

Forward

This article is the distilled experience of nearly 16 years of role-playing. I have played in many types of games. Through the efforts of countless players and GameMasters alike, I have been a superhero, a thief, a wizard, a starship captain, a tank soldier, a spy, an elf, and a giant robot! I have survived World War 3 (twice), repelled numerous invasions of Earth, stolen industrial secrets from the Japanese, repelled 16th-century pirates, saved a princess, mapped a world from orbit, patched a Zero-G suit, polished a magical battle axe, and started a brewery! None of this would have been possible without the magic of role-playing games. While I wrote this article myself, I was not alone. My efforts were aided by several GameMasters, past and present. "We" is used out of respect for the many contributions made by these GameMasters, both to the game and to this article.

As with all publications in this day and age, (and especially one dealing with role-playing games), gender is not (and should not be) an issue. I have used "he", "him" and "his" when writing portions of this booklet to avoid cumbersome writing. This is not meant to show prejudice against female gamers. Personally, I have found female gamers to be refreshing, as most play in a sensible and stable manner. They are the equal of male gamers, and often their superiors.

[Author's note: this was originally written and published in 1992 as a vanity project, a booklet I intended to hand out to new gamers. Don't misunderstand – I love to hear myself talk. But after countless hours of trying to pass on my hard-won knowledge to each new gamer I met, I finally decided that endless lecturing was **not** the answer. After all, no one liked old Polonius, no matter how practical his advice was.

After I printed about twenty copies and handed them out, the Little Book of Roleplaying (LBOR) went through a revision and was again printed in booklet form. A second revision occurred when I published it as a serialized article in a (now extinct) Seattle gaming 'zine called 'The Sorcerer'. Hopefully, this will be the final version – but with generic systems based on the twenty-sided die extending tentacles to every type of game setting imaginable, I doubt it.

People don't change, but their games do. However...until the next revision, just keep in mind that the ratios remain the same, and I think most of you will not find it too much trouble to pick up what I am getting at – and profit by it.]

Steven John Satak
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Successful Roleplaying (It's Not Just Straight 18's !)



Over the years, many people have written many articles on successful role-playing. These bits of wisdom cover a wide range, from a few paragraphs in the (gaming magazine of your choice) to hardback books which go into great detail on a particular game system. They all cover pretty much the same thing: knowing when to use spells, what to wear and which weapons work best in a given situation. The idea is to show you how to survive the various nasty surprises your GameMaster has set for you. They demonstrate the way the rules work, and give examples of how to make the best of what little your character is allowed.

Doubtless, all of this information is very useful to the average role-gamer; otherwise, the books and magazines would not sell very well! However, there is a common trait which all these worthy articles share which is at once their strength and their weakness. Each of these attempts at "hints and tips" concerns itself with the game structure and with the character's statistics, abilities and alignment. This is good, as a working knowledge of the ins-and-outs of the game is necessary to get the most out of your character.

The trouble is, most of these guides focus only on the game mechanics and apparently forget that, while the adventurers are paladins, thieves, wizards and whatnot, the players are **real people**. And real people act and react in certain, predictable ways to game situations. These reactions, as you will see, often have nothing to do with what is happening in the fantasy world. It is the aim of this article to advise you in the ways of players and GameMasters. True, there are a few suggestions related to game mechanics, but with some common-sense changes, they can apply to just about any game. This information can be used in any role-playing environment. Although the examples given refer to a fantasy game, people are still people!

If you apply this advice, you will find yourself enjoying the game more because you have increased control over your character and (surprise!) more control over what happens to you in the game - regardless of the GameMaster's intentions.

To get some idea of just how this can be done, we'll start with a basic question.

Why am I playing this game ?

Surprisingly, it is the rare gamer who seriously questions why he or she spends at least four hours (or more) at the game table each week. Surely, they could be doing something more productive, or possibly more enjoyable. Think for a moment. Here you are, sitting at a table which is overflowing with food, sodas, books, papers, dice and miniatures. You are talking and interacting with people you'd never give a second look if you saw them at, say, the local mall.

Why ?

There are as many answers as there are gamers, but most of them boil down to two things: to escape the real world and to feel good about yourself. If your reasons don't boil down to these, you're more complex than the vast majority of gamers, or you're not being honest with yourself.

For the rest of us, these two reasons sometimes go together. Maybe the real world isn't so pleasant for you. Maybe you like the feeling of control gaming gives you. Maybe you're bored! Where else can you while away the hours, vanquishing the bad guys with a swing of a fictional sword? Some players like to let their imagination roam where there is structure, but no real limits. Whatever the reason, you can all agree on one thing. There is no point in playing a game you don't enjoy.

There are many reasons why you might not enjoy a game. The players might not like you! The GameMaster (GM) might be a control freak, dictating to the players how they must play and react as characters, so as to conform to his ideas of proper gaming. Your character might be a wimp, loaded down with weak statistics (stats) determined by the roll of the dice. Perhaps your character has too much of **you** in it, leaving you disappointed and angry when things don't go your way. Or all the other characters in the game might resemble robots (lacking any sort of personality or drive), leaving you with the feeling at game's end that nothing of any importance has been accomplished.

Whatever the reason, there are certain steps you can take to ensure that your game will be satisfying to you - and to others! Remember, the other players are there to feel good, too, and getting satisfaction at their expense is not good for you in the long run!



Choosing a GameMaster



Many players are content to play in any game which happens along, regardless of the quality of the other players or their GM. Such players don't game with any sort of regularity, and often come equipped with a single favorite character which the player has used in many different campaigns. We call these players 'universe hoppers', and while they are not as common as they used to be, we will mention them later on. The rest of you, wishing to join in a regular game, may be a bit more discriminating.

When looking for a satisfying game, the first thing to look at is the GM. What is he or she like? Listed below are some (but by no means all) of the traits to look for when separating the "Good GMs" from the "Bad GMs". You can use these as guidelines, but only after sitting in on the game for a session and observing - without playing.

A Good GameMaster:

⊗ ⊗ ⊗ **Keeps the players organized** - with a firm hand when talking gets out of control or turns to non-game topics (it won't, if the game is moving along quickly enough). He allows each gamer keep his or her own statistics, and lets them work out things such as hit probability and initiative. The players can figure for themselves whether they can hit a certain armor class, roll their own dice for initiative and remember what number they act on! The GM's organization and delegation skills ease his load and keeps the game moving.

⊗ ⊗ ⊗ **Encourages the use of gaming props** - this includes metal or plastic miniatures, hexagonal gaming mats, drawings of treasure and monsters, and hand-drawn maps. Even dice can substitute for monsters, if necessary! Gaming props give a player invaluable perspective, and ensure each knows where he or she stands when the hammer falls. The realism of the game is greatly enhanced when you can see where the walls are, and just how big that ogre is, compared to you! But even when the monsters are represented by a handful of extra dice, combat takes less time and there are fewer arguments about "who was where" when an arrow misses the mark.

⊗ ⊗ ⊗ **Doesn't let the dice rule the game** - the idea is to live and play, not die and sit around watching the others have fun. A good GM will know this, and will fudge the dice once in a while to keep things rolling along. After all, he's a storyteller, not an undertaker. This willingness to temper die rolls with a bit of judgement ensures that the player who is really trying, will survive his inexperience - and the player who is behaving like an idiot will get his just desserts! The death of a character is never justified unless the player is aware of the risks involved (and decides to go ahead anyway).

⊗ ⊗ ⊗ **Knows his limits and sticks to them** - this GM knows how many players is TOO many for his gaming style, his "saturation point", if you will. And without hesitation, he closes the game to new players when he reaches that limit. This is sometimes difficult to do, especially when an old friend walks into the room with dice in hand. But exceed a GM's saturation point by even one player, and the game will slow down drastically. Don't be surprised if the game you are observing is currently closed - popular GameMasters never have a problem finding enough players!

Another limiting event to watch for is the occurrence of a split party - that is, the characters have somehow become separated in the scenario. A good GameMaster will try very hard to keep

this from happening, or else many of the gamers will be forced to sit idle while others play. This is deadly boring for at least half the players; they will lose interest and become irritable as they watch the other half having all the fun. And it's tough on even the best scenarios, since most of them depend on teamwork for success.

⊗ ⊗ ⊗ **Game-Objective and Creative** - In most games, the word "objective" is a polite term referring to a GM who is an unwavering slave to the rules book and the roll of the dice. This type of GameMaster merely ensures that things are equally unpleasant for everyone, as it is easy to see he is more interested in the rules than the players. "Creative" is another euphemism, referring to a GM whose only rulebook resides in his head. As no one else can see it, it is sometimes very hard to get along in this GM's game - frequently, his "rulebook" has only a passing resemblance to the one you bought for twenty bucks.

Obviously, neither of these is something you or other players want to see at a gaming table. So, what **do** we have in mind?

Game-objective is this: the GM separates his knowledge of what is going on with your character from what his NPCs know. Sounds simple, doesn't it? And yet, this is a great source of frustration in many games. It's very hard to beat an opponent who has intimate knowledge of your weak points and knows what your plans are. Worse than that, it's unfair! Many GMs unconsciously allow their NPCs this knowledge, inventing plausible reasons why the NPC would have inside information. But it is a sham, and you can spot it right away if you watch closely during your trial run and see how often the Non-Player Characters screw up.

If they never do, if they never make a mistake, then you should stand clear of that game. The GameMaster is either a tragically poor referee, or he is actually a frustrated player who has decided that from now on, he will be the most powerful character in the game - by playing God!

If, on the other hand, the NPCs appear just as clumsy and unlucky as the players' characters, it's reasonable to assume the GM is practicing proper game-objectivity.

Creativity, as we define it, is the ability to run the game "off the cuff", with an occasional glance at notes. This GM is a consummate storyteller and is intimately familiar with the rules. He can handle any situation which comes along, because he simply creates the new storyline out of thin air.

As you observe play, see how much the GM has on paper versus what he is telling the party. When you can't tell where the paper scenario stops and the adventure begins - well, that's creativity! The GM has carefully thought out his world, and there's always something under the surface, no matter where you look. You get the feeling that events are taking place, even if your character is not around to see them, and this lends continuity to every part of the GM's storytelling. The game moves along because there are fewer arguments - most events just "feel" right and logical.

Don't misunderstand us. Certainly, you should look for the GM who has intimate knowledge of the rules. He eliminates the need to dash through the rulebooks every five minutes, and this is a good thing. It is highly distracting to shift from Sigurd the Powerful to Bill the player - and back - to settle a rule quibble. But far and away, the best GameMaster you will ever meet is one who combines hard rules knowledge with storytelling skills to lull you right into a land of wonder. You will have an evening of adventure that is smooth and highly plausible. Your escape is more complete, and much more satisfying. This is how you add more "realism" - without writing more rules.

The GMs who can do this are very, very rare. They are the product of years of gaming and study, coupled with a certain flair for lying through their teeth. The world and the game rules are in their heads because they have put the time and effort into memorizing them!

⊗ ⊗ ⊗ **Displays Personal Objectivity** - different from game-objectivity, this is a quality that is sometimes hard to find. It is possible you'll meet a GM who separates his knowledge from his

NPC's knowledge - but still shows favoritism among the players! While your ability to brown-nose may be legendary, keep in mind that it will always be **you** the player who is judged, rather than your character. While your character can always unsay a harsh word or flip remark, you are a real person and cannot so easily repair hurt feelings if you blurt something out. And once you fall out of favor as a player, you will find things do not go so well for your character.

Steer clear of GMs whose attitude towards your character is based on the size of the pizza you buy them. They are a fickle lot, and will encourage you to become dependent upon them for everything you want in the game. Not only will the other players resent you, but you will not get the same satisfaction out of successfully completing a scenario. You'll never know how much of it was your skilled playing and how much was the GM's favor! Stick with the GameMaster who buys his own soda and chips.

⊗ ⊗ ⊗ **Has a Sense of Game Balance** - this is where the GM shows an intuitive feeling for what's right and wrong, too much or too little, when to talk and when to shut up and listen. He may have this naturally, or it may be the result of many years of gaming. Either way, it's tough to get a feel for this in a single game session, but a few pointers are available.

Does he listen to the players without interrupting? Does he make inflexible, absolute statements right off the mark, without appearing to give the subject much thought? Does he talk incessantly of his own characters? Pick a player at random, and when the GM has a spare moment, ask him about that player's character. Tell him that you're not interested in what's on the character sheet. You want to hear, in his own words, what he thinks that character is like, with no references to previous adventures.

If he gives a description which brings a image to your mind's eye, he's been paying attention to the players and knows what good role-playing looks like. If he has to refer to a sheet of statistics to spew numbers, monsters and treasure at you, he has no idea what you're talking about and will most likely disappoint you in the game. He won't recognize - or reward - good role-playing, and that is a most frustrating situation for you, the role-player!

Finally, as a last measure of the GM's sense of game balance, ask about something completely unrelated to the game (when he has the time). Believe it or not, a familiarity with what was in yesterday's newspaper is a good sign! It shows that the GM has an interest in things other than gaming. If he has a girlfriend or wife, (or she has a boyfriend or husband), so much the better. The wider the GM's interest and experience in non-gaming activities, the more stable the game will be when the players start to get a little weird. You won't have a good sense of proportion without a good deal of life experience - outside the gaming environment.



Gaming Styles - What to Avoid



There are many gaming styles. Some are less acceptable than others for long-term gaming, and this is where we illustrate a few of the more notorious examples. Keep in mind that these are rough sketches. No one game will look exactly like them. But you will have an idea of what to look

for. And if you see it, don't ask questions and don't try to change things – just excuse yourself politely, and don't go back.

Having read the previous section, you might think that bad GameMasters are easy to spot. They would be those who come up short or show a complete lack of the qualities we listed. Sadly, it is not that easy. It is the rare GM who embodies all of those sterling qualities, and you can't go on forever, "waiting for Mr. Right". You will have to compromise and learn to live with your GM's shortcomings (just as he or she will learn to endure yours). But this does not mean that you have to play with the dregs of gaming society, and we assure you, they are out there in abundance. You do have a choice. There are good games, and there are bad games. And it's not hard to tell the difference. But there are always some people who will play in these groups, regardless of the poor treatment they receive at the hands of the GM and the other players. Since you have read this far, we assume you are not quite so desperate. But what should you avoid ?

Ω Ω Ω The Monty Haul Campaign - this is famous among gamers of every sort and has been around as long as the role-playing game itself. It gets the name from an old TV game show called "Let's Make a Deal". The host's name was Monty Hall, and he was famous for giving away fabulous prizes to whoever would make the biggest fool of themselves on national television. Curiously, very few contestants went away losers from all the wheeling and dealing - thus, the "Monty Haul" dungeon, where your character makes an ass of himself for the edification of the GM and the others. In return for jumping through hoops, you get unbelievable amounts of gold, gems, magic items, etcetera.

There are very few concrete goals (other than amusing the GameMaster), and as you will see later, this is a very large roadblock to good role-playing. The GameMaster is usually a fellow who measures his success by how happy the players are. He seeks approval from the group, but does not understand that, when everything is given to you, the game quickly becomes boring. Players in these games almost always have characters who rise to unbelievably high experience levels in a matter of months. Unfortunately, the players themselves are relatively inexperienced, and their characters often have the personality of a dial tone.

Ω Ω Ω The Master Controller Campaign - this is a game in which you are issued a custom character sheet that has many, many more stats than the stock game requires. The depth of detail is astounding. You are required to generate the new character in front of the GM, and this is often necessary. This game is almost always a variant of some popular game, and the differences run deep enough that you will not be able to look the rules up for yourself. You will have to trust the GM's discretion - which is what he (or she) wants.

Unfortunately, this discrete guidance does not end with character generation, but extends to the game itself and even to the role-playing of your character. You will always get helpful "advice" on how best to proceed in any given situation, and Heaven help you if you step out of what the GM has decided is proper behavior for your character. This type of game is often run in 'real time', meaning that, if your character has only ten seconds to decide what to do, that's all you, the player, will get! In addition, you had better watch what you say at the table. Often, what you say will be what your character says - no exceptions !

Although it may sound extreme, this type of game is actually quite popular. It appears to be a combination of players who honestly don't care, and players who don't like to make choices. Add a GM with poor storytelling skills, scenarios that are written in stone, and an unhealthy fascination with the intricacy of his own work, and boom! Master Controller. If you don't mind following a script, this game will appeal to you. However, most players prefer a more active role in the Great Adventure – not to mention free will.

Ω Ω Ω The Great White Father Campaign - at first, this style of play resembles the Master Controller game. However, the exquisite detail and carefully-crafted script are missing. Most often, this game appeals to players who dislike making big decisions and the responsibility that goes with it. In short, they not only don't want to help write the story - they want the story read to them! The GM is most often a frustrated player who, failing in his attempts as a player to create the baddest character around, resorts to running the game and playing God.

The hallmark of this game is an NPC of godlike proportions. This is the GM's Avatar, also known as the Great White Father (or GWF). He is the ultimate NPC. Imagine a fellow who is infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, all-knowing – and always around. The Avatar can never be defeated by any character in the party who might challenge him for leadership. Because this NPC represents the GM, you must deal with him all the time if you want to actually play the game. In the person of the Avatar, the GameMaster has finally attained his goal.

This NPC leads the party and is the source of all that is good **in** the party and **for** the party. If you don't believe this, try doing something not suggested, or sanctioned by, the GWF. But remember to prepare yourself for certain defeat. You will not succeed at anything meaningful to either your character or the party that does not give a huge amount of credit to the GWF. There are certain benefits to playing in this type of campaign. The GM is often susceptible to ego stroking, as for all practical purposes, he and the GWF are one and the same. If you decide to play, be prepared to give him constant assurance that he is, indeed, the baddest player around. You will go far. However, most gamers with a shred of ego themselves will quickly tire of this type of campaign and move on.

Ω Ω Ω The Power Campaign - this is also known as the Killer Campaign. It should be self-explanatory, but there is more to it than that. It is easily identified: the scenarios are extremely lethal and there is next to no role-playing. Characters in this game have even less personality than those of the Monty Haul Campaign! The players don't want to invest the time or energy on an individual character, and this is because they are not expected to last very long. And sure enough, they don't.

In this game, it's the Players vs. the GM. Of course, it should be pretty clear from the start who will "win". But, because the GM adheres strictly to the rules, there's always the chance a player will come out on top once in a while. Characters in a Power Campaign are the leanest, meanest fighting machines you'll ever see. The players are intimately familiar with the rules for creating characters, and they take advantage of every loophole there is, to get over on the GM and each other. In a regular campaign, a character statistic of 18 might be considered the maximum. In a Power Campaign, you can be sure that some players will have found a way to bump it up to 25!

If raw power/hack and slash is your thing, this is the place for you. Play your little heart out until you get the urge out of your system. However, if you are into role-playing and setting attainable goals, look elsewhere for your gaming. You won't survive long here.

Ω Ω Ω The Deus-Ex-Machina Campaign - imagine a campaign where you never, ever die. Where, no matter how stupidly you play, you just can't lose. Welcome to the Machinery of God Campaign! If a player does something stupid which would normally be lethal to himself or the party, the gods will step in (or Fate or Luck or whatever) and save everyone. This is not a Great White Father Campaign, as there is no indestructible NPC leading everyone around by the nose. The GM is more subtle (or so he thinks), quietly fudging saving throws and fiddling with his world so that death isn't really quite final. Why does he do this? It's simple. The GM is so tickled to have you playing in his game, he will not penalize you for anything. He's afraid you'll leave and go elsewhere if your character suffers any sort of serious setback. And so it goes, the game collecting players from miles around who bring in the most bizarre characters ever seen, wielding weapons only whispered of in other campaigns. We once saw a campaign of this sort where two characters both had the same unique mythical artifact - and they were both allowed to keep them!

This campaign attracts mostly universe-hoppers and novice players. The universe-hoppers have found a game where they can pick up some easy loot without too many uncomfortable questions about their character. And the novice gamers cherish a place where they can indulge in the silliest behavior without worrying about the consequences. The universe hoppers don't stay long, however. The GM, sensing the threat to his regular gamers, throws the 'hoppers out after a couple of sessions. If he doesn't catch on fast enough, though, they move right into a well-established routine. Like human locusts, they beat up or destroy everything in sight, stealing everything of even the most remote value - right down to the wooden chairs (it all goes into multiple Bags of Holding). There is nothing to stop them. Their accumulated power and wealth completely disrupt the fabric of the game by corrupting such values as it has and making the other players feel like underachieving crap. Finally, the universe hoppers move on, satisfied that they have gotten the best of yet another sucker GM. Meanwhile, the newbies never really learn anything in such a risk-free environment, and go on to receive a rude shock at the hands of other, less accommodating GameMasters.

You can quickly identify this type of campaign by noting the behavior of the players and comparing it to the level of their respective character. If a First Level Player is running a Tenth Level Bard, there is a problem. Don't just look at the character's rate of advancement. Although it takes a fair amount of time to advance to high levels in this type of game, it is much like the Monty Haul Campaign. The GM doesn't give anything away . . . but he doesn't take anything away, either. With nothing to lose, behavior of the most outlandish sort is commonplace, and the players eventually grow bored. Goals are pointless in this game. The saying "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" takes on a special significance, when you finally realize that you can't do anything meaningful if there's no way to take risks.

Ω Ω Ω The One-Shot, Game-Of-The-Week Campaign - although not properly a campaign, this can fool many people into thinking they are getting into something regular. Instead, what you have here is a single-scenario adventure, where all the characters - low, medium and high level - were created out of whole cloth, perhaps that very evening. You will be tipped off to this sort of gaming by the offer to create, say, a new character not at the beginning, but 4th or 5th level! This is supposedly so that you can play with the others, but what you don't know is . . . the others created their characters the same way! The reason they did so is because last week they were playing a superhero game, and the week before that, giant robots. Next week, everyone will be in a spacesuit and a month from now, they'll all be spies. The GM is only one of many and they rotate every week. And since they each insist on playing **their** favorite game, you can be sure that you won't see this evening's game for at least another month! Which is why there isn't much continuity in the game itself, and why you should politely get up and leave as soon as possible. There is no point in role-playing when the world you're playing in ends promptly at midnight!

Ω Ω Ω The RulePlaying Game - a twist on the words "role-playing game", there are two major, alternate definitions of this type of campaign.

The first refers to a GameMaster's strict, unyielding devotion to the stark, literal interpretation of the rules - all the rules, all the time. Add to this an equally fanatical determination to follow the dice rolls exactly as they fall - no matter what havoc it plays with the storyline, the characters or the player's feelings. Why? The GameMaster will often tell you that "this is reality, pal. Life is tough and unforgiving", ignoring all the while that he is working with a fantasy world and that most players want to spend their evening getting AWAY from reality!

This style of play is a classic, and all too common, but it doesn't stay like this very long. Because all game systems have loopholes, many players, working together over time, will eventually morph the RulePlaying Game into a Power Campaign. This transformation is natural. It's a sensible response to living in such a deadly universe. Become the deadliest thing around, and voila! the world stops messing with you. "Live by the dice, die by the dice" is the player's motto in this version of the RulePlaying Game.

The second, less common definition of the RulePlaying Game describes a GameMaster who shows an endless fascination with the intricacies of the game rules. If the GM were the only one suffering from this obsession, the game would eventually go into a coma and collapse from neglect - but the players are just as bad! At least once every hour the game will halt, while the players pursue a vigorous discussion of the validity and correct interpretation of one rule or another. The players argue their version, the GM argues his version, and the quibbling can take up hours of real time.

You might think the arguments would stop with a final ruling by the GameMaster, until you begin to understand that this is the real fun for most of the players. This is how they "beat the game", you see? These players can run on for hours about what the author meant by this limitation or that table, the relative merits of this type of armor or that character class, or how "the game could be better if only . . . ". The game itself, as you might expect, is deadly slow.

Neither of these versions is satisfying. Most gamers will tell you they prefer a romantic adventure in the land of legends - not a pitiless, hardscrabble existence in a cold, random universe. They want to pass those few precious hours playing Darg the Barbarian - not bogged down in an endless critique of the rules, like some no-life-having gamer geek. Give the RulePlaying Game a miss.

Well, there you have it. Those are the major examples of sub-standard gaming we have seen over the years. Once you've steered clear of them, you can safely plan your character's adventures without worry. Or can you?

Not all GameMasters are warped, true, but keep in mind that they are not there for charity's sake. They have their own reasons for running the game, and you can be sure that these will somehow be bad for your character in the long run. That's the whole idea, and it's normal. Only when the competition gets too intense and too personal does it start to get strange (see the description of the Power Campaign). Now that you have some pointers on weeding out the lame games and sicko GMs, what can you do to get maximum enjoyment out of the game?



Control Gaming



This section deals with the ways you can maintain control over your character and what happens to him/her in the campaign. Some may not think this is necessary or even possible, but they are wrong on both counts. Control is where it's at. But not over the game as a whole, and certainly not over the other players.

Control is Power, and Power feels good, plain and simple. It will always be a major source of feel-good in the role-playing game. But Power corrupts, so unless you want to turn into one of those jackass gamers you've read about (and perhaps suffered through), the best kind of Control is over your own character and, to some degree, the things that happen to you. It's the only way to ensure you'll come out feeling good at the end of the game - without spoiling someone else's fun. Here is how you do it.

These examples are based on AD&D, 2nd Edition. Yes, I know, it's been largely replaced by 3rd Edition and D20. But most folks are at least familiar with the old system, so bear with me here. The personal statistics in AD&D 2nd Edition range from 3 to 18. But it's not the numbers themselves, but the ratios **between** these numbers, that's important. You can, and should, use such ratios in other games.

1) Do Not 'Roll Up' A Character !

Do not let your character's statistics be determined by random rolls. This is the only aspect of the game which will really be under your control – even if only at the beginning - so make the most of it. Write down what you want to be, and assign a number to each statistic to match what is in your mind's eye. Keep in mind that, to many GameMasters, designing your own stats is the same as cheating! It's not the act of assigning the numbers, as opposed to rolling them up. No, the problem is that most people, given this freedom, will abuse it. As a result, many GMs will object if you ask permission to assign numbers rather than roll them up. They assume you will use this freedom to max out every stat, and they don't want you abusing the system and cheating the other players. But there's no objection if you make the adjustments downward! Why not combine these two?

The obvious advantage of assigning your own character stats is offset by the (apparent) drawback of average numbers and a clunker of a low stat. What's not to like? But first, check if your GM is comfortable with this idea. Show them this section. Let them know you intend to follow this entire section's recommendations - not just what you happen to like. If the GM still won't let you design your own character, find another game. See, this is where Control starts. If you don't have it here, you'll find it hard to get anywhere else in the game.

Okay! Your GM gave you a thumbs-up. Now it's time to sit down and think of a personality you'd like to play which has one or two outstanding traits. How about a fellow who is greedy and tends to dress loudly? Or an overweight clod who brags loudly about his own deeds – oblivious to the fact that everyone knows he is a fraud? Or perhaps a seven-foot tall knuckle-dragging gorilla who is effeminate, wears lace and fights with a rapier? Imagine yourself as a thief who goes around pretending he is a cleric - all the time!

Are you beginning to get the idea? Mind you, we're not recommending you play only quirky characters or downright weirdos. Since your character is just numbers on paper, no one can "see" your purple hair and glowing red eyes. But they will notice when you trip over your own shadow, or when you wake up in the middle of the night with the munchies - and sneak around devouring the party's rations while they sleep ! But why include such silly things in an otherwise-sober adventurer? We'll talk more about this later.

When you have a concept for your character, assign numbers consistent with your desired personality. If you're going to play an amiable nitwit, you'll assign him a lower-than-average Intelligence, but a really nice Charisma. If your comely lass is pretty, but horribly clumsy, the Charisma score is a given.....but you will also write in an exceptionally low Dexterity. If you are planning a character who asks a lot of stupid questions, and does bone-foolish things with clockwork regularity, it should be reflected in his very low Wisdom score. That effeminate gorilla would have a Charisma which might be very high at the Baron's Court, average in mixed company, but very, very low when he is in the company of other, "real" men. And so forth. Of course, not all your stats must be low.

2) Be Modest In Your Character Design

Most GMs tend to avoid loading your character down with disabilities, if you take on disabilities on your own. There are so many players who attempt to abuse the rules and create characters with high characteristics. The typical GM is on constant alert for these combat monsters, and is often pre-occupied with limiting them, in order to keep the game in balance. Make him feel pity for you.

It's actually a relief for a GM to see someone who ISN'T trying to get a leg over on the rules. He may even praise you for your restraint. At the very least, he may hesitate to add to what he sees as a considerable burden. He may even leave you alone. But these disabilities are not really

drawbacks at all. Don't tell the GM this, but disabilities – low score stats, quirks, whatever - are all vital parts of your character which you can control and use!

And make no mistake – modest or poor stats are an integral part of the character. One of these disabilities may be the reason why the character is adventuring in the first place! Since you are going to be stuck with these stats for a long time, you should find ways to compensate or even take advantage of them before you begin play. By using the following formula, you can ensure your character will be instantly and gratefully accepted by even the most hardened GM.

All of this should be easy if you just use your head, and remember that you are trying to design a character, not an eternal killing machine. You can't cover all the bases as a starting character. If you try, at best you'll end up with a mediocre character who really isn't good at anything. At worst, you will find yourself with a combat monster who cannot be killed except by repeated lucky hits. Why is this worse?

Think about how the GM is going to challenge you. With that in mind, understand that what is challenging to YOU, will be extremely lethal to the rest of your party! In the end, you're a person gaming with other people, and they won't appreciate your attempts to be "da Man" at their expense. The chances are pretty good that you won't be invited back to that game any time soon!

3) Make Your Primary Stat As High As Possible

If the GM is comfortable with a player designing his or her own character, you won't need his permission to do this. It's none of his business, until you submit the character sheet. But if you follow all the recommendations here, he shouldn't complain. If 18 out of 18 is what your character concept calls for, write it down !

4) Make Your Secondary Statistic Two Values Less Than The Primary, But No More Than Three Values Less

Don't shortchange your character - you need a strong point to fall back on, when the Primary isn't getting results. If your Primary is 18, your Secondary should be 16 maximum and 15 minimum. If you are a fighter and your Strength is 18, take a 15 or 16 for your Constitution. Again, this depends on your character concept.

5) Make One Stat the Minimum Possible Without Incurring Any Immediate Penalties

First, let's get something out of the way. We consider Charisma to be a non-critical characteristic, because it seldom makes a difference in life-and-death situations, and is almost never involved in an adventurer's frequent grabs for instant power and wealth. A low Charisma is not a disability. Taking this as the low stat is the same as not taking one at all! No one can 'see' your character - he is just numbers on a piece of paper. You must choose a stat that will have some visible effect on the majority of your playing. Charisma is NOT it!

If you are a clumsy (but brave) fighter, make your Dexterity low. Since, in AD&D 2nd Edition, a Dexterity of 6 incurs a -1 penalty to your armor class, take a 7. This is still low, and you will feel it later. But under normal circumstances, it is not an immediate threat to your health or effectiveness in the adventure. You should always play your character with this disability in mind, constantly working to make it an integral part of the character's personality. You're painting a picture in the other player's minds, and bold strokes are best. But exercise good judgement!

Tripping and falling into a huge puddle while you are walking down a busy town street is funny. It establishes your character in the other player's minds. It's an example of effective role-playing. However, tripping on orc guts and falling into a huge sword while you are in desperate combat is not funny! It can put your party's entire adventure and an evening of fun at risk, for no good reason. There is nothing to gain in getting creamed like that, unless you're looking for a witty

comment on your tombstone. When the going gets tough, try not to perform stunts or otherwise draw attention to your disability.

6) Make ALL Your Other Stats Average, But No Closer Than Four Values To Your Secondary Stat.

Yes. This means that ALL other stats would be about 12 - or less - on a scale of 18. You can vary them a little, and in fact, you should. A healthy sprinkling of 9s, 10s and 11s will do wonders for your character. Not only will you find the play challenging, but you will discover that it is these average numbers which catch many a GameMaster's eye, not the 'low stat'. This leaves room for improvement and ensures your character is acceptable to the GameMaster

7) Maintain Your Primary, Secondary and Low Stat For As Long As Possible.

The Primary, Secondary and Low Statistic are the three pillars of your character on paper. They are the essence of the character, and should only be changed by the GameMaster over a long period of time, as a result of exceptional circumstances. Otherwise, leave these numbers alone. Feel free to improve your other scores, as long as they never exceed your Secondary stat.

8) Create Short and Long-range Goals for Your Character, and Always Consider Them Before Making Any Major Decisions.

Many players rely on the GameMaster to give their characters direction and a sense of purpose. Obviously, this is not the way to maintain control over your character. Worse, it places an unwelcome burden on the GM. He is busy enough running the rest of the world, without having to tell you what to do next! Creating goals for your character means you, as a player, will never be at a loss for something to do in the game. You can provide the GameMaster with ideas for new scenarios, as you move towards your character's dream. There are two kinds of goals, just like in real life – long term and short term. Long term goals are easier to come up with, but harder to make happen. We'll start with these.

Suppose your wish is to be the ruler of a local barony. The GM can write the story so that you have at least a chance of making some progress towards this end. Your goal may have a more primal motivation – such as a burning, lifelong desire for revenge on some NPC for an injury or wrong done to you. The goal can be tied in with strong idealism; perhaps you wish to embark on a crusade to liberate the Holy Land. Not all goals need to be melodramatic, however. You may have a very practical wish to start a tavern in the Imperial City! Maybe you've got the hots for someone who is far above you in social station. While there is always the pressing issue of staying alive in any campaign, this should never be the most important consideration when making a character's long-range goals. If it is, you're in the wrong kind of game and should make plans to get out in a hurry.

But no, you've managed to avoid all the weird games and have settled into something you can work with. And work with it you must, not just charging in with a head full of dreams, but with some solid thinking on the short term, as well.

Everyone knows how Fate and the whim of the Gods can mess up your best ideas. To get what you want in a character's lifetime, you must also set short-term goals that will get you from day to day. It's a bit harder to manage this, because you're not just trying to stay on track for the long term - you're also trying to stay alive! Think of short-term plans as a script you use to get from one scenario to the next. Long term plans decide where you are heading in the end. Short term goals are harder to think up, but easier to execute. Start by making plans to acquire the latest nifty weapon or information. You'd be amazed at how quickly the time goes on a town adventure, and how much you can accomplish right up front. It's a good way to improve your decision-making skills, and keeps your head clear when the other players are floundering about. Think about what you, the player, do

each day to make your living or keep yourself happy. This will give you a clue as to the things your character might desire, work for and take ridiculous risks to accomplish

9) Choose Your Alignment Carefully. Consult The GM To Get His Interpretation Of That Alignment. Check With Him Frequently To See How Well You Follow The Alignment.

Nearly every role-playing game makes some attempt to quantify behavior and establish a set of moral codes. Some work better than others, and some games don't even bother with this. Many players argue that the idea of aligning your character with Good or Evil, Chaos or Order, is pointless. Why follow a set of arbitrary, old-fashioned rules of behavior which have little to do with how the real world works? If your reality is the omnipresent, unforgiving law of the jungle and random chance, this might make sense – but as was stated a few paragraphs back, most folks are playing in a fantasy world precisely to get AWAY from this supposed “reality”. And when all is said and done, there is good, and there is evil, and it's not very hard to tell the difference. So rather than deny morality altogether, we'll just assume you and others will be expected to play a character who follows SOME sort of standard of behavior. And this, we'll call “playing alignment”.

So many different interpretations of “good”, “evil”, “chaos” and “law” have been offered up over the years, it would be impossible to present them all here. We've seen ‘black and white’ campaigns where you can tell the good guys from the bad guys by the color of their armor! There have been confusing and monstrously unsatisfying “grayscale” campaigns, where good and evil are so ambiguous that you can't tell the difference. You quickly discover that, when you are dealing with power-corrupted egomaniacs, there really IS no difference! You only know that there are people who want to kill you (they are bad), and others who are good only by comparison (they don't want to kill you - yet). In nearly every campaign, Chaos is interpreted as rAnDoM, with a healthy dose of Selfish. Its opposite, Law, is almost always a caricature, a conservative cartoon of a fellow who is stuffy, always follows the rules, always lays his life down for the good of the many, takes no chances and has no life outside of a few boring hobbies.

Obviously, most of these are extremes and not very good examples of what following an alignment should be about. So what can you do about it? Well, the best way to start out playing alignment is to determine where you, the player, stand according to the game rules. This is easier than you might think. Create your character and then run him (or her) without a specific alignment. After a few gaming sessions, consult the GameMaster and the other players, and find out what alignment THEY think your character has. Use this alignment with your first character. Simple, yes?

Of course, you will be playing your own alignment – but so what? It will give you a feel for how good and evil, chaos and law are perceived by the GM and the other players in your chosen game. You won't have too much trouble playing within the chosen alignment parameters! You can start other characters with different alignments later, when you are comfortable with the idea. Remember to check with the GM once in a while to see if your behavior is going astray. He will see things you don't.

How strictly should you take this idea of “alignment”? When does your paladin's behavior cross the line from insufferable boor to evil cad? Who decides what deviation from his proscribed behavior will lose him his God-granted abilities? This has always been a bone of contention, and usually because the player and the GameMaster did not sit down and hash things out BEFORE they began playing. But as experienced GMs who have seen games disintegrate over this issue, we can tell you that alignment is a guideline, and just like dice rolls, it serves the story. There are times when you toe the line, and times when you can allow a little latitude. So when can you do what? And does it even matter?

The Case for Playing Alignment

From a modern observer's perspective, no one is "pure" evil or good, completely law-abiding or totally chaotic. The holiest of clerics occasionally does selfish, nasty things, making enemies of normal folk, and acting insufferable at times. That evil wizard probably has a loving wife and children at home, waiting for Daddy to return after a hard day of raising undead armies! The point is, no one in real life is pure anything. Why should you expect them to be that way in a fantasy game? Sure, the setting is fantasy, but the characters have to be somewhat like people you know, or you won't be able to interact with them! This perspective can sometimes bring you to the conclusion that, because people are so much a mix of this and that, it is pointless to assign them labels such as 'good', 'evil', 'lawful' or 'chaotic'. After all, most of these labels are created by other folks who don't share your viewpoint, right? And if that's true, then there really isn't **any** point in including the idea of alignment in the game, since it has no real, objective value and therefore can serve no purpose for the roleplayer.

But a more traditional observer will point out that, whatever they say, folks do tend towards certain types of behavior. And these types can be classified as 'good', 'evil' and so on. The statement **'alignment is nonsense, since definitions of good and evil all depend on your perspective'** is itself nonsense. There has not yet been a society of any intelligent beings, fantasy or otherwise, that regarded cowardice or betrayal or envy or greed or lust or pain, in and of themselves, to be good things. The definitions of good, evil and other alignments **must** be independent and hold true, over and above each individual's needs at a particular moment, or there is really no point in calling any behavior anything at all. Every sort of description will, in the end, break down to "whatever happens to serve me at the moment". This may be where many folks stop, but you will notice that even bad guys don't admire a traitor. Though they need his information and pay for it, they regard him as scum.

So good or bad (or whatever) behavior is **not** relative. And if it **is** an independent standard, we can use it as a guideline to role-playing a character. Let's agree that 'alignment' in the role-playing game does, after all, represent reality after a fashion. It is then reasonable to assume that every society of intelligent beings, whether human or otherwise, will establish laws which they all agree are good, wise and just. And then, just like humans, they will exercise their free will and break those laws! Individual elves and orcs and giants stand condemned, not by some alien power or set of arbitrary rules, but by their own laws.

They are, then, capable of good and evil, behaving lawfully or chaotic. They have all the potential – and all the pitfalls – that any creature with free will and intelligence has. When the Monster Description says a particular critter is both intelligent and, say, an evil alignment, this is not to say there is a limit to the creature's ability to choose. It is meant as a comment on the Society in which they live. That Society may reward evil deeds towards others with improved survival, or some other advantage. This does not make the behavior less evil – but Societies that encouraged corrupt behavior are not new.

You can see that alignment – or Morality – or any set of rules that says you **ought** to do something, despite your own personal inclination – is not something just 'made up' by a given religious order, or whoever happens to be in charge. And it is something not taken lightly. After all the shouting has died down, you will discover that a character's alignment has a big part to play in the roleplaying game.

Take the modern and traditional perspectives into account when you play. The truth is somewhere between them. But remember that all of this hand-wringing serves one purpose – telling the Story. Alignment is a set of guidelines, just like your long and short-range goals. You should keep alignment in the back of your mind when you make decisions about people. It's there to help you create and maintain an artificial personality. You follow alignment, or ignore it, according to the degree of your role-playing. But don't let it rule the game.

It matters very much, sometimes, that you obey your alignment scrupulously. You want to do the right thing, according to your character's chosen personality. Other times, people being a mixture of good and ill, you can 'let your hair down' - without worrying too much whether your character will be rewritten by the GM come tomorrow morning. Being evil or lawful (or whatever) all the time is unrealistic, whether you are talking about a real person or a character. So is playing no morals at all, or what we used to call Chaotic Selfish. To bring either of these to the game (or tolerate them as a GameMaster) is absurd and makes for poor role-playing. Finally, remember that, like goals, alignment can change over time under the right circumstances.

10) Never Allow Your Alignment To be Changed Abruptly.

If, despite your best efforts, this happens, there is only one practical option: commit suicide. Seriously. Imagine waking up one morning and realizing that every important decision you ever made in your whole life was horribly, disgustingly, tragically wrong! It's bad enough that we should have to live with the mistakes we actually **do** make in our real lives (witness the number of people who would give nearly anything to "go back and do it all over again"). Waking up with a different alignment would be like being saddled with the memories of a completely different person, while your values remained the same. It would drive most people to despair or insanity, and there is no reason your character should be any different. It will be a short scenario - your fighter becomes hopelessly depressed and hangs himself. The End.

Should you be so concerned with your character's mental well-being? No. Killing off your own character is a means to an end - namely getting you, the player, out of a bad spot. Consider the sudden loss of control this situation represents. This is your character we're talking about here, not some GM's toy. When the character alignment changes, you are not running YOUR character anymore. It shares the same stats, the same belongings and the same piece of paper. But it is not yours anymore. It has a completely different personality, and worse, it is now subject to the GM's idea of how the new alignment is to be played. You have lost control, and should bow out gracefully, rather than argue with the GM. Just tell him the character is depressed and seriously contemplating suicide. If, despite this warning, the GM persists, have your character off him or herself in a suitably dignified manner, and start another character. It's pencil on paper, after all. Don't forget the fancy funeral.

12) Sex Changes Are A Challenge To Play, Not An Obstacle

Believe it or not, sex changes are played more for laughs than actual, serious challenges to the player! That is because most players are male and many have no idea how to play a female character. Because a male GM is not likely to know how to play a female character (and thus dictate your character's behavior), your change to a female character (assuming that is what happened) will have little effect on the game, and you are safe to play pretty much as before. Of course, there are folks who take their roleplaying much more seriously. For these players, we have only sympathy.

As their new female character's testosterone level is practically non-existent, she will have to begin making some pretty drastic changes. If the original personality was a rowdy, party-hearty type, it may be time for some serious mellowing out. There is the issue of the monthly menstrual cycle to deal with. Finally, a female character with the mind and memories of a male is, for all intents and purposes, a lesbian. Sexual attraction may have been dealt with, sort of a "package deal", but that is up to the GM. Everything else is against normal heterosexuality, so it's a toss-up.

You may decide to retire the character, as this is a difficult (and often uncomfortable) role to play. However, you **DO** have control over your original character, since sex plays such a small part in most role-playing games we've seen (the sight of a male GM attempting to run a flirtatious female NPC is not to be missed).

[I almost didn't include this section. It probably won't make the next cut, because it just isn't the problem for roleplayers that it used to be. Back in the early 1980s, probably before some of you were born, changing a character's

sex was a big deal. Most players and their characters were male, so it was interesting to see what happened to a gamer when he tried to act like a woman. Or, more precisely, what he thought a woman acted like. Many players had so little experience with women that it ended up being uproariously funny! What you got was more Richard Simmons than it was Xena, Warrior Princess. Nowadays, for various reasons, I think it has become less of an issue. Most of this is probably because, with the gradual increase in female gamers, the thought of a male player running a female character is not as funny – or titillating - as it used to be.]

13) Don't Tell Other Players About Your Character.

There is nothing in the gaming world as boring as being forced to politely listen to another player enthusiastically recount every detail of his latest adventure. Your mind immediately numbs, you nod your head, and think up stories of your own to recount. Do yourself and the rest of the gaming world a big favor - don't! If the other player was in the same game with you and can share your experience, or you wish to briefly illustrate a point, fine. Otherwise, you are going to bore the hell out of your audience, no matter how much they insist they want to hear about your experiences. Never discuss any of your character's adventures with anybody. It's none of their business, anyway. Let them wonder. No one is so popular as the player who is a good listener.

14) Never Accept A Gift Of Any Kind From The GM - No Matter How Badly You Want It

By now, you might think of a disability as an opportunity – which it is. But alongside that, you may also realize that, for purposes of telling the story, your disabilities are something the GameMaster uses to get a toehold on your character - a hook, or “foot in the door”, as it were. And you'd be right. And as you may now realize, more control for the GM = less control for you. But not all disabilities come in the form of curses, low stats and uncooperative NPCs. Some are more cleverly disguised - as gifts.

Trust us. That gift of gold or jewels or spells or raised stats or whatever is just numbers on paper. Your role-playing efforts are real. Such bounty, unearned, can ruin the whole motivation of your character. When his short and long-range goals are satisfied with one act, it's tough to justify staying out there and continuing to adventure. In other words, since your character's goals are the driving force of your character and your role-playing, it's easy to see that gratuitous gifts will rob him (and you) of the ambition to keep going.

Don't let the GM spoil your fun! Give that gold to the local orphanage! Trade that +2 sword in to the church in return for a favor! Who knows when you'll wake up dead some morning and need a resurrection? Of course, don't be stupid about it. If the gift **is** a resurrection, and you happen to be dead, take it! Dead characters are hard to role-play. And besides, the GM needs a way to hook you. How else can he lure you on to foolish deeds, and have his fun?

Earlier, we mentioned some bits of advice relating to game mechanics. Their individual utility will depend on how the GM likes to run his or her world. They are as follows:

A) No matter who or what your character is, ensure that he or she always carries two things into combat - a ranged weapon and a close-in weapon.

B) Record your game on a separate sheet of paper. Don't go for blow-by-blow detail, but instead, write down things like: what you killed and how many hits you scored. How much money and jewels you found, and what kind. What kinds of magic you picked up. Skullbusting ideas you came up with that saved the party or changed the campaign significantly. Methods of coping with the GM's quirks. A list like this is useful for presenting to the GM at the end of the game. You get to learn from your mistakes, and you can usually make a case for extra experience points - and, of course, there's always the glory of it. Such a list can get really impressive after a while (assuming your character is the type to brag). Of course, if you find you have to record every little quirk just so you can survive the next scenario, you may be in a bad game.

C) Ensure you know what the area of effect is for whatever weapon you use, magical or otherwise. Be sure you, and anyone you care about, are outside this effect diameter. In most games, area-of-effect weapons (like fireballs or plasma guns or whatever) do amazing amounts of damage. There is no surer way to cream the entire party than to miscalculate your range!

Problems With Gaming Personalities

Just as you will not find the perfect game to play in, you will also find that your fellow players are less than perfect. That said, we want to point out some of the less pleasant aspects of the personalities you may encounter in the average game. But be warned! The observations we make here are derived from years of gaming experience and consultation with many, many other GameMasters. Some of these descriptions are sad statements on the personal lives of many players. As such, they may offend some of you. Just the same, we feel these descriptions are legitimate and we include them because the DM and the Character are only two elements of a satisfying game. The other players are the third ingredient, and you must study them if you want to get the most out of your evening's gaming.

When you are playing in a role-playing game, you are interacting with other people. And while most players have normal reactions to what happens in the game, many do not. These players may confuse and anger you. If you see elements of your own personality here, don't be discouraged. Playing in a regular game will give you the experience you need to overcome these problems.

Our observations?

(1) Many gamers are made up of people who are not very good at relating to other people. They do not like to make decisions, as this exposes them to criticism from others. These players avoid personal confrontation like the plague, because they don't want to be seen as the 'bad guy', but they are determined to get their way just the same. In short, they exhibit passive-aggressive personalities, and they are legion.

(2) Many gamers are not used to either confrontation or adversity, and are frequently unable to handle arguments or disagreements in a civilized manner. Since they often play themselves in role-playing games, this poses a problem. When there is an argument about a game-related topic, they take the situation personally. It's not unusual for two red-faced players to go for each other's throats for some disagreement between their characters. And the player who passes "Screw-your-Buddy" notes to the GM while he sets up a grand betrayal of a fellow partymember – or even the entire party – is a gaming classic. These players often welcome the presence of an authority figure, usually someone other than the GameMaster, as it relieves them of having to solve their own problems (or so they think).

(3) Many gamers, not being the most social of creatures outside the gaming environment, place an inordinate amount of value on what goes on **in** the gaming environment. The more stable it is, the better they feel about it. Heaven help the player who rocks the boat! These gamers will pursue acceptance in this group, regardless of the cost in time or money. If the current game changes to space-opera and runs all weekend, they will pack away their fantasy material, hurry out to get the books for the new game, and call in sick to work on Saturday morning.

(4) Most gamers resent being told what to do by any other gamer in the context of the game. This is one reason why most "parties" are democratic in nature. But the biggest reason why a democracy is so popular is because most of the players do not want to assume the responsibility of leadership, be it through suggestion or outright decision-making. They don't want to take the blame if they screw up. They demand a say in what happens, but don't want to make the decision themselves. We have noticed this in games across the spectrum, and have found that experience in

real-world business and the military are of great benefit. As long as you can make a clean decision, you stand a very good chance of being elected the 'leader' of the party.

Keep the above observations in mind, and you will find it easy to understand how many players will behave in a given situation – and predict how their characters will react. Naturally, not all players fit into these neat boxes, and we're not implying that. But you can avoid a lot of anger and misunderstanding if you know what to expect from some of the less socially-inclined types.

And now for the final part of this article.

Reasons For Role-Playing

Since you've made it this far, you probably don't need to be told why you should actually try to role-play in a game. You probably wouldn't think anyone would need to **be** told. But the sad fact is, most players play themselves. Regardless of what's on the character sheet, despite the character's professed history or alignment - they play themselves. Which is why the contents of this article will give you a huge advantage when it comes to the average role-playing game. Manipulating game rules will only get you so far. Even then, you really won't have anything another player can't get. But successfully navigating the minefield/obstacle course that is your fellow player is another thing.

There are four reasons why you should attempt to actually role-play in a role-playing game.

The first reason – Good role-playing is essential to painting the picture of your character in the other player's minds. You are telling a story – make the others care about what happens to you!

The Second Reason - You are playing in a role-game to escape, and to escape, you need to assume a different personality. It's a lot like being in an online chat room - you get to break free of who you really are for a few hours, but you have to use a different name and maybe even show an interest in things you'd normally never discuss. The new 'handle' is a cover, but it's also an obligation. But maybe you don't see the value of pretending to be a different person – or not yet?

a) If you play yourself, you will be easily disappointed when the game does not go your way. If you play another person, things will be happening to your character, not you.

b) If you play yourself, there will be times when you are ready to beat the hell out of a fellow player for frustrating you in some way. In a word, everything will be personal. If you are distanced somewhat by a good, solid character, it reduces the bad feelings and clashing egos won't spoil the fun so much.

c) If you play yourself, you will naturally make friends and enemies among the players and this will lead to preferences and bias between you and them. Unfortunately, this will leak over to the game, where you will find it affects your character in ways that have nothing to do with his alignment or performance. You will find it hard to make correct decisions due to personal preferences among the players.

d) If you play yourself, you will not be able to escape the real world as effectively, because you will be affected by the same social or mental limitations you experience in your personal life.

The Third Reason - To have fun doing things you could never do in real life.

The Fourth Reason - To meet new people and maybe make some new friends in a place where you all share a common interest - or at least, a bit more tolerance for individual differences.

So go ahead. Play a character – *really* play one.

It's time to wrap this up – let's go for a recap, okay?

Start your role-playing game by following the instructions we gave you for creating your own character. When you're done, select two or three "hooks" for his personality, reference points for you to use in playing the character. Choose an alignment, then use the 'hooks' as the skeleton of your character, and flesh him or her out as you play. Make realistic short and long-term goals for your character (and you!) to follow. And then paint a picture of your character in your mind. As you play, you will be painting this same picture in the minds of the other players. You will contribute to the telling of The Story, and you may even get extra experience from the GameMaster for playing it so well.

Don't be surprised if people begin addressing you by your character's name! Pat yourself on the back – you deserve it! But remember that, while you are busy doing this, other people may not be. You will have trouble with their lack of role-playing time and again. What should you do? Nothing. Just leave them be and continue on. Some of them will eventually begin to follow your example, if for no other reason than to get those extra experience points! As for your own personal growth, we encourage you to try as many different roles as possible. This not only allows you to get wide experience as a player, but keeps the role-playing experience from becoming stale. It also allows you a better perspective on the advantages and limits other players have. In short, you will be a better player for it.

And last, always remember that role-playing games are a device for having fun - that's all. They are not a primer for devil worship or any other such nonsense. Gaming is intended as a temporary escape from reality. Just like any other form of escape (drugs, alcohol or whatever), it can be easily abused. When you get up from the gaming table, real life will be waiting for you. And real life does not allow saving throws. You should not sacrifice real friendships or neglect the things in life which truly matter (family, job, girlfriend or boyfriend) for the sake of 'getting ahead' in any game.

Cheers!

Steven Satak
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