



## Episode One: Getting Dirty

In which the Author introduces himself, reveals why Chumbawumba is the key to great game mastering, then discloses why everything you know is wrong.

Hello.

My name is John Wick. I believe we've met before. No? Funny, your face is familiar. Well, if I am hallucinating, maybe I should introduce myself. I've served a term with a company called Alderac Entertainment Group, and while there, I was a staff writer for *Shadis Magazine*, Continuity/Story editor for three collectible card games, wrote three roleplaying games along with over two dozen supplements, helped design a collectible dice game, and bunches more.

Now-a-days, I'm starting up my own little game company, writing about orks and fluxes, freelancing for folks who can tolerate me and keeping up with a regular weekly column over at [gamingoutpost.com](http://gamingoutpost.com). I've also got a day job, but don't tell my wife that. She'll wanna know where the money is. Oh, and I'm married to a girl named Jennifer. Been that way for two years on December 31. Got a dog, two cats and a rat.

So, that's me. And now that we're all acquainted, maybe I should get to the job that I'm here to do. You know. Talk about Game Master stuff. That's why you're reading all of this, right? To see what I've got to say about nasty, underhanded, sinister and otherwise praetorian (like that one? I paid four bucks for it) tricks to play on unsuspecting, innocent, naive and culpable players.

But before I get started, I'd like to lay a couple of ground rules. After all, the title of this column could be a little deceptive. We're here to talk about GM tricks. Nasty GM tricks that would make Ol' Grimtooth himself do a double-take. What we are not here for is killing characters. Nobody wants to play with a Killer GM.

But everybody wants to play with a Dirty GM.

Just to make sure you know what I'm talking about, let's spend a moment or two defining terms. In some circles - - the ones I was educated in - - that's a pretty important step.

A Killer GM is someone who takes glee in destroying characters. He kills them without remorse, without compassion, without care. He does it because he can. Gives him some sort of sick rush.

This is bad.

A Dirty GM, on the other hand, is someone who uses every dirty trick in the book to challenge the players. Keeping them off balance with guerrilla tactics, he increases the players' enjoyment with off-beat and unorthodox methods, forcing them to think on their feet, use their improvisational skills and keep their adrenaline pumping at full speed.

This is good.

So, now that we're all speaking the same language, let's get down to business.

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The first step to becoming a Dirty GM involves a little syndrome I call "The Die Hard Effect." (I've talked about this before in other places, so I'll keep it brief.) Essentially, all players want their characters to be John McClane. You know, the guy Bruce Willis plays in the *Die Hard* films. They want to be knocked down, punched out, bloody, battered and beaten.

But (and this is an important "but", folks), every time they get knocked down, they want to be able to get back up.

That's right. Just like the Chumbawumba song.

Being Irish, it just comes to me naturally.

Players want to be a bloody mess at the end of the adventure, but they still want to win. And they want to feel like they won by the skin of their teeth. They want to think that last die roll was the luckiest one they ever made. They want to feel that their characters' lives were hanging in the balance, ready to fall like a pin hanging on the edge of a precipice.

That's what players want.

And that's what a Dirty GM gives them.

Because he throws stuff at them that they never counted on. He uses techniques that are so outside the mainstream that they hit the players like a left hook to the jaw. He uses everything at his disposal to knock them down - - so they can get back up just in time to dodge the next hit. All of this comes under the basic premise that the GM is there for the players' enjoyment; he's providing them what they want. That's the GM's job. When it's all said and done, the Game Master's fun is helping his friends have fun. At least, that's the way I've always seen it.

## Bad Guy Corwin

Now, on to the Game Mastering advice.

I'm going to be using a very specific method in this here column. First, I'll explain a technique, and then I'll give you a practical application. In other words, I'm going to tell you, then I'm going to show you. The first technique we'll employ is something a friend of mine nicknamed "The Bad Guy Corwin Technique." He dubbed it thus because he first saw me use it in my *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game*, but you can use it in just about any licensed game. In fact, you can use it in almost any RPG setting the players are familiar with. It works something like this.

We get to see Roger Zelazny's famous *Chronicles of Amber* through the eyes of one character: Prince Corwin. (For those of you who don't know a single thing about *Amber*, here's the run-down. You've got one real world and everything else is just a pale imitation of that one real world. Even Earth isn't real, it's just a "shadow" of this place called Amber. That means that everyone living on these shadows aren't real either, and the only real people are those from Amber. "Amberites" can walk through shadows and are ten times faster, stronger and smarter than us shadow-people. And because they're the only real people, the only folks that are worth challenging are their own siblings, making Amber a hot-bed of political and military intrigue. That's the gist of it. Now go read the books and find out what you're missing.)

As you read along, you watch his transformation from egocentric bastard to sympathetic martyr. The change is incredible.

A little too incredible if you ask me. Corwin himself admits that he's not an entirely trustworthy narrator. When I started planning an *Amber* campaign, I decided to take that statement to the extreme. I based the idea on a great little book by Philip Jos? Farmer called *The Other Log of Phileas Fogg*. In that book, Farmer uses all the mistakes (not a very pretty word, but an accurate one) Verne and his editors missed in *Around the World in 80 Days* and uses them to build a quiet conspiracy the likes even Umberto Eco has never seen. When a character has his glass in his left hand in one passage, then in his right in another, that's not a mistake - - it's a clue! It's a brilliant little book whose methods have inspired me on many occasions.

On this occasion, I decided to use the same technique on Zelazny's *Amber*. I told my players that they'd be making characters that were sons and daughters of the Elder Amberites (the characters from the books), but the game would take place during the time of the novels. They'd get to witness all the cool stuff that was going on and fill in the blanks that Corwin never quite filled in. They made up their characters and got ready to watch the events of the novels unfold.

But things didn't go exactly as planned. Not by a long shot. In fact, within one hour of gameplay, they were as jittery as a junkie waiting for his fix. You see, everything was wrong. That is, everything was happening the way it did in the books, but Corwin's role was a lot different than the role he spelled out on the page.

In other words, he lied. A lot.

As soon as the players thought they had things figured out, I threw another loop at them, playing off their assumptions and using those same assumptions to set them up for nasty traps. Here's an example.

In *Amber*, it's possible to go out into shadow and find a perfect (albeit inferior) duplicate of yourself. After all, anything an Amberite can imagine is out in shadow, you just have to be willing to look for it. At the end of the first book, Corwin is imprisoned for four years in the bowels of Castle Amber. What's worse, he has his

eyes burned out. The player who took the role of Corwin's nephew didn't like that one single bit.

But there's a snag, you see.

That ain't Corwin down in the dungeon. It's his shadow.

And so, all through the rest of the series, the Corwin that's telling the reader his story is a shadow who believes he's Corwin, while the Real Deal is behind the scenes, operating unseen, manipulating events while his dummy-self keeps everybody's attention.

And make no mistake, Corwin is a bastard.

Now for those of you who don't read or play *Amber*, here's another example so you can get a picture of what I'm talking about.

## Good Guy Vader

Chew on this.

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda warns Luke about the Dark Side of the Force: "Once you turn down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny."

Yeah. Right. And the Good Side makes you want to sleep with your sister and kill your father.

Think about it for a second. What if Vader ain't such a bad guy? What if Vader only wants to be reunited with his son, overthrow the Emperor and rule with his boy at his side? What if he wasn't lying? And what if Kenobi and Yoda are just playing a very complicated game of revenge?

Watch *A New Hope* again. Watch the scene with Kenobi and Luke in the old guy's house when R2-D2 shows the video of the fair princess begging for help. Kenobi turns to Luke and says, "You must come with me to Alderaan and learn the ways of the Force." What's good-hearted, sweet-faced Ben Kenobi trying to do there? He's using the Old Jedi Mindtrick! Watch it! Watch Luke staring at him with glassy eyes! Watch Luke pull away (because the Force is too strong in him). Then watch Kenobi use Luke's desires against him. "I need your help Luke. She needs your help."

Yeah, Luke. You know what she needs.

They even lie to him. They tell him his father was betrayed and killed by Vader. And no, it ain't a different point of view. It's a lie. My mommy taught me better than that. Kenobi and Yoda manipulate Luke all through the films, trying to convince him that the Dark Side isn't stronger, just quicker, easier and more seductive.

Let's think on that for a while.

The Dark Side is quicker to learn, easier to learn and just as powerful? Where do I sign up?

And for those of you who are saying, "Yeah, but it'll forever dominate your destiny!",

I got one thing to ask you. Did Ol' Emperor Palpatine look all that dominated to you when he was frying Luke's skull with blue lightning? Ever see Yoda or Kenobi do the blue lightning trick? I didn't think so. He was the absolute ruler of the Universe! Come on! If that's dominated, I'd hate to see "liberty."

Oh, wait. That's right. Liberty is living in a desert wasteland scaring Sand People for fun. Or how about rotting away on a mudhole hiding out from the big guy in black armor that can kill you with a flick of his wrist. You know. The one that's got his destiny dominated. The one with his own Star Destroyer.

You can use the Bad Guy Corwin technique in just about any game that's licensed from film or literature.

Think about Bad Guy Gandalf or Bad Guy Aragorn.

Think about Good Guy Doctor Doom or Good Guy Lex Luthor.

Think about Bad Guy Picard or Bad Guy Kirk.

If you're willing to look, you'll find the patterns.

The Bad Guy Technique throws players' assumptions out the window and forces them to think on their feet. Everything they believe they know is now wrong. It doesn't matter if they own every little sourcebook on every little subject, because everything is up for grabs.

And once their confidence is shaken, once they don't know where they're going, they'll realize that there's nothing they can count on - - but themselves.

That's a great starting point for that li'l thing we call the Hero's Journey. And you haven't broken a single rule or fudged a single die roll. But you're still playing dirty.

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Convinced? How about a little shaken? You pullin' out your copies of the *Star Wars Trilogy*, ready to look for more? Congratulations. You've just graduated Dirty GM 101. And, by the way - - Welcome to the Dark Side. Hope you enjoy your stay.

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