Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering

or...

How to Manipulate Friends and Influence People

Ver. 1.2

Introduction

I love roleplaying. For me, RPGs go way beyond the "G" part of their name. They're not just roleplaying "games", but a way of hobbyist life as serious as any fly-fisherman, sports fan/player or model railroad enthusiast. The problem is that very few people feel that way. Some say they do, but it's apparent through their actions that they don't; someone who truly loves something will always look for ways to be better at it. Most of the GMs I've played with, however, think they're "good enough" and if you don't like it, leave. So I do, because a roleplaying game exists for the benefit of both the GM *and* the player. And because of my love for roleplaying, I'm offering this online manual, free and without cost, to whosoever wishes to read it and possibly benefit from the experience contained herein. If you like it, feel free to print it up, photocopy it, and even give it to your friends -- I wrote it as a labor of love, not a way to make money -- just do me the favor of leaving my name, byline and copyright notice intact. And note that I'm not allowing anyone to use this for commercial gain, if you try to sell it, my lawyers and I will come after you for the money you make, got it?

Chapter 1

Forget Winning

I know it's difficult, what with western civilization's grand attachment to winning and losing, but do it anyway. Role-playing games are not the GM versus the players. I don't care if people have told you it is. I don't care if books have said things like, "whose game is it, anyway?" Because the real answer to that question is that it's everyone's game: the GM and the players. Without players, you ain't got no game. Period. You'll end up just playing with yourself.

Your Uncle Figgy has encountered so many GMs out there who believe that they either have to 1) kill off at least one character a game session, or 2) put in clues that only have meaning to someone who already knows the solution; all in some pathetic attempt to prove that they're better than the players. These sad individuals suffer under the delusion that they're "winning" if the players can't figure things out or if their characters drop like flies.

If you're that hung up on the concepts of "winning" and "losing", Uncle Figgy will be so generous as to toss you a bone: you're winning if your players are having a grand time and talk about the game when you get up to go to the bathroom. You're losing if your players show no animation other than when it's time to roll the dice on your umpteenth combat in the last ten minutes or when they beg out of the next game with such excuses as, "I'd really love to come, but I..."

If it doesn't make you happy to see your players having fun, then maybe you'd be happier as a player yourself. That should be your first and most important goal, after all. Everything else is secondary.

Avoid GOD Syndrome

The person running a game is, almost literally, the god of the campaign world. The GM decides the fates of the NPCs and, in a way, the PCs. Population, evolution, weather, magic; all of creation rests at the GM's whim. Problems arise, however, when the GM gets carried away with this minor power rush and takes it into the real world. Symptoms of GOD syndrome: refusing to discuss anything with the players -- insisting that its, "my way or the highway"; getting angry when players raise a voice of dissent about GM calls; threatening to kill characters when things aren't going his or her way. I've even seen one GM go so far as to throw someone out of his house for daring to look at the GM's die rolls (which he wasn't making the least attempt to hide).

All of these are examples of GMs whose power has gone to their heads. Remember, it's the players' world, too. If they're not having fun, they leave -- leaving you without a game. Then you've lost ALL your power. Don't risk it.

Cheating: Good and Bad

There are two ways to cheat: good and bad. So which is which? Here are some examples, see if you can pick out which one is an example of "good" cheating and which one is "bad":

> A PC is about to be shot in the back, and she hasn't a clue. Even though you've rolled a critical hit (if your game system uses such things) that will kill her instantly, you tell the players that they hear a gunshot and a bullet shatters the glass she's holding in her hand.

> A PC is about to shoot an NPC in the back, and he hasn't a clue. The player has rolled for a clear hit. You, not wanting your NPC to die just yet, roll a few dice, ignore the result, and tell the players that the NPC bends down to tie his shoe at just the right moment and the bullet breaks a window above his head, thereby alerting him.

Both of these are cheating, and are pretty much an example of cheating in the same way. The first one is good, the second is bad. Why? Mostly because it's a law of numbers. As the GM, you control an entire world's worth of characters. The players get only one at a time. Vinnie the Thug can easily be resurrected as Johnny the Thug, Lefty the Thug, Squints the Thug, Joey the Thug, etc., etc., ad infinitum. The player, on the other hand, only gets one Torinia Darkheart. When Torinia is dead, that's pretty much it. Sure, her player can create another character, but if she's any good, the new one just won't be the same as the last.

Good cheating is useful for a light, cinematic style of play where the PCs only die from sheer stupidity (Player: What does the sign above the lever say? GM: Emergency Reactor Destruct Lever. Player: I'm going to pull it and see what happens...). Bad cheating is mainly used by GMs who feel that they have to "win" against the players or force the players to follow their "plan".

Don't Follow the Rules

Almost every role-playing game has at least one sentence that says something like, "these rules are only guidelines..." and that's exactly the way they should be played. Common sense and GM's judgement should be the *only* rule followed 100%. If your system comes up with something that you think is totally bogus, drop it and get on with play. Don't make your players sit and wait while you search in vain for the "official" answer. Make a judgement call based on what you feel is most logical and go for it. I once had a GM that had to look through at least three or four books whenever a character wanted to purchase something. And if that thing wasn't

listed in one of the books, this GM said, "nobody has any." It goes right along with that "improvising" thing we'll talk about later.

Some of the sillier rules out there include:

- One where an infant could throw a football about seventy feet.
- One where a character had to take a to-hit penalty to hammer a wooden stake through the heart of a prone and unmoving vampire.
- One where a character standing right in front of a cannon would be relatively uninjured when that cannon was fired.

Just like your own planning, the people who plan role-playing games simply *cannot* predict every possible action or situation in which a rule might be used (and consequently, might break down). If you find a rule breaking down, drop it and use your common sense. We all know that an infant can't even hold a football, much less throw it. It shouldn't even take a to-hit roll, much less a penalized one, to hammer a stake through the heart of an unmoving victim (a struggling one is another story). And standing directly in front of a cannon when it's fired will kill most anyone, even if it's not loaded! Remember, the GM's decision, as long as it is fair, honest and sensible, is one of the fundamental aspects of gaming. Trust yourself and your calls, and don't be afraid of the players arguing with them -- as long as you're consistent and equitable, they have no complaint coming.

Do Follow the Rules

At least the basic ones of the game. The "mechanics" of it. If you're going to make changes to the underlying mechanics of the game, make sure that all of your players agree to the changes first. I played in a supers game where I had created a character three times faster than the average human -- it was a character who couldn't hit hard, but who would always hit first. Until we started the game and found out that the GM wasn't using the rules for character speed (a fact we discovered only through play, the GM wasn't admitting to any rule-changes on his part) which made my character next to useless. Needless to say, that was the last game Uncle Figgy played with that particular GM.

If the rules state something important, and you forget it, admit to it when the players bring it up. If the rules to your system say that a roll for a parry is a roll on three dice, and you forget (or don't understand) and call for a roll on four, don't get aggravated at the player who brings it to your attention -- that player may very well know the system much better than you. Admit your mistake, reroll the dice and keep playing. I once had a GM get quite angry at me for bringing up a fundamental rule which he had apparently misunderstood and which, in his translation, would have resulted in the unfair deaths of the entire party. This hot-tempered individual told me that he hated rules-lawyers and he did not appreciate me arguing with him. Your Uncle Figgy, in turn, told him that I did not appreciate playing with a person who was not mature enough to admit that perhaps he might be in the wrong. That was the last time he ever ran a game in which I (or anyone else at the table, for that matter) participated.

Chapter 2

Stop Planning

You know how it is: you spend days, maybe weeks, planning a fabulous adventure. You've got your clues. You've got your red herrings. Your macguffin, your villain, your victim, your plot and your story. You know it's just going to wow the bodily fluids out of your players. You bring it to the gaming table, and everyone just kind of yawns, blinks at you, and starts asking when you're going to order the pizza. They think the plotline you've spent so much time on is more boring than the latest news of Great-Uncle Gilbert's prostate, and they're chasing after the red herring as though it's the most interesting thing in the world. Quick, what do you do!?

First, throw your whole plan out the window. Burn it. Bury it. Eat it. Wrap it in a steak and feed it to your pet pirahna. Why'd you make it, anyway? Do you have that big of an ego that you figured you could predict *everything* your players were going to do? I've seen the seemingly stupidest individuals become instant geniuses while role-playing. Conversely, I've seen some of the most intelligent people become morons. You can never predict with 100% certainty what your players are going to do, and if you force them to follow what you had planned, they'll resent you for it. (Unless you can make them think that it was their idea, see Chapter 4 for hints on how to do just that.)

Another danger to this kind of planning is that you run the risk of loving your well-crafted story so much that you might get angry at the player's actions. The situation I describe above is a real one, and the GM was extremely peeved that no one would do what he wished. In a misguided effort to correct the situation, he began cheating -- ignoring basic rules and character attributes, or changing them to accomplish what he wanted. As an example, it took a character traveling at 250 miles per hour (approximately 370 feet per second) about 30 seconds to cover a distance of about one-half of a mile. In that amount of time, the character should have been able to cover four times as much ground -- at least 2 miles! But that wouldn't have fit what the GM had planned for his NPC to accomplish.

And that leads us to the final danger of rampant planning: NPC favoritism. A common pitfall for the GM to fall into is to become so much in love with the NPCs that they have a tendency to take over the story, especially when the story has been planned out and the players refuse to follow it. PCs can't figure out the clues? Have your wonderful NPC come in and explain how stupid they all are because the clue was just SO easy. PCs having a hard time defeating the wonderful villain you've created? Have your NPC be the only one who can take him out. Better yet, what about when the PCs are kicking the snot out of the villain you thought would be such a terror? Why, just have him all of a sudden become smarter, stronger, quicker or somehow much more powerful than he really is. Whose game is this, anyway? It belongs to the GameMaster, right?

WRONG! Uncle Figgy has said it before and he'll say it again: the game is for the player characters, *not* your NPCs. They should be the movers and the shakers. They should be the motivators. If they can't figure out the clues, maybe you've made the clues just a little bit too esoteric (maybe innocently, maybe out of some need to prove how much smarter you are than the players -- if this is the case, you should reread the section on "winning"). It's your job to keep the game moving and exciting. If the PCs can't figure out the clues, you need to make them easier. If they can't beat the villain, maybe you've made him too tough (for the same reasons above, possibly). Make him a little weaker, or, better yet, make him hold back until the PCs are strong enough to go head to head with him (fiction is full of this sort of thing: the villain throws henchman after henchman at the PCs, but refuses to get into a confrontation with them). And if you've made your villain too weak and the PCs are dusting his doilies, let them. They'll feel good about the easy win and they'll all go home happy, little realizing that he was only a small fish compared to the barracudas that are out there and who have probably gotten ticked off at the loss of one of their friends. And now rumors may have gotten around about the PCs strengths and weaknesses, making them that much easier to counter (see the section on good NPCs for more info).

Lastly, don't be afraid to see one of your NPCs die -- what's good for the players' characters is good for yours, too. The death of an NPC that the players have grown to love will inject a touch of drama. Even a villain that has been taunting them for years will leave a vast hole in their hearts when he finally bites the bullet. And in a horror or fantasy game, the death of an NPC could be just the beginning!

The Bare Bones

You should, however, plan a role-playing game to some extent. You need to know who the villains are. Who is on the side of the PCs. Where the majority of the action will take place. But don't do any more than that. Role-playing is like interactive storytelling. A good author comes up with a plot, a setting (or locale), the antagonists and the protagonist. The nature of the protagonist she has created will dictate how the character gets from point A to point B, but as the author, she is able to make changes to the character to make sure he really *does* get from point A to point B.

But you, as GM, can't do that. You have to come up with the plot, the setting and the antagonist, and then you have to stop. The protagonists belong to the players. It's *their* job to decide where to move them on the playing field. The best way to deal with this fact is to simply construct a basic skeleton (or framework) for the game, and let the players flesh it out. That way, you don't feel like the players *have* to do this *one* certain thing to move the game along. If you need the PCs to run into the Thing Forgotten in the Fridge, don't plan on where it's going to happen because then you have to force your players to get to that spot, and if they don't, your whole plan could be thwarted. Instead, plan that the Thing could attack in several different spots at several

different times. Chances are good that your players will end up in one of those many spots at some point, then boom! And as a bonus, they'll think you planned it all along.

So how much is too much and how much is not enough? The best way to handle planning is to use what Uncle Figgy calls "planning wide". In my experience, there are two types of planning: Planning long and narrow, and planning short and wide. The first type, planning long, is the bad kind. It sets up one path to be followed. One goal to achieve. It's the easiest kind of planning there is. The problem is that you're stuck when your players don't like that one path and don't want to reach that one goal.

The second type, planning wide, is the best (and the hardest) type. Planning wide consists of coming up with multiple paths, none of which are set in stone, that your players can choose to explore. A wide plan will often have many different long plans throughout, many of which overlap. Once the player characters have decided on a path to follow, then you can hit them with the long plan for that path -- just make sure that the long plan has jumping-off points in case your players feel that they're really *not* that interested in the particular path they've chosen. **Uncle Figgy's Note:** This is unlikely to happen. Usually, when PCs set down a path, they pursue it to its bitter end, no matter the consequences. I *have* seen one or two individuals, though, who want to go somewhere else while the rest of the group follows the chosen path. It's Uncle Figgy's tactic to then give them a path to follow on their own that will eventually lead them right back to the original path with the rest of the group.

Man, I *Loved* That Movie!

So now you think it would make a great roleplaying game. Here's what you should think about before you do. First of all, you run the risk that some of your players have seen the same movie. If they're the generous type, they'll forego the snide comments about your lack of creativity, but they'll *still* know the movie and where it goes at the end. And even though they're *supposed* to keep player knowledge separate from character knowledge, that's kind of a hard job to handle and many players can't. Secondly, you have to remember that the screenwriter of the average movie has almost *total* control over the characters in that movie. As GM, you don't have that luxury. The characters still belong to the players and are theirs to do with as they see fit. You're going to have a hard time getting them to follow the plot exactly.

If you *still* want to turn your favorite movie into a role-playing game, remember to keep it FUN! If your players aren't following it the way you want them too, they obviously don't think it's worth playing. Don't force them to or you run the risk of losing players. This falls right back into the section on "planning" we already mentioned. Movie scripts are often too tight for the average player character, who will seek to break out of it at any opportunity. The best thing to do is take the *idea* of the movie, and then let the players go where they will with it. If your movie is one with which most of your players will be familiar, twist the idea while you use it. The "killer alien loose on a spaceship from which there's little chance of escape" can just as easily be done as a "killer mutant loose in the classified, underground, government facility from which there's little

chance of escape" or even the "killer sea-monster loose on the luxury cruise ship lost at sea from which there's little chance of escape". We all recognize the popular movie (with the motto: "In space, no one can hear you scream"), but would it be so apparent if it took place in a different setting? As with most other things GM, flexibility is the key. Modify, plan wide and think fast.

Game Balance

These two magic words are used by game designers and gamemasters alike to explain away poor decisions and arbitrary rulings. Make it so a certain character type has poor survivability? In the interest of game balance, of course. Make a ruling that has no basis in common sense or realism. Bingo: Game Balance. Too often, however, the phrase is used as an "ego bandage" to prevent the designer or GM in question from looking stupid when a ruling fails the reality check.

Don't get me wrong here, sometimes rulings must be made in order to promote game balance. If a GM runs a dark campaign where combats are bloodily realistic and death is quite common, she definitely doesn't want to see a character who is virtually untouchable and can slay anything with a single whack of a sword. Remember, you can disallow any character that you think doesn't fit into the spirit of your game. The good GM says, "This is what my campaign is like. These are the best types of characters to have. These are the rules we are (or are not) using. These are the PC attributes available and unavailable." The bad GM says nothing, waits until his campaign is on the rocks, then resolves to underhanded scheming and arbitrary "GM call" decisions.

Your Uncle Figgy once played in a fantasy game where a magical object was hidden in the center of a maze. Once in the labyrinth, Uncle Figgy's wizard utilized a "find direction" type spell to navigate. This, of course, upset the GM mightily because it was unbalancing what he had planned (note the inherent danger in planning?). His response? "If you use that spell again, I'm going to kill your character!" Last game I ever played with him.

So how do you handle this sort of unbalancing effect? First of all, be very familiar with your system of choice and how it can possibly be abused. You can bet your life that if there's a way it can be abused, the average player will find that way (*not* necessarily on purpose, either. Some of them simply stumble onto a good idea that works, so they keep using it). By finding the abuses before your players do, you can nip them in the bud. In the very first super-genre game that I ran, I made the mistake of allowing a very powerful psionicist. When the super-villain showed up to summarily trounce the heroes, the psionicist stepped forward and promptly mind-controlled him into giving up. Bang! Game over! Talk about unbalanced. But if I had known the rules of the game better, I would have been able to improvise my way out of it, or known to disallow that type of character altogether! (My solution since then is to make intelligent beings somewhat naturally resistant to mind-control -- that way I don't have to tell people that they cannot play that kind of psionicist. But please note that I always tell everyone this fact *before* they decide to play a psi.)

Secondly, be ready to improvise your way out of an unbalanced situation. How would I have handled a character like the one mentioned above? Perhaps a side effect of the aforementioned magical item at the center of the maze was to interfere with all uses of magic within so many yards of it. The character's spell would get them near to the artifact, but not within reach of it. Perhaps the builders of the maze had planned on such uses of magic within its walls, and so had covered it with an enchantment designed only to mislead that particular type of spell. In such a case, going at it the hard way would be much easier than trying to take the easy way out.

Campaign Types - The Two Extremes

Monty Haul and You're All Gonna Die! Good games fall somewhere in between these ends, but Uncle Figgy has played in quite a few that were at either one end or the other.

Monty Haul gets its name from the host of the old game show "Let's Make a Deal", where contestants would be selected out of the crowd, given say a hundred dollars, then asked whether they would like to keep it or trade it in for a hidden prize that could be anything from a cruise or new car to a wheelbarrow with a flat tire. Monty Haul games are pretty much the same. For amazingly trivial exertions on their part, the characters are given rewards that far outweigh the efforts. An equivalent in real life would be paying someone a million dollars just to go out and get a kitten from a pet store. Too often, it is the result of a GM who wants everyone to be happy, so he gives them as much as they can stand. One fantasy GM asked me to help him with a character who had gotten out of hand because of Monty Haulism. Over the course of three games, this character had increased mightily in personal experience and power and had acquired magical items that made him almost godlike. Luckily, the system he was using provided creatures to take care of this problem and I was able to tell the GM how to use them. But it's best not to even start, that way the game can be balanced from the beginning. Make sure that the rewards are equal to the trials needed to get them. If the players get a magic sword, for instance, make them have to fight an NPC armed with it. Remember that gold coins weigh a *lot*. An average of about 1 ounce per coin is reasonable, making them about the size of a silver dollar -- this means that 16 such coins would weigh one pound. So much for the "you find 160 gold pieces" stuff. Are the characters REALLY going to be able to carry 10 pounds just in gold? Using these guidelines and your own common sense helps maintain balance without arbitrary and punitive rulings by the GM.

You're All Gonna Die (YAGD) games are at the opposite end of the spectrum as Monty Haul games. In YAGD games, the characters go through countless obstacles and harsh trials for very small rewards indeed. The GM of the YAGD campaign is generally one of those who believes in "winning" a roleplaying game by killing off characters. It is common in the average YAGD game for at least one player character to be killed during each gaming session. Often, the PCs face overwhelming odds and come out on top just to face a deadly trap placed there only to wipe them out. I played in one game in which the GM happily twisted rules and created fiendish traps

that existed for no other purpose than to murder the PCs. Even the monsters which the PCs faced were far more powerful than the characters could hope to conquer. Out of six characters starting the game, only one made it out, and the experience awarded him was quite small. After all, the GM had said, he didn't deserve much experience since he hadn't finished the quest and he'd lost all his companions. Again, like the Monty Haul campaign, the rewards must match the trials. If the characters work their fingers to the bone for only a pittance, pretty soon they'll quit doing anything. Their players, likewise, will feel as though there's no point in trying since their characters are just going to die anyway. Some of them might stay and put up with it. Others, like myself, would probably leave.

Roleplaying vs. Adventuring

Throughout the course of modern gaming, one question usually crops up; a question that splits gamers down the middle with each group totally, adamantly, almost violently, pro or con. "Which is better?" They ask. "Roleplaying or adventuring?"

First, let's describe the two schools of thought: The roleplayers believe that a character's advacement should be based on how well that character is roleplayed as well as actual game-play experience; while the adventurers believe that a character's advancement should be based *solely* on actions taken by that character during the game. In short, the roleplayers believe experience point bonuses should be awarded for playing totally in character (among other things), while the adventurers believe that a character should only get experience points from slain monsters or other "game system" methods of reward. The roleplayers think that they contribute more to a game than just rolling dice and so should be rewarded for any acting ability, no matter how bad. The adventurers, on the other hand, think that it is unrealistic for a character to gain *any* advancement based on the actions (or lack thereof) of that character's player; they don't believe that any acting ability should be rewarded, no matter how good.

So which is the right attitude? While the latter argument does have a point (why should a character become, say, a better thief just because her player has written a good story and plays with an accent?), it is Uncle Figgy's opinion that it is the former that holds the most merit. The games are, after all, about ROLEplaying (I.e., playing a role -- like a part in a play). Why should a player who simply rolls dice and reads the results out loud get as much reward as someone who goes that extra step to make your game more exciting and enjoyable for everyone involved? And in most games, the only way to reward the players is by rewarding their characters, usually with experience points (or some other method of advancement).

It is only through this type of reward that a player is motivated to go above and beyond the dice-thrower/reader. Motivated to become a Mad Gamer who enriches your games and makes you happy when he shows up at your door for the next game. And if you neglect these rewards, if you have that Mad Gamer who goes above and beyond when it comes to roleplaying and you give him the same rewards you give to the drudge whose contribution to the game is nothing more than spouting die rolls, don't be surprised when that good player gives up trying or leaves to seek a better gaming group where his efforts will be appreciated.

Chapter 3

Think Fast

That's the only way you can run a great game when you don't have anything but a skeleton. Remember, no matter how hard you try, you can *never* plan on every possible action a player could make -- that's why computer RPGs are so limited. What happens when the warrior in the party decides he wants to take a flying leap off the table, snag the chandelier, swing across the room and put his foot right into the villain's face? Didn't plan for that? Think fast! It's easiest to say, "You can't reach the chandelier". BORING!!! Make him roll some dice to grab ahold of it. Is he wearing full plate and carrying a sword that could be used as an I-beam in high-iron welding? Maybe the rope won't hold him. Don't tell him that. Let him grab hold and start his swing. Using common sense you decide that the chandelier isn't all *that* heavy so the tavern owner didn't use a very strong rope to hold it up. Halfway through his swing, the rope breaks, bringing warrior and chandelier down into the midst of the villain's henchmen.

Improvisation is the keystone of good GMing. It's what separates the entertaining GM from the module-reader whose games are simple dungeon crawls. You need it in almost every situation. If you've decided that the PCs need to go into a specific farmhouse, be ready to change your plans if they won't do it. Maybe what you wanted to happen in that farmhouse could be moved to another location. As an example, I was running a horror game in which I had planned an encounter in the kitchen of the haunted house. Once there, they would have been attacked by a haunted carving knife, which, when finally restrained, held an important clue. But the irresistable hook I had used to lure them in turned out to be far more resistable than I thought. It was imperative to the plot, however, that the characters get ahold of that knife. What to do? Improvise! I ended up having a zombie stumble out of the kitchen wielding the knife. Once the players dealt with the undead, they then had to deal with the knife. When the shooting was over, they had their clue and they never once had to go into the kitchen like I had planned.

In the average pre-published game module, seemingly useless items are placed apparently randomly in dungeons, cities, caravans, whatever. The module-reader GM ignores them. But you can bet your bippy that your players won't. It has been my experience that the average player thinks that if you mentioned it, it *must* be important. Maybe that barrel of apples is just a barrel of apples, but you can't be surprised when a player decides that her character is going to load up. Maybe to use as throwing ammo. Maybe as a way to steal some horses. Their reasons can be surprising, and you can't let yourself show that you've been surprised. Take it from Uncle Figgy, players can sense that uncertainty like a dog can sense fear. If they do something unexpected, do something unexpected right back. Don't cop out just by saying, "it didn't work" or "nothing happens". How lame can you get!? Do something exciting!

So the character in question has filled her pack up with apples. If she gets in a fight or falls into a pit, check to see if any of those apples get smashed. And if they do, and she doesn't wash her pack out, don't forget to have her be swarmed by bees and other flying insects looking for a sweet treat. Don't forget to have her horse munch a hole in her pack while she's not looking. Use common sense -- think about what would happen in the real world, then do the same thing in the game.

Be Overly Dramatic

This goes hand-in-hand with improvisation, you can't really do one without the other. Don't settle for just, "you try to jump the pit, but you don't make it. Take this amount of damage." Yawn. Get dramatic with it!

In one of my games, I had this very thing happen. The characters came across a pit blocking their path. One of the characters, an acrobat, decided that she could jump across despite the crumbling stone and low ceiling. When her player asked me, "can I jump across?" I smiled my best "evil GM" smile and replied, "I don't know. Can you?" Secretly, I decided that there would be a penalty to her die roll, then told her. "It looks pretty treacherous, but you could probably make it." She ended up blowing the roll, but instead of ending it there with the "you don't make it" bit, I milked the tension for all I could.

"You're not going to make it!" I said excitedly (talking loudly and quickly in these kinds of situations makes the players more tense and excited). "Quick, make a die roll to grab onto the other side!"

In this way, I'm giving her another chance at salvation, but putting the responsibility on her character. The player made the second roll, so then I had her make yet a third roll to climb up (again at an unmentioned penalty due to the crumbliness of the rock). She failed.

"The stone you just grabbed hold of pulled out of the wall! Quick, make a roll to grab another one!" Another failure. I'd given her enough chances, so I figured this was it. But still, what about all that training as an acrobat?

"Make a roll to take half-damage." No problem. Now she's at the bottom of the pit. A bit shaken up. A bit banged up. But otherwise fine. Until the other players decide to rescue her...

There's much more to the story, mostly involving more rock being pulled loose from above and nearly landing on her, but that bit should suffice to prove my point: that I took the simplest and most cliched fantasy trap -- the pit -- and turned it into a major scene exciting enough to show up in an action/adventure flick.

Milk Everything the Players Give You

Uncle Figgy once played in a game where one of the PCs had a major love affair with his car (not surprisingly, so did the player). The GM of this game got tired of the car and the player's constant harping about it, so he destroyed it beyond repair in one fell swoop during a super-brawl. What a wimp. The best thing to do about it was what I did when the player moved the character over to my campaign. I milked that car for all the drama, tension and heartache that I could.

First, an explosion in the character's face that knocked him into the front quarter-panel. DENT! Player and character freak and the rest of the players have a *great* laugh. A couple of weeks of game-time pass and the auto is now repaired and in pristine condition. Whoops! Time to have one of his passengers get shot by a sniper (it was a dark supers game, did I mention that?). Now he's got a broken window *and* blood all over his interior. *Back* to the body shop...

I kept this up for as long as the campaign went on, and boy was it fun. Much more enjoyment all around than the one-punch card played by the original GM.

Sometimes players won't give you that much to go on, but most of the time they'll give you at least *something*. I had one player whose character was very standard and run-of-the-mill. With one exception: the player was always looking for a bigger and badder weapon. That was all I needed. Keep a careful eye on your players, and chances are good that you'll see something, too. Then squeeze every drop of drama out of it until you think you can't get anymore.

Chapter 4

Find Players Who Fit Your Game

The corollary is also true: players should seek out GMs who run the style of game they enjoy. Some players like games where there's a lot of detective work. Others just want to kill. Just like the stereo-typical character "classes" in fantasy. You have your warriors (those players who play to kill things), your wizards (the ones who like to think problems through), and your thieves (the ones who are in it for the neat stuff their characters can get). And, just like in one popular fantasy game, there are infinite combinations of these types.

Generally, players who don't enjoy your style of play will leave the group and go looking for what satisfies them. This can lead to bad feelings all around, so it's best to state up-front what style of game you run. I personally do not enjoy hack-n-slash games -- some combat is okay, as long as it's warranted and as long as its not the end result of every encounter. While looking for a gaming group, I came across a GM who was very reluctant to say what his gaming style was (for fear of losing a potential player). Turns out, he ran combat-happy games in which every single encounter resulted in a battle to the death, despite my character's best efforts to the contrary. Seeing that his games were nothing more than kill or be killed, I told him that I really wasn't enjoying myself and was dropping out of his group. This particular GM accused me of "not giving his games a chance" and "letting all the other players down". Not a very mature response, to say the least. Had he simply told me what his gaming style was when I asked, neither of us would have had a problem.

Sometimes, though, players won't leave the group despite the fact that they're not getting what they want. When recruiting for a new gaming group, I always mention first-thing what my style is like. I once had a fellow tell me that he didn't mind. Later, however, I found out that he *did* mind, he was just playing my game because it was the only one around. He wanted much more combat than I normally play, and instead of leaving, he sat and glowered through the entire game, and then complained bitterly at the end that it "needed more combat". The other players thought I had just the right mixture of thinking and fighting, so I did what I could to give him the combat he craved without upsetting the balance for everyone else. It didn't work terribly well; he still felt slighted and the other players weren't too thrilled with all the combat. So from then on, whenever he told me that there wasn't enough fighting for him, I simply said that he had to take it or leave it. I had told him what my style was before we even started playing. It was now his choice to make, not mine.

Player Types

In all my years of roleplaying, I've encountered many different player types. Some are quite interested in roleplaying. To others, roleplaying is just something to do when nothing else is

available. Below, I've listed the types I've come across, and I've tried to arrange them in order from most interested in playing to least interested.

The Mad Gamer. This is the good GM's dream player, and, in Uncle Figgy's experience, the rarest of all players. This guy loves to roleplay and is as serious about it as any human could possibly get. He uses props at the games -- if his character smokes a cigar, he buys one just for the game even if he doesn't smoke. He speaks in different accents for each different character. The names of his characters quite closely match the atmosphere of the game being run (if you run an Arabian-nights style game, he comes up with a name like "Sha'bat al'abatha" or some such). His characters will do things that seem idiotic, but if you look, those things are always totally *in character*. If he has defined his character as curious, he will happily pull every lever he comes across, even though he knows as a player that it will likely get his character killed. To do otherwise would mean to not be *in character*, which is worse to him than death. His characters will often be "concept" characters that, more often than not, totally fit the game genre. Min-maxing is a foreign concept to him. Sure he'll try to make the best character he can, but only if it fits the concept he has created. Get a stronger character for free? He asks. But I really wanted a weak genius, thank you. As long as he knows ahead of time what your gaming style is, he might be quite happy joining in or he might bow out until you run one more his style.

But there *are* problems involved with The Mad Gamer. He expects nothing less than perfection from his GM. If he's not having fun, he's gone; looking for another GM. He wants the GM to respect him for his character playing abilities, not how many monsters he can kill. The GM of a Mad Gamer must give him what his character needs. If he has created an inventor type and the game turns out to be nothing but a slug-fest, he'll leave. If he has created a sneaky thief-type, there'd better be opportunities for sneaking.

Unlike The Average Joe, he is hard to predict because all of his characters are different -- with different motivations and reactions. What you used against one of his characters won't necessarily work against one of his others. But if you know his character, you'll know how to manipulate him, because 95% of the time he will do whatever would be most likely for his character to do.

There is a tendency for fights and arguments to break out around The Mad Gamer when the other players cannot fathom the depths of his being *in character* (e.g., a Mad Gamer playing a ninja from medieval Japan: He puts high stock in honor and finishing the mission, whatever the cost. Another player's character loses a leg through sheer bad luck, thereby -- at least in the ninja's eyes -- endangering the mission. So the ninja kills the hapless PC to prevent him from: 1) spilling information should he be captured, and 2) holding the party back. Needless to say, that character's player gets quite upset with the Mad Gamer for such a heinous act. It is important to note, however, that it is *not* the Mad Gamer who has made this decision, but the ninja character. And being *in character* is of primary importance to the Mad Gamer.). When all the other players are laughing about the stupid thing another player has done, the Mad Gamer will only join in if his character is likely to do so, because he is doing his best to stay *in character*. This can make it look like he's not having fun, but he's really having the time of his life simply being someone else. Uncle Figgy prides himself on being a Mad Gamer of the highest degree.

The Powergamer (Min/Maxer or "Munchkin"). This gamer wants to wring every drop of ability she can out of the character creation rules. If there's a point-break or die bonus, she'll find it. She genuinely likes role-playing, but she's locked into the concept of "beating the game". Her characters are usually not very creative; instead being the "best" that the genre has to offer. She examines the rules as much as she can in an attempt to find the most useful character type. If one class of character seems stronger than any others, she will almost always go for that class. In games where point values are used to design characters, she will constantly redesign her characters for maximum cost-effectiveness and point-breaks.

There are few inherent problems involved in playing with a Powergamer; the most obvious being that a Powergamer can (and will) quickly become a Rules Lawyer if she feels that she is being cheated out of a rule that she has relied on to make her character more powerful.

The Average Joe. Your basic gamer. There is nothing extraordinary about the Average Joe in any way, either positive or negative. He likes roleplaying, but he hasn't quite understood that his characters are supposed to be different from each other and different from himself. He shows up on time for all the games, but he might not take them too seriously. If one of the other players starts talking about work while the GM is busy with another player, the Average Joe will join in.

The Average Joe is the easiest to predict because all of his characters tend to be the same and they all tend to be like him. Uncle Figgy had a player in one of his groups who was the perfect Average Joe. When playing a supers game, his character was a big, metal-covered, muscle-bound combat machine. When playing a fantasy game, his character was a big, metal-covered, muscle-bound combat machine. And, when playing a cyberpunk game, his character was... well, you get the idea.

Like the Powergamer, there aren't many problems involved in playing with the Average Joe so long as you don't expect too much of him. He'll tend to go along with whatever the other players decide in pretty much anything. Put him alone, however, and his decisions will be based on things he has seen, heard or read (e.g., he'll do whatever he thinks other players would do in that situation -- his actions are based on what the player would do or think, *not* what the *character* would do or think).

The Copycat. It's not exactly certain who enjoys roleplaying more: the Copycat or the Average Joe. One thing *is* certain, the Copycat wants to play something she's seen in the movies, on television or in books. If she's allowed to do so, she's quite happy roleplaying and seems to enjoy it very much. This makes her very easy to predict, as her character will almost always do exactly what the original would have done. If you know the original, you know the Copycat's duplicate.

The main problem with the Copycat is that she expects her character to be just as powerful, well-known and respected as the original. In systems with randomly-determined attributes, this can be next to impossible. In systems with point-based characters, the Copycat might not be able to afford the cost of the original. And the Copycat almost never quite understands *why* she can't have *exactly* the character she wants.

The Psycho Killer. This player type likes to roleplay about as much as the Copycat, but only while he's getting his way. If he doesn't get his way, he lashes out by having his character attack everything in sight. When he goes shopping for a weapon and the store-owner won't give him a price he wants, the Psycho Killer kills him. If a cop stops him for something, the Psycho Killer kills him. If anyone in the least bit annoys him, the Psycho Killer kills them. The Psycho Killer believes that his character is the penultimate being and every NPC should bow to him just by right of his being a player character. In his mind, there should never be consequences to any of these deaths.

It's very easy to spot the kinds of problems inherent with the Psycho Killer, the bigger question is what to do with him? Uncle Figgy's chosen solution is to keep track of the death count around the Psycho Killer's characters. When the numbers out of hand, that's when the game authorities step in. In a supers game, for instance, if someone is murderous enough, other supers (maybe even other party members) will hunt him down. Sometimes (such as in a horror game) even the villains might band together to take out a common threat. Usually, after having it proven violently to him several times that his character is *not* the biggest and baddest character, the Psycho Killer settles down to become either an Average Joe or a Combat Monster.

The Combat Monster. Fight, fight, fight! That's the motto of the Combat Monster. She loves roleplaying for three simple reasons: combat, combat and more combat! She's only happy when she's rolling dice and rocking heads. If more than five minutes goes by without her being able to fight something, she sulks like a dark cloud until the next combat. In fact, it's relatively easy to forget she's even there, as her characters will just follow along blindly until a battle occurs.

There is no problem with having a Combat Monster in your group as long as you're running a hack-n-slash campaign. But if you're running a game that isn't very combat intensive, she'll be unhappy and chances are she'll ruin everyone else's ability to enjoy themselves. Uncle Figgy's solution: tell her up front that you're not running a combat-oriented game. If she persists after more than one game and she's ruining it for everyone else, politely insist that since it's the combat she likes so much, maybe she'd be better off staying home and playing certain, popular, martial-arts video games.

Captain Boredom. It's Saturday night, you're running a game, and he doesn't have a date. Sure! He'd *love* to come! But that's the only time. He's not really interested in gaming at all, he just has nothing better to do and this way he can be around friends. If you're running a one-shot game, that's fine, but don't invite him to an extended campaign because next time he might have something better to do. A Captain Boredom will tell you how much he enjoys gaming, but if someone else invites him to a movie on the same day of your game, he won't show up. If he does manage to make it to a game, he'll be more interested in socializing than actually playing. Captain Boredom uses every lag in the game, no matter how slight, to strike up a conversation on how his day went at work or how his car is doing. If he can't do that, he'll doodle or write while everyone else is playing.

If you know of a Captain Boredom, don't even bother inviting him to your game. In Uncle Figgy's nicer days, he had a player who would show up for every-other game or so. His excuses ranged from "I had to go to a junkyard to look for a part for my car" to "a couple of friends called

last night and invited me to a nightclub" (even though he knew two weeks in advance that we were having a game that day) and even "I totally forgot about the game so I went out with a girl I just met". Finally, I got smart and told him that it was obvious he wasn't interested in the game so he was out. After all, when someone doesn't show up for a game in an extended campaign, it puts a strain not only on the GM (who must work out the absence of the character or play it as an NPC) but also the other players (who might have been counting on that player to be there, especially if it's a small group and one person missing would mean that no game would be played).

The Friend. Roleplaying? What's that? Do you mean that Dungeons & Dragons stuff? The Friend really IS ignorant of roleplaying. Usually she's the girlfriend of one of the other players and she's just there because he is. "Try it, honey, it's fun!" Sometimes she'll join in. Other times she won't. If she does try it, she'll sit quietly next to her boyfriend, not saying a word as he urges her to play. There's a slight possibility that she could turn into one of the other types of gamer, but it has been Uncle Figgy's experience that, at best, she will only become a Captain Boredom who is there because her friend is. More often than not, she will find something better to do during subsequent gaming sessions.

While she's there, however, you can (and should, it's the polite thing to do) try to get her involved in the game. Best not to waste tons of time making a character for her until you know she's going to enjoy it and stick around. Also, don't give her a character that is going to be integral to the plot of upcoming games, since you don't know if she's going to be there for them. *Do* try to get her involved, but *don't* force her if she seems less than enthusiastic. Be friendly not pushy.

Special Case: The Rules Lawyer. This is the guy who has memorized every game book related to the system you're running. He knows exactly what does how much damage and exactly how much damage what can take. If you screw up, he'll call you on it. In some cases, he'll be right and you should admit your mistake. At other times, he'll be wrong (usually when it's a Powergamer and the rule regards a creature he thought should be an easy fight) and will have to be persuaded.

However, it has been Uncle Figgy's experience that Rules Lawyers only crop up in certain situations. When those situations occur, *any* of the above player types can become a Rules Lawyer (although some are more prone to it than others). The main situation, when even a Mad Gamer can become a Rules Lawyer, is when major system rules are changed or ignored and none of the players were notified beforehand. If you don't use rules straight out of the book, *make absolutely certain* that all of the players have been told about your change. This way you prevent middle-of-the-game arguments about those rules.

The second situation is when there are rules that the player really has no right knowing, such as NPC or monster stats and attributes, and the player relies on those rules to get an "edge". Let's take a fantasy game in which Uncle Figgy played: In this game, the rules specifically mention that animated skeletons take double damage from fire and fire-based attacks. Knowing this, one of the players (a Powergamer who found it difficult to keep player knowledge separate from character knowledge) attacked a skeleton with a fire-based spell. The GM, not wanting the fight

to be over that easily, ignored the "double damage" rules and let the battle continue. The Powergamer immediately turned into a Rules Lawyer and began arguing his case. The GM came back with, "these are special skeletons!".

So what went wrong here? First of all, the player was in the wrong for not keeping his knowledge separate from his character's knowledge. Second of all, the GM was wrong for cheating in order to preserve his plan. (It would have been best had he allowed the Powergamer to blast the skeletons at that moment in the game. Later, the GM could have introduced fireproof skeletons with plenty of warning of what they were.) Third, when noting the effects his spell had on the skeletons, the Powergamer should merely have taken it in stride and thought, "Wow! These skeletons must be magical!". Lastly, the GM should have simply stated that he understood what the rules were but that they did not apply in this case.

Manipulating Players:
Uncle Figgy's Big Three

Once in a rare while, you may get a player who makes a character that is totally heroic. This person leaps willingly into the gates of the demon-filled abyss just to save a kitten. No cry for help is ignored, whether it be from an innocent bystander, a friend, or even a villain. You picture this person with hands on hips, chest puffed out proudly, and maybe even a white aura surrounding her as woodland creatures gather at her feet in awe.

This can be very nice for gamemasters, because it makes their jobs extremely easy. Unfortunately, though, it's not very realistic and it probably just won't happen much unless you force your players to play that way, which opens up a whole other can of worms. On the average, the thief isn't going to be quite that noble and the costumed vigilante might just kick someone when they're down. You're players aren't going to be that honorable, either. They're looking to have a good time, not to make you're job easier. The cold hard fact is that sometimes they just aren't going to agree to go along with what you want them to do.

The key, then, is to make the players do what you want them to do while misleading them into believing that it was all their idea in the first place. And to accomplish this, you need to use the same motivations that bring your NPCs into fully-breathing three-dimensional life. Unfortunately, you can't dictate a particular PCs code of honor or system of belief, that's up to the player to decide. You can, however, use what Uncle Figgy calls "The Big Three": **Fear, Greed,** and **Curiosity.**

Fear: Even in the bleakest setting where death is common, players don't want to see their characters die. Some don't even want to see them injured. And some can't even stand to see them captured. Your players won't go into that farmhouse? Put a bigger threat outside it. They still have a choice -- stay and face the threat or go hide in the farmhouse -- but they'll think that it's

their choice to make. Most of the time, if the external threat is big enough, they'll run for the farmhouse instead of making a stand. This should always be the motivator of last resort. It's the most obvious of them all, and sooner or later your players will pick up on it and come to the realization that you're "herding" them to where you want them to be. Don't use it unless the others don't work.

Curiosity: These are the people who, in the situation described above, will want to check out the farmhouse just because it's there and they heard that something mysterious was inside. If you give these same players the external threat, they may change their minds and decide to investigate the threat instead. These players don't seem to care that their characters might die, they usually feel that it's just a game and they can always make another.

Greed: This is what motivates most people. Greed doesn't have to be evil "money-grubbing". When people work at jobs that they hate, they do so out of a kind of greed -- they want comfort, security and whatever pay that job gives. Most characters, however, take the greed a step further. They want power (whether it be through more powerful weapons or more personal power -- through character advancement, say). Or they want money. But this kind of player/character usually *wants* something. And sometimes they want it so badly that they'll go after it no matter the risk (of course, it's always better if the risk seems very small to start with). If these characters won't go into the farmhouse out of curiosity, that's when the NPC traveling with them needs to say something like, "Didn't old man Carvey live there? They say he hid all sorts of (gold/weapons/spellbooks/whatever) before he died." That's usually enough to get the greedy ones moving.

Remember, this is where you especially have to watch your players and their reactions. In some game systems, the characters themselves are saddled with things called "disadvantages" that affect the actual character. These might be things like codes of honor, vows, belief systems, fears and phobias, even delusions of some sort. In these types of system, the GMs job is made much easier; the disadvantages a character has can be blatantly used to manipulate him or her. In other systems, no such things exist, so the GM has to be more subtle. Uncle Figgy's Big Three can be used to manipulate either the character (because that's the way the player plays him) or the player (because that's the way she thinks, not necessarily the way the character thinks). Again, the point must be made that subtlety is the key. You have to master the art of making the players go where you want them to while making them believe that it was entirely their own idea.

Okay, so what's a big chapter like this without an example? Once, I ran a game where an excellent role-player had created a thief who wasn't very greedy but who was just shy of the label "cowardly" (the character wasn't necessarily a coward. As he would have put it, he had "a healthy respect for physical injury."). The rewards for the adventure he and the party were undergoing just weren't quite enough to interest him once the true danger of it was found out. By then, it was too late. He tried to leave the party and strike off on his own numerous times, but the danger he faced alone each time he did so was much greater than sticking with the group. The long and short of it was that just by having been once been part of the party, he had become a marked man hunted after by several powerful enemies. Safety was in sticking with people whom he didn't like and who didn't like him. Whenever he tried to go it alone, I would have the villains pop up and he, realizing how outclassed he was, would go running back to the rest of the group

for his own protection (not to help them, though, he tended to stay out of the battles unless he could get in a cheap shot that didn't involve much risk).

The Death of a Character

The killing of player characters is one of those over-rated ideas that is mainly used for a bizarre form of "keeping score" where the GM thinks she's winning if she's slaughtered enough PCs. But player character death should be so much more than that -- if a PC dies, that death should *matter!* Don't be afraid to kill characters, though, if you feel it's warranted. A game masterly since of drama should not be a guarantee against player stupidity. If Dud the Barbarian charges the Dragon's Union 753 picket line, he should be toasted.

The GM must walk a very fine line when it comes to the deaths of player characters; either too much or too little results in the cheapening of the event's emotional impact. Your Uncle Figgy walked into an established gaming group that had experienced *way* too much character death. The players were so desensitized to it that they didn't even get upset when it was *their own* characters getting kacked, much less their fellow adventurer with whom they'd destroyed the demon lords some four years ago. I ask you, where's the role-playing in that!? Is this in keeping with heroic literature? Heck no!! If a main (or even secondary) character dies in the average novel, her friends grieve. The cop's partner becomes obsessed with revenge. The world mourns the passing of a great person. And isn't that what the characters of a role-playing game are? Aren't they supposed to be the *heroes?* Because if they're not that important, why are they the ones on the adventure? Why not get someone who's better at the job, then? And if they *are* the only ones who can get the job done, then their deaths should be mourned all the more. Their deaths should at least mean something to their friends and companions if not the world in general.

But too little character death can run the same risks; making the players feel that the PCs should get away with anything because the GM would never kill a character. Just as with too much, too little causes death to lose its bite. And when a character does die, it might have unpredictable effects -- some players, used to the "immortal" mentality, might actually get angry at the death of their character and begin accusing you of favoritism ("Why'd you kill my character and not theirs? What they did was just as stupid!"); some players might be so shocked by it that they refuse to believe it happened (sounds strange, I know, but it's happened to Uncle Figgy on more than one occasion).

Probably one of the most important things to consider when it comes to character death is that if it's good enough for the PCs, it's good enough for the NPCs -- and *not* just the ones that you're letting the player characters kill. Nothing brings the emotion of death home like having a favorite NPC ally who has been around for years suddenly die in some hideous fashion that could *easily* affect one of the PCs and *will* if they're not careful.

Chapter 5

The Good NPC

Too often, Uncle Figgy finds that the average GM slips into something he calls "monsteritis". Monsteritis is an insidious disease that leads gamemasters to believe that everything not PC is a monster, open for slaughter at any point. The GM suffering from monsteritis has NPCs of any and every race or species that never negotiate and always fight to the death. Monsteritis spawned NPCs know no fear, no love, no joy and no peace. They exist to kill the PCs, no matter the cost to themselves, and there are never repercussions when the characters mow them down.
Not very bloody likely, is it? And not very deep or realistic, either. Even the most "unintelligent" of animals will flee pain or approach pleasure. But monsteritis NPCs take the pain until it kills them, and only seem to get pleasure from being stupid and evil. Now take a look at the world around you. If a gun was fired on a crowded street, how many people would stick around and see what was going on? Answer: None. The *average* person would run, possibly screaming all the way. Why should your game NPCs be any different?

Again, here's where common-sense needs to be used. Some soldiers are trained to fight until the death. Some people have a sense of honor that dictates the same belief. Some people would get amazingly angry at someone and spew insults and profanity like an erupting volcano, but would never throw a punch and would become *very* apologetic if confronted with violence. Most people stop and drop when they hear the police yell, "freeze". The ones that don't do their best to run; firing back only when they're trapped and they feel things have gotten out of control. Even the vilest of killers tend to prefer capture to death because there's always the chance, however slim, that they could get free to spread their mayhem in the future. Uncle Figgy reminds you of the old saying, "he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day." This should usually be applied to *any* intelligent being, no matter the race or species. (And usually, the lower and/or higher the intelligence of the individual in question, the more likely they would be to follow it. Those of lesser intelligences react more to stimulus-response than any concept of "honor" or "nobleness", while those of higher intelligences would be most likely to rationalize their actions to fit within these concepts. Ask a child why he ran when he was frightened and you might get an answer like, "I was scared, so I ran." Ask the highly-intelligent adult why he ran, and the response might be, "I knew I couldn't do anything to help, so I thought it best to flee and seek help.")

Animals, though, can be different. Most animals in today's world have learned to fear humans -- they only attack when cornered or starving. In a world where the animals haven't learned to be afraid of mankind (or where they're so much stronger and more vicious than humans) they might see humans as an easy food source. Animals have no need for material goods, so they usually only attack for one of three reasons: territoriality, hunger or protection. The mother fighting to defend her young will usually fight to the death, while the male fighting over territory will generally be more than willing to find new stomping grounds if he's getting his tail kicked.

The motivation of any non-player character is key to his, her or its actions. Motives for any being can include (but are not limited to): revenge, fear, honor, defense or greed. Even basic instincts

can be motivators: hunger, for example. And of course you could use any combination of these, such as the character whose honor dictates that he only defend and never attack. Also, don't forget that there are many different types of each motivation. Fear can branch into fear of injury, fear of death, fear of pain, fear of loss, fear of commitment, fear of capture, not to mention all the different phobias that exist. A person doesn't have to be greedy just for money; greed for power, greed for love, greed for knowledge (curiosity), greed for territory -- Uncle Figgy even had a player whose character was greedy for weaponry! And as for defense, don't fall into the trap that people only defend themselves for physical reasons; more and bloodier wars have been fought over defense of religious belief than any other reason.

Player conflict, character conflict and GM responsibility

A big argument I've noticed deals with intergame conflict and the GM's role and responsibilities regarding such. Some people believe that it is the GameMaster's job to keep the party together and all the characters at peace with each other. Others believe that conflict is the way of the world and no GM should try to exert the large amounts of control necessary to keep a party of widely different characters totally copacetic.

Player conflict is an easy one to understand, because that *is* the GM's responsibility. Sometimes a player just can't stand to be around another player. Maybe playing style is at issue, or maybe it's something much more direct and personal. Either way, the mature gamer will either tolerate his foe for the sake of the game or will simply stop coming to your games. The immature gamer will go so far as to start fights in an effort to be rid of the "enemy". Uncle Figgy has seen GameMasters invite two people who are known to severely dislike each other to the same game just to make them "get along". Usually the attitude is "they're both my friends and I just want them to be friends, too". Needless to say, this is an immature attitude at best. Sometimes people just don't get along, and if you try to force them together, you're asking for trouble.

This is where you have to make a choice, and a tough choice it will be. From a game standpoint, you simply choose the one who adds the most to your game. From a personal standpoint, however, it's not going to be quite that easy. You're the one who's going to have to make that judgement call, and you risk hurting feelings when you do it. It has been Uncle Figgy's experience that these things will tend to work themselves out as one or the other of the conflicting players will leave to seek out a game where he's more comfortable.

Character conflict is where the line gets a little more blurred, however. Most everyone has seen the player who, for some deep psychological reason best left untouched, absolutely *needs* to play a character that is pure evil. This guy wants to kill the new characters just because he's bad and he wants to slaughter the others to get their stuff. More often than not, the other players will get terribly upset. Some may retaliate by having their characters take action against the offender, blasting him off the face of the gaming world. Some may resort to temper tantrums, whining that it is the GM's responsibility to make sure the group stays together in perfect peace and harmony.

It is Uncle Figgy's belief that it is *not* the GM's responsibility. In any roleplaying game, you will have characters who simply will not (for whatever reason) get along with others. Period. To act otherwise is not only childish, but boring and banal as well. Instead of being a dramatic story of real people fighting overwhelming odds, it gives the game the feeling of one of those insipid little "cutesy-toons" that were cranked out for the masses in the early to mid 1980's (you know the ones: happy little bears with friendly little icons on their tummies, or maybe all those "whatever-Babies" cartoons). Not to mention the vast amount of bizarre and unrealistic control the GM would have to levy just to make such things possible:

> **Bob:** Gristle is going to stab Wizzo and take his magical boots.
> **GM (not wanting such conflict in his game):** Uh, you can't do that.
> **Bob:** What!? Why not?
> **GM:** Are you arguing with me, Bob?

Or maybe:

> **Bob:** Gristle is going to stab Wizzo and take his magical boots.
> **GM (not wanting such conflict in his game):** Okay, just as Gristle goes to stab Wizzo, he trips and drops his knife at Wizzo's feet. Phil, Wizzo sees Gristle drop his knife.
> **Bob:** What!? Wait a minute! Don't I even get to roll for that!?
> **GM:** *sigh* Fine. Roll your dice.
> **Bob:** *roll* Made it! I get Wizzo in the back!
> **GM:** Uh-uh. It *looks* like you're going to get Wizzo in the back, but for some reason you miss...

Sound unrealistic? Sound unfair? It is on both counts. Unfortunately, Uncle Figgy has seen both of these (and worse) in games run by GMs who enforced interparty harmony at all costs.

So whose job is it to maintain interparty harmony between the characters? Nobody and everybody. You can't *force* characters to get along, it wouldn't happen naturally and sometimes it just isn't fun to play. In one extended campaign I ran, the favorite character of all the players was one who was played as a royal pain in the posterior. All the players loved him, all the characters hated him, but he was extremely useful to keep around.

Of course, this requires a group of mature roleplayers who understand that it's a game, and this means both groups -- the jerks and those they jerk around. It's a two-way street; the player who plays the bad guy with the rest of the group had better be willing to take his lumps when they come to him. If he cheerfully slaughters other characters, telling their players to "lighten up" when they complain, but then has the nerve to whine when the other characters gang up on him, get rid of him. Nobody needs to game with immature fools.

And that brings me to how interparty harmony *can* be enforced: logic and realism. Every cause has an effect and every action has a reaction. It is on both the GM and the players to enforce these simple rules of nature. GMs should remember that most game worlds are pretty dangerous

for the loner -- if you have a character that stabs another in the back, grabs his stuff and runs, don't go easy on him. There's a reason these groups band together, don't let this player ignore that reason just because you're afraid of killing off a character. The other players should also get into the act -- if Biff the Paladin sees Jacques the Thief taking shots at Wizzo the Wizard, both should band together to either slaughter the jerk, capture him to give to the authorities or tie him up and leave him to the mercies of the next critter to wander by. If the players just whine about it, the GM is perfectly within his rights to tell them to fight their own battles. The GM should not forget, either, that the authorities in most game worlds will take a definite interest in someone who constantly comes back to town with his friends' possessions but not his friends... Maybe after the killer-player loses a few characters to the police or even his own comrades, he might start to see the light. If he doesn't, and it really ruins gameplay for the others, don't invite him back.

As an example, in one game your Uncle Figgy was playing a rather dishonest wizard-type along with a pretty straightforward warrior and a bizarre warrior/acrobat hybrid. It was a rather generic adventure (the GM's first) in which the group was sent to an underground crypt to retrieve a magical gem. Upon achieving our goal, Uncle Figgy's wizard promptly grabbed the crystal, cast an invisibility spell and high-tailed it out of there. Interparty harmony? Heck with that. I play roleplaying games to have fun, not to be told that I can or can't do certain things. Luckily, the GM went along with me. And when the party finally #did# catch up with my character, I fully expected them to try to slaughter him, which I would have accepted as one of the pitfalls of the way I was playing my character. In my personal opinion, they went way too easy on him. And even if he hadn't been caught by the other party members, the GM would have been smart to have the authorities wonder just what happened to their magical gem and why was this one guy walking around town while the others never returned?

But the GM should never resort to "you can't do that" or other arbitrary and heinous manipulations just to keep the party together. Instead, it should always be a matter of action-consequence. The player (and the character) should think, "If I do A, then B will happen". In such a manner, the GM leaves the decision of whether or not to "play nice" on the player's shoulders. And if the player makes the wrong decision (whatever it might be), then bad consequences will follow.

Traps: Use and Abuse

What can be said here that hasn't previously been said? At first, I wasn't going to include a section on traps. Then I realized that traps are a staple of many roleplaying games, so they deserved some mention. If for no other reason than to pop the balloon of "sudden death" traps that hot-air GMs are so fond of.

First of all, they're not very realistic for a place that's inhabited. What happens if the owner accidentally sets one off? Most people aren't so obsessed with "protection" that they're willing to sacrifice themselves just because they used the wrong key after a long night at the pub.

Second of all, they're not very dramatic:

> **GM:** Whoops, Lonnie, you hear a click when you open the door.
> **Lonnie:** I jump back as far as I can.
> **GM:** A three-ton block as long as the hallway falls on top of you. You're dead.

Now don't get me wrong, sometimes traps like that really *were* used -- mostly in Egyptian tombs where *nobody* was ever supposed to get in or out. But the wizard's castle just *ain't* gonna be like that. Most traps are of the "capture, inconvenience and possibly injure" variety that can reset themselves after use (a pit with a hinged lid, for instance). Single-use traps of the "extremely deadly" variety are often very simple to set up, notice and disarm. Why? Because why would you waste hundreds of man hours of labor just for a one-shot blow? If it took the military four or five months just to make one grenade, you can bet that we wouldn't be using them all that often.

In a good RPG, traps should be used for dramatic value, not an "instant kill" for the GM. Look at the "traps" used in famous movies. All of those used in the Indiana Jones films, for example, had some way to escape from them -- usually at the last second and after a very harrowing bit of scrambling. So what's wrong with that? That is, after all, what heroic role-playing is all about. If you find you simply *must* do a sudden-death trap, sacrifice an NPC to it first so that the players can see just how dangerous it is. If they proceed without trying to find out all they can, then let them have it. But Uncle Figgy still says that you should give them at least *some* chance at escape, if only to make them sweat and think about a possible career change.