

The GEM Cutter s Manual

The Game Masters Guide for use with the Game Engine Manual
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The Very Basics

Welcome to the role of the Game Master. It's been several years since I've first stepped into those shoes. It's been many more since I first played under one. I've learned a great deal since then, mostly through making some very costly mistakes. I hope, with this book, that new Game Masters, and perhaps more experienced ones, can learn to avoid the pitfalls that I've stepped into, as well as learn to present an enjoyable game for their players.

Very quickly, I would like to thank a few people for their patience over the years. Most notably Dan Lawrence and Richard Morris, from whom I learned the majority of the "Do's and Do not's" in running games. Thanks for your help.

- Neale Davidson

Role of the Game Master

Role-playing games consist of a group of players, moving their characters through a setting. They will interact with the natives, enter combat, thrill to adventures, and gain powerful abilities.

The Game Master is the one to give the players all they need. He sets the encounters, describes the setting, mediate combat, and rewards their efforts. It's an imposing task, but one well worth the effort.

Being a Game Master

A Game Master is a thing reminiscent of a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is a very rewarding and enjoyable experience. On the other hand, it involves a good amount of effort, and often frustration. Players may love the work that the Game Master has put into the game, but may wander off in strange directions that she never intended.

She has a lot of responsibilities as well. A Game Master has complete control of the setting she's presented. She mediates combat between characters and their opponents. She presents challenges and obstacles. She does not, however, control the game. She merely handles it, for the enjoyment of the players and herself. In a sense, she's the director of the play, and the

script unfolds as a collaborative effort between herself and her players.

Using This Book

This book was written to introduce novices to becoming a Game Master. It doesn't explain any real rules, but instead focuses on show the Game Master how to handle situations and set her stage for adventures.

This book is divided into five main sections. Every Game Master should know and understand the material in the *Basic Storytelling* and *Non-Player Character* chapters. The others can come with more experience.

In truth, however, most of the book will seem like common sense. It's surprising, though, to learn what every good Game Master forgets from time to time.

Basic Storytelling: This chapter is probably the best for the novice Game Master. It provides tips for setting up and running sessions, as well as basics for handling characters, experience, and combat.

The Setting: For exceptionally creative Game Masters, this chapter aids in creating campaign worlds. It explains how to add sites, personas, and conflicts to a world. Fortunately, for the less creative of us, the chapter is broken down to bring a novice through.

The Campaign: Eventually, every Game Master is going to want to try a campaign. A campaign is a series of adventures with a common story line. They're a bit more difficult to set up than single adventures, but worth the effort.

Non-Player Characters: Every adventure should have interesting adversaries. More than that, though, every setting should be filled with people for the party to meet, know, love, and hate. This chapter serves as a guide for fleshing out these Non-Player Characters.

Creating Special Abilities: The final chapter is best reserved for experienced Game Master. It provides guidelines on creating special powers and abilities, assigning costs, and making them available for characters.

Basic Storytelling

Being a Game Master isn't simply about knowing the rules and making sure that everyone knows them. It's about knowing why the rules work the way they do. It's about making sure that the rules do not get in the way of a good time.

No rules system is going to be able to take a novice Game Master and make her an excellent one overnight. What that requires is practice and a little confidence. A Game Master really only needs to keep a feel for the dramatic, and an even hand when dealing with the players. Really, though, her primary goal is to make sure everyone has fun.

The Commandments

There are a few, very basic, but very important guidelines that any Game Master needs to keep in mind to be a competent Game Master.

Be Fair. This is the most important and most difficult guideline to follow. A Game Master needs to give all the players an even chance, and try to let all of them have equal voices within the game. When a Game Master makes a decision, it should apply equally to everybody, even herself.

Example: The Game Master is running three players, one of which is her boyfriend. When their characters are all involved in the same trap, the Game Master cannot show favoritism to her boyfriend's character. Each suffers from the effects of the trap equally.

The players are playing the game to have fun, which is hard to do if the Game Master is harboring a grudge or showing favoritism to someone, even herself. Unfair Game Masters destroys the game for everybody.

Use Common Sense. No rules systems in existence will model reality perfectly and there are some occasions where this could lead to silly or even ridiculous levels. We've tried to make the rules sensibly cover as much as possible, but players are a clever lot. If there is a weakness in the rules, they'll find it.

A Game Master needs to use her head when it comes to these situations. Sometimes, she'll need to either liberally interpret the rules, or ignore

them completely to make the situation make sense.

Example: *Melissa has fallen fifty meters. The game's rules state that she takes one die of damage for every five meters she falls. She rolls twelve points on five dice, with much of it being absorbed into the armor. Strictly by the rules, Melissa can get up and walk away as if nothing had happened. The Game Master, however, places the character into shock, making her unconscious for awhile after such a massive fall, even though her injuries were minor.*

Keep Action Moving. This type of game is like a story, and it should flow with a certain rhythm and style as each session continues. The Game Master needs to keep the game interesting and fun. When the games start to slow down, she should spice it up with something reasonable to get the ball rolling again.

The Game Master should do her best to avoid trappings and arguments that detract from the game. Stopping to explain decisions, for instance, causes both the players and the Game Master to break away from the game's rhythm, stopping the flow and ruining the mood.

Example: *A decision about cover was made that caused Jon to take more damage than his player thought he should. The player stops the game to argue the call with the Game Master. While the two argue, the other players start discussing whose turn it is to bring the soda next week.*

If a call must be argued, and if the player feels that the Game Master truly made a gross error, the discussion should take place after the session, and in private. If the Game Master was actually wrong, she should do something to make amends, perhaps in the next session.

Example: *Jon's excess damage killed him, but the Game Master relented that the cover probably should have helped more than it did. During the next session, the scene begins with Jon's broken character lying in a hospital bed, looked upon by Jon's worst enemy. A new episode begins.*

Accepting Characters

One of the Game Master's responsibilities is to make sure that each character involved in a campaign actually belongs there. Even by

following the rules to the letter, a player may make a character that, for one reason or another, may detract from the gaming sessions.

Too - Powerful Characters

On some occasions, players who use the 'random' method of generating characters could make one with very high values for most of her statistics. This character is naturally good at everything, and has no real weaknesses. This may or may not be a problem, depending on the particular setting and campaign, but a Game Master should consider toning down characters that have a hard time failing most rolls.

Example: Sam's character has all his statistics in the eight, nine, and ten ranges. Even without skills or training, this character will likely succeed most of the tasks ever put to him. Other players in the group weren't as lucky, and would let Sam's character do everything, making them feel useless.

"Min-Max" Characters.

Some players, in an effort to maximize their chosen abilities, will place certain statistics much higher than others. Generally, the player isn't as interested in playing out a role as he is in 'winning' a campaign.

These characters are very easy to spot. A couple of statistics will be pushed to their highest levels, nines and tens, while the others will suffer tremendously, twos and threes. A Game Master should outright refuse these characters unless the player can come up with a good role-playing background for them.

Example: A character is being made into a warrior. The player places the warrior's Strength and Endurance at ten, while setting the character's Intelligence and Willpower at three. The Game Master refuses the character.

A special note goes here about the Comeliness and Charisma statistics. Many players will notice that these statistics do not add into either Health or Mana, and do not have much in the way of combat-related skills. Some of these players might be tempted to keep these two statistics at a bare-minimum to maximize their other statistics. A Game Master should not let this happen. After all,

who wants to spend time with a group of ugly and rude characters?

Hopeless Characters

Other characters may possibly suffer from being too ineffective in their statistics. They may have all their statistics too low, or have a certain key statistic far too low for the player's desires.

The Game Master shouldn't force a player to play a character that she is uncomfortable with. On the other hand, a player cannot expect to get super-statistics every time she rolls. If the Game Master decides she wouldn't want a character like the player's, then the Game Master should allow the player to make a new one.

Example: A player has randomly created a new character, but rolls very poorly, none of the statistics go above a five, and quite a few of them don't go above four. The Game Master wouldn't want this character, and allows the player to make a new one.

Dissatisfied Players

It is possible that a player that makes a viable character simply does not want to play the character she's generated. A Game Master should never force a player to take on a character that does not interest her. The Game Master may suggest that the player stick it out, but shouldn't require it. If the player absolutely refuses to play the character, the Game Master should simply have her make another.

Example: A player had her heart set on playing a thief-type in a fantasy setting. Unfortunately, she generates a character with a DEX of three and a CHA of four, hardly the mold she envisioned. After explaining her problem to the Game Master, she is allowed to try again for a thief. In this particular case, however, the Game Master could suggest that the player use the point-generation method instead of rolling dice.

Skill Choices

A player needs to choose skills for her characters that both fit the character's design, and fit within the setting. A player needs to pay close attention to the available technology in a setting, as well as that setting's particular quirks.

Example: As much as a fantasy character may like, most campaigns simply won't allow a character with an Astrogation or Beam Weapons skill.

Character Background

A character's personal background should be thought-out by both the Game Master and the player before allowing the character into the campaign. There are many ways that the history and attitudes of a character could ravage an otherwise carefully created campaign.

Out of Place

Some characters simply do not fit inside a given campaign. Most extreme examples include placing characters from one setting into a completely different one. The problem, though, is usually more subtle. An out-of-place character is simply one that either doesn't fit in the campaign or setting at all, or is radically different from the rest of the group.

Example: Jon is a warrior who has joined up with a group of thieves to add muscle support. Jon is a guard-member, however, and isn't terribly likely to stand still while his companions are plying their trade. Jon either has to put aside his own morals, or report his companions constantly. Either option would cause difficulty for the group.

Rank

Any situation that allows one player's character to be in command of the others is simply asking for trouble. Of course, there is always the temptation for the leader to boss his troops around unwarrantedly, but the larger problem is that a player wants to do more than simply follow the orders of another player. A Game Master shouldn't allow the characters in the party to have a chain-of-command within their ranks.

Example: In a Mercenary campaign, Mike's character is in charge of a group of three reconnoitering troops. In a tight spot, he orders all three of them into a situation that could get them killed. The characters would not normally act in that manner, but they simply had to follow orders.

Wealth

Money has its privileges, and wealthy characters can justify getting expensive equipment, materials, and even henchmen, without doing a single thing to earn them. Beware of characters that claim to have access to their family fortune, because a player might use that as an unfair advantage over others.

Example: Melissa claims to be the daughter of a powerful corporate manager, who makes a great deal of cash. She further claims that she has a substantial amount of funds from her family on her own. She would have no problem spending that cash on high-powered weaponry and assault rifles, while her comrades can barely afford their rent for the month.

Nobility

Noble characters introduce a wide variety of problems. These characters attract a great deal of attention, for one, and they do have authority over their subjects. A noble generally has both wealth and rank, and their associated problems.

Example: Jean is a princess in an adventuring campaign. She stands to inherit the throne and is given a great deal of respect by most of her people. Sadly, she expects this treatment from everyone, including her companions, who don't take too kindly to obeying her commands.

Character Personality

Even if all the statistics and skills fall inline with the Game Master's campaign, the player may opt for a mindset for his character that will make adventuring difficult or nightmarish.

Reluctant Adventurer: For some obscure reason, there are players who insist on playing characters that do not want to adventure. This makes for an extremely difficult time for a Game Master, since the character does not want to be motivated into a campaign. A Game Master who finds himself in this position should ask the player if he intends to play in the campaign, and adjust the character's attitude accordingly.

Example: The character Marvin does not wish to adventure, and constantly spends his time

dragging down the rest of his group, and refusing to embark on missions that directly affect him. This makes for a lousy time in play, and the player is asked to retire him from the campaign.

Thoughtless: The thoughtless character is one that doesn't care about the needs and wants of the others in his group. He doesn't think things through, constantly goes off on his own, and often causes problems for everyone simply to have fun on his own. This type of character is difficult to handle because he doesn't want to be part of the group.

Example: Greg has become bored with the party, and wants to jump into action. When the entire party is hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned by an opposing group that wishes to talk, Greg decides to launch an attack, risking everyone. In response, the Game Master simply has one of his characters defeat Greg alone, recognizing that Greg is not acting with the party.

Evil: Some players find it enjoyable to play an 'evil' character. This is more than being a villain, this is someone that actively likes to hurt people, and this often can extend to the player's mindset instead of just the character. A Game Master should frown on any character being 'evil'. No one, in history, has been completely evil, though some have come close. At any rate, evil characters outright break a campaign, as they sow dissension and resentment amongst both the characters in the group, and the players playing them.

Example: Greg is a wanton murderer, and doesn't care who or where he kills. During one adventure, he decides to kill another party-member in their sleep, leaving little evidence to implicate him. Unfortunately, the player of the dead character knows that Greg's player is responsible, and refuses to continue playing until Greg and his player are dispatched somehow.

Handling Sessions

The session is where the Game Master and players come together to try out an adventure in a campaign. In other words, this is where the action is. A Game Master needs to know, or be willing to learn, the best ways to handle having a bunch of people over to act strangely for an evening.

Getting Groups Together

Probably the hardest part of running a campaign is actually getting the people together to play it. The Game Master has to wrestle with conflicting schedules, limited free time, classes, work, and other distractions.

Sadly, there is no simple solution for this problem. A Game Master should try to arrange times to play with everyone well before the game begins. If there is a local gaming club, it would be a wise idea to link up with them.

Sometimes, simply posting a note in a local gaming or hobby store will get some feedback. If those fail, the Game Master might consider offering free snacks and drinks to anyone he can find. If even that fails, there's always the Internet.

When the group is finally assembled, they should all sit down and decide on when, where, and how often that they are going to meet. This is why it's a good idea to know how long a campaign is expected to last before it begins. It makes scheduling much easier.

Preparation

There are several things that a Game Master should have ready before running an adventure. If the adventure or campaign is pre-prepared, such as a printed module, she should read through it carefully and know what to expect.

If the Game Master has designed her own adventure, she should take some time to become familiar with its premise, and the possible faults, before letting the players find ways of beating it. All the important characters, both those of the players and the Game Master, as well as all planned events should be well thought out.

This doesn't mean that a Game Master needs to formally plan for every possible contingency, but she should get a feeling for how things could go, and how the characters and premise would adopt as the campaign plays itself out.

Running the Session

The Game Master is in charge of the sessions, and she should her best to present an enjoyable adventure for her players. As with everything else

about being a Game Master, how she accomplishes this is a matter of personal taste.

There are some guidelines on what to do, however, as well as some definite things on what not to do when running. When a Game Master gets these basics down, it's only a few more steps to some excellent gaming.

Learn the Players. It's a bit of a trick to find out what a group of people likes. Even in a small group, different tastes will surface. A Game Master should cater to as much of her group as possible, at the same time not alienating the others. Unfortunately, there's only one way to learn this, and that is to simply make the attempt. Players are usually very vocal, and they'll let the Game Master know if there's something that they don't like.

Keep the Pace Going. The flow of a session says a great deal about the excitement of the game. If several hours pass before anyone realizes it, it's a good game. If people constantly look at their watches, they're bored.

Nothing gets people to look at their watches more than stopping or slowing the action in the game. Having to make the players wait while the Game Master fumbles through her notes is going to stop their interest. Too many monotonous combats get tiresome.

To avoid this pitfall, a Game Master should be prepared before going in, and resolve situations quickly. If notes are buried or lost, the Game Master should wing it with her common sense. If the number of combats in an adventure is slowing things down, then she should cut them down. A Game Master wants to design an adventure with a reasonable pace, and should eliminate anything that interferes heavily with it.

Keep the Story Going. While this may seem obvious, every adventure should have a point behind it. This point, in turn, should push ahead the campaign's overall story, even if the direction that the story is taking is not what the Game Master originally had in mind.

The problem comes in when a group of characters loses their focus, either on the goal, the setting, or each other. Characters take up their own agendas, leaving behind others. Players get distracted. The goal may not be as important to the characters as it should. These

are definite problems, and a sign that the campaign is coming to a painful and languishing ending.

Following the suggestions that are provided for designing a campaign could alleviate some of these problems. Keeping the characters involved in the story line can solve just about all other bits of the problem. If a player's character is actively involved in the plot line, he's not nearly as tempted to shrug it off.

A Game Master should give everyone something to do. This doesn't mean that the entire cast of characters must be essential to the overall plot, but it does mean that the group which meet on each adventure should all be kept busy and entertained.

Listen to Players. Players are generally very vocal, and usually won't hesitate to announce to the general public when they are not pleased. A Game Master should listen to the more constructive of their comments, and alter her campaign to be more accommodating.

If the majority of the players feel that there isn't enough combat, a Game Master can add a few sporadic fights. If the players feel that their enemies are constantly oppressing their characters, she could lighten up on them. If the players feel that the character's equipment isn't up to par, a Game Master can simply give them a chance to get more.

Communication is the cornerstone for enjoyment of a role-playing game. If the players and Game Master don't work together, no one has any fun.

Never Seek Revenge. Personal feelings can ruin a session if they're not kept in their place. A Game Master who's mad at a player might want to use her power against that player's character. This revenge does more than hurt that player's feelings, it adds pettiness and causes the entire campaign to lose its focus. A Game Master should remember that there are other players involved as well. If the feelings are too strained, then the Game Master should politely, and quietly, ask the player to leave the group.

Never Lose Your Head. Some Game Masters fall into the trap of insisting that they must have total control of the game. Worse than that, however, is that egos may be put on the line, and bad feelings get created between the Game Master

and her players. Remember that the game is about fun and entertainment. It is not about a Game Master seeing how many characters she can kill to feed her ego. After all, a Game Master can set up endless situations to kill characters without giving them a chance. Where's the fun in that?

If things don't go well for Game Master, such as ignored campaigns or endless arguments, it's time to let someone else take the reigns for awhile. She can take a few weeks off, enjoying someone else's campaign, or just keeping to other interests until she feels ready to have another go.

Dealing with Combat

Combat will, almost certainly, slow down the flow of the game. To simulate a combat, even remotely realistically, the Game Master and players have to keep track of a lot more than normal. They usually have to roll dice, or otherwise determine successes, a lot more often.

Even though combat can be a very exciting part of an adventure, a Game Master has to be prepared for a lot of extra work and detail when swords clash and guns open fire.

As with any other part of the game, the Game Master is going to have to tailor the flavor of combat, and the amount of detail she wishes to use, to the tastes of her group. There is no 'magic rule' for delivering an interesting and exciting combat for the players, but some guidelines can help.

Hand Waving: Many times, a combat's results can be guessed even before they begin. The size of one group may be huge compared to the other, or the sheer power of one individual overwhelms the other, or the combat itself isn't what is important to the characters.

In these situations, the Game Master should probably wing the results without going into the combat system. She can look at the skills of the combatants, and the current situation, and simply state who won and by how much. The closer the fight, the more damage will occur to the victors.

Example: Jon's group is attacking a group of orcs. The player's group is well armed and ready for

combat, while the orcs are disorganized and pretty drunk. Still, the orcs could cause a little harm to the player's group once combat begins. The Game Master declares that Orcs are routed, but everyone in Jon's party suffers average, or two dice, damage from the conflict.

Base Tactics: More often than not, players will want to have direct control over their character's combat moves and how much damage each move causes. A Game Master can still abstract a little, however, and keep things moving at a reasonable pace.

The Game Master merely follows the rules provided in this manual about combat, but abstracts the positions and specifics of the combatants themselves. Characters will worry about range and line of sight, but specifics on placement can usually be ignored.

Example: Jon's group has engaged the Orcs at their base. The Orcs are unready, but they still have a sizable chance. Jon's player asks quickly if he has line-of-sight on an opponent, and what the range is, as Jon pulls his bow.

Tactical Arms Simulator: A Game Master should reserve this option for those who demand as much realism as possible. Characters each possess miniatures or tokens that are placed on a scale map. The map shows the full layout of the battleground, leaving little question of layout, line-of-sight, or range. At this point, however, the game takes on the feeling of a wargame, which may or may not be in the best interests of the role-playing aspect of the game.

Example: Jon is lining up for a target. His player takes Jon's miniature and moves him five hexes to the side, coming around a building to get a clear line between him and his intended target.

Fudging. When in doubt, a Game Master should learn the art of fudging. A 'fudge' is a slight cheat that makes the game a little more interesting, a little more realistic, or gives the characters an even break. It shouldn't be done often, but the occasional fudge can keep the game from becoming too reliant on statistics and dice.

Example: Jon, normally an expert archer, misses three arrow shots aimed at an Orc. The Orc, desperate, throws a dagger. The Game Master privately rolls the extremely difficult attack, which somehow comes out to be a hit. Since Jon's

character should have won easily and merely had such bad luck due to the dice, the Game Master is a little giving and declares the result a near miss. Note that the Game Master at no time allows her dice rolls to be seen. Fudging is no good if everyone knows when it's occurring.

One final note about fudging. No Game Master should feel the need to fudge to seriously hurt a character of a player. After all, the game master is not trying to beat the characters. She should just try to make things interesting. Fudging to kill one of the players' characters is simply wrong and will do nothing but create bad-feelings.

Dealing with Mistakes

No Game Master is perfect. All of them make mistakes, some minor, some so blatant that they'll feel stupid about it for years. When a Game Master makes a mistake, she's got only two options.

Let it Slide: If the mistake is minor and doesn't greatly impact the characters or the game, then the Game Master, and the players, should simply forget it and get on with the game. Chalk it up to experience, and learn from it.

Retcon: Sometimes, a rules-mistake can be so bad that it gets a character killed or stop the campaign. Though it should be avoided, sometimes a Game Master is going to have to retcon a decision. To do this, the game is taken back to when the bad call was made, corrected, and then restarted.

Example: An Orc has Jon at long range, and rolls two dice for an arrow attack. The arrow slays Jon. After a round of combat, Jon points out that the roll actually required three dice. The game goes back to the critical roll and starts over from that point.

Ending the Session

The end of the play session should occur in one of two points. The first is the obvious, at the end of the adventure. The party has foiled the plans of the opponent and won the prize, end the session here and award experience.

The other option is to end it at a crucial moment that doesn't look like it will end the adventure. This is called a "cliffhanger" and is useful for

keeping the interest in a game. The adventure is frozen, and play will resume the following session from where it left off. Cliffhangers are especially useful after long sessions that don't seem to be wrapping up anytime soon.

When the adventure ends, a Game Master should chat about it for a few minutes with the party. What went right? What went wrong? What kinds of snacks should be brought next time? Put everything away and don't change what happened during the night, but try to improve on everyone's fun by listening to the other players.

Character Death

All Role-playing Games have an inherent problem that characters are going to die when they are out there adventuring. This usually happens in dangerous, possibly lethal, places fighting opponents with the intent to kill. Sadly, this doesn't always make for good playtime, since no player wants their character killed off every time they go on an adventure.

The Game Master has to find a careful balance between coddling the characters through each adventure and killing them outright. As a rule, always give the party some method for emerging from the adventure alive. Make it challenging, give them a reason to fear, but make it possible for them all to survive.

Occasionally, however, it happens that a character will get well in over his head and managed to get himself killed. Some players will take this very poorly. Do your best to make the most of the situation, possibly allowing the player to take over a non-player character for the night or by giving him a cookie and having him roll a new character. Remind the player that it's just a game and keep going as best that you can.

Example: A thief has been caught in the royal treasury. He has his weapons out, but ten guards have managed to surround him. They have murderous intent in their eyes. There is no real way out for the character, he just stepped out of his depth. The Game Master sighs, and just tells the poor player to make a new character.

Lucky Action: Sometimes, when a character is about to be killed, there can be a reasonable explanation why that character would still

survive. A character could have been spared of a grenade by it being a dud. The trap could go off ineffectively.

Example: Poised at the edge of a building, our hero is trapped between a long fall and a few overpowering corporate guards. Resigned, he jumps from the edge of the building, ready for the quick death. Instead of that, however, he feels hard wood smack into him after only a few feet. It seems luck was with him, as very surprised window cleaner finds his cart commandeered.

There are other possibilities to keep them alive. Avoid instant or inescapable death. Remember though, if it isn't reasonable to keep a character from dying, the character should die. It's just a piece of paper, after all.

Assigning Experience

The Game Master experience points for several reasons, and can do it either during or after each session. When the Game Masters does this, players will add the assigned experience points to their current experience point total. The characters can then use this experience to improve on their abilities.

On average, characters should receive between five and twenty-five experience points per session. Exciting and rewarding play should be rewarded with high experience awards, while bickering and frustrating play won't merit a great deal of experience.

Game Masters should use an even hand when rewarding XP, giving the same rewards for the same type of play, regardless of the players involved. Game Masters should also be consistent per each adventure in their campaign.

XP	Style of Play
1	Good acting award for a player
2	Clever and innovative use for a skill
3	Party member saves everyone with skill use
4	Successful brave and dangerous action by a character
5	Poor adventure with bickering and in-fighting
10	Typical adventure experience
15	Good and exceptionally enjoyable adventure
20	Exciting and dangerous adventure
25	Climatic adventure with lots of danger and excitement.

Assigning too Little Experience

It's easy for a Game Master to accidentally 'gyp' the players out of hard-earned experience once in a while. But if players receive too little experience too often, they still start to feel that nothing that they do will matter and could stop enjoying the game. If players start to complain about the lack of XP being given out, up it in small bits until everyone is comfortable.

Example: After a long and tedious adventure, the Game Master assigns each character two experience points. The players, feeling that their characters deserve more, protest. The characters have face several dragons, survived many deadly traps, and barely made it out with their lives. They're wondering what they have to do to get decent experience rewards.

Assigning too Much Experience

Of course, it could happen that the Game Master is giving out too much experience per game, allowing characters to become super-powerful too quickly. Players will start to sit back and do nothing but reap in experience points. A Game Master should slowly cut back the amount of experience he gives out each game until he and his players are comfortable.

Example: One campaign has been giving a large amount of experience per session. Each character can expect to raise their various abilities for the most mundane of tasks. As the campaign goes on, the characters are challenged less and less, and eventually can wade through anything that the Game Master throws at them. The final fight of the campaign was supposed to have a great dragon, but the dragon is dispatched by powerful offensive spells before the battle even begins.

Improving without Experience

It is possible for characters to be improved without spending the experience required. This is done through training, and it takes time. Just as a real person goes to school to learn, a character can go to school to improve.

Skills improve slowly through study. A level one trivial skill takes one week to learn through study. Level two trivial skills take two weeks. As a rule, determine the amount of experience required

raising a skill to its next level. The character must spend that many weeks in study to improve that skill.

Example: Sam is spending time to improve his alchemy skill from level four to level five. As a hard skill, this would cost twenty-five experience points, so would take twenty-five weeks of study. A character can study more than one skill at a time, but the time for study on each skill is added on to the total. A character studying two skills would earn experience in both, but would spend the full amount of time learning them.

There are a couple of things to keep in mind, however. First, a character should state what he is studying before he goes on his study-sabbatical. Second, experience points are generally quicker. Some players might try to build a super-character by setting him to the side for a while. This is fine, but his character won't be playing for a while. The character builds up a single decent skill the others are building up all of their skills.

Example: When the party reaches town, Susan, the mage, spots an impressive library. She decides to study up on her spells while the rest of the party goes and performs another adventure. They reluctantly agree, leaving her behind. Susan won't be gaining the adventure experience, but she will be learning new things about magic while they're absent.

Also, a Game Master should frown on an entire party setting aside a great deal of game-time to for simple study. Adventurers aren't the types to stay confined for long, even to raise their skills. An entire group of adventurers might as well retire.

Being Dramatic

Drama is often considered to be the highest form of acting. Drama in role-playing is difficult, but can greatly add to the feel and flavor of a setting. Being dramatic basically consists of using a small amount of natural acting talent, and properly setting a mood for the game.

Setting the Mood. The mood of a session should reflect the mood of the setting and campaign. If the players are going to be immersed in a gothic horror or cyber-punk setting, then the room

should have fairly dim lighting. The players and Game Master should keep their voices down.

Conventional ultra-hero campaigns and more light-hearted fantasy games could be in well-lit, even airy, rooms. Players should exchange quips in the middle of the action. The Game Master might allow minor diversions and 'out-of-character' actions.

Using Description. A Game Master's choice of words is also very important to the drama. Adding a little bit of unique color in a setting can greatly spur the imagination.

Example: Take this description of an Orc warrior. 'He stands at your height, but his frame is much wider, bulkier. His fists are clenched, and his dull yellow eyes are narrowed at you. He is carrying an axe with the rust of old blood dotting the blade.'

Acting Skills. Lastly, and perhaps the most difficult, the art of acting can play a very strong role in making a session more dramatic. When a Game Master acts out the minor rolls, it's easier for the players to get into the session.

Unfortunately, this book doesn't have the room to provide adequate space on how to become a good actor. Nor does it have the ability to transform someone who can't act to a convincing movie star. The only way to do that is to practice.

Game Master Experience

Becoming a good Game Master truly only requires two basic things. The first is patience, and the second is practice. With time, anyone willing to put in the effort can hone their gaming skills and become a great storyteller and Game Master.

The important thing for a Game Master is to never get too discouraged. Even the best Game Masters have bad nights, and even the most well-designed campaigns can have a dull run. Stick it through, learn from the mistakes, and know that the next game will be better.

The Setting

"And where shall the game begin but the playing-field?"

The setting of the game is, perhaps, the largest aspect of the game. After all, the setting is where everything unfolds. It is both what the characters react with and what they live within. It is what the Game Master uses to make his campaigns. It is what the players use to place their adventures. It is the world in which the player's imaginations lose them within.

When the Game Master wants to create his setting, he needs to answer a few basic questions. He needs to know the mood that the setting sets, what genre the setting fits within, and where the needed conflict comes from.

The remainder of this chapter goes into more detail about creating a setting, starting with the very basics, and eventually ending up with a small amount of detail capable of handling a moderately long campaign.

The Feel of the Game

The easiest way to start designing a setting is to go for an overall mood when playing within it. The mood will determine much of what's needed about everything else. For example, you won't see many cyber-punk worlds with hundreds of zany gags and whipped cream shooters. On the other hand, a setting with teenagers learning ninja powers probably will get silly on occasion.

A prospective Game Master will probably want to see what feel his players will want while playing. A group that often gets fully into character, acting about their dark demeanor, will likely want a dark and serious campaign, or at least a realistic one. Again, the other hand holds the more relaxed, fun-loving gamer, who will be more prone to making quips and enjoying a more lighthearted campaign.

Of course, some Game Masters won't have access to their players before the first session, and will probably have to guess at it. The Game Master could then take the route that he is most comfortable with. Game Masters trying to run a style of game that doesn't mesh with their taste will almost never succeed. If this sounds

frightening, don't worry about it. Every Game Master makes this mistake.

A true novice Game Master should probably try something a little light-hearted, at least until he's comfortable running different settings. Of course, most settings will be a mix of all three styles, in certain amounts, but mixing takes some practice to get quite right.

Dark and Serious: This type of setting is the most difficult, as every nearly element of the world is grim. Crime can be completely out of control, oppressive governments make the lives of the people difficult, and life is very cheap. Post-holocaust and cyber-punk games would fit best in this type of mood.

Example: The war had been going on several years, neither side cared what the fighting was about anymore, only victory mattered. Small teams of mercenaries were hired to strike against the enemy, coolly doing the job without emotion or remorse. That was the way it was supposed to work, but the armies would soon learn that no person is ever fully a machine.

Realism: The realistic setting is one where everything works precisely in the manner it is supposed to. Police will respond to criminal activity as best that they can. Guns will kill as they are designed. Serious issues are handled with all the confusion and grit that they are managed in the real world.

Example: He had volunteered for these missions. He knew the risks. Still, he realized, some secrets had to be kept, no matter the cost. It was his job to learn just what foreign powers knew about his country's strength. He had to sneak in, get the information, and head out. Hopefully, his skills would be sufficient.

Light-hearted: The lighthearted setting is probably the easiest type of campaign to set up and enjoy. Lighthearted settings are designed solely around fun, sometimes, but not always, to silly and strange degrees. A cartoon setting, or a pulp ultra-hero setting, or a space parody, are all good examples of light-hearted campaigns.

Example: Three teenagers inherit their father's massive robots to do battle against evil, and ineffectual, aliens. They have to deal with the evil Archenemies, high-school teachers, and the ever-dreaded zits.

The Genre

Once the basic mood has been established, it's time to begin setting down the basics of the setting. The first question to ask is about the overall flavor of the game. Is the setting filled with magic and sorcery?

Does it deal with exploring new worlds? Are the characters going into virtual worlds to steal information? When a Game Master starts answering these questions, at the basest level, she is deciding on a Genre for the setting.

A Genre is a mold, of sort, for making a backdrop of a setting. Genres carry a little bit of baggage in what's expected. For instance, the genre of fantasy cries out for magic. The genre of ultra-heroes requires special powers.

The Genre also includes the overall premise to the setting. Anything responsible for the state of the world should be considered. For instance, if ultra-heroes are around, the setting should give an explanation, if there is one. If the setting is an alternate history, it's a wise idea to explain where history took a left turn.

Fantasy: This is a fairly wide genre that basically covers the sword-and-magic motif. Fantasy settings can include the old legends of Celtic kings, Chinese magic, great dragons, and powerful druids.

Example: This is a world where nature is protected by the druids, and where their powers are derived from calling on the energies of the earth. They are worshippers of the old magic, struggling as the ironclad warriors from the south come to claim the Druid world for their own.

Space. The space genre encompasses star-ships sailing between worlds, exploring new stars, battling and befriending aliens. This is the stuff of high science fiction, where technology is at its peak.

Example: The generation ship was sent from earth many years ago. It was, simply, huge, measuring a dozen miles in length, and wrapped in a four-mile shell. Within here, in this artificial world, lied the hope for colonization. As the ship reached her final port, however, they discovered that they were not alone.

Espionage: This is the world of the spy, filled with underground organizations, special gadgets, and political intrigue. In many ways it is the same world as our own; in others, it is infinitely more complicated.

Example: Beneath the polished glass of the skyscrapers lurk those who crave power beyond measure. Slowly, these men have created small empires of finance and information and threaten the security of the world.

Cyber-punk: This is the post-modern world of technological darkness, where weapons and gear have been fused with living men and women to create a new breed of warrior. The grass is burnt, the bricks a darker shade of red, and the computers are in charge.

Example: In a few short years, the conspiracy of the mega-corporation has succeeded in controlling the world through unofficial means. If one isn't with the corporation, they're considered worthless. Crime is out of control, and law and order seem to be a thing of the past.

Ultra-heroes: Comic book heroes come blazing to life, using wild gadgets and awesome ultra-powers to combat evil and each-other for the greater good of society. It is a world near our own, but with far greater threats than we had ever imagined.

Example: At the end of the Cold War, desperate minor governments began to tinker with the genetic structures of some of their soldiers, making them into ultra-powered weapons. Now, without their countries and without purpose, they have turned their attentions to more personal ambitions.

Horror: Something goes bump in the night, specters haunt the streets. There is the stench of something most unnatural coming from the old woman's basement. These are the elements of horror, the unknown and dangerous. A world underneath our own, dipping into the dark reaches of the occult.

Example: The Alps have always been known as a place of beauty and wonder, but as one travels east through the range, the lights get dimmer, and sounds become strange. Darkness made its home here once, as deadly vampires would

control their undead minions in their search for flesh.

Alternate History. This is a world where something different happened in the past from ours. Basically, this is a setting based around a 'what if' scenario, where things have changed considerably from what they are now because of a different decision reached sometime in the past.

Example: In the late 1800's, the United States did not make an effort to open up Japanese trade, allowing the country to maintain its traditions and way of life. Now, one-hundred years later, Japanese mysticism has become the most powerful in the world, and Japanese influence grows on its own terms.

Cross-Genre: This is the catchall for mixing different genres together to create something new. By making the native Americans of the 1800's possessing more obvious and formidable magical powers, a Game Master can create an effective mix of the Wild West and Fantasy genres.

This sort of mixing is a bit risky, however, as some sorts of things don't mix too well, like water and oil. Space Cowboys were popular for a short time, but they lacked any real substance, and were basically silly short-lived romps, not the stuff of good settings.

Example: During the Christmas eclipse of the new millennium, magic is brought back into our world. Where once humans stood supreme, Elves and Trolls now reappear in the land. Magic mixed with science give rise to a new era of adventure, wonder, and power.

Technology

This is a very important part of the setting, and is directly related to the genre of the setting. The technology of a setting can determine what things are possible, and what characters would know about the world around them.

For game purposes, there are six basic levels of technology, ranging from simple "Primitive" science to the awesome powers of "Hyper-Technology". A setting should center on one level of technology, and fluctuate, a small amount, between the others for different aspects of the setting.

Example: For the most part, Earth of the 1990's is in the Modern Technology range. Of course, certain societies have not fully caught up with the more advanced nations, and suffer in some areas of technology, knocking them somewhat into the Industrial Technology range. Other bits in the world, particularly in government and private research firms, have managed to dip very far ahead on the technology curve, and hit into the Cybernetic Technology range. So, for a setting in current times, it's possible to have a technology base in three different ranges.

Primitive Technology: This level of technology is the lowest possible. Education doesn't yet exist, and weapons are no better than sticks and stones. Perhaps, special abilities are passed on from verbal teachings, and the supernatural is in control of the setting. Few skills will be offered, and only the lowest forms of equipment will be possible.

Example: A Game Master has settled on a post-holocaust world where much of the existing technology has been destroyed. Humans must relearn their world from scratch, and any pieces of technology that miraculously survived is now seemingly almost magical in nature. While high-tech items may exist in the setting, they're up to the Game Master's discretion. Most of the skills and equipment will be limited to a primitive setting.

Medieval Technology: Strictly speaking, this is a catchall term to cover not only the medieval periods, but all periods where the sword and bow were king. This can include any time period from before ancient Greece to just before the widespread of gunpowder. Magic may be in abundance, and a wide variety of melee weapons and bows would be common. Most fantasy settings would fall into this category.

Example: The worlds of kings and sorcerers have been brought to life time and again. Brave heroes take up their swords to fight for fame, kingdom, and fortune. They embark dangerous quests to slay demons and dragons, rescue the ravaged villages of the countryside, and restore order and honor to a tattered land.

Industrial Technology: This period begins with the advent of gunpowder, and ends with the advent of a society dominated by science and technology, a period similar to the end of World

War Two here on Earth. This can include the wars for independence, the settling of the Wild West, or the fantastic tales of Jules Vern. Most people in society are mildly literate, and weapons including early machine guns can be found.

Example: The locomotive seemingly opened up the frontier for colonization, but the native tribes found there had become unfriendly. Brave men have been called upon to settle the differences between the natives and the settlers, taking up arms if need be. The natives, however, will not easily be swayed, and are prepared to use their guns, and their spirits, to make the fight for the frontier a difficult one.

Modern Technology: This is the current day, the cusp of the third millennium. Weapons are very deadly and powerful, the political climate of the world is in question. Governments struggle to adapt to the changes of the world as technology races along at incredible rates. The society has been raised on media, and knows their world better than any generation before. Any weapons currently available in the real world are available in the campaign.

Example: Gangs in the city are out of control. Several former gang members have teamed up in the city streets to rid themselves of both their past and the dangers they now face in their lives. The characters risk their lives daily to make the future for their kids a safe one.

Cybernetic Technology: This is the first period of conjectural technology, where computers and electronics systems can be fused with living tissue. This is generally where lasers and other science-fiction devices usually make their first appearances. Technology is powerful, and people see it as a threat. The society is very literate, but could possibly be controlled through the media. Weapons of all but the most advanced types can be found.

Example: Small-minded dictators have gotten their hands on technology that they do not respect. Our government, perhaps trying to repair the damage from their earlier mistakes, has put out the call to curb these madmen before they can use their newfound hardware effectively. Injured soldiers have been reborn and enhanced with the latest cybernetic gear. These are the men of chrome and fire.

Hyper-Technology: This is the upper end of technology, encompassing many aspects of science fiction, where nearly anything is possible with the right gadget. The society is almost completely literate, and technology has produced ion weapons, faster-than-light travel, and even cheap long-distance calling rates. Man, and other races, has finally managed to learn and control his technology to a massive degree. Game Masters will set limits on what items are and are not available, depending on what he feels is appropriate, but science remains at its most powerful level.

Example: The Global Union has managed to colonize the local group of suns, and have tried to ally them into a federation of sorts. The colonies have remained mostly independent for too long, however, and are not welcome to the idea of following the rule of a planet they feel has abandoned them. Soon, pirate bands raid starships and the fabrics of the uneasy peace begin to fall.

Society

Each setting will have people in it, and those people will form a society. The society of a setting is basically how people live and work within the setting. It's what government runs the show, the religions people worship, the behavior people follow.

Obviously, society is very important. Characters in different societies will act very differently. The Game Master should consider this section very carefully as he begins to round out his setting.

Government

Most societies, excepting the very worst and very best, will have some system of government put into place. This can range from a tribal elder, to a complex bureaucracy ruling over billions. Every setting should have some governments put into play.

When choosing a government for a setting, a Game Master will want to make sure that it somehow fits the chosen genre and the mood she has in mind. An oversized and oppressive parliamentary government won't work in most primitive campaigns. Small, city-state dictators won't likely work in a modern-age setting.

A Game Master will also want to give the government some flaws. After all, if the government were perfect, there would be no room left for adventures. Typical governmental flaws include being too large, corruption, and isolation. A corrupt government doesn't care for its people. An isolated one cannot help effectively. A government that is too large can't get past its own rules to get needed tasks accomplished.

A Game Master doesn't have to take these weaknesses to extremes, however. A good, solid government with some inside problems is usually the best route. These governments get some respect, and allow for a mostly stable society, at least one stable enough to run around within.

Example: Unable to work past their own laws and regulations, the Global Government has failed to maintain order on Earth, giving rise to small bands of criminals and a wide-spread feeling of desperation. Where the world police is capable of helping, they work very hard. But many regions remain out of reach.

Along with government come laws. Some of the basic laws should be laid out simply for the characters. Is murder illegal and under what circumstance would killing be allowed if necessary? Does the law ban certain items? Any major laws that will often directly affect the play of the setting should be written down.

Religions

Almost every society has some belief in the supernatural. Many of these societies have structured their beliefs into a formal religion. Religion is a powerful and very important element of any setting, and is usually a driving force within its history.

Religion doesn't always need to play a major part in a setting, but setting down basic beliefs, morals, and speculations about the hereafter tells a great deal about the makeup of a society. A society whose primary religion allows bigamy, for instance, will likely have many multi-marriage couples. On another, more serious, arc, a society whose religion specifies women as inferior, has already made a point of conflict for adventurers to deal with.

Example: Religion in fantasy settings is often the source of powerful conflicts. Followers of one deity may declare war against the followers of another. Sacrifices can be common if the followers believe that their divinity desires non-followers to be destroyed.

Bias and Prejudice

It's a sad fact about any society that ill stereotypes creep in once and awhile to color perceptions about people based on a single aspect. Biases against a religion, a race, appearance, speech, and other facets of a person appear everywhere, some minor, and some severe.

When these biases become very severe, and serve as an excuse for oppression, they become a prejudice. These are the bad aspects of society, but very useful in a setting to help complete its feel, particular if the Game Master plans for the characters to be among the oppressed.

Example: In a world where a person with religion is frowned upon, he suffers under a bias that will constantly make him defensive and uncomfortable. If the same world presses that bias, making the act of religion illegal as punishable crimes against the state, it is a prejudice, and a religious person can find himself not only shunned, but a hunted criminal as well.

Culture

A society's culture encompasses a great deal. It includes fashion, speech and language, political views, holidays, and other important aspects. For the Game Master, the elements of culture that are most important are the ones that will greatly affect the lives of the characters within the setting. In other words, a Game Master shouldn't try to answer every possible question, but only the common or important ones.

Example: Knowing what clothes to wear and when isn't terribly likely to come up in the course of a typical game, but if certain types of clothing are banned in a city because they are considered provocative, the characters may want to consider their own wardrobe for a minute.

Currency

This deserves a special note because characters are going to often need and use money wherever they are. The Game Master should define what currencies are used in her setting, and draw some conclusions about the prices of various goods and equipment. This should be kept fairly simple, and prices should be set reasonably.

For good measure, a Game Master could think about how much it would cost a person to buy a single meal, rent a room for a night, buy the most common weapon and armor, and how much he would gain from a typical day's work as a commoner.

Example: In current times, a typical meal from a restaurant is around five dollars. A typical room can range around one hundred, so long as luxury is spared. A handgun, through legal channels, would cost around three hundred dollars, with a kevlar jacket costing around the same price. The average salary, for one day, is around ninety dollars.

From here, the Game Master can make educated guesses about the prices of other goods in her setting, keeping in mind her setting's quirks and culture, which could cause massive shifts in price. More barbaric societies, for instance, would have cheaper weapons. Areas under a wide land-rush expansion might have cheap real estate.

Setting Quirks

What sets each setting as unique are its little quirks. A quirk is a slight variation on a theme that adds a little flavor and spice to a setting. When a Game Master designs a setting, he should add a few quirks to set his setting apart from the others.

Magic: This is an excellent way to set one setting apart from one-another. Different styles of magic add unique and powerful influences on a setting. In some worlds, magic could be seen as a fearsome and powerful destructive force. On others, magic may be as natural as the spring rain. Two fantasy settings that would normally be alike could become radically different if the basic philosophy of magic is altered.

Example: The ancient Druids held a strong belief in the four elements of the world. By combining

different amounts of each element, they believed that new magical powers would develop. Their magic was both based on a pseudo-scientific study of nature, and on their religious beliefs.

Role-Reversal: Sometimes, a setting can change radically from a new point of view. In typical cyber-punk-settings, for example, it's very common to have the players act out the role of street-rats, struggling to survive against their oppressive government and the evil corporations.

The other option is to present the government's viewpoint. The government is sorely overworked and understaffed, suffering from the ambitious and political. Government agents are sent out to take down criminal groups in a desperate effort to try to keep the peace.

An Alien View: A very effective method for customizing a setting is to dehumanize it considerably. This is very good for fantasy and science fiction campaigns. Instead of the usual fare of alien races, a new theme is put into place. A fantasy setting with insect races would prove a good change of pace. A space setting where Earth is simply one small part of the universe could be quite interesting. Stray from the common fare, and new possibilities open up.

Going too far to be Different: Here is a common trap, making a setting so unique and alien that there is no grounding for human players to get a proper feel for it. A setting that focuses on the lives in a rabbit's den might be interesting at first, but could very hard for the players to grasp. There should always be some way for the players to get their bearings, and accept what they are in as alien.

Example: This week, we're going to play the lives of pollen as they travel from plant to seed, avoiding the dangers of animals and wind and guys? Guys? Come back.

Making Quirks Usable

Most times, a setting's particular quirks are going to provide a source of conflict within campaigns. Quirks are generally best when the people behave a little differently than expected by the genre. For instance, people within a cyber-punk setting wouldn't give a metallic man much more than a second glance. A quirk for a particular setting may make cybernetics illegal, however,

and the same man now would be a wanted felon.

Example: In an Ultra-heroes campaign, there are a number of "special" people who have been born with unique powers. When these powers manifest, it is much to the shock and dismay of society at large. These would-be heroes find themselves feared more than celebrated, and have to work very hard to get others to see past their abilities. Sound familiar? These basic quirks have propelled a certain comic book to great heights.

The Sources of Conflict

Conflict makes a story, and a game, interesting. The struggle of a few to overcome their conflicts is the stuff of drama, so every setting should be designed with many sources of conflict in mind. These conflicts should be fairly encompassing, making the setting rich with life and drama.

Troubled Society: Difficult to pull off, this source of conflict comes from a basic rift in the fabric of society. This can come from class struggles, race, technology, religion, or whatever division can be made between two or more groups of people.

Example: During the Crusades, the Catholics were ordered to liberate the religious lands of the mid-east from the Muslims. War ensued for centuries as both sides lost and gained territory. In some parts of the world, this religious rift continues to this day.

Adversaries and Villains: The easiest form of conflict comes from the wants and desires of a single group or a single person. These people place themselves above all others in their ambition, making them thoughtless at best, evil at worst. These people are villains, and every setting has a few. Their motivations may be greed, power, revenge, or something less tangible, but it is the characters' job to stop these villains at any cost.

Example: He had been abused too often. School had become a personal struggle for his life, dealing with drugs, rapes, and guns. At some point, he lost control, and brought in guns on his own. He feels that he's above the law, able to dish out punishment to those that he feels are guilty of any crimes. He's killed ten people so far. He will kill again.

Personal Conflicts: Internal conflicts, with a single character's psyche, or within the group of characters, can be designed into a setting to provide a more interesting bit of tension and drama. Characters may not actually like what they are or what they do. A group may be forced together out of necessity, and not feel any warmth between them when they first meet.

Example: They were outcasts, unwanted children of a war the armies did their best to forget. Each had to scavenge to survive, depending and trusting no one. Now, they need each other to survive.

The Details

The setting is nearly complete, but a little more fleshing out is needed for it to be usable for the game. The Game Master merely needs to fill in some details.

Sites

Every setting has landmarks. These landmarks are important, famous, and common sites for the characters and natives of the setting to know about and visit. Egypt is known for the Pyramids. Greece is known for the Parthenon. New York has the Empire State Building. The American Southwest has the Grand Canyon. These sites are very important, generally symbolizing a setting's culture and people.

Example: The Great Tower was built hundreds of years ago by the rulers that came well before our empire was forged. The spire draws the curious and the scholars who attempt to unravel its mystery. To those of us who live here under its shadow, it's become a lasting monument to a culture now vanished.

Important sites can also serve as foundations for campaigns. A major military base can act as a headquarters for a special military unit. A large city can act as a hub for a crime-fighting team in the near future. Ancient wizards can discuss magical affairs in old towers.

Example: Once, every six years, the druids would gather at the standing stones to commune and discuss the nature of being. It was at this time, also, that new initiates would be brought into the fold, to take their place within the circle.

Celebrities

These are the important people in the world, other than the players' characters. Kings, leaders, powerful figures, and media stars all fit into this category. Basically characters should instantly recognize these people when their names come up in conversation.

Every setting will have many of these types of people. The Game Master should decide what facets of her setting is going to need to have the major players detailed or even named. Enough should, however, to give an idea to the players that there are people in power over them.

Example: The pilots were bored. They had been stationed on their carrier away from Earth and any fun for weeks. Then, out of the blue, the USO announced that Bette Richard, the famous singer, was coming to play for them. Needless to say, morale was improved.

The Characters

At this point, the Game Master should have a early-complete view of her world. She now needs to figure out exactly what roles the characters are going to have within it. The game characters go outside the normal of their own society, making them heroes and villains. The Game Master needs to make sure that she's left room for such people in her setting, so that the coming campaigns can be played out.

Special Rules

Some settings require special rules for their characters. Ultra-heroes require some means of gaining their powers. Magicians require some method of casting their spells.

These rules will change from setting to setting, and therefore go outside of the range of this book. A Game Master should, if she chooses, either create new rules for handling these special cases, or modify existing ones to suit her needs. Whatever her choice, however, she needs to put these rules in writing, to be fair to her players.

Example: On a fantasy world, the Game Master has decided that some children are born with an innate magical ability. This goes a little beyond

the scope of this rulebook, but she decides to adopt these powers as advantages, which must be offset by a disadvantage of the same level of power.

Writing it Up

Once the basics about the setting are established, the Game Master needs to put her thoughts to paper. This lets the players see what's on her mind, and have their first glimpses into the world in which their characters will find themselves within.

The Two-to-five-page World: This type of write-up is pretty sufficient for any settings that are only going to be visited on a few occasions, or where there isn't a great amount of detail needed. The Game Master simply answers all the required questions about the setting and writes them down.

The Game Master needs to be sure that the write-up has enough detail to make the setting playable. This can vary depending on the need, but usually a few pages highlighting the most common and important aspects of the setting are sufficient.

Source books. A source book is a full manual detailing a particular setting. In it, the aspects of a setting are fleshed out in great detail. Many different sites are listed. Celebrities are given limited biographies. History is listed for the various cultures. A source book is a thumbnail sketch of an entire fantasy world.

It's doubtful that a Game Master will need to write an entire source book for her setting. It requires a lot of time and effort to bring out so much detail to fill so many pages. Still, it can be a very rewarding experience to fill out a fantasy world to such a great degree.

Another alternative is to use pre-made source books. Many gaming systems, including this one, have books dedicated to fleshing out settings. These books provide a wealth of material for a game.

The Campaign

Campaigns are, at their basest form, a series of adventures with a common theme. Each campaign can be set in one, or possibly more, settings, and generally involve the same characters from adventure to adventure.

When a Game Master gathers a group of players together, he has the option of running a single adventure, or starting a multi-adventure campaign. While campaigns require a little bit more thought, there isn't much real difference between designing single-shot adventuring and longer campaigns. In fact, a single-shot adventure is a campaign, it just happens to be a short one.

Designing a campaign is much like writing the outline of a book. In this outline, a Game Master will need to decide where the story will unfold, who will be a part of the story, and what events are happening within the story.

Premise

The broadest aspect of the campaign is the premise. Basically, this is the overall plot to the campaign, or the theme that links the adventures in the campaign together.

The premise should be related to the setting, and should fairly straightforward and simple. Details about the premise are fleshed-out later. What the premise must do, however, is take one of the setting's possible sources of conflict, and use it.

Example: In the fantasy world of Old Earth, the powerful warrior Michael seeks the long lost Sword of Might to gain control of his neighboring kingdoms.

The premise alone already begins to fill out details about the campaign by simply drawing on what the Game Master and players know about the setting. They might have an idea, perhaps an incorrect one, of what the premise means to the setting as a whole, and adventure ideas might already spring to mind.

There are a lot of possible premises to choose from, ranging the gamut from mystery, romance, and warfare. A Game Master should simply keep in mind that the premise is the focal point of the

campaign, however. Once the premise is chosen, the Game Master needs to design the other aspects of the campaign around it.

The Mystery Premise. This type of premise is basically the 'unanswered question.' Some event has occurred that presents a mystery to those around it. The campaign, then, will likely focus on resolving that mystery somehow.

Example: The will of Emperor Alan has gone missing shortly after his death. Each of his several powerful heirs could be suspect in the plot to take over his throne.

The Warfare Premise. An easy premise to develop, warfare entails the beginning of a series of battles, designed for some conquest by a powerful foe. The campaign could center on the battles themselves, or center on stopping the war somehow.

Example: The Horse-lord has rallied his troops to invade the Southland once again. He seeks to expand his empire, at the cost of thousands of free lives, and with the power of the sword and his insanity.

The Rescue Premise. Sometimes, a campaign could center on saving someone or something from a terrible and hideous fate. This could be saving the world from a terrible plague, or saving a friend from losing his soul to revenge.

Example: A former friend sworn to kill the leader of a rival gang. Unfortunately, another man committed the crime your friend blames on the leader.

The Wanderers Premise. This premise is based on the idea that groups of people are lost and want to go home. This is very easy to arrange, and could even result in a constant shifting of the setting while the wanderers try to find their lost way.

Example: In an experiment gone wrong, a group of students and their teacher vanish from our world and journey to many alternate worlds, trying to find the one journey which brings them back.

The Item Premise. This premise centers on a thing. This thing, however, is something that many men and women desire for a purpose. It may be valuable, it may be powerful, or it may

merely be a symbol, but this item carries a great deal of importance and meaning.

Example: The knights of the realm journey to the old city, hoping to be the one to pull the ancient sword from the stone to become the one and true king.

The Revenge Premise. Not a pleasant thought, the Revenge Premise involves a desire of some to avenge themselves for some wrongdoing in the past. Perhaps the world can be made right when justice can be served.

Example: The great dragon had slain most of the village, leaving only the children to survive. Years passed, and the dragon slept. These children are children no more, and they are coming home.

Cast of Characters

The Cast of Characters consists of those people who contribute, somehow, to the campaign. Of course, these include those characters controlled by the players, but these also include a number of other characters, those controlled by the Game Master.

When the Game Master designs the campaign, she needs to decide who is going to be involved in doing what. What villains will try to stop the characters? What friends could the characters call upon? When the Game Master starts designing these non-player characters, she is added a great deal of depth to the campaign, and giving the players something to play off of.

Major Adversaries

These are few in numbers in any campaign, and represent the major threat to the party, as well as the main instigators of the premise. They are sometimes the villains, sometimes simply rivals, but are always dangerous. These adversaries require as much write-up as each of the players' own characters.

Example: The wizards of the realm have united to cease control by stealing the Sword of Dread. They are powerful in magic, if not weapons, and are endless schemers. They care little about others, and will not hesitate to hurt or even kill those who stand in their way.

Minor Adversaries

Many villains will employ a large force to protect themselves against party characters. These adversaries are minor, and only need a write-up to show what harm that they can bring to the characters.

Example: The wizards have employed a number of minor bounty hunters to track the party down. They have modest combat skills, and many of them know a few tricks that can seriously threaten the party at times.

Major Allies

Many times, there will be people who will go out of their way to aid the characters. Some of these people may actually be useful and can grant the characters special favor if the need arises. These are Major Allies, and probably need a full write-up, detailing their statistics and abilities.

Example: King Landing knows that without his sword, his rule of the realm is in jeopardy. He knows that the characters are serving his interests, and suspects Gregory's treachery. He cannot, however, publicly allow the party to remain free after they are accused of theft, but he decides to keep the patrols looking for them light, in hopes that they can discover the truth.

Minor Allies

These are non-player characters who will aid the characters when they need it for more mundane matters. They don't need a great amount of write-up, just enough about them to know what kind of aid that they can offer.

Example: Around the realm are various priests, who will offer healing and rest to those who need their services.

The Player Characters

At this point, the Game Master should have all the players create their characters, if they're going to use new ones, telling them both the basic premise of the campaign, and the setting in which they are to begin.

The players should then decide how their characters know one-another, if they're just

meeting, and what their personal stake is in dealing with the campaign.

Example: The Game Master has managed to find three players for his campaign. He tells them that a mighty sword has been stolen from a Dread Castle in his own fantasy setting. With this information, the players decide that they are from a neighboring town, and have heard about the news through the local criers. Worried that a possible war would ravage their home, they decide to band up to find the thieves.

The Story Line

The story line is, basically, how things are expected to progress from the beginning of the campaign to the end. This means, setting up the premise, taking steps to follow the premise, and then resolving it. This isn't nearly as hard as it sounds, and every Game Master does this to some degree, even if she doesn't realize that she's doing it.

The Introduction

This is the beginning of the story, where the cast of characters, both those controlled by the players and by the Game Master, begin to set the premise in motion.

Many times, the introduction serves as a way for the characters to learn about one-another, and, hopefully, band together for the rest of the campaign. This is also where they first learn of the basic premise, though maybe not in its entirety. Most important, however, this is where the party of characters get their reason for adventuring.

Example: A group of young men and women hear from the town crier that the Sword of Dread Castle has been stolen. This sword symbolizes the peace and stability of the region, and without it, the realm could fall into chaos and anarchy. The governor of the town asks for volunteers to help find those responsible, hoping that his town will be looked well upon once the sword is returned successfully.

Unfolding the Story

The next step in designing the story-line is to think about what events take place to bring the

story to its conclusion, and how the players' characters fit into the scheme of things. What pivotal roles can the party play out in accomplishing the campaign's story line?

Example: The true thieves are a group of wizards who seek to overthrow the realm. They have employed the king's own guard, Gregory, to steal the sword and then to keep the curious party at bay while they ready their plans. Gregory, worried about the plot, decides that framing the party would best deal with them. Eventually, the party must deal with Gregory, and, from him, learn about the wizards to recover the sword from them.

The Climax

This is near the end of the adventure, where the villains and major threats are dealt with, and the objective has been reached. This should also be the most tense part of the campaign, and here, more than anywhere else, the characters should worry about who is going to be the ones to walk away.

Example: The party's information takes them to a long abandoned stronghold with the wizards meeting inside. With them, they know, is both the sword and their freedom. The wizards are a powerful group, but they can be beaten, with luck.

The Wrap-up

This is the conclusion of the story, where everyone might actually live happily ever after. For the sake of the story line, this is where the party receives their intended rewards for completing the campaign.

Example: Once the party returns the sword to the king, they are given back their freedom, and are paid handsomely with gold, land, and title. Their quests complete, the heroes can now look forward to some much-needed rest.

Episodes

Designing a campaign is a great deal like designing a mini-series for television. They start with an introduction, flesh out the premise and story, then resolve themselves in a big climax. These parts combine into a full and rounded

campaign, giving the players who complete it a certain satisfaction of accomplishment.

Setting the Series Length

Once the Game Master has decided on the story line, he needs to start setting to story to his campaign. The Game Master should look at the number of major events he needs to accomplish in bringing the story around full circle.

These events are sub-plots, and are the focus of each individual adventure within the campaign. In other words, each adventure should be designed to resolve one of these plot-related events. The more events needed in a campaign's story-line, the more adventures are needed to resolve it.

Example: In the Dread Castle theft, the Game Master has determined that four major things need to happen. First, the party must learn of the theft and be called upon to solve it. Second, the warrior Gregory must implicate the party in the theft. Third, the party must beat Gregory to learn the identities of the true thieves. Lastly, the party must confront the true thieves and recover the blade.

Of course, sometimes campaigns can run very short or very long, which may not fit right in the Game Master's, or players', time schedule. If a Game Master needs to add or remove plot elements to 'squeeze to fit', she shouldn't hesitate. She should just make sure that the story line remains solid.

Designing Episode Plots

As stated already, each episode centers on a single event, designed to move the story line forward. In essence, this event becomes the premise of the episode. The adventure is designed to make the event happen somehow.

Example: In our Dread Castle example, the second episode is supposed to see Gregory, a warrior supposedly serving the king, implicate the party of characters as the true thieves. The steps he takes to do this, and the party's steps in falling into the trap, would define the adventure.

Building to a Climax

One of the purposes of a campaign is to build to a climax, a high-point. This climax can be when the characters reach their goal, kill the main villain, or any other needed point of great excitement.

Episodes should do this on two levels. Every adventure should have a climax of some sort, then each adventure should build up to a major climax near the end of the overall campaign.

Example: About a third of the way into the full campaign, the party meets Gregory, the powerful henchmen of the Dread Castle's Emperor. The henchmen's ring will provide a valuable clue about the thieves, provided that Gregory is defeated.

Adventure climaxes should somehow contribute to advancing the story line, even if it isn't obvious. Each episode should continue the story. The climax of the episode should wrap it up, and set a notable mark on the campaign's progress.

Commercial Breaks

This may sound odd, but it's generally a good idea to design or consider a single break point in the middle of an episode. A single adventure can run several hours, and it's often good to get out of the chairs for a little bit in the middle, and get the blood flowing in the legs.

When a Game Master puts in this commercial break, it should be at an excellent spot for a cliff-hanger, to keep the interest going for the second half of the adventure.

Example: The party has spent hours cutting through the caves, looking for the lost shrine. They are about to open the shrine doors, knowing that something truly terrible is inside. Quickly, the Game Master gets out of his chair and hits the snacks.

Expect Things to Go Wrong

No adventure runs perfectly, and some things can go hideously wrong no matter what the Game Master has planned. In these cases, a Game Master must look at where to go from that point on in the campaign, possibly rewriting everything take should be taking place

afterwards. This is why most write-ups need to be kept short, otherwise a Game Master may spend far too many hours planning for games rather than playing them.

Example: The group of heroes has managed, somehow, to overcome the main villain in the campaign well before they were originally intended to. Many plot-threads are unanswered, and the campaign is simply not ready to end. The Game Master thinks fast, reviewing his non-player characters, and quickly decides that one of them may yet take the villain's place.

Of course, the trick here is to write each episode's plot such that they naturally lead into one another, but not so that they must occur exactly in one predetermined manner. Players will not always think like their Game Master, after all.

If things do go astray, a Game Master should rewrite only what's necessary to bring the game back on track. She should resist the temptation to force the players or their characters back on course, but instead bring the story line back on track with them.

Wrapping up the Campaign

The end of the campaign is something that marks great excitement for both the players and the Game Master. It marks the conclusion of, hopefully, a good story and a few weeks of enjoyment. It should, then, be memorable, and let the players feel a needed sense of accomplishment of attaining their goal.

The Big Climax

The climax of the campaign could be the final battle, or the attainment of the goal. In any case, it should not be easy, and cause the party a great deal of worry going into it. This is, after all, the end game of the campaign. It finishes off several adventures and quests. It should be difficult.

Example: The party has entered the chambers of the wizards, and they are ready for them. At once, the lead wizard lobs a fireball at the group, the first time the party has seen magic in the working. Combat here will be difficult.

A Game Master should avoid overdoing the finale, however. She should make it simple and to the point, and avoid the temptation to add

things that will wrench away the feel of the setting or the campaign. Most of all, a Game Master should certainly not go out of her way to kill any of the characters. The risk of a character's death is enough to keep interest.

Example: The party enters the wizards den. Suddenly, the lead wizard lobs an instant-kill spell on you. Everyone needs to make a hard Endurance feat or die suddenly. Guys? Those are my chips. Where you going with them?

Happily Ever After

When the party completes their goal, the characters should receive some sort of reward for their efforts, usually from a major ally during the course of the campaign. This reward may or not be treasure, and sometimes it may merely mean that characters earn their lives, but it should mean something to them.

Example: Having dispatched of the wizards, the King announces the party's freedom, and offers each a title and some land for their reward. Now they are free, and they command some respect for their efforts.

Some characters may opt to retire once the campaign is complete. These characters should get a little special ending to them, letting the player know that his efforts were appreciated.

Example: The knight of the party accepts his title, and vows to rule his portion of the realm fairly and evenly. He lives a good life, not free of trouble, but one of respect and honor.

Preparing for a Sequel.

Just because the campaign ends doesn't mean that the characters are done with their lives. Perhaps some loose end wasn't properly tied up, or perhaps a new challenge will surface to face the party. A Game Master can use the setting wrap-up to segue into a brand new campaign in the setting, and start a sequel.

Example: One of the lesser wizards managed to escape from the party's attack, damaged, and beaten. He vows revenge on the party as they leave him behind and already plots against them.

Non-Player Characters

"He was a worthy opponent. It was a shame to finally kill him."

The Game Master has a great deal of responsibilities. He has to keep the campaign going, and fill it with dangerous and interesting scenarios, intriguing plots, and exciting adventures.

For the Game Master though, nothing is more important to the campaign than the creation and handling of Non-Player Characters. These are the characters that the Game Master controls, and without them, the universe would be a very lonely and boring place.

The Game Master has to control each of his Non-Player Characters as a player does his character. But, each Non-Player Character is a different role, a different character, meaning that the Game Master has to control a large number of them in the course of any adventure. While this seems daunting at first, a Game Master will learn quickly how to use Non-Player Characters as both stock characters and fully developed major players.

Bit Players

A bit-player is someone who fills a minor role in the game, and doesn't need to be fleshed out. These Non-Player Characters usually perform common services for the characters, such as sales, communications, or other very common tasks. A Game Master will only need to specify enough information about the bit player to allow him to do his job.

Example: A tavern-keeper in a local bar is offering drinks to the characters. Details about the keeper aren't really necessary, since he's filling a very minor role. The Game Master gives a very minor description, and guesses at a couple of relevant skills, such as brewing, cooking, and haggling, to get an idea of how good the bit player is at his job.

Bit Opponents

Bit opponents are those Non-Player Characters that represent a combat threat to the characters. They're not supposed to be particularly cunning

or memorable, they've just been sent to kill or harass the characters. These are lackeys, henchmen, mercenaries, or pirates.

Bit opponents need only a slight amount more detail than bit players. These Non-Player Characters need their combat statistics defined, so the Game Master will know what rolls are needed when weapons are firing. It's also a good idea to list what major weapons and armor the bit-player is going to be using.

Example: Six Orcs are coming to attack the characters. The Game Master assigns their physical statistics, health, and combat-oriented skills. He also gives them basic weapons and armor.

Special Equipping Bit Opponents

A group of opponents will not likely all be armed exactly alike, particularly if a group has been working together for awhile, or if they've been called in to do a special job. The Game Master could vary the gear of one or two of the opponents in a group, and perhaps alter a skill to reflect the difference in weapons. These minor changes often result in a much more enticing scenario, as the Non-Player Characters suddenly change from being a simple template to something a bit more complicated.

It's good, too, to name the individual members of a 'special team', to help keep better track of which person is which. This also adds to the drama of an encounter, as suddenly the Non-Player Characters appear to be more alive when one calls for aid from another by his name. Again, this small amount of detail greatly boosts the mood and flavor of the game.

Example: Of the six Orcs, one named 'Greg' possesses a long sword and is stronger and more combat-capable than others. Another of them, Lucien, has apparently studied some degree of magic in his life, and has a limited amount of spell-ability.

Allies

Sometimes, the party will be in situations where they actually have help in combat. While this usually involves more detailed Non-Player Characters, it's also possible that the party can find itself working with a group of minor Non-

Player Characters in a pitched battle. A Game Master can simply use the guidelines above to generate allies instead of opponents.

Creatures

Creatures can be used for random encounters on alien world, to liven up scouting missions or other long and usually uneventful details. Remember, though, that most creatures do not attack something as large as people out of any particular malice, unless they have been trained to do just that.

Example: Three troopers are investigating a derelict ship when they stumble upon a powerful, deadly creature. The creature is protecting her nearby nest, and will fight the players vehemently until they retreat or until they, or she, are slain.

Recurring Non-Player Characters

A recurring Non-Player Character is a bit player, or opponent, that has appeared often in a campaign. The party may stumble across the same person over and over again in a port, or an opponent may develop a grudge against the party and start accepting jobs to take him into direct confrontation as often as possible.

These recurring Non-Player Characters are well on their way to becoming staples in the campaign. The party will recognize these Non-Player Characters, and begin to treat them and deal with them in a much more sophisticated manner than with other bit players.

On the other side, these recurring Non-Player Characters will also treat the party as more than simple opponents. They will start to study the party, and get to know them as they deal with them more often. A trick or unique skill that works against a recurring Non-Player Character once, for instance, won't work a second time.

Example: Greg, after losing some of his team to the party, begins to brood over his defeat. The loss of some of his unit has affected him dramatically, and he takes every effort to get himself into combat with the party again and again.

Appearance

Since the party will know these Non-Player Characters, it's important that the party know what they look like. Generally, a small description will be enough, so long as it defines the NPC well enough that the characters will know him on sight.

Example: While most-times the party with consider one Orc to look like another, this one is more than familiar. His dark yellow eyes against his harsh, short brown fur are unmistakable. Greg bears a long scar along his face from his first encounter with his party.

Personal Interest

Something motivates everyone, and when a person starts regularly coming into contact with the party, they're going to learn what makes him tick. A Non-Player Character's motivation is his basic desire in life, and why he wants to deal with the party so often. This simple statement is very important, since it defines his relationship with the party.

Example: Greg, primarily, wants revenge. He also feels dishonored by his defeat at their hands and wishes to prove himself. He regards the party as brutal killers who could have attained their victory through other means, rather than slaughtering his team.

Throwing in new Recurring Non-Player Characters

A campaign may start with a few recurring-level Non-Player Characters right off the bat. These can include spouses, flying-mates, siblings, or rivals. Basically, these Non-Player Characters are made for quickly establishing character relationships with the party, and to enhance the role-playing sessions with people that the party relates to immediately.

Example: James often asks for help from his sister, a genius at computer operations. While she isn't part of the party, her role occurs often, and she is important to the story line. The Game Master gives her a fairly detailed write-up, including her useful skills and her statistics.

Advancement

Recurring Non-Player Characters simply do not cease to exist whenever they are separated from the party. They've got their own interests and skills to hone. Their skills will improve, and enemy Non-Player Characters will become more dangerous.

Generally, a recurring Non-Player Character should advance about the same rate of the party, with a few rolls per session. The improvements will usually be in areas that the Non-Player Character already knows, though picking up new skills is not out of the question.

Example: Julia, the sister mentioned earlier, has some skills in computer programming and operation. During the course of the campaign, those skills improve a bit. This, makes her more valuable to the party. The Game Master would use the studying and research rules to give her experience.

Also, a Recurring Non-Player Character should start developing some skills, or have them assigned, that fits with his background. These skills are those that could normally come up in a game or be useful.

Example: Greg, the Orc, has more than simple combat skills. He also possesses tracking and hunting skills, as well as a few survival skills. These skills aid his profession as well as make him a more formidable opponent.

Major Non-Player Characters

The most complex, and most enjoyable, type of NPC is that of the Major role. These Non-Player Characters are nearly as important as the characters themselves, and serve as the main support, or antagonist, in a campaign.

Major Non-Player Characters fill all the heavy roles that the players can not, such as the lead villains, ship captains, and bosses. These are the Non-Player Characters that make the campaign, and as a result, must be the most detailed, and most complicated of the Non-Player Characters. They will be written up with as much detail as if they belonged to a player, perhaps even more.

Occupation

The first step in designing an Non-Player Character is determine what role he fits into the campaign. This means, what does the NPC do for a living? A Non-Player Character can fill any role, such as an assassin or ship captain, but any Non-Player Character worthy of getting a high amount of detail should have some work of importance to the characters.

Example: Richard is the captain of a Meka carrier, assigned by the Alliance for his years of dedicated service. He is a good captain, if a bit removed from being personally involved in combat.

Relationship to the Characters

Most Non-Player Characters are going to be in a position of some importance to the characters, such as a powerful adversary or commanding officer. This relationship is extremely important, as the party is likely not going to care about someone that they don't deal with often, but may viciously rush to the aid of a long-time friend.

Example: Richard is the party's commanding officer. He is responsible for their lives, and it his job to see that they aren't wasted. He is generally harsh to them, but more than fair.

Appearance

The amount of detail on the appearance of a major Non-Player Character is slightly more than with a recurring one. Also, the major Non-Player Character must look the role that he's filling. A few simple lines should cover this part of the Non-Player Character.

Example: Richard has a stern, broad face, weathered well with his age. His dark gray eyes seem cold and distant. He is strangely attractive, however, mostly due to his formal manner.

Statistics and Skills

Unlike other Non-Player Characters, a major Non-Player Character should be generated like a player's character. The Game Master should feel free to assign his statistics as they are needed, using the point-spread method to insure that the character's statistics meet the concept. The Non-Player Characters skills should be generated

normally, with an eye to getting the necessary skills for the Non-Player Character to perform his job.

Lastly, the Game Master may want to increase the amount of experience given to the Non-Player Character, to better match his role within the world. Older companions and warriors would have much more experience than young children.

Example: Richard is skilled in strategy and tactics, but also possesses skills in beam weaponry, meka piloting, and gambling. He also possesses an array of minor skills as a result of his training.

Personal Background

A brief history of the Non-Player Character can serve the campaign well, particularly if there is a historical point that is of special note. This can also lead to an early relationship with a character in the party, helping establish some other ties to the campaign.

Example: Richard rose in ranks slowly, proving himself time and time again during the course of the war. When the time came to choose the recruits that would join his ship, he took special interests in one of the party members, the daughter of his best friend.

Personal Interest

This, basically, is the same as for Recurring Non-Player Characters, except that it requires more effort, since the motivations of major Non-Player Characters can define the campaign. Villains could want power over an area, others may be searching for love, but the desire must directly influence the shape and the direction of the campaign.

Example: As commander, it could be said that Richard has no choice but to help the party. In truth, Richard envies the party's youth and freedom when they're out in their Meka, and longs for the chance to join with them on a mission. More than that, he promised his best friend that he would watch out for a certain party member, and is honor-bound to turn her into the best pilot that he can.

Tips on using Non-Player Characters

Once a Non-Player Character has been created, a Game Master should play him. A Non-Player Character is another character, with his own motivations, skills, and power. A Non-Player Character could be a close ally to the players, or their most hated villain. While some, minor Non-Player Characters can be played without acting or much thought, the major ones should be given as much detail as one of the player's characters.

Separating Knowledge. When the Game Master is running Non-Player Characters he has to keep in mind that the Non-Player Character does not have the knowledge of the characters that the Game Master has. The Game Master has to limit the Non-Player Character knowledge to what he would realistically have.

Playing Evil. The other danger about running Non-Player Characters is playing them as evil entities bent on galactic destruction or soul-dominance. Other than countless moral arguments, this really doesn't work well in a role-playing game.

Enemies aren't necessarily evil. They simply have a set of goals that conflict with those of the characters. Consider a villain that is a jealous rival for one of the character's affection compares to the conquer-mad dictator. Which sounds more interesting? Truly evil people of any creed are extremely rare, and a Game Master shouldn't need to rely on old standbys anyway.

Letting the Non-Player Character Die. More often than characters, Non-Player Characters are going to die. This may be a result of the campaign, or the characters themselves, but the Non-Player Characters do not have any special and unusual protections keeping them alive more than a character would.

In other words, if an Non-Player Characters dies during the course of a campaign, then he dies, pure and simple. It may be painful to lose a major Non-Player Character that the Game Master put a lot of effort into, but it isn't too difficult to create a new one. As with characters, when an NPC dies, the Game Master can make plenty more to take his place.

Creating Special Abilities

Many campaigns allow players to take on special roles. They take on the roles of ultra-powerful beings with abilities and powers far greater than those of the mundane folk of the world. They may be the martial-artists, ultra-heroes, or wizards of the world, but their abilities help form that they are, as well as their role in the world around them.

Purchasing Schemes

All abilities that are found in this game system has some sort of cost associated with it. The more powerful or difficult the ability, the harder it should be for characters to acquire it.

A few costing schemes are presented here, to give an idea to the Game Master on how to assign experience, or some other, cost to new abilities.

Advantages / Disadvantages Scheme

Some abilities are fairly minor, and could be offset with a common disadvantage. A character probably would not pick these abilities up through learning and experience, he is generally either assigned them or is born with them. The Game Master can use the advantage and disadvantage scheme presented earlier for these special abilities.

Example: Sam is a new character born with ambidexterity. This is considered an advantage which Sam's player offsets by assigning him a severe phobia to magic.

Flat Cost Scheme

The flat cost scheme is the simplest, and is most useful for those abilities that are simple 'on/off' abilities. A character either possesses them, or does not. There is no degree of power or skill involved.

One way to cost these abilities is to assign a flat amount of experience points required to pick them up. The more powerful the ability, the higher it's going to cost. Once it's purchased, however, the character has the ability to its fullest, natural, effect.

Example: A school teaches special maneuvers for physical combat. For a reasonable amount of training, a character can pick up one of these abilities. He pays a flat cost in experience, and walks out a little more powerful with a new special ability.

Ramp Cost Scheme

This scheme is how skills are purchased. Character abilities get much harder as they are improved, but are relatively cheap when bought at low levels. Basically, each ability using this scheme has a base cost, determined by its relative difficulty. The next level of the ability then multiplies that base cost.

Example: Max is learning the Elemental Skill of Fire for a campaign. This skill is treated as any other skill, and is considered an average skill. At first level, this skill costs three experience points, then six, and so on.

Piece Mixing

Some abilities might have many different facets that can be improved upon. In these cases, the Game Master should look upon each piece of the ability as a separate sub-ability, which can be more easily assigned a costing scheme.

Example: An ultra-hero has the power of 'optic-blast'. While designed merely to do damage, the blast can be improved to spread over a larger area, cause more damage, or strike a farther distance away. Each of these facets are assigned their own base costs, and can be improved separately. Combined, however, each increase makes a more powerful weapon.

Statistic Draining

Some abilities will drain from a character's Health and Karma statistics. These abilities are said to 'drain' from the character, limiting how often they may be used.

Example: James is casting a second-level magic spell, which drains two of his running mana. He subtracts two points of mana to power the spell. He'll need a night's rest to recover the spent mana.

Package Deals

Some campaigns may make use of 'package deals', which can include a number of skills and special abilities for new characters. This gives the Game Master a little power in putting some consistency for the party's characters.

Example: In a military campaign, the Game Master offers what he calls a 'Grunt' package. This skill package costs a flat amount of experience, but includes special training abilities and all the needed skills that starting characters would require to graduate from Army Basic Training School.

Mixing Schemes

The last major method to assign cost is to mix together existing schemes into something new. This can be done if a special ability is fairly complex, has a lot of pieces, requires a certain feel, or is particularly powerful.

Example: Richard is learning the Arcane Magic spells. When he finally learns level six, he'll need to spend thirty experience points to gain the spell access. When he uses those powerful spells, he'll also be draining six points of mana for each casting.

Designing the Special Ability

Designing abilities is not terribly different from the rest of the design notes found in this manual. A Game Master gets the idea for the ability, and structures the rules around it to make it work.

Get the Idea

As with any other aspect of design, the most important part of designing a special ability is to get the main idea first. The Game Master needs to decide how the special ability takes shape, how powerful it is, and how the character comes by the ability. Lastly, the Game Master has to determine how the ability fits within the scope of the setting, and her campaign.

Example: On a particular world, many people are born with wild magical talents, able to cast a single spell innately. These 'wild mages' frighten both conventional mages and mundane folk alike and are often persecuted.

Mysterious Origins

The Game Master should determine how each character goes about getting the special abilities. Where they were born with these powers? Are they a part of special training? Are they infused with the power somehow? Choosing how these abilities are acquired is the first main step in making them available for characters.

Example: Wilders get their abilities at birth, though they don't usually manifest until they reach adulthood. Once the ability has developed, a Wilder can improve on his innate ability, but never learn another.

Purchasing Scheme

Once the nature of the ability has been decided, it gets easy to determine how a character can select it. Simple, one-shot advantages can simply be offset with a disadvantage. Abilities that can improve like skills can use the ramp-cost system used by skills. Complex abilities with many facets of improvements might require a package deal.

Example: A Wilder is pretty much stuck with the power that he is born with, but it marks him. The Game Master decides that being a Wilder is an advantage, and handles it as such. Each character becoming a Wilder must take an additional disadvantage to offset their power.

Assigning the Value

Once the ability has been designed, and it has been decided on how it is purchased, the Game Master only needs to decide how expensive the ability is going to cost. This part is a little tricky and requires practice to place the right value on the ability. In general, each level of power, range, and area-of-effect increases the cost of a special ability. A damage bolt that causes five dice of flame, for instance, could cost five mana to use, or require a level five skill, or both.

Example: A particular Wilder advantage gives the holder a power to cause sleep in a victim he touches. The victim must resist a two-dice effect against their Endurance or fall asleep. The Game Master decides that this is a level-two advantage.

Multipliers

Some abilities may modify others, making them more or less powerful. One way to cost this is to make the modifying ability a multiplier of the other. This multiplier simply affects the base cost of the other ability, making it more or less expensive depending on the value of the multiplier.

Example: An ultra-character has a powerful energy blast. Normally, this would cost a great deal of experience points, but a multiplier reduces this amount. The character uses some of his mana each time he fires a blast, weakening him and limiting his firepower. This modifying ability halves the cost of the energy-blast ability.

Unbalanced Abilities

Sometimes, a Game Master will make some mistakes when creating and using special abilities. Generally, the biggest problem with a special ability is that it is unbalanced. This means that the cost in getting the ability has little to do with how difficult or powerful the ability is. Either the ability is too easy to get, too powerful for the experience, or just not worth the effort in getting it in the first place.

Example: In a fantasy setting, a character has taken the ability to reflect magic back on those who cast it at him. While this sounds good, the level of magic in the setting is very rare, and the character spent most of his starting experience on gaining this ability. Meanwhile, other characters far surpass him in usefulness. The Game Master needs to re-evaluate the cost assigned to the ability.

Overpricing

Some abilities can sound really powerful, and turn out to be not terribly worth it. In these cases, the Game Master will want to tweak the price of the ability down a little, if possible. A Game Master should avoid trying to 'correct' existing characters, however, since that usually causes more trouble than its worth. She should just keep the new ruling consistent from that point forward.

Example: Smith has picked up the ultra-power of water breathing. After using it for some time, he notes that it's more expensive, and less powerful

than his ability of ice-weaponry. He shows it to the Game Master, who then lowers the price. Smith can improve the water-breathing power at the new, lower, price, but cannot 'buy back' those points he's already spent.

Under-pricing

Much more common, this refers to any ability that is worth more than its original purchase price. In these cases, all the Game Master can do is jack up the price for future purchases of the ability. Again, she shouldn't try to 'correct' characters who already possess the ability and just make it consistent at the new price from that point forward.

Example: Jones has a powerful disintegration ability that works regardless of defense. After a few combats, it becomes obvious just how terrible a weapon he possesses, and the Game Master jacks up the price. Jones keeps his existing levels, but will have to improve his ability at the new, higher, price.

Ditching the Ability

In some of the worst possible cases, an ability might be too powerful for the campaign. The Game Master is only left with one, painful choice, she has to ditch both the ability and the characters who possess it. Forced retirement of a character is not an enjoyable experience for a player. Sometimes, however, desperate measures are called for. Once the Game Master takes this step, the offending ability is permanently removed from play.

Making Non-Human Races

Fantasy and science fiction games often make use of alien and unique races. Designing them for use in a campaign can seem daunting. Fortunately, it is fairly easy. The Game Master needs to only do a few things to get a new race ready to play.

Get the Idea

The most important part of making a new race is to get an idea of what the race is for. Is it a warrior race covered in scales or soft fur? Is it a logical race with pointed ears? A Game Master should think about both the strength and weaknesses of the race.

Example: We're going to start off with the typical fantasy race, the Orcs. This is a capable and strong warrior race, but not too terribly different than humans.

Physical Differences

Some races will wander heavily away from the human norm. The races could have transparent or gaseous bodies, six legs, or any other number of different physical features. The Game Master needs to make special notes about these differences, and assign advantages and disadvantages if needed.

Example: Orc males have a small set of horns. These males can use these horns as a piercing-style attack, causing their strength, divided by four, in damage.

Appearance

How a race looks is very important. A Game Master should give careful thought as to how she will be describing the race to human players. She should pay particular attention to the size, number of limbs, coloring, and other obvious traits.

Example: Our Orcs are slightly wider and shorter than humans, and walk with a slight hunch. They have dark green skins and dingy fur. Their stone-like faces are dominated with large tusks. Their eyes are narrow and mean.

Society

Most of the information about a non-human race should be covered in the setting's information. Still, a few details about each new race could be brought to light with their racial description. Culture, lifestyles, history, attitudes, and biases are all aspects of a society that should be covered enough to make decent character backgrounds.

Example: The Orcs are a violent, warrior race. They often appear purely bent on conquest and oppression, but they are more geared for the glory of the fight. They are firm believers in the strength of muscle and steel, and their society is shaped around that belief.

Statistic Modification

Many races will vary a bit from humans. Some will be stronger, others will be smarter, still others will be both feeble and dumb. Still, it's a simple matter to modify starting statistics to reflect these differences among the races. Each statistic increase that a race receives should be offset with a statistic decrease. In other words, every plus on onto a statistic should be balanced out with a minus one somewhere else.

Example: Our normal Orc is intended to be a little tougher but slightly less intelligent than a normal human. So, when new Orc characters are created, they gain a plus one bonus to their Strength, but suffer a minus one on their Intelligence statistics.

Racial Advantages

Some races have special abilities that heavily modify game play. Some might have armor skin, some may have innate magical abilities, and others could be prone to energy weapons. These racial traits are merely a subset of advantages and disadvantages.

Giving a race advantages and disadvantages works as for any other character, except that these traits are tied to the race itself, a character of that race is stuck with them. When applying these advantages and disadvantages, a Game Master should be certain that they balance out. If a race gets a bonus, it should have an equal penalty.

Example: Our Orcs are all going to be Resilient in combat. To offset this powerful advantage, the Orcs also have the penalties of Phobia: Magic, and Restless Spirit.

Writing It Up

When the Game Master has decided on everything she wants for the race, she merely needs to write up the details for her players. At this point, the race should be viable and ready to play.