Margaret, and Heriot-Watt.
- Edinburgh was once heavily polluted, and known as “Auld Reekie”. It approximately translates as “Old Smokie”. Much of the soot still adheres to older tenement blocks although many have been cleaned, and older pictures often show Edinburgh swathed in smoke.
- Edinburgh is supposed to be one of the most haunted cities in the world. Mary King’s close, a subterranean complex under the city, is a popular visitor attraction. It is known for having strange events occur of the paranormal variety.



- One of the city's biggest drawbacks is that there's no Underground/Metro to get you around. However the bus service is particularly good – £1.30 can get you from one side of the city to the other (mainly Lothian Buses). On the downside, the Edinburgh tramworks (or TIE) are currently driving residents mad!
- House prices are pretty steep, somewhat more than the rest of the country, and most central buildings are large 3 to 5-floor tenement blocks.
- The Scottish Parliament building is an expensive joke to most Scots and it is less than impressive. It is situated at the bottom of the Royal Mile, at the foot of Arthur's Seat next to Holyrood House (the Queen's residence in Edinburgh).
- Edinburgh has areas of great deprivation like Wester Hailes and Pilton, and in contrast the palatial town houses in the New Town and Morningside. Paradoxically many of these areas are side by side: Dumbiedykes is next to Holyrood Palace, and Leith where I live has both areas of wealth and poverty (Trainspotting was set – not filmed – there). Morningside is where authors such as JK Rowling and Ian Rankin live.
- Most movies that feature Edinburgh are shot in Glasgow, although **Rebus** was largely filmed here. Only specific location shots (like the running scene in Trainspotting) are usually used.

For a different view of Edinburgh, why not visit the [Dark Edinburgh](#) Page or my [Through the Looking Glass](#) setting.

## Getting gamers in

*(Revised January 2015)*

I've been gaming in various venues as part of ORC Edinburgh, and what follows maybe something of personal observations. It's basically about the places I've gamed and some of my experiences at these places, and what I'd prefer to have in a venue. I'm pretty certain that some folk will empathise with what I'm talking about. If you run a venue and want to get a society or group in, then you might want to think about what I mention here (not just gamers).

Having a gaming group play in a venue makes financial sense, considering that you have six or more people clustered around a table (in the case of RPG groups). They're likely to be there for a few hours, often during quiet times if a venue serves food or drink. There's a better-than-average chance they'll buy a lot of food and drink too – playing RPGs (and running them) is hungry and thirsty work! A game in session also gives the place a busier vibe than just a few folk sitting around.

This is not exactly a “code of conduct”, but could be construed as a foundation for a “best practice” agreement between a group and a venue.

**Space.** Space to play is essential. It is all very well getting large tables (wargamers and board gamers especially need these) but if there's very little space between each group it can become impossible to hear what folk are saying, and can become a shouting match with the other group(s) – not ideal if you're running an RPG. The seats need to be comfortable, and not hard wooden benches, as they will be used for a long period. Being able to rearrange the furniture shouldn't be a problem. There should also be enough tables to play on and still have non-gamer customers too. Ideally, RPG sessions need their own space away from loud music or live sport (worth bearing in mind for pubs).

**Cleanliness.** If you want folk to feel comfortable in a venue, make sure it is clean. Seriously. I shouldn't have to say this. At the very least the toilets should be cleaned regularly (both Male and Female) and be functional – at least one

Edinburgh venue didn't do this, and it turned into a manky hole. If food is served, the serving area should be spotless, or at least the area that prepares/serves food. At the very least some ventilation is necessary, especially in the summer. It'd be nice if gamers also made sure they bathed regularly and used deodorant, but sadly there's often one who doesn't.

**Food.** Gamers traditionally don't eat healthily, but that's no reason to feed them poor quality food. Yes, they do eat chips and burgers, not "fine dining". Gamers have a preference for certain kinds of food – soup, nachos, chilli fries, gourmet burgers, pizza. Desserts like cheesecake or hot puddings are popular too. Make them good quality; you'll sell more – and word gets around. As gamers often tend to order food at the same time it is worth having some kind of numbering system for orders (e.g. a number-on-a-stick or plastic number you sometimes see in pubs). A venue that sells hot food needs to be meticulous about hygiene, and need to make sure food is heated properly (see **Cleanliness** above). At least two venues I know of in the past have given folk food poisoning (one of those suffering was myself), possibly because all they did was reheat the food. Not eating there again, and I make a point of telling folk why. It's also a good idea to make clear the policy on cleanup. I always ask my groups to clean up after themselves (including empty wrappers and plates etc.), but it helps to make it clear from the outset.

**Drink.** If you're serving alcohol, it's always a good idea to check if any of the gaming group are under 18 (or 21 in some places). Try and set some clear guidelines for a group in these cases (e.g. under-18s cannot sit in the bar area, but can order food). Will bar staff come and collect empty glasses, or should the group themselves do it? As with **Food** above, it's usually best if groups clean up after themselves but it is a good idea to make this clear. Also, many gamers have a liking for cask beers or similar other than the usual brewery fare so it may be worth a thought (and may get other custom such as real-ale drinkers). Cocktails are pretty much a no-no, but soft drinks are also good (many gamers will drink these rather than alcohol).

**Communication.** Vital on both sides. Make sure the venue and group have a Group Contact. Someone the venue can deal with personally, either by phone, email, or PM (or all the above). It's IMMENSELY frustrating for a group to turn up to find that they can't use a venue. If a venue has an event going that might impact a group's attendance (e.g. use of a function room), make sure you let the Group Contact know well in advance. It's also worth pointing out that if gamers are in another part of the building, some event managers may not like to share a venue they may have paid to use. It never hurts to let the venue staff know, and be aware of any potential problems (e.g. room use, music concert, etc.). If the venue is likely to be unavailable (such as during the Edinburgh Festival, for a wedding, or corporate event), let the Group Contact know – likewise if a room is needed earlier/later than normal.

**Customer relations.** Customers are customers, and there's no reason to treat gamers any different. All too often gamers are treated as second-class citizens. We're paying customers – often regular paying customers -and should be treated accordingly. I've had staff be openly rude to us in one venue – bang out of order, particularly since we had to pay to play. The fact that gaming groups can get loud and boisterous should be seen as adding character to the place: if it's too loud, let the group know. If gamers have a block booking, honour it and let them get on with it, rather than badgering folk during the time they've booked. If you're selling food make it clear to the groups that they can't bring in food (or drink) from outside. Gamers can make for the best customers in smaller venues, and there's no reason to treat them like crap. We may get the venue for free, but that's no reason to run roughshod over gamers if there's something else on.

One final thought: it's a bad idea to rely purely on gamers for business, especially as they can be fickle at the best times. All too often groups are kicked out because they're not buying food or drink in a venue. There's a simple answer to this: flag this up with the Group Contact.



Ultimately, getting gamers in is no different to any other special crowd – real ale drinkers, live music, etc. – all it needs is a bit of forethought, and possibly some ground rules.