

47 TIPS AND TRICKS

TO BECOME A BETTER GAME MASTER OR STORYTELLER



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47 Tips and Tricks to Become a Better Game Master or Storyteller

When we sit down across the table from a group of players – whether they are lifelong friends or merely gaming buddies, we are taking on a role. Across the table from us sit a group of people who have appointed us as caretakers of their trust, their imaginations, and indeed a good many of their evenings for the coming weeks – perhaps months or even years.

By taking on this role, you take on the responsibility to tell a great and engaging story, to keep the momentum in a world, to make it all link together in a way that is believable, fun, and rewarding, earn the trust of your players, and finally, how to build and keep your integrity as a Storyteller.

While it could be argued that the roles and responsibilities of a Game or Dungeon Master, Referee, etc. (for the sake of consistency, we're going to use the term **Storyteller** from here on out) are not all that difficult to master, it is the little things that an experienced or talented Storyteller does before, during, and even after the game session that really make the difference. From taking good notes, to maintaining a believable, richly-detailed world, to breathing life into the smallest corners of that world, there are specific tools of the trade to accomplish what you want to achieve in your games.

The 47 Tips and Tricks listed below are intended to help you do just that. In the following sections, we will address five primary methods to become a great RPG Storyteller:

1) How to tell a story.
2) How to keep your game engaging.
3) How to tie it all together.

4) How to earn and keep the trust of your players.
5) How to establish and keep narrative integrity.

Obviously, we should mention that there are many, many ways to achieve the things we list below, and that our suggestions should in no way interfere with any system you currently use, so long as that system works for you and your players. Hopefully, even experienced Storytellers will be able to pick up one or two tips or strategies from the following list.

If we help a single Storyteller to improve upon his or her art, we'll be happy.

I. How to Tell a Story:

1. **Find, build, or borrow** a world in which your narrative will take place, and make it your own. If you are using an established campaign setting, no matter how detailed the game supplements or materials might be, you need to carve your own niche in it. From picking a scantily-detailed little corner of the world to inventing a small region, village, or ruin for your players to explore, what is important to do here is to find a way to make one portion of this pre-existing world *yours*. If you are building your own world, but using another setting or story as inspiration for it,

make sure to give it your own twist, and don't allow yourself to create a one-for-one copy of any single place, idea, people, or event. Using other stories as inspiration is a wonderful way to get your own creative juices flowing – just be sure to use some of that creativity to fill parts of that world with your own original ideas and concepts. For those of you who have created your own entirely original campaign world, feel free to move on to the next item ☺.

2. **Don't tell your story; *present* it.** Rule #1 of table top storytelling is that a minute or so into your grand soliloquy about the rich history and stunning depth of your world, the brains of your players are already beginning to erase what you told them at the beginning of said soliloquy. Introduce your players to your world with short, detailed overviews of things, and move straight into the story. From that point onward, pepper your narrative with additional background details as the pace of your game allows. Never stop the action to monologue your way through a five-page description of someone or something they encounter – instead, tell them the single most important two things they absolutely need to know, and move on. When you revisit the subject, give them one or two additional details, and move on again. Eventually, your players will learn everything you want them to know about your world and its history, and never once go cross-eyed hearing you lecture them about it.
3. **Develop, copy, or wing** your vocal skills. Find a way to alter the tone, depth, and pace of your voice as you run your games. Try to use accents, drawls, and setting-appropriate dialects/idioms/vocabulary when portraying NPCs. This doesn't mean you have to give all of your NPCs their own voices – even the best Storytellers out there have their limits. Instead, find a way to use your voice to give more flavor to certain NPCs your party is likely to communicate most often with, as a way of helping to make them more memorable and unique. Your voice is also a great tool to use when you want to build a scene – dramatic pauses, subtle use of pitch and volume to help you breathe life

into your descriptions and encounters. Try to develop your natural narrative voice as well – the tone and tempo you use when speaking publicly or to a large group. Your narrative voice will be the one you use most often, so find one that doesn't strain your vocal chords too much.

4. **Terror springs from the *safest* places**. When building a scene for your story, remember that contrast is a wonderful tool for springing the unexpected on your players. None of your players will so much as bat an eye when zombies leap out at them if you begin your game in a creepy, dark cemetery. Start them off with a light-hearted summer-fest celebration, and fifteen minutes in have a skeletal hand grab them during a potato-sack race. The same is true about campaigns full of war, plague, and suffering – if you want the grim events in your story to have an emotional impact on your players, paint the world with bright colors at first, and allow the stark contrast of reality to have its natural effect.
5. **Outline, outline, outline**. When you first create your campaign, outline every single thought and concept, dividing your story into its most important elements, and leaving lots of spaces in the middle. This way, as you progress with your ideas, you aren't spending too much time on any one part, potentially burning yourself out before you get to the end. Outlining can also help you with organization – we'll talk more about that in section III.
6. **Write a richly detailed story**… then throw it out the window. The only time you should ever tell people a story is at bedtime. Good preparation pays for itself a hundred times over, but should never be a substitute for good improvisational skills. A role playing game is a collaborative form of storytelling, which means that everyone around the table not only has a stake in the story being told, but the ability to influence it as well. When creating your games, keep this fact in mind – players; even the ones you've been gaming with for years; do unexpected things. Be prepared – even expect – changes to the course of your game, and adapt to them. Never shoe-horn your players into doing what they don't want – more on

that later.

7. **Iceberg right ahead!**. A narrative is an immersive presentation of the game world through the words and aids of the Storyteller; it is equally presented by the depth of the Storyteller's unrevealed background knowledge. Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Theory style of writing requires that the true meaning of a piece of writing should not be evident from the surface story, rather, the crux of the story lies below the surface and should be allowed to shine through. Achieving this requires an in-depth knowledge of your game world; its people, its secrets, and its history.

   As the Storyteller, your goal should be to reveal only about 10% of your world through descriptions, written words, maps, aids, etc. The remaining 90% should remain just below the surface; shadows lurking at the edges of your narrative; revealing themselves as much by their absence as by their presence. Role players, being naturally inquisitive, will always want to know more. Just as the human eye can take a series of still images flashed quickly before them and assemble them into a seamless movie, mentally filling in the gaps and 'creating' the illusion of motion, your players' brains can do the same with a well-presented world. Narrative by Omission can be a powerful tool in the hands of a good Storyteller.
8. **Yeah, but what's my character's motivation…?** Always remember: every NPC lives his or her life independent of the choices and paths taken by your PCs. They wake up, go about their day, think about the future, worry about money, love, success, etc. - and most importantly: they want something. It doesn't matter what that something is, so long as it motivates them. Their purpose in life goes well beyond standing about waiting for a PC to come along so they can set them on some quest - always remember to give them realistic motivations that drive them to do the things they do.
9. **Don't fear the uncharted**. Move out of your comfort zone once in a while, and try new things in your games. Add elements of high

fantasy – or conversely, stark realism – to your repertoire, and branch out from the genres you are most familiar with. If you're a died-in-the-wool fantasy purist, don't be afraid to run a game with elements of Steampunk, Sci-Fi, horror, or even historical realism thrown in. If you're a dungeon-crawler, run a game or two in the open world. The key here is to take a look at things you don't think you'll like or enjoy, and ask yourself why. If you've never tried something, you don't really know if you'll like it until you have experienced it firsthand. You might surprise yourself.

10. **Set up is everything**. The key concepts should be presented early and clearly. Using both verbal and non-verbal communication, develop the feel of your campaign in the very first session. Play music from a mood-appropriate genre in the background, or display pictures or artwork that captures the feel and color of your campaign world. Create a distraction-free environment, ensuring your players are able to maintain the best degree of in-character immersion – at least for your opening sessions. The tone you establish here should be easy to maintain throughout the course of your campaign.
11. **Fill your world with people, not caricatures**. When you write down ideas for the major NPCs in your world, try to stay as far away from archetypes as possible. If you intend to base certain NPCs on real-world or literary figures, try your best to give them some original life and color all their own. Give every good guy a flaw, and every villain a redeeming quality – however small. Grow your NPCs naturally from concept > detail > portrayal, using large brush-strokes at first, then filling in all the little details as gameplay progresses. Allow room for each and every one of your major NPCs – good or bad – to grow and adapt during the course of the game, just as a real person would change and develop over time.
12. **Involve your players**. As mentioned earlier, roleplaying is a form of collaborative storytelling. As such, when you first begin to write down the ideas for your campaign, keep your players in

mind. What do they enjoy the most? What sort of situations, scenarios, or events have they enjoyed in the past, or are likely to enjoy in the future? A collaborative story is only complete when everyone around the table has had their say, so why not include your players' preferences during the concept phase as well?

13. **Opening the chest, you find this tattered old**… Visual aids, maps, diagrams, objects, sketches, and player handouts can do the work of any long-winded description. Spend some time drawing or creating such things for your game sessions. For the less-artistically inclined, there is a literal treasure-trove of free maps and RPG handout materials online that you can use to spice up your games. Giving your players something they can see, touch, or hold is an instant attention grabber, and really promotes a sense of immersion.

II. How to Keep It Engaging:

14. **Momentum**. Perhaps the most important aspect of a great campaign is momentum. The basic rhythm of drama, action, rest, and reengagement must flow naturally, but there are ways to help this along. Take a look at the Outline you created for your game – try to ensure that each "Act" or "Chapter" has both action and storyline drama evenly peppered throughout. Try not to get bogged down by low-performing elements – if you sense that a certain scene or event is dragging, wrap it up neatly and change gears.

    Another great tool is to manage your time spent away from the table as well. Whether you game weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, it is important to keep a sense of progress in your campaigns. Keeping momentum going in groups who game less than once a month requires a little more work from the Storyteller. Condense the narrative as much as possible, and make sure you tweak your action scenes so that they can be completed in under a session. Expedite your experience/treasure rewards so that the

sense of accomplishment and progress is still viable.

For weekly (or more frequent) games, the irony is that too little rest between sessions can kill the momentum as well - by wearing down your players' engagement with the story. Change things around every few weeks – run fun little one-shot adventures, alternate your campaigns, or just take a scheduled week off every once in a while so that you and your players can decompress just a bit.

15. **Meet your players' expectations, and then turn them on their heels**. As a Storyteller, you should always seek to bend your narrative to what your players want or expect. Players who enjoy hack-and-slash games are going to want action, so when you start a new game with such players, give it to them. The same goes for hardcore role players – there is absolutely nothing wrong with tailoring your games for your player base, even if those sorts of games are not your forte.

    The key here is simple – if you want to present something new to your players, wrap it up inside something familiar. Give your hack-and-slash players a couple great fighting sessions to start off, then present them with a token bit of story. If they play along with the story, reward them with more blood and gore. Little by little, you will find them eagerly following more and more role-playing or storyline threads. The same tactic goes for mixed groups as well – reward each player for contributing to the playstyle you want to encourage with what that player will consider a reward.

16. **Drop the boring stuff**. If you run across an element of your game that doesn't seem to work for you or your players, get rid of it. Strangely, a lot of Storytellers and players absolutely HATE travel descriptions – many times because they can't think of what to describe during an overland/overseas journey. Although some people find travel descriptions great fun, if it doesn't work for you or your group, drop them.

    The same goes for any plot thread that has lost its steam – if

your
players lose interest, find a neat way to wrap it up, forget about it, or combine it with another plot thread. Never drag along dead weight – and remember the most important maxim of entertainment – no matter how much fun it is for you, if your players are bored, you are doing it wrong.

17. **Reality Checks**. Sometimes, when the players are moving the story along at a good pace for a while, complacency can set in. They're winning all of their fights, foiling all of the bad guys' plots, and generally having a great time. While this is the ideal state you want for your adventuring party, always be mindful of complacency. No matter how many victories your players have won, or how well geared/high leveled they are, they should never, EVER think of your primary villains as easy foes. If this happens, the fun will quickly go away, and you will be left with a campaign that just fizzles out halfway through. No one plays RPGs for long when there is no longer a challenge to be overcome. Rather than sit idly by as your players develop an invincibility complex, throw an in-game wrench into the works to remind them of the stakes.

    The key here is to offer a reminder of why your bad guys were such a threat to begin with. Rather than arbitrarily 'level up' your bad guys, switch tactics. Bad guys around the world share one thing in common – they hate fair fights. Rather than go after hard targets (well-armed soldiers, fortresses, etc.) they will strike the undefended weak spots – allied NPCs, player allies, or even the very support structure that your players rely upon (temples where they go to get healed, towns where they go to rest or sell their treasures, inns where they let off some steam, etc.) As your players scramble to respond, improve the bad guys' tactics in a fight – don't make them stand their ground if your players have an obvious upper hand. Instead, have them flee, setting up ambushes for those who try to follow to closely – after all, if your players have a reputation for winning their battles, who is to say your bad guys won't set up escape routes (filled with nasty traps)

well in advance of a fight?

18. **Peel back the layers one by one, but always be ready to rip them all off**. When trying to establish a good momentum, always ensure that the flow of information to your players is constant and rewarding. A good portion of momentum is how quickly your players learn about your world and its plots/stories. Try to reveal or at least hint at new information (even in tiny amounts) every session, and keep the narrative going. If your players suddenly find themselves at a loss for what to do next, then it's time to make your *big* reveals.
19. **Make your players care about the good guys AND the villains**. This can't be stressed enough. Almost everything on this list depends on your players actually caring about the narrative, plots, and people in your games. Your players need to have a sense of motivation when it comes to their interactions with their allies and enemies in order for you to use NPCs to drive your narrative.

    So how do you make players care about the guy in town who appraises their newly-found treasures? Well, much time and wasted effort has been spent by Storytellers the world over trying to make their players like a certain NPC, only to find that their response is lukewarm at best. The key is not to really look like you're trying at all. Instead of having Bob the Appraiser constantly trying to make friends with your PCs, instead portray Bob as the average workaday fellow he is. Have a local constable or lord accuse the players of tomb-robbing or theft, and when the powers that be have the PCs all but locked up in the local jail, have Bob show up. The appraiser vouches for the PCs' honesty and the length of time he's been doing business with them buying and trading rare goods. The PCs are freed. Thanks Bob!

    Getting your players to like villains is just as easy. The key here is that while the PCs might (and rightly should) hate the fiend, your players don't necessarily have to. The best way to approach this is when you first create your campaign, wipe the

terms *hero* and *villain* from your mind entirely. Instead, write *characters*. A character has good points and bad, and a motivation to do something great or terrible in your story. The best villains became so because of perfectly rational but tragic events – the death of a loved one, being wrongfully accused of something, or a single mistake that snowballed into a life gone wrong. The best villains aren't evil people, they simply do evil things along the way to achieving their goals.

20. **Give your players a stake**. The player is the crux of any role playing game. It isn't called role-telling, or role-game-mastering; the whole point of the game and its genre is the player. Without their involvement and personal connection to our stories, there is no game. So how do you forge this connection?

    Ownership.

    When your players realize that the game world is theirs, they will naturally begin to take ownership. The roads, trails and tides are theirs to master; the choices they make give birth to new stories, new allies and enemies. The concept of ownership lets your players know that they can do, become, or take on anything they desire within the bounds and rules of the world and its denizens. Always give your players a path by which they can achieve their goals reasonably, fairly, and successfully.

    This doesn't mean you should let your players run your game for you. Much the opposite; make the rules and setting clear to them, keep your boundaries fair and transparent, and let them work within the rules and boundaries to achieve their ends. Give your players the room to explore their characters and their roles in the story, and they will create their own narratives that fit within the shared world – taking some of the burden from the Storyteller, and along the way, develop a feeling of ownership over their little part of your world.

21. **Rewards, rewards, rewards**. This can't be stressed enough. We are not saying that you need to run Monty Hall campaigns, giving out treasure like air and water, but always

ensure that accomplishments are recognized with a commensurate feeling of achievement – whether that comes in the form of Experience points/skills advancement, treasure, in-game recognition (fame and glory) or simply approval and congratulations around the table. Rewards should be given out liberally, but never freely. Make your players understand that rewards must be earned, and ensure that when rewards are given out, they are given out equitably. When your players put in a lot of effort and hard (in-game) work – no matter what that effort is, it is up to you to ensure that such things are not being ignored.

22. **Penalties, penalties, penalties**. The other side of the reward coin is an instant and commensurate penalty for failures as well. When your players bite off more than they can chew, make sure they know it – at no time should your players feel as if they are 'too big to fail' (See Reality Checks above). Furthermore, in-game failures (in whole quests, not merely dice rolls) should have consequences, giving your players a dose of negative reinforcement to go along with all the positive. Balance any penalties your players suffer with their rewards, and make it clear what level of consequence each of their actions or decisions will have – it is unfair to penalize players for a mistaken impression or misunderstanding of a rule.

III. How to Tie it All Together:

23. **Keep an adventure journal**. As you plan the game, start a journal, filling it with important NPCs, places, ideas, story threads and arcs, and notes on encounters and battles. As you run your game, update this journal with all of the new or updated information derived from your sessions. Little by little, you add to your original notes on NPCs and places, fleshing things out as you go. This way, you avoid the burn-out of trying to completely flesh everything out before the game begins, and you are left with

plenty of room to change and adapt the various people, places, and events in your game.

24. **Outline by NPC, Time, and Plot Thread**. Using a simple linear chart, plot the progress of your story in three ways; first, plot the actions of each major NPC (particularly the villains) during each chapter or act of your story. Then, on a separate page, plot the Timeline of your campaign, taking care to note important events and their intended dates – even if those dates are very rough. Finally, plot the actual narrative events on a third page, keeping track of significant story elements and plots as best as you can, and taking care not to allow too many loose threads or unresolved stories to develop. Once you have your three plot charts filled out, compare them, and rectify any disparities you might find by overlaying them. The final outline for your campaign should reflect lessons and consistencies you discovered during this process, and it will allow you to think of your story in three dimensions, better enabling you to alter certain events (to account for unexpected PC choices, victories, or failures) without throwing the whole plot out the window.
25. **Encourage your players to take notes**. While a good Storyteller keeps detailed notes on all of his sessions, events, and NPCs, it never hurts to have your players get into the habit of taking notes as well. This gives you a fallback in case you forget something, and helps to create an air of honesty and transparency at times too. When your players know they can 'call you out' on something you forgot or didn't keep consistent, it not only makes you a better Storyteller in the future, it bumps your integrity up a notch or two in their eyes. After all, while everyone makes mistakes, it is most admirable when someone can immediately and gracefully own up to them.
26. **Make character sheets for your most important NPCs**. Keep their stats, abilities, and resources written down for easy reference. This will enable you to quickly confirm various facts in-game, and help you to keep everything together over the course

of a game. Write down any important information revealed by or to each major NPC during your sessions, and refer back to them in the future when your players encounter him or her again.

27. **Resources, resources, resources**. Boil down the plots, intentions, and capabilities of all of your major NPCs (ally and villain) to resources. Figure out how many soldiers, spies, assassins, apprentices, henchmen, etc. each of them has, as well as the amount of money they have on hand, their income, and the source of said income. Determine what properties they own, how many specialized retainers (blacksmiths, ink-makers, scholars, seers, bakers, etc.) they have at hand, as well as their more intangible sources of wealth or power – public support, royal protection, powerful allies, religious influence, etc. This is one of the best ways to determine allied and enemy strength at any given moment. Referring to this list can give you all sorts of new ideas and plans when it comes to these NPCs and what they are capable of doing at any given time, as well as their strengths and vulnerabilities.
28. **Leave nothing behind...** The biggest no-no in storytelling is the unresolved plot thread. Too many storytellers (especially in television) forget this fact, and write themselves into a corner with certain plots and storylines, only to drop them completely. This leaves your players hanging, and creates a sense of unpreparedness and disorder in your games. Every single plot thread you introduce should have some sort of resolution, even if it is down the road a bit. If a plot thread is underperforming, never just forget about it, sweeping the rubble under your rug. Give it some sort of resolution, even if that resolution is sudden, and be sure to find some tiny element of the now-dead plot to tie back into one of your main threads.
29. **But pack lightly.** Dovetailing with leaving nothing behind, make sure that every single plot thread you do come up with drives your primary narrative forward, even just a little. Economy here is very important – while every campaign should have a

number of primary and secondary plot threads, care should be taken to ensure that there aren't too many of these floating around at any one time. Try to find a number of simultaneous threads you can manage without too much hassle, and stick to it. Don't let yourself get bogged down with too many storylines at once, and you won't feel the need to drop them or leave things unresolved. Find the happy middle-ground where your players each have at least one personal or secondary plot line to follow in addition to the two or three primary story threads in your campaign.

30. **And I keep hitting repeat peat peat**… Role playing games are verbal narratives, in that the information being passed from storyteller to player is spoken, rather than being written down. This means that information being passed should be passed clearly, often, and repeated when necessary to ensure it is driven home. Never be afraid to hammer a key concept into your players' memories over and over again. Information retention among players is about the same as with any sort of public speaking – about 50% of what you say will be remembered by your players by the time you finish saying it. To counter this, always present your key pieces of information early in the session, before people are tired, bogged down, or thinking about going home/to bed for the night. Present information when people are most likely to pay attention and remember it – moments when none of your players are distracted, absent, or talking. Make a habit of revisiting important moments from previous games at the beginning of each new session, and don't be afraid to develop a non-verbal clue when presenting important information to your players – an eyebrow waggle or dramatic forward lean that lets them know to take note of what you're about to say should suffice.

IV. How to Earn and Keep the Trust of Your Players:

31. **Integrity**. As a Storyteller, you have an important covenant with your players, who will look upon you as their guide and window into the world you're presenting. There is no greater asset to a Storyteller than integrity. If your players can't trust you, then they can never enjoy the stories or encounters you bring to the table. All of us at Blackstone Entertainment are players or game masters ourselves. We know full well what it's like to have an unreliable or dishonest game master. You slay a dozen foes more quickly than your game master expected, and a dozen more appear from nowhere. You figure out an elaborate scheme and corner an important villain earlier than your game master wished – and that villain miraculously manages to escape. Such tactics make for a thoroughly bad gaming session. Be honest and forthright in all of your decisions, and never trifle with the trust of your players.
32. **The adversaries are on the table, not around it.** Sometimes, from the other side of the table, it is easy to forget that your players are just as invested in your story and world as you are. You spend hours making maps, designing encounters, and breathing life into your world. Your players are just visitors, right? They're just here to foil your best-laid plans and trample over your carefully crafted stories. It is a frighteningly simple thing for players and game masters to become adversarial in their outlook. This is only made worse when your players feel they can't trust you.
33. **The world belongs to the players – you just work there**. Always remember that at the end of the night, whether your world, your session, or your ideas were good or not depends entirely on the opinions of your players. Players are the heart and soul of an RPG, and if they're not having fun, it's a bad game – *period*. It doesn't really matter how much the Storyteller enjoys the game; the thing that keeps your players coming back to your table again and again is *their* enjoyment. Luckily for you, if the players like it, then it probably goes without saying that you've done well, and

should be proud.

34. **Consistency**. One of the worst deal-breakers for any game session is a lack of consistency. If Rule 47 states that dragons always sleep on Thursdays, and your party enters your cave on Thursday, then the dragon had better be snoring his scaly head off. Ensure your rules are clear, concise, and known by all, and abide by those rules, even when they work against you.

35. **No one is the Storyteller's favorite, even if they are**. Worse than a lack of consistency for utterly ruining a gaming group is the presence of favoritism at the game table. Nobody expects Bob the Storyteller to ignore his wife's character at the table, but they do at least expect that their own characters are going to be given the same level of attention and fairness as she. We all play favorites at one time or another, but the gaming table should not be one of those places – after all, everyone is there to have fun, and deserves an equitable amount of playtime, fairness, and fun.

36. **Reward your players for ruining everything**. The easiest trap for a Storyteller to fall into is an unwillingness to allow an easy victory over a carefully-made encounter, foe or villain. We've all seen this scenario play itself out at one time or another – Evilpants Vilebreath has trapped the PCs in a deep, dark dungeon, and laughs maniacally as he monologues his way through his dastardly plot. Suddenly, a PC picks up a sharp stone, and gives the rock a toss (queue the sound of a d20 rolling across the table…) and boom! A critical success! Rock to the skull, lights out, massive hemorrhaging and death.

    But Mr. Vilebreath wasn't supposed to die until the 17th Act of the campaign, and this is only day 2! What is a Storyteller to do? Well, if the rules state that the damage kills him, and he had no pre-existing defenses, then I'm afraid Mr. Vilebreath is *dead*. If you fudge it up here, *your players will remember it*, and never trust your impartiality again. They will see that your story is more important to you than either the rules or their die rolls (not to

mention think a little less of Mr. Vilebreath in the future), and cease to buy into your illusion.

37. **Ensure everyone knows the rules, and abides by them, especially you**. Simply put, if you don't know the rules of a game very well, don't run that game. Familiarize yourself with the rules, and ensure you at least know the rules that are most likely to come up during your next session. Help new players understand the system by running practice combat sessions before their characters' lives are on the line, and always take the time early on to explain things so that everyone understands. If a question over rules comes up, make a quick ruling so as not to break your momentum, but take the time to thoroughly read said rule once the game session ends, and explain what you've learned to your players afterwards.

38. **Be an arbiter, even away from the dice**. Though the purpose of this list is to provide tips for better Storytelling, one of the key ingredients of maintaining trust *in-game* is the Storyteller's reputation for conflict resolution *outside the game*. Nip unhealthy player-on-player conflict in the bud, and ensure it doesn't disrupt your game sessions. Gaming groups who are easily distracted, fight with one another or shun certain members, or who engage in disruptive or disrespectful behaviors are rarely successful groups.

    No matter how much planning, drive, or good intentions the Storyteller might put into his or her games, bad group dynamics will invariably bring down the mood, drag personal grudges or distrust into the session, or outright sabotage the evening. Harmless ribbing is perfectly acceptable (even encouraged), but anything that goes beyond a jovial or amicable level should never be tolerated in a good gaming group. Responsibility lies largely with the host of the game, but the players must also police themselves from time to time as well. Everyone around the table needs to feel as if they belong to the group, and that they contribute meaningfully to the dynamic.

39. **Pay attention to your players, especially the quiet ones**.

Recognize the contributions of each and every one of your players - if you can't do this, remove the player from your group because you are doing him or her no favors as their Storyteller. Many players fit into the category of the "Shy One" or the "Newbie", and as such they often remain quiet and relatively passive during your sessions. Some people stay in this phase for months, even years - it is up to you to figure out how to challenge and reward them based on the level of their ability to contribute, and praise them for their achievements. In the personal experiences of those of us at Blackstone Entertainment Inc., it is often the quiet or shy players that surprise and amaze you when you least expect it.

V. How to Establish and Keep Narrative Integrity

40. **Fall in love with your story, not your characters**. A major sin for any writer or Storyteller is to like an NPC so much that you turn him or her into a Mary Jane. Avoid this at all costs – nobody likes an infallible or immortal NPC. Give your best heroes flaws, give your worst villains redeeming qualities, and when it is time for someone to die, let it happen – if a favorite NPC has to fall because it makes sense for the story, don't spare him or her out of nostalgia or fondness. The trick here is to make your players love your NPCs, rather than just you.
41. **Both allies and villains have long memories**. Be sure to reward your players for their accomplishments, ensuring their actions and decisions have all of the consequences – good or bad – that they warrant. If your players help out an NPC ally, make sure that ally remembers it, and adapt their outlook accordingly. The same goes for villains – the best villains are the ones who last, and making a nemesis out of a villain early on in the game should have lasting and meaningful consequences down the

road.

42. **Consistency builds your world for you**. While players might not remember your thirty-minute speech about the history and politics of The Three Kingdoms, they will remember all of the little encounters and events that happen along the way – a border skirmish here, a murdered diplomat there, and the ever-present whispers of escalation and plots in the halls of The Marcher Lords. Through your consistent portrayal of your world and its major NPCs' reactions to events, you are cementing the laws and rules of the campaign setting in your players' minds. Tiny, consistent portions fill a stomach more efficiently (and comfortably) than binge-feeding.

43. **Fall in love with your characters, not your story**. Wait… what? Didn't you just tell us to do the exact opposite?!? The reverse of our first lesson in this section is also true. Too many Storytellers fall in love with the story they WANT to tell, rather than the story their players are actually EXPERIENCING. We all let ourselves forget that the narrative belongs to the players, not us. While the Storyteller may write about, populate, and even paint the game world, it is not really a world at all until the players enter it. If you find your players going in a direction that they want to go, resist your knee-jerk reaction to 'steer' them back into the channel, and try to determine whether their enjoyment might better be served by a change in heading on the part of the story. Let your players steer your campaign when they're so obviously enjoying themselves, and never try to 'take their toys' from them. Your story belongs to them, after all. Instead, create character-driven narratives that depend on people, not specific story arcs, to drive momentum. Present your world not only through your own voice, but that of important allied and enemy NPCs as well; allow these NPCs and their basic nature and motivations to evolve naturally, and your story will seem to flow just as naturally.

44. **Condense the world around your players**. One of the best ways to both build player trust and keep their attention is to weave

a living, breathing world around them. This might seem a difficult task to do properly – how in the world are you supposed to make every single NPC, place, and event seem natural and alive? Simply put, you do so using the greatest tool in a Storyteller's arsenal: you portray only the tiny portion of your world your players actually see. If they are in the village, all you have to do is make THAT village come alive – sprinkle a half dozen mundane, perfectly village-like things going on around them; a blacksmith absent-mindedly hammering at a horseshoe; a baker angrily pulling a burnt loaf from his kiln; a farmer fussing over turning his fruit about to present their best side to passersby. Call it window-dressing if you like, but this kind of mundane detail creates a powerful illusion in your players' mind that they are in a sandbox – that the world behaves precisely as they expect it should – not just this tiny village, but the whole realm beyond. As any sandbox, it will invite them within to do as they please – go where they want, and explore every nook and cranny you present to them.

45. **Allow your players to play, but don't forget that you're a player as well**. Creating a great story about more than just making a giant sandbox for your players to dig around in. It is also about finding the perfect balance between ushering your players towards the things you want them to find, and letting them find those things on their own. The key here is to learn how to become a subtle mover, always acting to influence the narrative just beneath the surface. Perhaps the most powerful tool of all in a Storyteller's arsenal is his or her ability to convince the players that they are doing what they WANT to do, when in reality they are doing what you have INFLUENCED them to do. Most players can spot a 'railroader' immediately; once they figure out they're being led around on a conveyor belt, they stop trying to come up with anything on their own, and the world becomes a whole lot less fun. Never railroad your players into an action or decision; instead, constantly and consistently present them with a number of choices and consequences for every event; little by little, you

will not only ‘train’ them to pick the best choices, but learn a great deal about their decision making processes at the same time. This will allow you to tailor your narrative in the future to match with their decision making, enabling your players to feel as if they are the ones leading the reins, rather than you. It is all about deception and subterfuge, but done well, it is seamless and a great deal of fun as well.

46. **Create mystery, but don’t be mysterious**. The trick to weaving the illusion of seamlessness and continuity in a world is to imbue your stories with the subtle air of mystery. That strange, mystic uncertainty that lies just at the edge of everything in your world – the invisible current which doesn’t quite explain everything your players seek to learn, always leaving them wanting to know more. Make sure your players know just what they need to know, but nothing more until the story is ready to reveal it to them.

    Take this mystery to the very edge of reason, and STOP THERE. Never allow mysteries to fog up or entirely obscure your story or your events – nobody likes too many unanswered questions – and it is easy for your players to begin assuming that either you yourself don’t know the answers, or you are simply holding back out of sadism. Just as important as making sure your players don’t know EVERYTHING is ensuring they know ENOUGH to be able to make the correct choices and sacrifices along the way. Nothing kills drama faster than meaningless riddles or inscrutability

47. **Don’t make Jaws: The Revenge**. Now, the great campaign is finally over, and the heroes have defeated the evil villain and saved the lives of their friends and families. They return to their homes as saviors and legends, perhaps retiring from their adventuring days and taking up the reins of power, or returning to the simple life or a farmer, or even buying the old tavern where they first met those many years ago. There is an extremely appealing – even irresistible – temptation to revisit these heroes one day in the near future, dusting off the old character sheets

and setting the aging heroes on yet another quest. The problem here lies in the fact that Storytellers too often attempt to recapture the ‘mood’ of the original campaign, only to have the story fall flat. This is the sequel effect, and it is a pretty well-known and documented phenomena in movies. If done hastily, it often feels tired, rehashed, and even a little sad sometimes to see our beloved heroes become little more than nostalgic old relics grasping and reaching for former glories.

When approaching a ‘sequel’ type game, the first thing you need to do away with right off the bat is any notion that you will ‘recapture’ the exact mood or feeling of the original game. You can’t, because the original game was just that – *original*. These are no longer the naïve, plucky adventurers from that first session many months or years back. These are hardened adventurers now, and the players portraying them are probably a little different in their approach to them as well.

If you must do a sequel, approach it with fresh ideas that would stand on their own merits if even the game were being played with brand-new characters. The best sequels in movies are usually those capable of standing alone, after all. Fresh ideas create a fresh mood, and rather than attempting the impossible task of recapturing some bit of nostalgia or feeling from the previous game, they allow you to create a whole new mood for the story.

Feel free to reintroduce old friends and old rivals as well, but don’t forget to infuse the story with new blood as well – new friends and enemies alike to round out your cast. Always resist the urge to make caricatures of your old NPCs; remember, they evolve and change as well, and there is always the possibility that old friends will become new enemies, and vice versa!



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