

ARCHIVER



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PRESS

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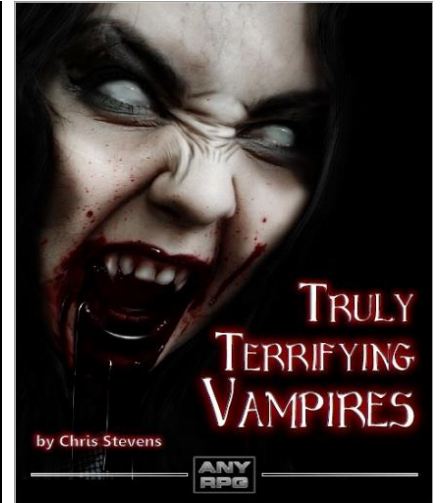
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What is ARCHIVER, exactly?



A lot of RPG websites have a lot of old (but great) articles, but those articles can become forgotten, lost to time. Stuffer Shack is no different.

So, we're putting together a quarterly collection, an anthology that brings those lost articles back to life. It's a way for old content to be seen by new readers – not lost to time, but safely tucked away in the archives...

License to Rube

Originally [posted Septembr 27, 2010](#)

By Dixon Trimline

This is a hard world we find ourselves in, where everyone is looking to steal our money, screw us over, and make wee-wee on our hats. This is a world that hates and punishes naiveté, and loves and rewards cynicism and suspicion. Trust no one and fear everyone, strike before you're struck, an extended hand conceals a blade, the arm around your back connects to the hand in your pocket. It's an unfortunate reality, but this is a perfectly sensible reaction to this world, so slimy full of realtors, spammers, lawyers, and liars.



Sadly, we carry our real-world wounds into the games we play, which transforms our characters, first imagined as sweetly smiling pure souls with cartoon birds lighting on their shoulders, into gritty, hard-bitten, heartless, soulless bastards. This may be because of experiences with a DM that shattered hope and trust like a cinderblock on a crystal ornament, and we have decided we cannot allow ourselves to be hurt like that again.

Players who are young (figure under 14 years old) or brand new to gaming can be unspoiled by distrust and doubt, which means they might actually release the defeated kobold chieftain, and might actually touch the faintly glowing altar in the middle of the cobwebby temple, and might actually believe the exotic beauty needing an escort back to her underground city. The paragon level cynic cries, *"Kill the chieftain! Avoid the altar! Ignore the beauty!"* Each of these situations is obviously a trap.

And here's my question: So what?

When I first started gaming (many lifetimes ago), when I was young and dumb and full of... um... foolishness, I regularly blundered into regrets and traps and betrayals, and these were in games riddled with DM statements like, *"The room appears empty,"* and, *"The wardrobe appears safe,"* and, *"The woman appears honest."* Naturally, all of those "APPEARS" rang my alarm bells, but I still got caught, hurt, nailed, and crushed.

Every villain that got away always came back, more dangerous, better equipped, and insane with the need for revenge. Every time I didn't obsessively prod the floor with a 10' pole, I fell into a deep pit with poisoned spikes at the bottom. Every femme I trusted turned out to be extremely fatale, usually working with the escaped villain and often the architect of all those spiked pits.

And despite all that pain, despite all those times I was burned, I had some real fun in those way-back-when games. I am so careful and worried and neurotic in the real world, I could really enjoy being reckless in a fake one, rushing ahead, devil may care, and let's see what happens. I've seen it in so many games, where the party is skulking fearfully around a chest as though it were an unexploded bomb (which sometimes, it is), and then somebody grunts, *"Ah, screw it,"* and kicks the chest open. In the moment that this happens, there's always a look on that player's

face, a look of relief, a look of release, a look of freedom. What I'm calling for here are more "Ah, screw it" moments. And why not? What is at risk exactly? I've placed several of my characters in dangerous circumstances, and even watched sadly as a few of them died, and outside of some mild razzing from other players, I never personally suffered from the outcome. The DM often rewarded such brash action, or, failing that, didn't overtly punish it. Usually, I wound up with a funny, wild, loopy story with which I could bore friends and family for years afterwards.

Happy Ending Example: In a post-apocalypse game, our group was under assault by metal-heads inside a sprawling mansion, and Steve and I needed to get across a wide hallway that ran north-south along the mansion's spine. We knew there were leather and spiked killers waiting for us to show our faces, so there we were, crouched and dithering inside the laundry room. Finally, I stood up, turned to Steve and said, "Cover me," and made my dash. I was two strides across the hallway when a metal-head leaned from a nearby room, leveling his rifle on me. I dove, snapping up my .357 and firing... CRITICAL! I vaporized the top of his head from the eyebrows up, then curled into a tight ball and rolled into the room across the way.

At the table, my heart was going thumpa-thumpa-thumpa and my hands were slick with sweat, but I had my moment, all because I was willing to say, "Ah, screw it," and try something extremely stupid. But what if it hadn't gone my way? What if I fired and missed? What if the metal-head fired and hit? I'd still have a great story ("Remember that time you ran out into that hallway and got shot six times?"), just without a great ending.

No-So-Happy Ending Example: In our D&D game, Kevin was the quintessential "ah, screw it" player, and always acted without thinking, kicking down doors, charging into combat, and chugging unidentified potions. He found himself



lots of feet up a tree when an orc shambled into the clearing underneath him.

Immediately he said, "I jump onto it." We all stared in horror, and the DM, grinning in bemusement, asked, "How many hit points do you have left?"

Kevin looked down, then back up and said, "One!" He didn't seem remotely concerned. "How do you expect to survive the fall?" the DM asked.

"I don't know. But I should hurt the orc, right?" You can't argue with that kind of logic. So he leapt from the tree, rolled to hit... and got a natural 1. Ker-SPLAT!

Once we had all stopped laughing, Kevin asked with a snuffy kind of pride, "Any chance my 20 oil flasks explode?"

I am issuing a challenge to every DM who runs games for me, and it is this: bring it. Bring your enemies, bring your traps, bring your double-crosses. I'll buy into it all, swallow it hook, line,

and spiked chain, and still want more. I am going to live (and probably die) dangerously. And after it's all done, I'm going to have some stories to tell.

Eliminate Combat Drag with Realism

Originally [posted August 7, 2010](#)

By Chris Stevens

You've been there - we all have. The fight, just, will, not, stop. You're thinking, "*Man, this fight is taking FOREVER.*" Yep, I feel your pain. In this article, I'll be talking about how to shorten combat drag - not through the altering of specific system mechanics, but by something that would actually happen (or not happen) in a real fight.

There have been plenty of articles and forum posts about how to *mechanically* shorten combat by changing the rules. That's great for some gamers, but for me, it makes me feel that the game is broken. No, I want a real-world solution (yes, I know that it's a make-believe world). I simply don't want to have to make mechanical changes in order to enjoy a combat encounter. Here is the single solution that has been working for me for the last few years:

Not every fight has to end with every enemy dead. That's it. That's my big secret.

This is not a computer game. PCs don't have to kill every enemy. That's simply not a plausible solution in most fights. It's that simple. Is every

- orc
- goblin
- ogre
- wolf
- minion
- henchman
- bounty hunter
- street samurai
- dark Jedi
- etc., etc., etc.

going to fight to the death? I don't think so. Unless they absolutely, positively, have no other choice, they will *not always* fight to the death. If it looks like their side is not going to win, they will turn tail and run away. If they can't run

away, they will surrender. Guess what? The combat is over, the PCs win, and they get full experience points/rewards for winning the encounter. Done and done.



As the GM, you can have your bad guys run away or surrender at any time. I suggest you do it when it becomes apparent that they can't win. Perhaps they are not courageous to begin with and run away after only one or two rounds of fighting. Maybe you could have them surrender whenever he reaches half hit points or wounds?

Why is this NPC going to fight the PCs?

- Is he getting paid?
- is he getting paid well?
- Is he defending his family, his home, his most prized possession?
- Is he bloodthirsty?
- Today, is he being lazy?
- Is he all bark and no bite?
- Does he really care if the big, bad boss gets overthrown by the PCs?

Really, I think it's important to define why an enemy, NPC, or monster is in the fight to begin with. ***What is his motivation for fighting?*** Once you figure that out, you'll know when he stops fighting to either surrender or flee. Of course, some monsters will always fight to the death, but after a while, plausibility starts getting strained when every single enemy fights to the death. That's just not roleplaying; that's farming.

As a player, is it a necessity to kill every enemy? Does the last kobold that turns tail and runs away HAVE to be shot down? I'm sure others have already gotten away, so it shouldn't really matter. When you're fighting the big, bad boss, do you think it's possible to get him to surrender, or do you assume that he'll fight to the death? My players just about exploded with epiphany when they tried to capture the main bad guy halfway through the fight. *"You mean, he agrees to surrender? I was just trying to roleplay a bit. Cool!"*

Gamecraft: The Stress-Free GM

Originally [posted December 13, 2010](#)

By John Lewis

Over the years my approach to running games has changed and evolved. I used to spend the game session scribbling notes, rolling dice, consulting charts, and frantically trying to anticipate my players' actions, and keep them on track. Oftentimes, the players would throw me off by wanting to go somewhere that I hadn't

planned on, or by interacting with an NPC that I hadn't fleshed-out, or by taking a totally unexpected course of action. These are those moments of pure GM frustration, when the players go "off the map." Sometimes I would just wing it and hope for the best; other times I would stop the game for a while to readjust and compensate for the new direction things were going. Both of these techniques worked to varying degrees, but not without adding stress to my life and completely disrupting the game.

These days when I run a game, I do it with the confidence that nothing is going to throw me off or derail the game. I'm ready for whatever the players want to do and wherever they want to go. I'm ready to tackle whatever the players throw at me. So what's the secret to running the stress-free game? How do you approach your game with this level of confidence and self-assuredness? Well, the answer is simple, really. Do what I did - run games for thirty years and eventually it will get easier! However, for those of you who'd prefer some advice that can help you *tonight*, I'll let you in on the secret:



relax, be flexible, and don't stress... But since that's easier said than done, I'm here to offer the following tips and techniques for making your life easier and for making the game as fun for you to run as it is for your players to play.

Tip 1: Change Your Focus

In the past, when I would begin laying out a campaign I found that I was very player character-focused. My mindset had me thinking about how the *PCs* would do something, or when an event would happen to the *PCs*, or what the *PCs* would do. Although it is critical to remember that the players and their characters are the focus of the story while actually *playing* the campaign, they are not necessarily the focus while *designing* the campaign.

These days when I begin designing a campaign, I start by focusing on the setting and the *NPCs*. I develop a feel for the people, places and events that are going to be important during the campaign. Even before I have a theme, a primary antagonist, or plot line in mind, it's critical for me to *know* the setting, to have an understanding of how its components work together without interference. I get a feel for the setting and then begin thinking about the people within it, more specifically, who they are, why they are there, and what they want. Once I have some idea about the people in the setting I move on to thinking about my antagonist(s). I don't need to think about goals or motivations yet, just what type of antagonists the campaign will feature. There could be power-mad despots, a criminal organization, psychotic serial killers, or even the environment itself working against the heroes.

Having an idea about the campaign's antagonist, I begin thinking about what they want and how they are going to get it. In my mind, I begin telling the story from the villain's point of view. I think about where the villain will go, who he will ally with, what he's going to do, and what he's

already done. I have found it is much easier to envision the antagonist's plans at this point *without* thinking about how it will interact with the *PCs*. In a nutshell, I imagine how the campaign will evolve for the antagonist without any influence or interference from outside sources or random factors. Enter the *PCs*, or as I like to call them, the random factors.

Changing your design focus makes it much less work to remain flexible and adapt to the infinite variety of unforeseeable things that your players and their characters do. **Reacting** to the characters' actions is much easier than **anticipating** them. Once you begin thinking from the antagonist's and the world's points of view, it usually becomes self-evident what will happen in response to any course of action the *PCs* choose to take. A clear understanding of what the bad guys are trying to achieve makes it easier to figure out how their plans will change when they're interfered with. When you eliminate the need to anticipate the actions of the player characters your life as a GM becomes much less complicated. Remember, focus your energy on the characters you control, not the ones you don't.

Tip 2: You Run the World, not the Other Way Around

As GMs, we continually design and create worlds - even when we use published settings we still take great liberties with the design for our individual campaigns. However, in an effort to design a realistic and exciting setting, many GMs frequently back themselves into a corner. We do this without even realizing what we are doing every time we place a dungeon on a map, when we pick a specific location for some climactic battle, or even when we decided when an event will occur. Once we commit to some specific time, place, or event within the campaign, we often become completely inflexible about it.

I used to do this all of the time. I would design a great location for some fantastic encounter, make it the scene for the final confrontation with some arch-villain, and then I would place it somewhere on my map. The only problem was the minute I placed it somewhere, whether on a physical map or in my mind's eye, I felt committed to its location and its circumstances. I would place myself in a position where I was forced to find a way to get my players to that location or to make those circumstances occur. By doing this, I allowed the world to control my game and dictate the things I needed to do to make my story work. The secret to overcoming this is for the GM to not fear having a *lack of commitment*. I know this goes against everything your parents, boss, and significant other has been saying to you, but it is one of the secret keys to stress-free gamemastering. I like to think of it as the *Schrodinger's Cat Theory* of campaign management.

For those of you unfamiliar with Schrodinger's Cat (and if you call yourself a geek you *should* be familiar with it), it is a thought experiment in which a cat is placed into a box wherein there is a 50/50 chance of the cat being killed. How the cat might die is irrelevant here (maybe it's a one hit point minion) but Schrodinger suggested that until we actually look into the box we don't know the cat's fate, and furthermore the cat's fate may, in fact, be undetermined *until* we look into the box. So what does Schrodinger, his cat, and your lack of commitment, have to do with being a better GM? Simple, be flexible. Remember, only the part of your world that the characters are actually interacting with, needs to be in solid, sharp focus with a sense of permanence. Many of the aspects of your world can be safely tucked away in the box with Schrodinger's Cat. They can exist in a state of flux, ready to be used when and where you need them until the characters open the box and "reality" is forced to take shape.

When I gamemaster, there are many "static" features in my campaign - most of the villages,

cities, and geographic features of the world are fixed and in permanent locations. However, there are still many aspects of the campaign area I leave "in the box." Say for example, I design a haunted tower. I won't commit to its location until I'm forced to. Then when I need to use it I can place it in the characters' path. Of course, it won't appear in a place in which the characters have actually been and they know there has never been a tower there (unless it is some sort of "ghost-tower" or something), but it will appear when I need it and once the characters "look in the box." This reduces GM stress in a couple of ways - first, I don't have to worry about how to get the characters to the tower. I don't have to drop a bunch of "subtle" hints or worry about "railroading" the characters. And secondly, it helps maintain the illusion of free-will for the characters. This approach works for events, locations, NPC's, almost anything. Many of the elements of your campaign are things that can remain in the box until *you decide* that it has been opened. Remember: flexibility is the hallmark of the stress-free GM.

Tip 3: Just say "Yes"

One of the things that more games are stressing to GM's is the idea of saying "yes" to players instead of saying things like "no you can't," or "no your character wouldn't do that." I'm a huge fan of this concept. Nothing kills the illusion of free-will like saying "NO" to the players. Don't be afraid to let your players *attempt* anything. Remember, even if success is virtually (or even completely) impossible, it doesn't mean that some fool (I mean PC) shouldn't be allowed to give it a try. It's completely fair to let the players know that the chances for success are slim to none, but never simply tell them no. Besides running the risk of making the game less enjoyable for your players, you are missing a golden opportunity to let the game grow on its own accord, instead of you always having to be at the helm.



Why are some gamemasters unwilling to say yes? There are a lot of reasons. Sometimes the GM hasn't anticipated the character's actions, so feeling the pinch, they say no. If this is you, go back and read the first section *Change Your Focus*. Others may not feel prepared for where a "yes" may take them. If this sounds like you, go back to the second section, *You Run the World, not the Other Way Around*, and read that again. But for many of the GMs I know, they are afraid to say yes because they are unsure of a game mechanic or feel they don't know the rules well enough. Never let the rules get in the way of a good time. In some cases, rules aren't even necessary, but if you feel they are, keep in mind that virtually every game out there has some sort of "core mechanic." Use it. Pick a stat, roll against it. When all else fails, simply assign a percentage chance for success and roll away.

The important thing to realize is that saying yes actually makes your job easier by allowing your players to exercise their character's free-will and being able to do virtually whatever they want - players love that. It also helps build player/gamemaster trust. In some campaigns, the GM begins to seem like an unyielding authority figure, someone who is always telling the players no and forcing the story upon

them. When a group of players has trust in their GM, he becomes a partner in the story-telling, not a dictator, and he shares in the group experience. This kind of relationship eliminates many of the problems that can come up at the table greatly reducing GM stress, and that is the key to allowing your best game to come forward.

Tip 4: Let the Players do the Work

One of the most stressful parts of being the gamemaster is the responsibility of continually providing new, thrilling, and creative adventures that characters are emotionally invested in and players are excited to go on. In fact, the pressure to turn out great stories and adventures can easily cause GM burnout and make running a game feel more like a job than a beloved hobby. The key to staying fresh and keeping your creativity up is remembering that most of us GMs do a lot more work than is strictly necessary when it comes to creating great stories. As GMs, we tend to forget that our #1 resource for inspiration and motivation are the players sitting around our table.

Earlier I talked about designing the campaign without focusing on the PCs. Although this helps reduce the frustration of anticipating the

characters' actions, it doesn't do much to "connect" them to the story. This is where *character hooks* become the bridge between your story, and the characters' stories. Need to motivate characters into action, use an old friend or ally. Want the players to care about a community, make it a character's hometown. Need an assassin for your arch villain to send against the characters, of course it's an old enemy with a vendetta. All of these NPCs may seem like a lot of work, but let me share a little shortcut with you; make the players do the work.

When I've finished laying out a few general aspects of the campaign (see *Change Your Focus* above), I sit back with the players while they create their characters. I like to help the players come up with interesting backgrounds, character hooks, and ties to each other. Among other things, I ask players to come up with some NPCs, at least three friends or allies, three rivals, three mentors or contacts, and at least one true enemy. These don't have to be more than a name and a one or two sentence description, but right away I have 20 – 40 custom made NPCs for the campaign that tie directly to the characters. This, combined with a background consisting of at least a place of birth and two or three notable life events, and I have plenty of inspiration for dozens of great adventures.

In my campaigns, I usually have one or two primary plot arcs designed for the overall story. Oftentimes however, that isn't enough to carry an entire campaign, or they simply don't dominate every part of the campaign level-to-level. Enter the character hooks; they are an excellent resource to mine for adventure ideas and sub-plots. These act as mini-stories within the greater plot line that help to tie each individual character into the campaign and make each of the players feel like they are part of something greater. This not only takes some pressure off the GM by giving him some ideas to

work with, but also helps build verisimilitude in the world.

Tip 5: Sit Back & Enjoy the Ride

All of the ideas presented here were designed to help you, the gamemaster *relax* and have more fun while running the game. By using the tips and techniques presented above you should find the stress and anxiety that sometimes comes with running a roleplaying game to be greatly reduced. With time, you may even find yourself feeling more like a player and less like the person in charge. Hopefully, you will be able to shift your role as gamemaster from *director*, needing to control everything and keep the players on track, to *story participant*, watching events unfold around you and being pleasantly surprised by where "your" story takes the group.

The Best Character Formulas - Part 1

Originally [posted May 1, 2010](#)

By Charisma Keller

Think of any story, film, or novel. Quality-wise, those with the most success have something in common (special, memorable heroes). Well, I'm here to define those character formulas and relate them to your player characters. Ready?

Formula 1: Personal Demons

The character who carries personal demons is not the ideal hero (far from it). However, he has the potential to elicit the greatest emotional response from his audience. This character has something of a negative nature that he needs to eventually overcome, and is the most tried-and-true winning formula for novels and film. This antagonist is not only *not* perfect, but he has a negative quality that, should he eventually turn around, will make him the ultimate hero.

You could say that Darth Vader is the pinnacle of the “personal demon hero.” Think about it – he has this tragic history, making him the worst of the worst. His only real, ultimate, believable-worth-watching final outcome is to either die horribly as a major villain, or die gloriously as a redeemed hero. Which has the better story? I know, I know, “*but he’s a bad guy.*” I’m not saying to take it to the extreme and play a major villain, I’m just saying that he is the ultimate hero. Your character (should you choose to play the personal demon hero) must have some major negative thing to overcome, some obstacle that we can all feel as being real.

Sure, the most extreme is playing the really bad guy until the end, when he sacrifices himself to save his kid, while the other end of the spectrum would be a normal guy who eventually overcomes his addiction to smoking. I don’t suggest trying to play either, just something in between.

This character is unprincipled, selfish, or evil, and his actions are fueled by that trait. Normally, characters with any of those traits will die that way, or learn his lessons after it is too late (Darth Vader learned them just in time). For you, it is the events, emotions, and other characters in your campaign that might teach him the error of his ways. This is the guy who

- goes on adventures looking for loot, regardless of how he gets it
- is hired on as a mercenary
- is forced to work with the other player characters
- or has *no choice* but to work with the other player characters.

It’s from the things he’s seen, friendships he’s formed and perhaps lost, and milestones that he’s achieved and missed, that will eventually lead him to the ultimate crossroad. You can’t change a man - all you can do is give him options

and hope he chooses wisely. Will he die the unworthy death, or finally find redemption?

One thing that is important: for this transformation to mean anything, for us to care about whether this character makes it to the good side, he must have some sort of quality that we like. We have to see something in this character worth saving. In the case of Darth Vader, we know him to be a once normal, likable kid. Even as a young adult, we saw that he was unfairly taken advantage of and turned to the dark side by a great evil. We know there’s good in there, because we’ve seen it. Even if you’ve only watched the last three chapters, you know that he is the father of at least one child. So even that could be the quality (being a father) that makes us want to see him saved (father and son united).

Here are some examples:

- Jayne (from *Serenity*) eventually learns trust and loyalty, and then finally shows a bit of heart.
- Jake Sully (from *Avatar*), as he goes from selfish marine to savior.
- The bank robber who goes against his buddies when they start hurting hostages.
- And yes, Danny DeVito’s character from the movie *Twins*, who finally shows his heart in going back to save his freakish brother.

These are all heroes that we like, but they have some very deep demons to overcome for their stories to be completed. I don’t know about you, but these are the characters I care most about, having seen them rise from so low, to so high.

Thanks for reading Part 1 of the Best Character Formulas! I’ll see you all later for part 2 (Hindered Heroes)!

The Best Character Formulas - Part 2

Originally [posted May 7, 2010](#)

By Charisma Keller

Hello again! I'm here for the second installment of The Best Character Formulas. So far, I've talked about heroes with personal demons, and how while they might not seem to be the best choice as a hero, in the end, their stories might be the most rewarding. Moving On, I'll be talking about my favorite type to play, Hindered Heroes.

Formula 2: Hindered Heroes

Superman is awesome, Superman is cool, Superman is a great hero. What he isn't is invulnerable, because if he were invulnerable, his stories would get dull pretty quickly. Sure, he can fly faster than bullets, stop bullets, and even eat bullets, but he can't do a damn thing about *kryptonite* bullets. Ah ha! Now we have something that peaks our interest! It is largely more entertaining watching a hero *overcome* obstacles, instead of completely *overpowering* them.

I don't expect you to make a super character with one Achilles heel (that's hardly a good role-playing character). What I do expect, is that your character has some negative trait that sets him apart from others - something that says, *"Yeah, I'm cool, but I'm even cooler because I have to work harder to get that cheddar."*

Here are some examples:

- Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson's character) from Lethal Weapon, and his struggle with sanity
- Axel Foley from Beverly Hills Cop, trying to be a cop in *"this ain't your jurisdiction"* Beverly Hills
- Superman, and his kryptonite
- Daredevil, and his blindness

- The Hulk, and his anger management issues
- Robin Hood, being continuously hunted by the sheriff
- Willow, and his being small in a human's world
- John Constantine, and his *"let's get this life over with, I don't give a crap"* attitude
- Edward from Twilight, and his struggle to not eat his girlfriend (or anyone else). *Team Edward!*

Most of my characters are considered hindered heroes, as that is what I get the most enjoyment from.

Even power-gamers and godmoders can benefit from playing a hindered hero. The hindrance doesn't have to be a mechanical penalty, and usually, it isn't. For instance, your character could be a mean alcoholic, or has horrible scars, or is a little crazy, or whatever.

Really, it's up to you to decide how your character is going to be set apart from the rest. Believe me, being the underdog in some fashion or another has its rewards. Just go for it!

Thanks for reading!



What's with all this fancy talk?

Originally [posted May 18, 2010](#)

By Max Krueger

So, you've finally got your awesome background for your character. In addition, you've decked him out with the best gear a 1st level character can get, and you're totally ready to impress your gaming buds with your new badass character. Then, when the game starts, you're sitting there waiting for your character to get introduced, and you're nothing but a bundle of nerves. You can't wait! Everyone is going to remember this awesome character forever, so you think.

The time is now! The stage is set! Your character, this piece of your mind, that you gave a name and history (an *essence*, if you will) is about to step into a collective fantasy! He is seen by the party, he opens his lips to speak, and... he sounds exactly like you. Your character loses any sense of identity he had. Then your character quickly becomes relegated to his party role. His name forgotten, reduced simply to "mage" or "tank". How sad. How could this have happened? Your guy was cool! He had an incredibly interesting backstory! How could the character just fail to be interesting?

All right, all right. I'll tone down the melodrama for a moment so I can be clear about what I'm talking about. It's always fun to create interesting characters. In my view, it's the best thing about role playing. However, sometimes it takes more than an interesting backstory to make your character come alive. What am I talking about?

I'm talking about *diction*.

It's about how your character says things. It means giving him a unique *voice*. Now, I know we gamers love good pirate voices and other silly accents like that, and those can be a part of it. Really, though, diction means so much more. Diction, in this case, refers to specific word choices your character uses when speaking. Diction can reveal a lot about a character, it can reveal his education, his nationality, his religious beliefs, and even his personal philosophies.

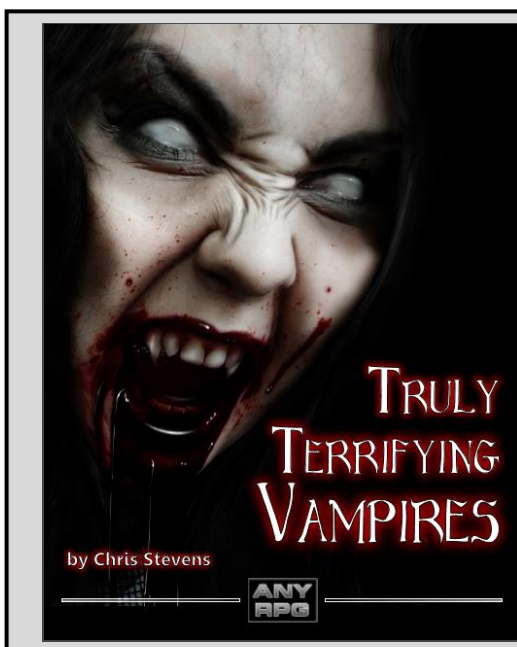
For example, let's look at a very simple situation that might come up in a game. Hero gets a good Spot roll and manages to see an ambush being set up in a forest. Your character tells the party of course (or perhaps not), but what does he say exactly?

Example 1: Friends, up ah-h-eed, I think those t-three guys are gonna try to kill u-s-s.

A bit over doing the stutter for sure, but this guy sounds like he could be interesting. No?

Example 2: Ahead, thirty paces, three villains, I will strike first.

This guy seems like a lot of no-nonsense paladins I've dealt with before.



Quite simply, modern vampires are laughable lightweights. They're a dime-a-dozen, cliché, and severely troped. Today, they're just not scary, and that's how people think of them (instead of the truly terrifying monsters that they once were). With vampires having been watered down so heavily, how can any dungeon master hope to give their players a morally interesting and fearful challenge?

...By going back to what made them scary in the first place.

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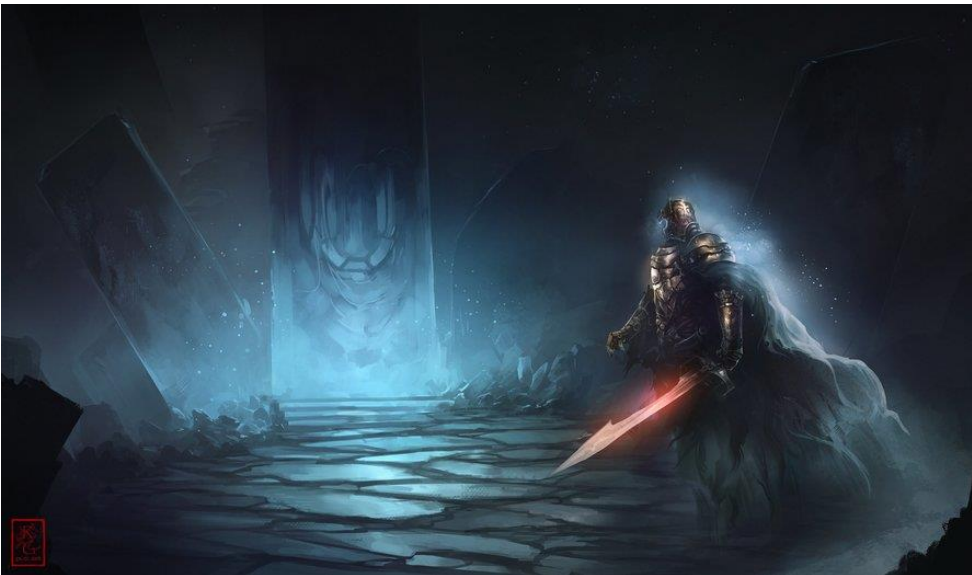
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Example 3: Three Dead Men Hiding! I see you!
We're gonna kill you for that!

Certainly a bit overly enthusiastic, but he'd be a cool barbarian!

Of course, these are a bit jokey, but hopefully you can understand the power of appropriate language choice. Now, imagine that all three of the examples were DnD 3.5 Lvl 1 fighters. Yes, they would all have similar stats. Yet they don't seem similar at all, do they?

For instance, example 1 is a mystery, he seems strange and acts deranged. Yet you can sense a vulnerability in his voice - his stuttering adding another layer to the character. Example 2 seems confident, calm and under control, perhaps a little too confident, but certainly he has a keen military mind. Lastly, example 3 seems strong,



young, and eager. Now, he could be played as a generic fighter, but doesn't his voice suggest that he may be young, perhaps desperate to prove himself to his companions?

I know I'm overdoing it a bit, but I'm trying to prove a point about how characters, word choice, and proper voice can improve a game. Even with all the numbers and books and dice, it seems that we sometimes forget that every

Tabletop RPG really just boils down to acting. Acting is what holds our fantasy worlds together! And every actor should know about diction.

Peace.

Rules Lawyers – Raising the Bar

Originally [posted May 30, 2010](#)

By Charisma Keller

The rules lawyer knows the ins and outs of the game system like I know the curves of every turn in Gran Turismo. It's their specialty, their baby, their forte. Give them the opportunity to throttle into the turn... er, I mean spout out a rule infraction, and they take it. Meaning, the referee is not always the gamemaster.

On my first session with a new gaming group (my current group), I was shocked to see a player tell another player that his character couldn't perform an action because of rule X,Y,Z.

Excuse me? Why was this player throwing a rule at another player? Isn't that the GM's job? I mean, if my character is about to do something and another player tells me I can't "per the rules," I think I'd get a little peeved.

Later that same night, a different player interrupted the gamemaster to tell him that a monster should get a +4 to hit instead of the +2 that the GM figured. Whuh??? What was up with this group?

I asked the first player about this later. I wanted to know why he was stunting the other player's action, since I didn't feel that was very team-like.

I also wanted to know why the other player was giving extra bonuses to the GM. I was so righteous and sure of myself, that this veteran gamer had no idea what it meant to be part of a team.

This is where I got schooled-

He told me that everyone at the table took on the role of "rules lawyer." That way

- everyone had a terrific grasp of the rules
- everyone always played with consistent rules
- no one ever felt cheated
- no one was ever shown favoritism
- the GM was less burdened
- and everything that applied to us also applied to the monsters

He finished his lesson by saying that because of all the teamwork, the GM was more apt to rule in our favor when not sure of something. And, because the GM knew we weren't the type to cheat him or the system, he was very generous with throwing bonuses our way.

Oh.

That pretty much summed up my first experience with a grown-up gaming group. These guys were the real deal, and I felt kind of humbled...

Still, at least I can kick their butts in Gran Turismo. So there.

Now, I know that a rules lawyer can sometimes upset the game. Tell the GM that he can't do something, and you'll get on his nerves. Tell the GM that you CAN do something, and you'd get on everyone's nerves. There has to be a universal way to handle interpreting rules and bringing them up in-game. I know my current group does it very easily, and in truth my gaming experience has never been better.

Adding flavor to the bard

Originally [posted May 24, 2010](#)

By Chris Stevens

I've always liked the idea of the bard, not because of what he can do in terms of game mechanics, but because of what he can do in the game. Simply expanding the perception of the bard just a little bit can greatly expand the gamer's experience. Let's look at the two most traditional roles a bard can assume in any fantasy setting:

The Entertainer

The most often used type of bard would be the entertainer. This is the guy (or gal) who usually works for himself. He's in every major town, and can be seen on any major street. The lucky get a few gigs in taverns, while the talented can book major events. As an entertainer, this bard is always looking to make people laugh, swoon, or close their eyes to enjoy his music. This guy doesn't have to be versed in literature, or have any knowledge of history (though all that helps). What's important is that he knows how to give the people what they want. And hey, in an age without TVs or ATVs, that can sometimes be hard to come by.

This guy is very easy to insert into a fantasy game. He simply tags along an adventuring party to gain material for his songs, stories, and poems, so that he may make some coin off them at the next town. As a plus, he might also get to include himself in the adventures.

Since a bard among a group of adventurers is already a cut above the rest, it can be assumed that he has, or will soon gain, a reputation. After a bard gains a few levels, it can even be said that he has become a celebrity. Just imagine the bustle that happens when a bard of renown walks into town. He will soon be asked to perform at events and gatherings - and in fact it

is assumed that he will. Invitations to dinners and parties are readily offered. He'll even be offered money just to make an appearance at events.

The Voice

As the voice, a bard is responsible for praising his patron, and insulting his patron's enemies. This position almost always requires formal training in literature, history, and poetry, as well as an excellent knowledge of current events. Such bards are employed by rich merchants, noblemen, or even royalty, and remain in service for years. At any gathering or event, they either speak for, or alongside their masters, to make for a better presentation. Not really suited for singing, dancing, or playing music, their specialty lies in what they say, as opposed to how they say it. For sure, being able to gain attention through commanding presence and charisma is a must, it's just that they are not necessarily entertainers.

It's very easy to integrate this type of character in a fantasy game. The simplest way is for the bard to be employed by the adventuring party. At the very least, he is simply part of the group and speaks up for them every chance he gets. When an introduction is called for, he does it grandly. The deeds and exploits of the group (what they fought, who they rescued) is spoken at every tavern and recited at most other gatherings. His position as a bard becomes quite apparent to others right away, and that often improves how the adventuring party is perceived. Anytime the adventuring group is addressed, the bard is almost always included in the conversation, if not talked to directly.

If you've ever wanted to play a bard, but were unsure about how to take it on, use one of the two examples above. Hopefully, by choosing either the entertainer or the voice, you'll have an easier time. I think you'll find that role playing a bard, while challenging at times, can be very rewarding.

P.S. - Why don't you try to add the bard to your sci-fi game, like Star Wars or Traveller? I'm sure it could work just as well, maybe even more so.

I wanna be bad! Playing in an evil PC game.

Originally [posted June 3, 2010](#)

By Max Krueger

I am a huge "Breaking Bad" fan. For those of you who haven't heard of the show, it follows Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher who contracts cancer. To try to take care of his family and his own medical bills, Walter turns to cooking crystal meth. The show intimately follows his decent from humble family man to a drug kingpin. And, do you know what? I've been rooting for him the entire time. Even though Walter has become a pretty bad guy by this point in the story, I still want him to "win." Why would that be?

The same thing happened with my parents when "The Sopranos" was on the air. Tony Soprano was always an incredibly evil character, but we still loved him. I think that at some level people understand evil a little bit more than we understand good. We can understand why people fall. We can empathize with guilt more than we can selflessness. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that people can't be good or whatever, but I just think that in literary terms, the concept of the villain is very powerful and compelling. So, why is it then that we don't see more evil player character games? Probably because players find it uncomfortable, or they don't want to be in a game where everyone is just playing a ridiculous "I set it on fire" all the time character. However, I personally believe that a good evil character can be more fulfilling and fun than many would suspect.

My first year in college marked the first campaign I had played in that went beyond a few sessions. It was fun, and forever influenced the way I

viewed and played RPGs. It was also an evil player character campaign. It wasn't meant to be like that from the beginning, it simply evolved into that. The player characters themselves were simply despicable people, but they were *compelling* despicable people.

My character was named Zachariah, and he worshiped a god named Jolem (who was a god of the hunt). Jolem's religion had exactly one tenant, *"kill whomever and whatever you wish, but kill only for sustenance."* In short, Zachariah was a cannibal - he would hunt animals and people, kill them, and then eat them. In fact, whenever he killed anyone, he would have to spend a round eating part of their body.

Now, Zachariah may sound cartoonishly evil and grim, but let me assure you that he wasn't. Zachariah was an incredibly optimistic and upbeat character. He was just so fun to play. He had charisma and a unique outlook on life. That alone made him closer to a real person than any other character I had ever played until then. I still find it difficult to call him evil, even though he did horrible things. He simply believed in a strange religion. His religion gave him hope and helped him make sense of his world. Without it, who knows what would've happened to him. It was his faith in a greater power, an easily understandable motivation, that compelled him to do evil things.

That's really the key about evil characters; proper motivation. Yes, they do evil things, but why do



they do evil things? Sure, the evil wizard wants to make bizarre owlbears and beholders, but why? If you can come up with a good motivation that makes sense, your character can really come alive. Again, let's talk about "Breaking Bad". Walter justifies his evil deeds with the fact that he is trying to support his family. Tony Soprano has similar justifications. Zachariah does evil things for his god. What's your justification?

Screw Combat! Why sometimes the best fights aren't even about fighting at all.

Originally [posted May 2, 2010](#)

By Max Krueger

Midway through my sophomore year in college, I was persuaded into GMing a game of D20 Future. I had only GM'd once before, and it didn't go too well, so I was a bit reluctant (a story for another time). However, with a bit of persuasion from my friends, I decided to give it another whirl.

After a few weeks of game-play, my skills as a newbie GM had improved dramatically, and I was feeling great. As the semester wore on though, I began to be overwhelmed by schoolwork, and my cognitive capabilities had to be devoted away from campaign planning to more scholarly pursuits. Unfortunately, I had left my group in quite a pickle - after being forced into stasis tubes for ten years, they had awakened to find that their ship now had four extra occupants. At the time, I thought that was a pretty good cliffhanger, and decided to leave it at that.

However, when the next week rolled around I realized I had no detailed stats prepared for the hostile aliens. I felt guilty enough as it was, and I was unwilling to make my group wait any longer to resume playing. So, I made a resolution - If I couldn't make the fight itself interesting, I needed to make the *atmosphere around the fight* interesting.

On the fly, I decided to give the aliens a unique trait that existed entirely outside the rules. The creatures would be mimics of a sort, no more intelligent than parrots, really. As they would scurry around the ship, they would imitate the characters voices in an attempt to lure the characters out from their hiding spots. It was like the creatures were using a duck call. They would just repeat words that they heard the characters say enough times. "Where are those things? Where are those things?" the creatures would say again and again as they scuttled through the

ship. It gave the characters the sense that they were being hunted, as these creatures weren't standing around waiting for a PC to cleave through them. They were working as a pack, and the PCs were their prey.

It was this mimicry (which I played up with my voice as much as possible) that elevated the creatures from Generic Space Beast #35 to something truly fearsome. Now, remember that the actual stats of the creatures were completely uninteresting (45 hit points, no special abilities and a +8 hide check). In spite of that, though, the fact that the creatures were hiding and imitating the PCs gave them that special creepy touch that genuinely scared my group.

Whenever your group fights a creature, you should make sure that creature is theatrically memorable in some way, and this is best done in a way that avoids combat rules entirely. Sure, your custom made Were-Dragon may get a wicked 2d6 bonus to damage every full moon. But does it really matter if your players can't imagine seeing those ebony claws tearing their characters limb from limb? If a creature seems scary and dangerous outside of its actual in-game stats, then you know it can stand on its own.

Good luck and good gaming,



"Fire in the Black," the Story of Teig Makusy (a Firefly character background)

Originally [posted April 8, 2010](#)

By Andy Venn

"*Torpedo Away*" said the missile tech over the ship intercom in an exited voice. The Captain always turned on the com when he had a sure kill lined up. Teig thought he did this to make himself look better to the crew.

Five minutes ago he had opened the com up and announced that they were closing in on a Browncoat transport. When the transport failed to fire on them as they were chasing it Teig had thought it strange. He heard the same concern voiced over the com to the captain by one of the bridge crew. "*They're out of missiles is all,*" said the Captain in reply.

The chase wasn't much of a contest. The UAG Salisbury was able to catch up with the larger Alliance transport easily. "*Her name is the Hope*" said the Captain over the intercom, "*add her to our sunken list.*" As usual, the Captain was claiming the kill early.

"*Pompous bastard*" thought Teig angrily, "*the war is about more than a scoreboard.*"

As the missile was in the air Teig heard the first of many distressed shouts. "*She's marked as a medical transport*" screamed the helmsman. "*Sir, I'm aborting the torpedo now*" said the missile tech. Teig breathed deeply, reflecting on the near disaster. "*Negative on the abort, let the torpedo run,*" said the Captain in a firm voice.

That command chilled every man in the boat. They knew that the Captain was a bloodthirsty bastard who hated the Browncoats, but even he must have limits. Teig heard deathly silence over the com. "*Sir...*" a tentative voice said. "*Those bastards are a threat to the Alliance. Exterminating them now will just save us time later*" growled the Captain.

Any further argument was cut short when the ship-to-ship came on, the voice carrying over into the Salisbury's intercom. "*Alliance Gunboat, this is the Hope,*" yelled a woman's voice, "*we are a medical transport and are unarmed.*" When there was no reply from the Salisbury she came back over the radio "*for God's sake, turn your torpedo! We have 40 wounded people aboard including women and children settlers!*"

"*You are traitors to the Alliance and your so-called God will have no mercy on you, and neither will I*" said the Captain in a cruel voice. Teig stood in horrified silence listening to the exchange. The woman on the Alliance ship did not bother to switch off the ship-to-ship as she turned on her own intercom "*prepare for impact, seal all hatches, incoming.....*" The rest of her command was cut short by a tremendous explosion.

Teig could hear shouts and panicked yells over the intercom from the Browncoat ship. No one on the Salisbury breathed a word as the sounds of hell came across the radio. Teig knew that the engines on the transport had been hit, it was the only way a torpedo wouldn't have hulled her instantly. This was not a reprieve for the Browncoats though. He could hear the damage report being called in to their bridge, fire on all lower decks, suppression system off line, life support down, internal fuel leaks everywhere.

As the Hope burned, the tortured screams of her crew and patients came across space like daggers. Two life pods set off from her in time to escape the flames. The captain must have been hypnotized by the destruction he had caused, for he didn't pay them any attention as they shot off into the black. For 10 long minutes the screams came, begging for rescue, cries of agony, and finally deathly silence.



The after-action report that Captain Mah Yong submitted reflected a great chase and kill. It neglected to mention the medical markings on the Hope or the screams that Teig would never forget.

The Screams had started again the night after the attack, bursting from the depths of his mind as Teig slept.

At the next port of call Teig jumped ship, hoping that distance from the Salisbury would help silence the screams. They did not. Night after night Teig awoke screaming, the cries of the people aboard the Hope echoing inside his head.

He tried fighting for the Browncoats, but did not see any significant action with them. With the war's end he remained on the rim planets, knowing that he was wanted for desertion by the Alliance.

One day Teig sat outside a ramshackle church smoking cigarettes and drinking cheap beer. The

seats in the bar across the street had all been taken and Teig preferred to drink alone. The town was just another typical backwater town on a typical backwater moon. As the evening wore on he gazed into the sky, reliving those terrible moments again. The screams started softly. The crescendo of the tortured voices rose to an ungodly pitch within his head. He fell to his knees holding his ears. He screamed out loud, trying to drown the screams of anguish in his head. A Sheppard rushed out of the small church and grabbed him around the shoulders. He held on to him until the screams went away. Then he brought Teig into the church. That night Teig spoke of what had happened aboard the Salisbury for the first time since leaving the ship. The shame and anguish poured out of him. The Sheppard listened in stony silence. When he was done with his tale the Sheppard handed him a small cross on the necklace.

"Go to where the pain of those that died is. Ask their forgiveness when they are ready to hear

you, only then will the voices that cry out in your mind stop."

Teig signed on with different crews, traveling from crappy moon to crappy moon. He kept waiting night after night for the voices to allow him to ask for forgiveness, but so far they had only screamed just as before inside his mind.

On his last cruise out an accident in the engine room had taken his left eye. The captain had put him out on the next moon they landed on. *"Can't take the time to let you heal,"* he had said. With the few credits he had left Teig took a small room near the spaceport. The room was cramped and dirty. There was another occupant in the room when Teig moved in. A black cat had been sleeping on the bed and looked annoyed when Teig entered the room with the landlord. *"I'll get her away"* said the landlord in his thick accent, moving towards the cat. *"Leave it be"* said Teig in a tired voice *"it was here first."* He thought the cat would leave that night when his dreams came, but it was not so. When he got up he saw the cat sleeping at the foot of the bed. *"Well"* said Teig, chuckling for the first time in weeks, *"at least one of us slept well."*

He sat on the porch of the hotel day after day smoking heavily and watching the spaceport. The cat had taken to sitting by his side, keeping quiet company. His nights were spent listening to the voices screaming and dealing with the sharp pain where his left eye once was.

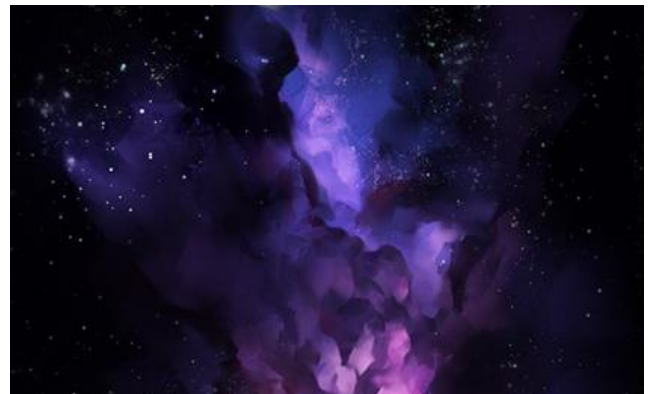
A few days ago Teig got up in the morning, exhausted from another night filled with fire and screams. He sat in front of the little boarding house with his cup of synthetic coffee. *"Only a few days of coin left Ritz"* said Teig to the cat, who just looked at him disinterestedly. He raised his cup of coffee towards his lips glancing towards the spaceport. The cup froze before reaching its destination. Sitting on one of the landing pads was a Clydesdale Class Gunboat. The weapons had been stripped and she was in dire need of

panel work, but it was an Alliance Gunboat none the less.

Eagerly entering the spaceport, nodding at Jake the gate guard as he past, he took a turn around the ship. The markings of the Alliance had all been stripped off and the name "Calypso" had been painted on her. Looking at the port side flash degrader he could tell that it was set about 15 degrees off what it should be.

He was surprised that he did not feel revulsion when he looked at her. The nightmare that had occurred on a ship exactly like this one had changed his life forever. He paused to reflect on how he was feeling. He felt a pull towards her. *"Is this where they will talk to me"* he wondered. He gripped the cross around his neck with one hand, reaching the other out towards the Calypso. He placed his hand on her port thruster with a tentative touch akin to touching a block of ice. A chill ran down his back as his eyes misted up. Tortured screams rang in the back of his mind softly. *"If ever I am going to be able to make peace with those who died, this will be the place they will hear me out,"* he said aloud to himself.

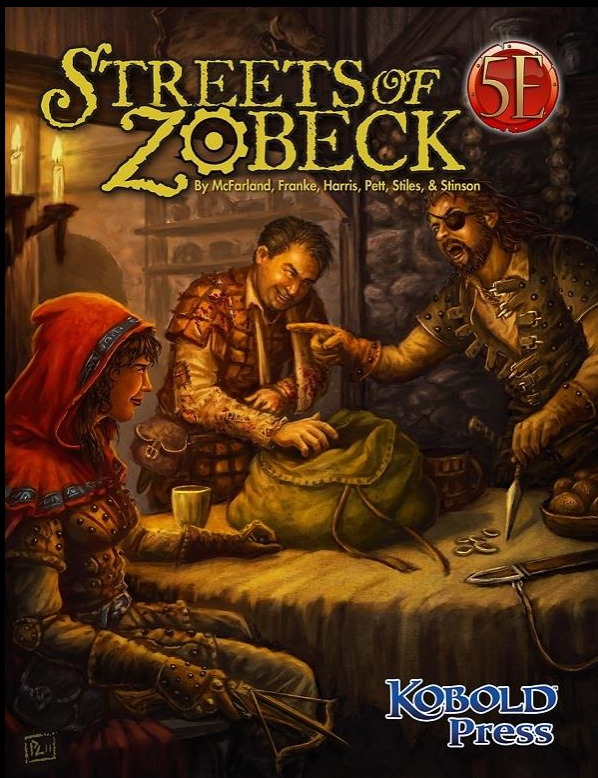
Teig turned towards the ramp of the ship as he heard voices coming from inside. He lit a cigarette and slicked his hair back. *"Excuse me,"* he said as the person emerged from the Calypso, *"did you realize that your port side flash degrader appears to be misaligned? I have a little experience aboard a ship like this and would be happy to offer my services."*



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You should probably leave the Paladins home for [this one...](#)

