THE ART OF GAME MASTERING

Many people and many different game systems have different opinions as to what makes a successful Game Master. GM's at their core are story tellers, referees, and character actors all rolled into one. When one considers game mastering one must understand that a books and dice RPG is played by a group of players who, under the guidance of a Game Master, go on a quest while portraying persons of a heroic nature in a fantasy reality. The GM has the twofold purpose of presiding over the game system rules (game mechanics) and maintaining the illusion of the game world in which the game takes place. The game master uses descriptive narration and character acting to maintain the fantasy reality while using dice, tables, and charts to govern the physics of the fantasy universe. The purpose of this book is to act as an aid to the game master, through the presentation of techniques, tables, and other resources for use in running a game. The bestiary, contained in this book, is the GM's source for creatures that the players will face in this fantasy universe; as well as being a source for additional player character species and vocations.

The Game Scenario

It is important to remember that there is no scenario that is set in concrete, even if it is intricately scripted with many optional variations. Effective Game Masters know a game that will be enjoyable for both the players and the GM involve using a little imagination and some flexibility. Because each player will perceive the game world according to his or her point of view, game play will never go exactly as the scenario outlines. There is always room for drift in the story and GM's can add their own "spin" on the scenario to fit the flow of the game allowing it to become a free flowing adventure where player ideas and perceptions help shape the adventure.

Players may deviate from the scenario and run off to get drunk or go shopping for new weapons. These diversions can be added to the scenario and are provided for by the presence of towns and cities. This affords the GM the opportunity to be more creative in their interpretation of the game script while allowing the players to experience their own take on the game setting. Returning the players to the scenario objectives can be as simple as involving them in a bar brawl, or having them accused of cheating a merchant, in order to force them out of town and back on the quest. Non-player characters from the current location within the adventure scenario can be utilized by game masters to guide players back on track when needed.

Game Mastering is non-adversarial

Other than playing the part of hostile NPC's or monsters, game masters should never see their role as adversarial as an RPG is not a competition between players and the GM. Rather, it is theatrically presented challenge to the players with both danger and reward presented in the context of a theme or loosely scripted story. While the game master is (usually) the only one to see maps and descriptions, which may include the location of traps, hazards, and rewards this still does not necessarily create an adversarial situation between GM's and players. GM's who play to "kill" player characters often lose players and do not run enjoyable games. In a sense, the game master is analogous to "god of the game world," since they have all the fore knowledge of every bad situation and great reward the players are likely to face it would be far too easy to manipulate them into hazard. There is really no challenge or enjoyment in adversarial game mastering and such is not considered to be in the spirit of the RPG genre. That having been said there are many times when the game master will not reveal the presence of unseen or lurking danger as the flow of the story or player actions do not warrant warning.

Role-playing games are "real world" in terms of the player's actions or lack thereof determining the outcome of any given situation. There are many instances where players may simply forget to use their magic danger sensing ability or not look before they leap. In these cases GM's are never considered adversarial if they don't tell players about things they could not have seen or known about. This may, at times, cause disputes and this is when your knowledge of game mechanics or rules processes comes into its own. If players run afoul of some hazard or lose a battle or fall into a trap they may often ask if there is a die they can roll or a chart they can look on to see if they can escape or win. In most cases the appearance of danger or challenging situations automatically invokes some die roll. However, it is up to the GM to decide what rolls and when and who makes them for any given situation as stipulated in the Main Rule Book. The sometimes tricky part comes about due to the "free form" nature of RPG's that creates situations that are in gray areas of the rules and do not directly invoke a specific die roll or rule driven decision. Game masters in this situation must decide which die rolls apply and sometimes either make up a die roll or a judgment call in the spirit of the rules system being used. By possessing a good working knowledge of the rules, the game world, and the general idea behind how the whole thing is supposed to work GM's can make these judgment calls on the fly quite easily and fairly.

Game Masters need some restraint

It happens that GM's will sometimes allow themselves too much freedom in creating game situations, monsters, or items "on the fly." While this is sometimes necessary to help stuck players or nudge the story along it can also lead to unrealistic or irritating game play from a player's perspective. In some instances, GM's may become a bit adversarial or feel that players are getting to strong to quick and invent some peril or penalty that was not original in the scenario. It is important for game masters to adhere to the prepared scenario as much as possible even if they wrote it themselves. Nothing frustrates players more than a GM who pulls monsters or impediments to progress "out of their hat," as these new challenges are obvious to everyone as being there simply to trip them up or slow them down. Sometimes players will have a good run of die rolls, or anticipate the storyline and sail through the quest circumventing hazard and gaining great reward very quickly. This happens and game masters should guard against the urge to throw dragons at people just to humble them. This is one of those situations when GM's have to be subtle and offer the players a side quest or "shiny bobble," in an attempt to get them to face situations that are more challenging. This won't always work as some players may play the system against you (Rules Lawyer) and seek the quick road. This can be particularly frustrating to game masters and if this happens experienced GM's will let the game progress for the sake of the other players and just not invite that guy back to play again.

The bottom line for good GM's is that you are the creator of the illusion and through die rolls and rules interpretation, administrator of the natural laws of the game world. It is your adventure and you run it with the hope of giving players an immersive fantasy adventure that gives their characters ample opportunity for personal gain and glory while providing sufficient peril and challenge to make it exciting to play. Keep your game world consistent and don't be adversarial and you will run a good campaign and build a following of good, motivated players.

What is an "NPC?"

NPC stands for Non-Player Character and basically refers to any creature, person, intelligent monster or supernatural entity that the players may encounter. NPC's are usually thought of as persons or creatures within an adventure text that have a background story or at least a profession or position that makes them integral to the plot or immediate situation. Generally "dumb" monsters that just simply try to eat the player characters are not NPC's because they do not require the GM to play a part. Rather monsters are considered hazards and their actions are generally determined by simple die rolls. Non-player characters can be hostile, helpful, or indifferent but will always interact with the player party on a much deeper level then simple monsters or animals. They can be shop keepers, bartenders, soldiers, kings and queens, ruffians, villains, protectors, guides, or companions. Literally any intelligent thinking being in any situation or profession not controlled by the players can be thought of as an NPC.

In nearly every case, the NPC will have a list of vital stats just like a player character in addition to a short list of equipment, weapons, armor and the like. They will have a reason for being present at a given point in the adventure and will offer the players some meaningful plot element, challenge or item(s) related to their quest or current situation. As the Game Master, you will play the parts of these different NPC's based on the given description and listed assets. This is where the "role play" aspect of RPG comes into prominence for the GM. It is not particularly difficult to play act these characters as they are usually written for specific situations or professions which inherently limits their role in the story. All the Game Master usually has to do to become the NPC is know its abilities and purpose while placing themselves in its situation.

Henchmen, mercenaries, guards, guides, etc refers to NPC's that players may hire to accompany the player party within the adventure. GM's can either allow players total control over these characters allowing them to make all die rolls and determine all actions, or the GM can maintain full or partial control over the henchman character. GM's should keep in mind that hired guns are not as likely to stick their neck out or show party loyalty. It is likely that such NPC's may flee at the first sign of extreme danger. However, if the NPC is written into the story as being on a similar quest or a highly motivated character they may be much more loyal sometimes accompanying the party free of charge, and even standing and fighting to the death for the sake of the quest. Likewise if a player rescues an appropriate NPC they may join the party and show much greater loyalty. Such NPC's may be given, by the GM, to a particular player as a permanent henchman or companion that will accompany the player character on future adventures. In all cases the GM will determine the henchman or companion's attitudes toward player characters and the limits they will go to before abandoning the players to their fate.

Being the NPC

Playing the part of any NPC is to put yourself in their shoes by understanding their personality, profession, and ultimate goals within the adventure. You, as the GM, have an advantage here since you are running the game you often determine the personality and goals of NPC's based on situation and scenario texts. All you have to do is allow yourself to become immersed in the fantasy and you will realize that play acting is something you already learned to do when you were a young child. As you become a more experienced GM you will learn to create your own NPC's and insert them into adventures ultimately constructing your own adventures.

Four Questions to understanding an NPC

When it comes to NPC's that you are unsure how to play simply answer these four questions and it will become easy to become the character.

1. What am I? Man, woman, mythical humanoid, beast that talks, etc.

2. Who am I? Soldier, shop keeper, bar maid, autocrat, villain, mercenary, companion, villager etc.

3. Why am I here? What brought me to this place and time within the context of this adventure?

4. What do I want? Am I here to help, hinder, or hurt the players?

The Innkeeper non-player character
A common NPC example

The innkeeper as an NPC is a common occurrence in many scenarios, usually encountered in the local inn (small hotel with a pub and kitchen attached) or sometimes elsewhere in a town or village. The inn keeper's purpose is to welcome players to the inn, offer it as a safe haven, and generally be a friendly, or at least a neutral, persona with information available. Since the idea of role play games is to create an immersive reality food, shelter, and sleep are necessary for player characters. Inn keepers can have any personality the GM thinks suits the moment or applies to the player's condition within the context of the adventure. They often manifest as bar tenders within the pub portions of inns offering food and drink to guests and, as a rule, are cordial or even flamboyantly jolly in an effort to relieve players of some of their coin. This NPC will possess vast local knowledge of who's who and what is where in the town and surrounding area. They are always up on the local gossip and be generally full of stories that the GM can use to offer the players anything from help in getting on the right track to side quests. The innkeeper is a simple character for most GM's to master as so many examples exist in our day to day lives and in hundreds of movies, books, and TV shows.