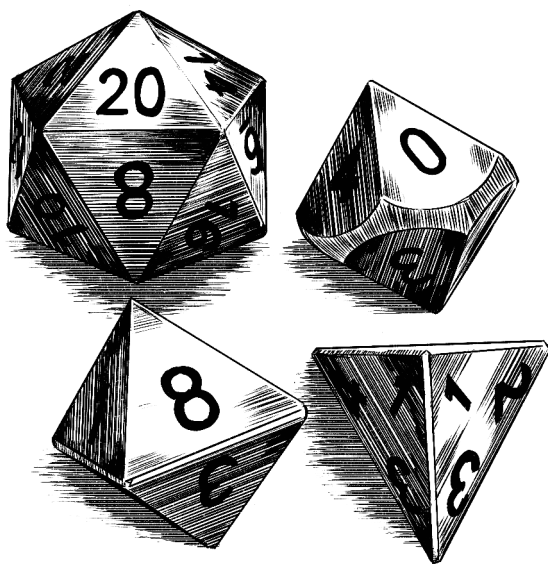# The No-Prep Gamemaster

Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Random Tables

Matt Davids

The No-Prep Gamemaster

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ARCANA

THREE KEYS

ARROWS IN THE QUIVER

Glossary

RPG - Abbreviation for Role-Playing Game

TTRPG - Abbreviation for Tabletop Role-Playing Game

Gamemaster - The person who runs a role-playing game session or campaign.

Player - Any person playing an RPG that is not the gamemaster.

GM - *Noun:* Abbreviation for Gamemaster, *Verb:* The act of running an RPG.

Character - A fictitious individual created for an RPG.

NPC - Abbreviation for Non-Player Character.

Non-Player Character - Any character controlled by the GM.

Player Character - Any character controlled by a player.

Session - A block of time spent playing an RPG in one sitting, usually two to four hours.

Adventure - One session with a complete beginning, middle, and end.

Campaign - A series of linked sessions played by the GM and players.

Railroad - The act of a GM taking away player agency.

OGL - Abbreviation for Open Game License

Introduction

My intention with this small volume is to relieve the massive amount of pressure that is often placed upon gamemasters. It began as articles that I posted on my website dicegeeks.com.

I gathered them here and expanded and added to the content, so the information and advice I share would be convenient for any who wish to improve their role-playing.

The book is organized into three sections: Arcana, Three Keys, and Arrows in the Quiver.

The Arcana section deals with my history and struggles with learning how to gamemaster and why I decided to stop preparing for sessions. If you are looking only for practical tips, this section can be skipped.

The Three Keys section is the heart of the No-Prep Gamemaster. These short chapters provide the framework on which anyone can begin to gamemaster without preparation.

Arrows in the Quiver is a selection of tips and tricks that a GM can use at any time to cut down preparation time.

I hope that whoever reads this book will be inspired and empowered to run better campaigns. The advice contained here coupled with the experience of running games should make every gamemaster a No-Prep Gamemaster.

Matt Davids
8-5-2019

ARCANA

Gamemaster Evolution

The first time I was a gamemaster during a tabletop roleplaying game session was the day after I played *Dungeons & Dragons* for the first time. I ran my mom through a simple dungeon.

Rules? I didn't really know the rules other than what I had just learned (and distorted) the night before. I was nine years old. (I still have my childhood characters.)

Needless to say, role-playing games stirred something within me and I took to them as if they had always been a part of me.

TABLETOP RPGS I'VE PLAYED

From the beginning I began branching out and before long I had played many different RPGs.

I continue to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, but I have played *Pathfinder*, *Marvel Superheroes*, *Star Frontiers*, FASA *Star Trek*, West End Games' *Star Wars*, Fantasy Flight's *Star Wars*, *Stars Without Number*, most of the Palladium games and more.

BECOMING A GAMEMASTER

When I was young I quickly found that if I wanted my friends to role-play, I needed to be the gamemaster.

I desired to play more than they did; I had the books, so I was elected the gamemaster. Also, if someone has never heard of an RPG it is hard to expect them to be the gamemaster.

I think my initial naivety helped me in one way and hurt me in another.

Jumping into running a game right after I played for the first time taught me that GMing doesn't have to be a big deal. I thought anyone could be a GM. At the same time, it hurt me because of that same assumption that GMing wasn't a big deal and that anyone could run a game.

I would run a game for a few of my friends. They would love it and ask when we were playing next. I would ask if anyone else wanted to run a game. They would say they didn't know how and I would say that I didn't either. They could try it and learn how.

Then I would run the next game.

THE BITTERNESS OF A GM'S SOUL

My first forays into GMing were certainly disastrous. However, I wouldn't change them for anything because they were creative learning experiences.

In that sense, they were not failures.

ALL ABOARD!

When I first started gamemastering, I had the tendency to a railroad my players quite extensively. I would come up with dungeons or some situation in a sci-fi setting with only one exact outcome.

I would wait - sometimes for hours - for my players to discover it. If they didn't, then I would intervene in some way to save them, usually through a GMPC that I would rather have been playing.

I have a clear memory of planning out a dungeon and thinking, "Okay, at this fork in the passage my players will go right first," so I planned for something to happen specifically if they went right first and then left.

However, as soon as my players came in contact with that dungeon they went left first and I nearly lost my mind. After some disasters railroading my players, I decided I would only run sandbox campaigns.

YOU CAN DO ANYTHING!

With these sandbox campaigns, I attempted to create everything in the entire world. Continents, planets, towns, cities, rivers, oceans, villages, everything the players could interact with and have a wonderful experience.

These sessions proved to be very popular. However, they were draining on me. Not only was I creating many things that no one would ever see or touch, players can only do so much after all.

But I was also working myself so hard that if a session was canceled or if nobody showed up I would become angry and bitter. Honestly, I didn't know what I was supposed to do and I thought the gamemaster was supposed to have amazingly huge campaigns and great adventures waiting for the players.

Truth be told, at this time in my life I had only played 10 or so times without being the GM. I really didn't know what I was doing.

SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE

As I got older and there were more demands on my time, I realized that there was no way that I could keep preparing gigantic campaigns. Preparing tons of this material just to have no one show up or to have every session canceled is soul-crushing.

Something had to change, so I started evaluating what it means to be a gamemaster.

True Role of the GM

It is a dirty little secret among the role-playing game community that there are very few people who actually want to be a gamemaster, or at least who want to be a GM exclusively.

I think that is because the role of the gamemaster is often misunderstood. Let's take a look at what the role of the gamemaster is and how we can learn to master this craft. And of course run fun games for our friends and family.

WHY IS RUNNING A TABLETOP RPG A BIG DEAL?

The gamemaster is usually made out to be such a huge deal.

Tons of pressure is put on that person to create an entire world from the cow in the field, to the random hunters on a hillside, to the raven flying on the wing, to the pretty barmaid, to the elf prince, to the surly innkeeper.

Now, some GMs like this because it gives them a mystique. They get to be the cool kid for once. Only so-and-so can run the game he's so special.

I'm not making fun of anyone. I totally did this. I milked the power the gamemaster for all it's worth a number of times.

Players on the other hand hide behind that idea of mystique. It takes so much creativity and hard work, they could never GM. Only those special people who can channel the spirit of Tolkien or Heinlein can run a game.

However, as we're going to see you do not have to put that much pressure on yourself. A person should be able

to pick up a gamebook and run a session on a moment's notice. Just like a player could play a role-playing game on a moment's notice if they have a character.

There's no reason to make GMing into a massively huge production. It is unnecessary. If you keep things simple you can still run amazing RPG sessions.

THE GAMEMASTER IS JUST ANOTHER PLAYER

Ah, the old lie...

Now, for all of my insistence that you can GM on a moment's notice, the gamemaster is not just another player in the game. Don't get me wrong, they should be. But in reality, they are not.

This is proved to me every time I hear someone say, "I want to play more before I GM." Oh, isn't that sweet? If I would have waited to "play more" before I ran a session I have a feeling I would have only been able to play a few times in my entire life.

Some of us never get a chance to "play" our favorite games, we are always the GM. I have played some games for years as only the GM and never as a player.

Do you want to play more? Well, GMing is playing, so why don't you do that? It's because the GM is not a player, they are something else. I know a number of people who would play a role-playing game any day of the week, but they would never GM. Why?

No one treats GMing like they are just another player at the table. Here are several reasons people may not want to GM:

Players are afraid to be the gamemaster because it looks like a huge investment.

GM's make it a huge production by taking hours to prepare.

Players are afraid of making mistakes or doing a poor job.

Players are afraid of conflict that may arise while being a referee.

These reasons are simply excuses and can be dealt with. We all have to start somewhere, so why not give it a try?

RELAX

The first step is to relax and don't put a ton of pressure on yourself. Yes, you do have to answer a lot of questions and you do have to make a lot of decisions when you are the gamemaster.

However, you do not need to get overwhelmed. Take a deep breath and know you're here to have fun. I mean, we're playing a game after all.

REFEREE

The main focus of a gamemaster should be as a referee between the players, the game system rules, and the NPCs as well as monsters.

If you are hanging out with a bunch of friends and someone says, "Hey, let's play D&D," no one should be afraid of GMing; no session prep is necessary.

STYLE

Everyone plays differently. It is important to know that everyone gamemasters differently. Every RPG group plays a tabletop role-playing game in a slightly different

manner than another group.

This is perfectly fine and acceptable. So you may find some of my advice doesn't fit your style, that's cool. You may find some of my advice very helpful, that's cool.

It all depends on your style and how you run games and what your group likes.

WHAT GAMEMASTERS ARE NOT

It is important to understand what gamemasters are not and as well as what they are.

Gamemasters are not tyrants

GMs do not get to lord their authority as a referee over the players. There should be no crazed "my way or the highway" moments during sessions.

There should be no "well, that's not the story I want to tell" moments either.

As stated, the gamemaster is the referee and arbiter of the rules as well as the player who controls all of the NPC characters and monsters during the game.

Gamemasters are not the players' servant

The flip side of the tyrant GM is the GM who allows players to run over them.

As a GM if you make a decision on the rules of the game players should be allowed to appeal, but you are the referee. There comes a point when discussion ends and your call stands.

Gamemasters are not supposed to be miserable

Gamemasters are not the long-suffering souls who begrudging run a game so their friends can have tons of fun while they read rulebooks, spend lots of money, and take abuse from players with large (toxic) personalities.

GMs should be having as much fun as the players. If you are not enjoying a game, let your players know.

Gamemasters are not mythic figures that bestride the game table like a colossus

Frankly, there is nothing special about being a gamemaster. Anyone can be a gamemaster and everyone who enjoys playing role-playing games should try their hand at it.

Gamemasters are not rules experts

Gamemasters do not need to memorize every rule. Knowing the rules is helpful, but it is not necessary.

GM Confession: I've run games without having read the rules. It's a little crazy, but it's completely doable.

Gamemasters are not permanent GMs

There is only one reason why a person should be a GM only and that is by their free choice. Even if people prefer GMing to playing, they should be able to take breaks and play occasionally as they desire.

For many years, I was the "forever GM" and while I enjoy GMing, it can get old. It can also be frustrating.

Case in point, I was 11 years old when I got FASA's *Star Trek* RPG. Now, I love *Star Trek*, both *The Original Series* and *The Next Generation*. I love running *Star Trek* games.

However, I always wanted to be the captain of the *Enterprise* (who doesn't?).

As I said I got the game when I was 11 and besides one or two abbreviated sessions, the first time I got to play without being the GM was when I was 36 years old. Now, I had a number of friends who loved playing *Star Trek*, but they would never GM.

Gamemasters are not the sole worldbuilder

It is often true the GM plants the seed for a campaign or session. However, it is not necessary for the GM to create everything.

Players are a valuable resource when a GM needs to take some work off of their plate.

GOING NO PREP

After evaluating my failures as a gamemaster as well as trying to understand the true role of a gamemaster I came to the conclusion that I would no longer prep for each session.

I looked back at all the times I ran games and asked myself, when did I run the best session? When did my players have the best time? When did I have the most fun?

While asking myself these questions I kept coming up with one thing in common. It wasn't the system. It wasn't certain players or my mood (though those can be difference makers).

Every session that I did my best GMing and everyone, including myself, had the most fun were the sessions I didn't prepare.

I made a conscious decision to go completely no prep or with as little preparation as possible for whatever I was attempting to do. This can be scary at first.

However, I don't think the original intent of tabletop role-playing games was to have the gamemaster spend 20 to 40 hours preparing for a session that lasts 2 to 4 hours.

It just doesn't make any sense and is truly impractical once a person has a family, a job, and other responsibilities.

D&D, PATHFINDER, AND ETC.

To be clear I'm talking about no prep GMing for games like *D&D* and *Pathfinder*.

I can't tell you how many times I've seen a post on Reddit say something like this, "Hey guys, I've been running *D&D*, but the GM prep is killing me. What system can I run that doesn't require GM prep?"

When I respond that *D&D* can be run with no prep, I am treated to a legion of downvotes and I'm left reading comments saying *D&D* and Pathfinder are terrible.

There is no reason why these specific RPG rule systems need more session prep than other systems like *Dungeon World* or *Fate Core*.

The No-Prep Approach

No-prep GMing comes down to the mindset of how you approach the game.

If you approach the role-playing games as the game master who has to know everything and control everything, you just put a ton of pressure on yourself.

However, if you can get into the mindset that you are here to have fun and that your job is to offer options and arbitrate rules, hen you can see how not preparing will actually help you during the session.

I'M ALWAYS PREPARING TO GM

In some sense, I'm always preparing for an RPG session or campaign of some kind.

I'm constantly thinking of ideas. When I'm in the shower. When I'm driving to work. When I'm eating my sandwich during lunch break.

I'm constantly thinking of cool scenarios that I could run and awesome settings that I want my players to encounter.

If your mind works like that, you should never have a problem being able to sit down and start an RPG session.

If your mind doesn't work like that, it can be trained to. I'll go into more detail on how to train your brain to be an idea machine later.

IDEAS CAN BE A TRAP

Having a premise of an adventure or campaign before you talk to your players or before you start to run a

session can be helpful. However, it can also create a trap.

There should never be any thought that the story has to progress in a certain way or the game's a failure.

If you are thinking of things like a spooky cottage in the woods, a castle that appears to be abandoned but actually shelters a coven of evil clerics, or a bounty on the head of a bandit leader, then you're safe.

If you have a bit of material to work with, you can then allow the story to unfold based on the player's actions and choices.

Great set pieces or locations are helpful as well.

A sheer glacier cliff, or a space station casino, or a crime lord's river barge are springboards for your players so the story and adventures can emerge organically.

If you are thinking of plot points or certain things that must happen during a session to trigger something else, you're walking on unstable ground.

THREE
KEYS
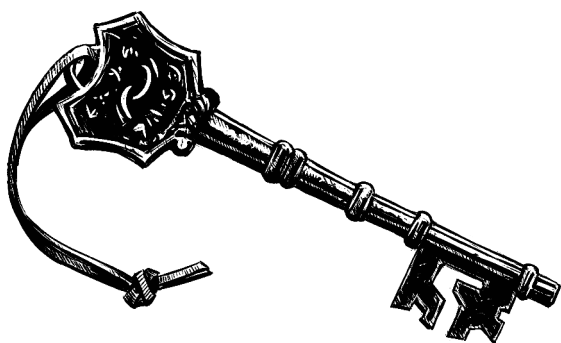
Fill Yourself with Stories

Okay, this is the woo-woo section where I tell you to be a better person. Just hang with me for a bit.

It is critical for any gamemaster or dungeon master to understand story structure. To understand how stories work and how they are told. But I don't want to go overboard.

I don't want to put more work on a GM because my theory of no-prep GMing is all about taking work off of the gamemaster, not adding more. However, the more stories that you are familiar with the easier it becomes for you to tell a story.

If you are a gamemaster and you find yourself drawn to tabletop role-playing games you most likely love stories, so this should not be a problem.

What I'm saying to do is:

Read as many books and stories as you can
Watch as many TV shows and movies as you can

There are some very important benefits that come from reading stories and watching TV shows and movies. This should be a fun assignment.

THE BEST STORYTELLERS READ EVERYTHING

Gamemasters are, at the bottom, storytellers.

One does not simply just become a good storyteller. Learning how to tell stories takes practice and effort. Fortunately, learning requires consuming and experiencing stories.

The best storytellers are the ones who have consumed myriads of stories. You'll notice that famous novelists, screenwriters, and movie directors have read tremendous amounts of stories and have screened an enormous amount of films.

As they are reading or listening or watching they are learning story structure, allowing them to better create their own original stories.

Stories are the materials that they work with so they need to have as many of those materials at their disposal as possible. And the only way to do that is to experience them through reading or watching.

Great writers are great readers. And great storytellers have heard countless stories. So there is nothing new with this technique, in fact, it is millennia-old.

Some modern examples of great storytellers reading everything would be Ken Hite and Robin D. Laws. They are professional role-playing game designers behind *Trail of Cthulhu* and *Hillfolk* among many others.

If you listen to their podcast, *Ken and Robin Talk about Stuff*, you will see how much they read and how many films they watch.

In the screenwriting world, Ted Elliott and Terry Russo of *Aladdin* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* fame also consume tons of stories.

On their website, Wordplayer Russo mentions reading all of Robert Heinlein's, Theodore Sturgeon's, and Alan Moore's published works just for starters.

In the realm of novels, Michael Crichton was famous for being incredibly well-read and quoting rare books during interviews.

The novelist and essayist C.S. Lewis read every extant English work from the 16th century. Yes, seriously he did.

Film directors Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese will screen every film from a director or time period they are studying.

Without this catalog of stories in their memories, storytellers are limited to what they have experienced. If the last book you read was in high school or the last movie you watched was *Weekend at Bernie's*, then you are going to have trouble running a good RPG session.

As GM's we do not need to (or cannot) read or watch as much as the creators mentioned above, my point is that in order to tell good stories you need to have experienced many of them.

A CATALOG OF SITUATIONS FOR YOUR RPG SESSIONS

If you fill yourself with stories, you will have a catalog of ideas and situations you can pull from at a moment's notice. If you read a lot of books. If you watch a lot of movies. If you watch a lot of TV shows. If you listen to radio dramas or audiobooks.

You gain a kind of a catalog of situations and story points in your mind and in your imagination from which you can pull from and flow right into running an RPG. For example, I remember watching a movie about a group of adventurers protecting a dragon egg.

Now I have the situation of protecting a dragon egg in my memory and I can take that situation and throw it into one of my games. If I had never watched that movie, I may have never thought about protecting a

dragon egg as an adventure hook.

I read a book where there was a secret tunnel at the bottom of the lake. I now have that situation and I can use that in one of my campaigns.

I've read a number of books where an advancing army landed their ships on the shore. They left their ships lightly guarded and went exploring. An enemy was able to sneak up behind, dispatch the few guards and burn the ships. Now that I have this situation, I can present the players with it may be right at the beginning of a session or a campaign.

I could simply say your enemy's ships are now beached and they are lightly guarded. The main force is heading to your city and you're leading a scouting team. The ships are right in front of you, what do you do? I've just created a session and more likely I just created a campaign.

The more stories you experience the more you will have inside of your imagination that you can then pull up on a moment's notice and be ready to go.

If your players or the world that you've created present an opportunity you will have it right there at your fingertips. However, you need to be consuming stories, in whatever form you can, to have enough situations.

STORY STRUCTURE IS HELPFUL FOR GM'S

Consuming stories also teaches you about story structure. The structure makes a story more satisfying.

Story structure basics:

Beginning – *Stories usually begin with some status quo*

Inciting incident – *This breaks the status quo*

Rising action – *The number of events increases as does the tension*

Complications – *The heroes face more and new problems*

Raise the stakes – *Consequences of action or inaction increase: The heroes are in jeopardy of losing their pay, now they are in jeopardy of losing their lives, now the nearby town is in jeopardy of being destroyed, now the world is in danger*

Climax – *The main problem of the story is resolved: The heroes defeat the villain*

Resolution – *The action decreases and a new status quo emerges*

The more stories you read the more you learn about how to begin a story and how to inject complications into it.

You learn how you can make things look very bleak for your players and how you can pull the action to a climax. Then how you can let the tension go down into a resolution or denouement.

This is important because it can add a layer to your gamemastering without much prep work. Just from having read many stories you will know how to tell one more effectively.

If you've been playing a session for a while you know almost automatically when you need to inject a few complications.

Or after a huge battle climactic boss fight of some kind, you will know to allow the players a resolution phase so they can talk about what they accomplished and regroup.

This structure creates an emotionally satisfying experience. It's an extra layer on top of exploring a dungeon or trying to steal the keys from the jailer so you can rescue the dog that has the secret message hidden in its collar.

BRANCH OUT AND EXPLORE STORIES

In your reading and your watching you need to build a breadth of different stories. Watching the Marvel movies is fine, but also expand yourself a little bit and watch the films of Akira Kurosawa.

Reading new fantasy authors is very helpful, so reading Patrick Rothfuss is a fantastic way to prepare to run a gaming session. However, reading the so-called "boy books" of Robert Heinlein or the Conan stories of Robert E. Howard is also fantastic preparation. Delving into the renowned "Appendix N" of *D&D* is also excellent preparation.

Expanding the sources from where to get your stories is eye-opening and gives you more tools in your storytelling toolbox.

LISTEN TO BOOKS

I know what you are thinking, how can I do all of this? I thought this was a post about not preparing for games!

I do not want to give you more work. You already have a ton on your plate. Everyone has family obligations, work obligations, school obligations and even more than that. However, there are ways to overcome the problem of consuming more stories.

First, I'll assume watching movies and TV shows aren't too much of a problem. Everybody loves movies.

Everybody loves TV shows. You're probably doing okay in that area with Netflix and Amazon Prime not to mention YouTube or Hulu.

The problem can be reading more books.

Now there are people who read voraciously and can consume a 200,000 word novel in a matter of days. That is amazing and I am not one of those people. Many of us read slowly. There are other ways we can still make sure that we read books.

In this day and age, you can listen to books. There is almost no excuse for not being able to find audiobooks and the time to listen to them.

Even if you cannot afford or do not want some type of audiobook service, all you have to do is go to YouTube. Type in whatever kind of audiobook you want: sci-fi, fantasy, or whatever genre you would like. You can probably find some very interesting and very good audiobooks

There is also a website called LibriVox and it has free recordings that are in the public domain. The readers can be hit-or-miss since most are not professional voice talent but you can find some great works there.

Also, there are some wonderful storytelling podcasts done by professional actors. Podcasts about myths and legends can be helpful as well since you will be learning some of the oldest stories in the world.

A few mythology podcasts:

Myths and Legends
Our Fake History
Mythology
Mythunderstood

Online reading apps like TTSReader and Natural Readers, while they sound like a computer, can be used for audio reading: put any text into them and they will read it. Some are better than others but that is always an option.

I listened to *Stars Without Number* just by using the "Read Aloud" function in a normal PDF reader.

Of course, do not forget your local library.

In many cases you can check out nearly any audiobook you can imagine from the library. If you happen to live in an area with a good library, take advantage of it. There really is no excuse not to try at least listening to books.

Again this is always with the aim of consuming these stories so that you are more familiar with how to tell a story yourself. Each book you read gives you more options as a storyteller and will help you be prepared to run an RPG on the fly.

THE CLASSICS ARE FREE

If you are budget conscious and you're worried about the expense of buying books or buying an audiobook service or paying for Netflix or paying for Amazon Prime there are other options.

The main one is that classic literature is completely free because the copyright has run out and they are now in the public domain.

When searching YouTube or looking on LibriVox there are some amazing classic works of fiction and nonfiction that are available for free that you can listen to.

Think about this. If you're running the Eberron setting in

Dungeons & Dragons, you could look for novels that go along with the science fiction steampunk flavor of that world.

You could listen to several Jules Verne novels and they will help you think of situations, complications, and scenarios that would go quite well with the Eberron setting. Recordings of Vern's novels are readily available and in the public domain so they can be listened to legally for free. You listen to a couple of classic Jules Verne novels and then you run your RPG campaign.

If your gaming group falls apart or the campaign can never get off the ground for some reason, the only thing you've done is listen to a few novels that are considered classic world literature.

There is no downside.

REDEEM THE TIME

Who has time for this! I hear you shout. Well, there are always ways we can redeem the time.

Do you have a commute to work or school? If so, stop listening to morning radio, and listen to audiobooks.

Do you have a job where you can listen to music? If so, stop listening to music and listen to an audiobook.

Do you have to spend time cutting the lawn? If so, listen to an audiobook.

Truth be told we have the time, we just need to put some thought into how to better use it.

BONUS: IT MAKES YOU A BETTER RPG PLAYER

Having this catalog of stories in your imagination helps you to be a better gamemaster, but it also helps you to be a better role-player.

It allows you to anticipate situations that the Gamemaster is presenting to you and gives you more options on how to deal with those problems because you've seen them in stories before.

Your character has been thrown into a cell by the town guard. You can ask yourself, how would Captain Kirk escape?

The dungeon floor just fell away revealing a pit. How would Indiana Jones get across?

You just gained control of a powerful but dangerous magic item. What would Master Samwise do?

Don't Set Dungeons in Stone

Aren't all dungeons made of stone? I guess there could be a wooden dungeon, but that's not what I mean.

Let's think about it this way. How many times have gamemasters and roleplayers seen or prepared a dungeon map, a town map, or a forest map that has numbers on it with corresponding descriptions?

A million, right? And they are very helpful. Everything is right in front of you and easy to spot.

NUMBERED DUNGEON MAPS

I know I've prepared for a lot of sessions doing exactly that. I would place the Mummy Lord in room 16 and then put the Umber Hulk in room 21. The treasure chest goes in room 4 and the goblin lair in room 18.

And of course, most published adventures or TTRPG modules come with maps like that as well.

Now, this is a great organization tool and it makes reading and running the dungeon easier. The GM knows exactly what to do at each room or location.

PROBLEMS WITH NUMBERING DUNGEON MAPS

However, there is a serious drawback to numbering the location on your dungeon map. What if your players don't go into room number 14? Or 2, 12, 8, or 5?

What if they follow a certain path through the dungeon and they miss several rooms? What if they get distracted by a cool magic item they found and decide to leave the dungeon?

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If the gamemaster is running a published adventure, it may be no big deal. The players will miss something, but they are probably having fun anyway and all the gamemaster did was read a cool adventure.

But, if you as the gamemaster spent hours in prep time creating 20 or 30 locations and set them with numbers in the dungeon, there is a big problem. Your players may skip those rooms and your prep time was wasted.

What if you spent two hours creating a super fun encounter at an underground waterfall with an ogre in room 13 of your dungeon? Well, if your players do not enter room 13, that encounter does not happen.

What if that was your centerpiece encounter? What if you thought about that encounter for weeks? What if that encounter contained information driving the story forward or revealed character backstory?

But it doesn't happen, because your players decided to turn left instead of right. Or they didn't find the tunnel that leads to room 13.

Now, this is where GM bitterness becomes a very real thing. But, I don't want GMs to be bitter. Trust me, I've been there and it is not pretty.

DON'T MARRY LOCATION AND ENCOUNTER

What's the solution? The solution is to not set the encounters and rooms into stone. Have your encounters and other ideas, but don't marry them to a specific room with numbers.

This method creates built-in flexibility and it ensures the gamemaster will get to the important stuff.

Do your players skip room 13? No worries. Just take the

ogre and the waterfall and put them in room 7 as your players enter it. Then you're all set to have the encounter you wanted.

CONTROL THE FLOW OF THE RPG SESSION

Using this method, the GM has more control over the flow of the session.

Need a climax? No problem, just put the climactic encounter in the next room the characters enter. Need a chest with the secret map hidden in it? Cool, put it in the next room your players enter.

Staying flexible in this manner opens up the gamemaster's options in a variety of ways as you can see.

In fact, it gives the gamemaster and the players the potential for better and better sessions. The GM gets to run their favorite encounters and the players get to play through all the cool stuff.

IS THE GAMEMASTER CHEATING?

I have heard some players say that this is cheating by the gamemaster. I mean, the gamemaster is just changing the map and the dungeon to suit their whim, right? Players can't do that.

Well, my response to any player that thinks this is cheating is for them to begin GMing. Then they can run a role-playing game any way they like.

TRY IT IN YOUR NEXT SESSION

Being the gamemaster is difficult and any tool that helps the GM and the players have fun should be used.

The next time you are getting ready to run a session, just think of a couple of key encounters and place them where you need during the session. If your players enter a room and it is not the time for your big encounter, just fill the room using random tables.

If you are running a published adventure or module, just move the preset encounters to different locations as you see fit to help the game.

Random Tables

The best tool for the no-prep gamemaster is the random table.

A random table is simply a list of items, objects, people, places, situations, or complications that are given a number so that dice may be rolled to chose one at random. The random table is the gamemaster's most faithful best friend.

RANDOM TABLES ELIMINATE THE NEED FOR SESSION PREP

We've all heard the horror stories about gamemasters who spent 20, 30, 40 hours a week preparing for a session only to have their players cancel. This is disheartening , to say the least, and I can tell you I've been there many times. It is my mission to stop this from ever happening again.

Random tables eliminate the need for role-playing session preparation. There, I said it. I know there are gamemasters who will argue with me about that statement, but that's okay.

It doesn't change the fact that random tables can answer every question a player can ask, provide a setting and locations and even give adventure ideas on the fly.

LET THE DICE TELL THE STORY

Using a random table allows the dice to tell the story. Some will cry foul. However, the dice always drive the story in other cases.

For example, if the barbarian swings his two-handed

sword and the roll says he missed, that affects the story in some way.

If the diplomatic character rolls really well and convinces the queen to allow the players to dig up the sacred tree in the middle of her garden. Well, then the story has been affected by a dice roll.

Why shouldn't we then allow the dice to tell the story and other cases as well? For example, at the beginning of the session why not just roll on a random jobs or rumors table?

Give your player's options to choose one of those or a couple of those to investigate. The dice just told the story just like they would at any other time.

All gamemasters cry out in one voice, "But I don't know what to do! I don't know what 'guard a caravan' means! I don't have anything planned!" Well, that's part of the fun.

Rolling on the random table for the adventure allows you to think on your feet. It also allows you not to know what is going to happen so you can be surprised and get caught up in the story along with your players.

DON'T WASTE TIME FILLING DUNGEON ROOMS

One of the worst things a GM can do is to fill every single room within a dungeon or a building with some cool and interesting objects or encounters. This may seem counterintuitive.

Of course, you want cool and interesting things for your players to encounter as they search the dungeon or explore a large office building.

However, if you create something to go into every room

of a dungeon and your players don't explore them, or they decide they don't even want to enter the dungeon at all, then your time was wasted.

But there is a solution. Simply use a random table during the session to fill the rooms with interesting encounters or objects. This is the concept behind my book *Dungeons for the Master*.

The key here is during the session. If players enter the room, roll on the table or better yet have your players roll.

Then the situations and complications, as well as the objects in the room, come to life right then and there when needed instead of being mapped out ahead of time.

Never leave tons of cool stuff unexplored and never waste your time. I love random tables. I love them so much I have created a series of books, called *The Books of Random Tables*.

They are my best friend when running a session. In fact, I would rather have a book of random tables while GMing than a rulebook for the system.

PLAYERS WANT TO SEARCH EVERYTHING

Using random tables also comes in handy because players want to search everything. If you've been playing tabletop role-playing games for any length of time you know this is true. The gamemaster can describe the room as completely empty, but the players want to search it anyway.

Random tables save GMs tons of time. Discover fun story hooks and objects randomly so you don't have to think about it. I find that using random search tables

really connects the players to the game. I have seen players get extremely excited when the search table comes out.

Why? There's a bit of mystery. They do not know what they will get and neither does the gamemaster.

There's also value in finding certain objects. It's part of the fun of the game for the players and the GM. Players can also just get to know certain numbers on the table and wait for those to be rolled.

The anticipation of doing something with those objects or wanting to explore something if they know, for example, number 74 is a map to an ancient library. They may be hoping to roll 74 so they can set off in search of that ancient library.

There are plenty of random tables that don't enrich the characters, but rather give them items to exercise their imaginations.

Perhaps a random RPG table contains items like scraps of leather, small pieces of metal, canvas, hides, and bits of rope. These things, while worthless on the first glance, can always be used by the players for creative solutions to complications during the adventure.

SEARCHING IS IMPORTANT FOR THE GAME

Searching is a sense of reward for the actions that the players have just taken.

After defeating the evil guards, searching the crime lord's warehouse is an exciting moment because not only do they get useful items or gain money but they're also hurting the crime lord.

However, if your players walk into the warehouse and

begin to search and you don't have a random table, then you have to know everything that is in that warehouse before the session begins.

Who's got time for that? If you have a set of random tables, you can fill the warehouse with interesting items quickly and easily just by having your players roll on the random tables.

RANDOM TABLES ANSWER QUESTIONS

Random tables can also answer questions that you don't have answers to. A player asks, what's the waitress's name? A player asks, what kind of booths are in the marketplace?

Does the blacksmith have a horse for sale? Is the guard asleep? Is the door locked? Where's the potion shop? What's on the ceiling? Are there any chickens?

Pull out a random table and roll. The answers are there when needed and not before. Just think about it, what if you planned to have the blacksmith selling a horse, but the players never asked about it? Then you wasted your time.

HOW TO USE RPG RANDOM TABLES

Needless to say, random tables can be used in a variety of ways. I think there are better ways to use them, but there's no real wrong way to use a random table. Well, except not using them at all.

Gamemaster rolls before the session

One method of using random tables is that the gamemaster rolls before the session.

Say there is an old hermit's cabin that will feature in the

next session of an RPG campaign. The gamemaster takes out a random table rolls and fills the cabin with certain objects or items a few days before the session.

I don't like this method.

First, it's preparing for the section which I don't have time to do.

Second, it opens up the possibility of creating things that the players don't see or will never touch.

What if they don't come across the hermit's cabin? What if they turn right instead of left when they see the cabin? What if they see the hermit's cabin and burn it down?

You just wasted time you could have spent with your significant other, your kids, watching that show you're behind on or reading that book you've been trying to finish.

Gamemaster rolls during the session

The gamemaster rolling during the session is something I utilize on occasion and it can be very helpful. But it always depends on what the random table is or what I am trying to determine.

Two quick hints:

Speed – If I need something fast, then I will roll. If asking the players to roll will disrupt the flow of the game or will distract the players at a key moment, I will roll.

Limit Player Knowledge – If the answer to a question or the outcome of a situation will spoil the players fun or reveal information that is better hidden, I will roll.

For example, a player may ask if the party is being

followed. I don't know the answer since I wasn't even thinking about that. I would roll randomly (and secretly) to see if they are being followed. Then I would have the player roll their Perception (or similar skill). Depending on the roll, I would then tell the player if they are being followed or not.

Players roll

Having players roll is my preferred method. There are a number of reasons for this, so let's break them down.

Players control their fate – If the roll is bad and the thing rolled is terrible for the players then it's their fault because they rolled.

There's no real arguing with this and this is what I like. If I roll on the table behind a GM screen and I say oh it's the worst thing that can happen to your characters, then I have to face questions of whether or not I am being fair. The last thing I want to do while I'm trying to have fun is to talk about how I'm being unfair to someone's precious character.

There is too much conflict that can happen between GMs and players for me to secretly hand out fates all of the time. Having the players roll eliminates that conflict right off the bat. Why does Sarah get 12 gold pieces while Andy gets a dead rat? Because they rolled differently on the random table.

Greater player agency – It gives the players more agency. They are controlling the world even if it is a random roll.They get to hold their fate in their hands and that is a powerful feeling in a tabletop RPG and in real life truth be told.

Less work for the gamemaster – It also takes more

decisions and responsibilities off me as the gamemaster. Gamemasters have enough to think about during every session, so anything that takes something off their plate is great. Plus I want to be able to think about other things during the session, like what's over the next hill or where the missing ring can be located.

Self-reward – When a player searches something and rolls on a random table and the outcome is a great item for the character or the party, there is a feeling of accomplishment. If the GM simply hands out everything, there was no risk or sense that they added to the story.

It is always more rewarding for a player to know that they rolled well and got the magic item, than to just be handed a magic sword.

THE RANDOM TABLE IS YOUR SERVANT

Always remember that the table is your servant and you can do whatever you want with it.

Some people don't roll. They just pick items off the table that they think are interesting and that they can run in the game. That's fine, however, I do think they are missing out on something.

There is a magic in the pure randomness of a dice roll. That shouldn't be discounted quickly just because you think something might be a hard result or that you can't handle that kind of situation.

Some of the most memorable and engaging RPG sessions that I have ever run have been the result of random rolls. That said if the table provides something that is just simply unworkable then ignore it.

This happens on occasion because obviously random

tables can't be made to exactly fit in line with every session or campaign or world. If something does not fit then just ignore it. Roll again or have the player roll again.

But always consider every result before you reject it. There just may be gold you are passing by.

ARROWS IN THE QUIVER
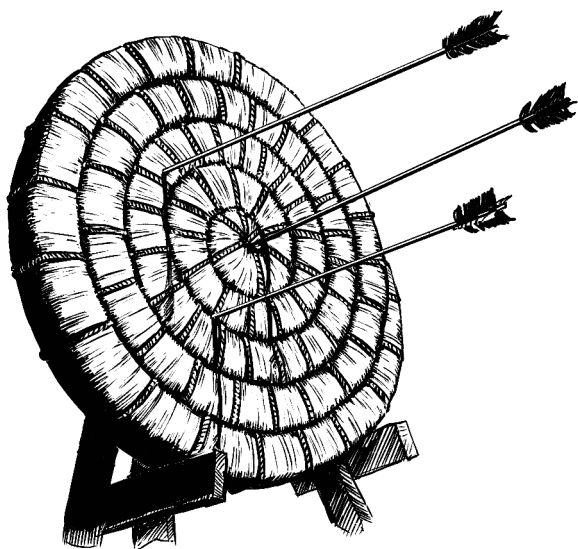
Best Case/Worst Case

If you get overwhelmed with all the decisions that a gamemaster has to make, there is a quick way to solve that issue in the no-prep GM model. This is what I like to call the best-case/worst-case roll. (Yes, I need a better name for this, but this will do for now.)

Simply take a six-sided die with six representing the best-case scenario for the player and one representing the worst-case scenario. The numbers in between represent degrees. Five is good. Four is okay. Three is bad. Two is really bad.

This is used whenever a player asks you the GM a question that you do not know the answer to.
Since we're not prepping we don't know the answers to many questions players can ask during the session.

WHEN RPG PLAYERS ASK QUESTIONS

Players always ask tons of questions. It's impossible to prepare for every question a player can ask.

Does the innkeeper have a brother?
Do I recognize the Captain of the Guard?
Who's the noble family in this land?
Is there an active black market in this town?
What's over the next ridge?
Where is the nearest apothecary shop?

All of these are valid questions. The player needs to know the answer so they can take action. But if you haven't prepared anything you most likely do not know the answers to any of those questions.

Heck, players always stumped me even when I prepared for sessions. Maybe with experience, you can just make up an answer on the spot.

HAVE THE PLAYER ROLL

However, it is rather engaging to have the player roll best case/worst case. For example, a player asks if they know the captain of the guard because they are from the city they are in. Have them pick up a six-sided die and roll.

Six would be the best-case scenario. Yes they know the captain of the guard and he was their childhood friend or she is their aunt. A number one could mean something like they do not know the captain of the guard and he is antagonistic towards them for something that happened in the past.

It is important during these rolls to take some burden or strain off of the gamemaster.

THE PLAYER SHOULD DECIDE

Go ahead and have the player decide what the consequences of the role are.

If they roll a best-case, what's their best case. Perhaps their best case is that they don't know the captain of the guard.

Also, ask the player what the worst case would be. They know these things better than you because it affects them and affects their character.

The player should be honest about their intentions but of course, you are the judge so you can override as you see fit.

THE DICE ARE TELLING THE STORY

This quick little system will help you answer questions during the game quickly and efficiently.

I have found in my games that these best-case/worst-case rolls actually take the story in interesting directions that would have never come about through the prepped session.

The key here is to take the pressure off the GM, so they do not need to create every little detail of the world or spend hours in preparation.

Don't Create Everything

If you are creating your own setting for an RPG campaign there are some keys to not losing your mind.

Let me back up and say that worldbuilding is a ton of fun. That's why it is easy for some gamemasters to get a little out of hand. We are looking for an outlet for our creativity and that's totally fine. However, none of us can afford to waste time.

DON'T CREATE WHAT PLAYERS WON'T SEE

If you're creating your own world don't create things that your players won't see, touch, or interact with.

One time I created 12 star systems all with multiple planets for a *Star Wars* campaign. My players went to only two or three of the planets. Not systems mind you, two or three planets. I created tons of material that was never seen or enjoyed by my players.

I wasted a lot of my time. What should be done is to think along the lines of the "don't fill every room" approach that random tables solve for gamemasters.

CREATE A FRAMEWORK

If you are pressed for time, and who isn't, think about a framework for a world. Some general concepts that will help you steer your players in certain directions or create a certain mood that you're looking for in the campaign.

Thinking in broad strokes as you are world-building will help you not to get bogged down in the details of every single culture or location.

If your world is mostly desert that's going to affect the culture of characters as they're being created. Also, it will change the nature of the cities and the adventures that you'll be having. Knowing that the world is a desert is important, knowing every culture is not.

LOCATIONS AND NAMES BUT LITTLE ELSE

Having locations and names is a good starting point and you don't really need much else. Honestly, you can even wait on the names if you have some random tables.

You only have to be one step ahead of your players. You don't need to be 10 or 15 or 20 steps ahead of them.

For example, if your players are traveling down the road and they already know they're going to reach a town start thinking of what they're going to encounter in that town. Don't worry about what they'll encounter after they leave that town. They may decide to stay there or they may decide to travel north instead of east or west. They may go down into a dungeon in the town and then decide to make it their base after they cleaned it out. So creating other encounters or cities down the road would be a waste of time.

DO NOT BUILD EVERY CONTINENT

If you're creating world don't worry about every continent. Focus on creating a few things where your players will be adventuring. This allows you the freedom to actually come up with other storylines and things later and doesn't cement the world into place before you know what the players will do.

If you have created every continent in your world and you know exactly what happens on them you don't have the ability to roll with some interesting quirks that

your players came up with or where the story is leading.

If your players are principally in one continent then you have no need to create any others. If they're not traveling there they will never see it; your cool ideas will be wasted. Take some of those ideas and work them in as necessary where your players are.

Plus, there is usually one player who'll want to be from another continent anyway. That will help you create that continent.

DON'T CREATE EVERY CITY

Also, don't create every city in your world or even all the cities on just one continent.

Allow some for some freeform play. A time may come when you just need a small village or a big city to send your players into to complete some type of hook or story or to finish some conflict that started somewhere else.

If everything is completely mapped out this actually limits your creativity. If you create 50 cities on a map each with their distinctive culture and rulers but your players only go to three of them, what just happened?

You wasted a lot of your time unless you decide to publish your RPG campaign material in which case that extra prep time can make you some money.

List of Names

No-prep GMing can be very rewarding. However, one of the biggest pitfalls can be names.

Coming up with exciting people and place names on the spot can be the death of even the best gamemasters. The main trick to not having every NPC named Bob or every town named Springfield is to have lists of names with you while GMing.

HAVE A LIST OF NAMES

A simple solution is to print out a list of names and keep the list handy as you are running the RPG session. Just keep it in your papers or notes at the gaming table.

A better solution is to have a random table of names. A random table allows you to simply roll the dice for a name and move on.

YOU ALWAYS NEED NAMES

Players always ask for names. Let me repeat, players always ask for names. It is important to be prepared even when not preparing. Not having a name ready to go can break the mood or throw players out of the session. Also, having a name that doesn't fit the world or time period will break the mood as well.

DO NOT HAVE NPCS NAMED BOB

I ran many sessions where I would be caught without an NPC name and they would always end up being named Bob. This might seem fun at the time but it really breaks the mood of the session.

A random table of names not only gives you a name that

fits the culture or the time period in which your RPG is set, but they can lead to fun coincidences that you would not have thought of.

For example, not too long ago my gaming group and I were playing my post-apocalyptic OpenD6 game called *Anarchy*. I'm running the session and a player meets an insane man raving in the street.

What does the player do? He asked the man his name because he did not want to engage in combat. Since *Anarchy* is a near-future game the names are somewhat fairly common names that we have in the United States today.

Oh, no. This was a random encounter in a session I did not prepare for. What was I to do? I pulled out a random table of names and I rolled on it. The name I rolled was James.

A very common name fitting the time period and the NPC's age. Do you know what was really interesting? The player character's name was James as well.

Now if I would have just made up a name on the spot I might have chosen Bob as already mentioned, or Peter, or Michael, or Charles, or Travis. I most certainly would not have chosen James since the PC was named that.

Of course, meeting someone with the same first name is a common experience the vast majority of us experience all the time. But it took rolling on a random table for me to think of doing it in a session.

The NPC and PC having the same name led to some very interesting interactions and exceptional role-playing from my player all springing from a random table of names.

DON'T FORGET TOWN NAMES

Many books contain names for people. However, there are very few random table books that have names for towns. In *The Book of Random Tables 2*, I include 500 town names.

If you need a town name quick it is best to have a random table on hand, because a stupid town name has a way of sticking around an RPG campaign for a long time.

Simply add a list of names or some random tables of names to your gamemaster tool kit. You will never be sorry you did.

Listen to the Table

Another important resource at the gamemaster's disposal that usually goes overlooked is to listen to the table. As your players talk at the table, listen to what they say.

The players tend to talk about everything. They discuss their plans. They mull bits of information their characters discovered. They think aloud about situations or things that happened in the campaign or session.

This is a gold mine of information that you as the gamemaster can use, especially if you are running a session without preparation.

AS YOUR PLAYERS TALK, STEAL FROM THEM

As your players talk at the table go ahead and steal from what they say. Players say things like:

I think the innkeeper is the murderer.
That bard is shady.
Where did the orphan boy go?
When we entered this dungeon, it felt like we entered a new world.
Why is the river flooded?
That old beggar was more than she seemed.

These statements are precious gems for the gamemaster to take and use.

For example, the party finds a strange note in a dungeon. All the note says is something like, "I need help." The note was just a result of a roll on a random table, so the gamemaster has no idea of how to use it in the session or campaign.

However, the note could spark an idea in a player's mind. They could say something like, "Wasn't the innkeeper in that town asking for help?" or "Maybe there is someone trapped deeper in the dungeon."

As you hear these tidbits of information you can steal them and use them in the session, even though you would never have thought of it yourself.

Let's say the gamemaster has no idea what to do with the random note. A player mentions he thinks someone is trapped in the dungeon. Now, the GM has something to work with.

GIVE IT A TWIST

You do not have to slavishly follow what the players say. Use the players' thoughts and ideas to introduce red herrings.

For example, your players say they think the shady NPC in the inn is the bandit leader they are hunting. You as the gamemaster can feed them information to make that NPC more suspicious only to reveal at a critical moment that he's not the bandit leader.

This will engage your players in the story more and make your sessions memorable.

PLAYERS WILL FEEL LIKE THEY GOT IT

By listening to the table you will actually be including your players more in the session, hopefully without them actually realizing.

They will feel like they are understanding what is happening, but when the twist comes they will be surprised. They will be happy on two levels. They get satisfaction from being smart and figuring out

something about the story, but they get surprised as well.

As an added bonus, the gamemaster looks like a genius and all you did was take the best of what the players said and tweak it.

Players Can Help Create

Creating a world for an RPG campaign does not have to be a solitary experience.

A lonely gamemaster sitting at a computer desk creating reams of material dreaming of friends who actually want to play role-playing games as desperately as he does is not a healthy state of being.

Have your players help you create the world you will play in. This makes your players more engaged in the campaign and it also cuts down your prep time.

ASK YOUR PLAYERS QUESTIONS

Start off by simply asking your players questions about the world and have them fill in the details for you. What's the countryside like here? Are we near the ocean? How big is the nearby town?

They can be leading questions if you have definite ideas of what kind of world or setting you would like. In that case, you could say something like why have all the dwarves disappeared? Why has no one seen an elf for 300 years? How did the great empire of man fall?

Of course, they could be questions on a small scale as well. Who founded this village? Who owns the inn? Why does your character wear a simple brass ring?

If a player tells you that their character is from a certain city or land or continent, have them explain it to you. Why would you as the gamemaster take time to create a city that a player wanted in the world?

This also goes for other situations as well. If a player says her character is from a circus family, why would you

create details about the circus? The player should do so.

This allows the players to be engaged in the campaign all the while saving the gamemaster's time. I mean, you need to do other things instead of prepare for game sessions all the time, right?

ROLL DICE

Another neat trick is to number your players. Say for instance you have 6 players, number them one through six. The gamemaster rolls a six-sided die and whatever number comes up, ask that player a question. It's a fun exercise, especially during session zero.

THE DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS QUESTION

There is a school of thought in the RPG gaming community that says *Dungeons & Dragons* does not allow players to help create. All the burden falls squarely on the Dungeon Master.

Therefore, they say, an entirely different RPG system is needed. If you want your players to help you create the campaign world, you need to ditch *D&D*.

So how do these systems solve the problem? Well, in the few that I've seen they introduce a new "mechanic" that says...

Wait for it... ***Ask your players questions about the game world.***

Seriously? Do we need to throw the greatest role-playing game ever under a bus for one that gives the GM a rule to ask your players questions? Um, no.

Just play *D&D* and ask your players questions, so you don't have to create everything.

RPG Modules

Published RPG adventures, often called "modules," can help the gamemaster who doesn't have time to prepare.

These are ready-to-go adventures that can be run by anyone. However, there are some drawbacks.

THE DOWNSIDE OF RPG MODULES

The first drawback is cost. If you've already spent hundreds of dollars on RPG books and other materials and resources, buying a published adventure every month (or week) can be very expensive.

Second, published adventures and modules need to be read. I know this sounds terribly lazy, but I barely have time to keep up with a full-time job, a family, and other responsibilities in the real world. Not to mention reading books and doing other things that are not RPG-related.

Now I have to read a published adventure every week? Before my friends come over?

I don't usually care to run modules and I find that a lot of people do not care to run them either. Why is this? For me, a published adventure is too restrictive and often I find myself railroading the players.

THE UPSIDE OF PUBLISHED RPG ADVENTURES

There are many helpful aspects of published adventures for the busy gamemaster. The quality of some published adventures is outstanding. There's no way just sitting at the gaming table I could come up with some of the interesting ideas in a published adventure that

professional writers took months to craft.

If we grab a module and just read a little bit, we can always glean some powerful concepts, situations, or set pieces from them. Doing this has always helped me run a great RPG session.

MINE THE MODULE

Don't discount published adventures right off. But I would not rely on buying one every week, it's just not a sustainable activity. Know that you can mine a published adventure for useful bits over and over again.

Use the modules to find new and useful materials. In many published adventures you find new maps, or new creatures, or NPCs that can be used as-is in anything you are running.

Even if you're not using the adventure as written you can take the city map, or the villain and just plop those right into your game.

For example, when I was a teenager I ran a lot of West End Games' *Star Wars Role-playing Game*. My players enjoyed bounty hunting and smuggling adventures and so did (do) I. I bought a published adventure called *Tatooine Manhunt*. The only reason I bought that module was that it came with a map of Mos Eisley. You know, the wretched hive of scum and villainy.

The city center was on one side and an incredible map of the iconic Cantina was on the other.

That map became the centerpiece in a number of memorable adventures and sessions. I have actually never run the written adventure, but the use I got out of that map alone was vastly greater than the seven dollars

I paid for the entire module. In fact, I still use that map to this day.

More than 30 years worth of good gaming out of one map. Now, that is a valuable RPG resource.

Pro Gamemaster Tip: *Maps don't care what game edition or system you use them for.*

I can use that same Mos Eisley map for WEGs, *Star Wars Saga*, or Fantasy Flight Games' system, or even a non-*Star Wars* game. The same goes for a lot of older edition *D&D* maps. They work great in 5e or any fantasy TTRPG.

SHOULD YOU USE RPG MODULES?

Sure, they are great tools for a gamemaster. However, don't feel you need a new one every session or that you have to use them as written.

Retcon

Running an RPG session without prepping can certainly lead to mistakes. However, I made a ton of mistakes even when I spent hours prepping.

A gamemaster should never be afraid to retcon. Backtracking a bit to set something right is perfectly acceptable and players should understand that even the best GMs make mistakes.

IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE, CORRECT IT

If you make a mistake always feel like you can correct it. Stepping back a turn or fixing something in narration is always acceptable to correct a mistake that you've made.

Although, you should use your judgment. Retconning can cause confusion and delay a session wasting precious playing time.

MAKE SURE IT REALLY SHAFTED A PLAYER

If the mistake really shafted a player or broke a scene or it was a blatant misuse of a certain rule then, by all means, stop the session and do it over again.

IF IT WAS MINOR, MOVE FORWARD

If the mistake was minor and did not seriously affect gameplay, just move forward. Then make sure to correct the issue during the rest of the session or campaign.

RETCON TIPS DURING RPG SESSION

Here are some tips on how to handle retconning during play.

Do a simple do-over if the mistake is discovered quickly.

Don't allow your pride or arrogance to keep you from fixing a mistake.

Listen to your players, but you make the call on how to fix the mistake.

If the mistake happened in a previous session, just fix it with narration.

If the mistake led to character death or something extremely detrimental to the party, fix it even if it means retconning a whole session or more.

If the mistake outlandishly or unreasonably benefited the party, retcon it even though your players may object.

Of course, you should always use your judgment of how bad a mistake was and if retconning or living with it is what you and your gaming group wants to do.

Run the Movie

This is a bonus tip for gamemasters who do not have time to prepare.

While you're consuming stories, reading books, watching TV shows or movies, you can actually just take the scenario and the story of the book or movie and run it as an adventure or an RPG campaign.

Simply take the movie or book and lift the whole thing, putting it right into your campaign. Just run the story exactly the way the movie or book does it only changing or departing from it as necessary due to the limitations or the nature of a tabletop role-playing game.

GOOD EXAMPLE

Here's an example of when this is done correctly. When I was a teenager I had created a post-apocalyptic role-playing game that I called *Anarchy*.

It's actually the first book I self-published and it started my career in self-publishing role-playing gamebooks. But I let it sit for a long time and didn't do much with it.

When I was playtesting in my early twenties, I had one playtester who was pretty much always there. He was my best playtester and he was one of my really good friends. As we played the RPG, I experimented with different combat systems and different skill systems and everything else. He was a great sport and he loved the post-apocalyptic genre so we had a blast.

However, I had never been able to play my game as a player. I was always the GM. I never got to just make a character and play it myself. So I begged my friend. I begged him asking him if he would gamemaster and

run me through some adventure. He didn't want to. He said he was not a good gamemaster. He gave me all the standard excuses.

So, what could I do? I begged him and I begged him and I begged him until finally, he agreed.

He starts off a session and to tell you the truth it blew my mind. It was amazing. The session was incredible; he had a full story, situations, NPCs, locations, and villains. He had everything. In the end, I was like man you are such a great gamemaster why don't you do this all the time? Well, it turns out that he ran me through a movie.

The movie is called *World Gone Wild*. It was a movie he had picked up at the video store on a whim a few years earlier and he just used that movie and ran me through it. I hadn't seen the movie at the time, so it was all fresh and new to me.

This trick of running somebody through a movie or book or TV show is perfectly valid and can save you a ton of prep time and can be a great experience for your players.

By the way, I watched the movie years later and it was awesome. If you are into 1980's post-apocalyptic cinema, check it out.

DANGER!

However, there is a danger here. Make sure that the movie or TV show or book is obscure so that your players haven't seen it or even heard about it. If somebody at the table knows the source material very well, the situation I described above will most likely not happen. Case in point.

One time I was about 20 minutes into a session as a

player, and I realized the gamemaster was running *Star Trek 6*. I am a *Star Trek* fan. A pretty big *Star Trek* fan at least back in the day. I have seen *Star Trek 6* more times than probably any person should really have ever seen *Star Trek 6*.

I know the story. I know the scenes. I know some of the dialogue. I've seen the making of videos and behind-the-scenes documentaries about *Star Trek 6*. I have read behind-the-scenes articles about the making of *Star Trek 6*. Needless to say, when I recognized that we were running through *Star Trek 6* I was concerned.

I thought perhaps maybe it's just a scenario or a situation from *Star Trek 6*. Maybe the GM is going to use *Star Trek 6* as just a setup for the session. No, that was not the case. The entire session was *Star Trek 6* with no deviations. Everything was the same. Everything. I was very sad for the next three or four hours.

There is danger here so make sure if you're running the person through a book or movie, pick one that is obscure or one you know absolutely that your players have not seen or read.

BORROWING FROM POPULAR MEDIA

Using popular books or movies for sessions or campaigns can be done. However, keep in mind a couple of things.

If you're going to borrow from *Black Panther* or a very popular book like *Ready Player One*, make sure you're only taking kind of snippets or little bits of the scenario. Something you can use as a starting piece or some setup. Then allow the campaign or scenario to bloom and go on its own way.

Do not slavishly force your players to follow the exact

plot of the book or movie. Or if you're going to take the concept from a book that is fairly common or very popular, get player buy-in first.

Just tell your players, hey we're going to be playing through *Ready Player One*. Or hey we're doing the Trojan War or *The Lord of the Rings*.

As long as the players have agency and the session is not simply a march through the exact plot, many players will be excited to play.

Session Zero

The Session Zero is a very helpful tool in the gamemaster's toolkit.

It is a relatively new development in tabletop RPGs and it has gone kind of mainstream within the gaming community (if there is such a thing). I wish I would have thought of it when I was a teenager.

If you are beginning an RPG campaign, it is wise to take the first session and simply call it a Session Zero. You use this session to lay a lot of the groundwork of your campaign and to get player buy-in.

A Session Zero is basically a time when the gamemaster and players discuss their characters, the world, the game system and all kinds of meta setting material. This allows everyone to be on the same page when the game begins.

In the Session Zero, there wouldn't be any roleplaying per se, but there would be planning and getting ready to start the campaign.

The Session Zero can be put to great use by a no-prep GM. It helps build out details that are needed, but it doesn't weigh down the GM.

CAMPAIGN STARTING POINT

A Session Zero is a great starting point for a campaign. The gamemaster and players discuss the many details of the world, the rules of the game system, and generally, get a feel for how the group is going to play.

CREATE PLAYER CHARACTERS

Session Zeros are also the perfect time for character creation. If you know you have three hours well then that is plenty of time to create characters for everybody without the hassle of worrying about playing that same night.

It takes a lot of pressure off of you as the gamemaster. Also, it allows everyone to be together while creating characters. Having the gamemaster and other players present during character creation is key to creating a cohesive team when the campaign starts.

You will be surprised by how many interesting situations are created just through this kind of collective process of creating characters together.

PLANT CAMPAIGN WORLD SEEDS

As a gamemaster, you can use this time to learn what types of characters the players are creating. This allows you to create situations and plant them into the world or setting in a very organic way.

For example one of your players says their character comes from a faraway land (as usual). This gives you a perfect opportunity to add that land into your campaign while your player does all of the heavy lifting creating customs and histories and things like that.

Also, little tidbits of the character's background, as they become known, work their way into your story and you can use them in future sessions. For example, a player says their character's father was a low-level politician and he was assassinated when they were a child. You can take that situation and use it to your advantage to bring up that character's background in a later session.

This creates the impression of a fully fleshed-out world. And of course, introducing a situation that will elicit a more powerful reaction from the player.

LEARN WHAT PLAYERS WANT IN THE GAME

The Session Zero is also the time to learn what people want to see in the game.

Do they want to time travel? Do they want dinosaurs? Do they want a lot of combat? Do they want a lot of court Intrigue? Did they want to go treasure hunting? Just by asking your players simple questions you can find out different concepts that they want to see during the game.

Once you know what they want to see you can work those ideas in and make sure that you're giving them the experience that they find enjoyable. Also as gamemaster, this helps to lighten the load of running the game.

If your players tell you they want to hunt for treasure, you already have a situation you can work with and you know they will be on board because they asked for it.

GAMEMASTER IDEAS

Gamemasters get to have fun too and you do not have to bow to every player whim. Session Zero is when you let your players know what you want to see in the game.

Do you want dinosaurs? Do you want to time travel? This is the time to get buy-in on your concept for the campaign.

SET BOUNDARIES

Another important aspect of session zero is setting boundaries for the type of behavior and situations that are allowed at the table. If you are playing with strangers or people you have not known for a long time, it is important to make sure you see what kind of game they want to play.

Also, gauge what type of situations they do not want to see in the game and what kind of content they do not want to be exposed to. Of course, the reverse is true; you are running the game so you do not have to run anything you are uncomfortable with.

For example, when starting to run your game you can simply say something like we're going to keep this campaign PG-13. Hopefully, all of your players will understand what type of situations language or what violence level is allowed in your sessions.

No further discussion should be needed.

META CAMPAIGN DETAILS

Session zero is also the place to work out meta-details like scheduling, hosting, food, help clean up, and other questions about the logistics of the game. These are often overlooked necessities that cause conflict between friends. Lay everything out on the table, so there is no confusion.

NO-PREP GMING

Having a session zero slashes the amount of prep a gamemaster has to do. The players do the work while you take notes and interject as you wish. What could be better than a gathering of friends talking about RPGs?

Situations Not Plot

A gamemaster needs situations and complications, not huge epic stories and plotlines. For the no-prep GM, this is where that catalog of stories we talked about comes in handy.

DON'T THINK OF A PLOT

Don't think of an event that follows another event or an event is triggered by this event. Once your players begin interacting with the game world they may (will) make decisions and take actions you never dreamed of.

If you force them to stick to a plot like you are writing a novel, you are doing what is called railroading. That is where the GM kills all player agency and has the players follow a predetermined course.

Also, many GMs can grow frustrated if their beautifully constructed plot is not coming together.
The players have decided to stay at the inn for several weeks or to check out that pile of stones by the road.

This is usually where gamemasters begin to lament spending hours in prep and start hating their friends. The solution is to not worry about the plot. Let the players' actions drive the plot.

THINK OF SITUATIONS

What a GM should do is think of situations that can create conflict and then allow the plot to flow out of those situations. Give the players a situation, then let them give you the plot.

For example, think of situations like a kidnapping, a raid on the town, someone hiring a group of adventurers to

explore a dungeon or someone needing a spacecraft to ferry cargo to a neighboring star system.

If you think in terms of situations then you simply present those situations to your players and they will be able to act. Out of the players' actions will flow story and plot as well as give opportunities for more situations that you use to weave an interesting RPG session or campaign.

THINK OF COMPLICATIONS

Gamemasters also need to think of complications. They are a critical part of a dramatic structure. Once you have a situation you need to think about what could complicate that situation.

Complications force the players to use their minds and to use their characters' abilities to overcome those obstacles. The easiest example is a dungeon.

The situation is to explore a dungeon. Once the players enter the dungeon they face locked doors, traps, monsters, rooms that fill with water, pits and all manner of complications. This goes the same for any setting in any situation.

If you're playing a science fiction game and your players have their own ship, give them the situation of carrying cargo. There are many complications that can be thrown into the mix to help keep driving conflict and produce an interesting plot.

To continue the example of a science fiction setting, the faster than light drive on the characters' ship can malfunction. The ship can collide with an asteroid. Pirates can attack. The cargo they're carrying could spill or explode or be damaged in some way. All of these

complications add to the story and allow your players to react by taking their own actions.

If you are thinking of situations and complications you will quickly realize that a session and even an RPG campaign will spring organically from them.

Use Combat to Stall

As a gamemaster, sometimes you need time to think during a session. Other times you need a place to start your campaign or session.

If you are playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder* or another combat-heavy tabletop RPG, you're in luck. Combat is a great stalling tactic as well as a great place to start an RPG campaign or session.

Plus there's an added bonus. Players usually love combat.

STALL FOR TIME DURING RPG SESSION

Combat is the no-prep GM's old friend. Just think about these scenarios.

Your players' characters are walking along a road and you as the gamemaster have no idea where they are going.

Your players say they want to go cross-country instead of taking the road.

Your players enter the dungeon quicker than you expected.

What should the GM do? Time for combat! You can just grab a few monsters or bandits and just throw them right at the characters. And look at that the players are occupied for at least a half-hour to an hour. You have some time to think while just running some number crunching on the creatures.

Also, some adventure hooks may appear during the combat giving you the ideas you need to fill the session.

STARTING AN RPG SESSION IN COMBAT

Starting a session or campaign in combat can be a tremendous asset to a GM who is not prepping. If you have your players all set up with characters and you have a premise but you do not know how to begin the first session.

Don't waste time in a tavern or an inn. Don't force role-playing before everyone is comfortable at the table. Throw them right in the middle of combat.

If your players are a group of bounty hunters then just narrate a scene where they're in the middle of combat trying to capture or kill a bounty. During combat, the session can get underway and different story hooks and items will emerge. You can use them to build upon a story and fill out your session and campaign.

You can use random tables to reveal the items that are on dead bodies. Those items will lead to story hooks and interesting tidbits your players will want to explore.

If your players are treasure hunters or just dungeon crawlers then start them in the middle of a fight in a dungeon. The results of combat will lead right into stories and things your players can act on.

Once your players become active and are making decisions about where they want to travel or what they want to do, your job as the GM has just become incredibly easy.

Use Technology

Technology has obviously become a huge part of our modern lives. Gamemasters should embrace it, especially if you are not prepping for sessions.

Technology provides role-players a lot of helpful options when we're at the gaming table. Let's use everything at our disposal to help us create better RPG sessions and campaigns.

POWERPOINT IN TTRPGS

Using PowerPoint is more useful if you are preparing for sessions. I used to do this, but now that I usually don't prep I don't. But there are those who can benefit from the tip.

If you have access to a TV during your RPG sessions you could create a PowerPoint deck of certain interesting locations, pictures of cities, pictures of people and then as you play show your players what exactly you're talking about.

For example, if your players are on a long journey you can gather beautiful pictures of landscapes, waterfalls, forests, mountains, deserts, or whatever you need. This can create an in-depth environment and experience for players especially ones that are more visually attuned.

I created massive slide decks for my epic Jedi campaign years ago and my players loved it. Sadly, it was too much work. However, technology can be used to cut down GM prep.

LAPTOP OR TABLET FOR RPG SESSIONS

If you have a laptop or tablet at hand while you are gamemastering, you have a world of information and resources at your fingertips. You can look up random tables, rules, and maps as you need them without any prep.

Anytime you need a creature, just do a Google search for *D&D* OGL monsters with full stats. If you need a map, google "dungeon maps." You will find some amazing dungeon maps that you can use right on the spot.

For example, recently I was running a post-apocalyptic session. I rolled on a random table and my players found a half-buried submarine. Of course, they wanted to search it for loot. I needed a map of the submarine quick.

I had my laptop next to me, so I hopped online. I was able to find a map of a submarine from a simple Google search. I was able to describe the inside to the players as they were searching the submarine for goodies.

Also, having PDFs of random tables or of the rules on your device is a tremendous help. You are able to search quickly through the entire document and find the rule you need fast. This is one of the main reasons why I created my books of random tables.

USING GOOGLE MAPS IN TABLETOP RPGS

Depending on what game you're playing and what time period it is set in, you can use Google Maps. If you're playing a modern setting or a near-future setting you can simply use Google Maps as your world map.

For example in my post-apocalyptic OpenD6 game called *Anarchy*, a main feature of the game is to use Google Maps concurrently while you play.

I simply cast the Google map to a TV screen. Players can see exactly where they are. The landscape and buildings are right there. It brings the game to life in a very realistic manner without spending hours preparing or drawing maps.

OTHER TECH USES IN TABLETOP RPGS

There are many more ways you can use technology when running Tabletop RPGs. Here are some more examples.

Send secret text messages certain players
Show pictures of NPCs
Have the players choose pictures of their PCs
Have a group message thread to discuss the game
Display a map so everyone can see it easily

And the list goes on and possibilities are limited only by your preferences. In short, use technology to cut down your GM prep and to have more fun.

Get Free Dungeon Maps and More
dicegeeks.com/free