

# THE ULTIMATE RPG GAME MASTER'S GUIDE

ADVICE AND TOOLS TO HELP YOU  
RUN YOUR BEST GAME EVER!

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## Dedication

To my spouse and child, who always understood when I had to write.



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# Introduction

Talented game masters (or GMs) make dynamic, exciting, and imaginative worlds for their friends to inhabit. Maybe you've played with a brilliant GM, and you're ready to follow in their footsteps. Maybe your favorite show inspired you to take control of the world its characters inhabit. Or maybe you have a group of friends who want to play RPGs and there's no one to spearhead the campaign.

RPGs everywhere depend on one player stepping up as game master to guide the group through a fantastical world, govern mountains of rules, and manage interpersonal relationships between the characters in the fiction and the humans at the table. GMing is more than rolling some dice or creating lovable non-player characters (NPCs); you're *taking ownership* of the story your table wants to tell and infusing it with your unique style. Whether your table is setting sail on a pirate ship questing for a mythical treasure, exploring the far reaches of outer space, or banishing eldritch horrors in the modern era, the world depends on you. Your only constraints are your creativity (and probably the game system you're playing with).

As your journey begins, you'll need to answer questions: Are you running a one shot or a campaign? Is your game horror, fantasy, science fiction—or something totally different? Who are your main player characters (PCs) and how is the story built to feature them? As a game master, you'll have to find answers to all of these and more—no one can tell you the right way to do it. *The Ultimate RPG Game Master's Guide* is full of advice and tools to help you succeed at GMing in the way *you* want to. No matter your experience with the

GM role, this book will help you explore the marvelous complexities of this art form.

A GM's artistic canvas is infinite, and that means there is a staggering amount to learn and master. With a little help, you'll be able to focus on honing your craft and having fun instead of catching up. This book is here to provide that help. In the first part, you'll explore the basics—what the GM does, how to deal with conflicts between players, how your role changes depending on the format of your game, and how to make your choices intentional. In the second part of the book, you'll find more nuanced and hands-on advice. Part 2 walks you through Session Zero, helps you think about how to open your game, teaches you how to shape and move the plot, explains the complexities of role-playing, guides you to explore your expectations around PCs and NPCs, and more.

The experience of GMing is joyful, rewarding, and even profound. It's a form of artistic expression that may help you connect to yourself in unexpected and powerful ways. So, get started! As the GM, you'll take your PCs on a journey of creation and discovery!

## Defining Terms

**B**efore tackling the issue of how to make your role-playing game experience richer, deeper, and more enjoyable, let's go over some basic terms. If you're new to this world, this section will make clear a lot that may be confusing to you.

### What Is an RPG?

A role-playing game (RPG) is a type of game where players generate stories through shared imagination. The core concept behind RPGs is similar to imagination games you might have played when you were young. Playing pretend calls on players to inhabit a role and interact in a shared imaginary space.

Tabletop RPGs published in game manuals introduce structure to this process. Published RPGs, or role-playing systems, help players establish goals, track abstract information, and resolve conflicts. Rule systems and randomizers (usually dice) help adults make sense of what comes naturally to most children.

The first and most famous example of a published RPG is *Dungeons & Dragons*, first published in 1974. It defined what most people picture when they think of RPGs. This sword and sorcery fantasy with polyhedral dice is still immensely popular. However, RPGs have grown well beyond these roots to encompass every genre imaginable.

Folks benefit from RPGs in a number of ways beyond simple entertainment. RPGs foster communication skills, empathy, and creative problem-solving ability, and they provide a fantastic outlet for creative expression. For some players, creative expression is the most appealing aspect of play. Stories built with RPGs have become their

own form of entertainment called actual play, where groups record or stream their game sessions for an audience.

If you discovered RPGs through actual play productions like *One Shot*, *Critical Role*, or *The Adventure Zone*, this book will explain some of the storytelling techniques you've seen and help you develop those skills. Whether you're new or old to the world of RPGs, hopefully while reading this book you'll grow to love RPGs even more.

You did a stellar job in purchasing this book or receiving it as a gift. Turns out, it's exactly what you needed. That said, before diving in, there are a few roles you should understand.

## PCs and GMs

Everyone involved in an RPG is playing the game and is therefore a player. When this book refers to “players,” it includes everyone at the table. Traditional RPGs have specific roles that work differently to make the game function. Broadly speaking, the most popular meta roles are player character (PC) and game master (GM).

### What Is a PC?

In most games, the majority of people participating are responsible for controlling individual characters. For our purposes these characters and the people who play them are PCs.

Narratively, PCs are the protagonists, and players in the PC role are the primary authors of their story. PC players choose how their character thinks, looks, and acts. PCs interact with outside forces like other players and randomization; so, a player in a PC role can't control everything that happens to their character. However, a PC player always controls how their character reacts.

Players in the PC role can have the following responsibilities:

- Determining their character's appearance, behavior, personality, and history
- Making decisions about their character's actions

- Embodying their character's voice
- Managing their character's statistics and abilities
- Addressing storytelling challenges through character action

These responsibilities and the overall function of the PC role can vary from game to game. In some games, the most important aspects of a PC are numbers that make up their vital statistics. Others call for players to pay attention to their character's emotional state based on events in the game. And some games focus on both.

## What Is a GM?

Many RPGs have a specialized role that controls any elements of the game that are not PCs. The title for this role varies, but this book refers to it as the game master (GM). This is your role, or it will be soon.

The GM is like a narrator, director, producer, supporting actor, and crew rolled into one person. Colloquially it's said that the GM "runs" the game. The GM is usually also the arbiter of a game's rules. Sometimes there are no clear rules in a game system for what's happening; sometimes there are a few contradictory rules that might apply. The GM is tasked with deciding what to do in those situations. The GM is also role-playing. They control the actions of non-player characters (NPCs), which function to support or oppose PCs in the story.

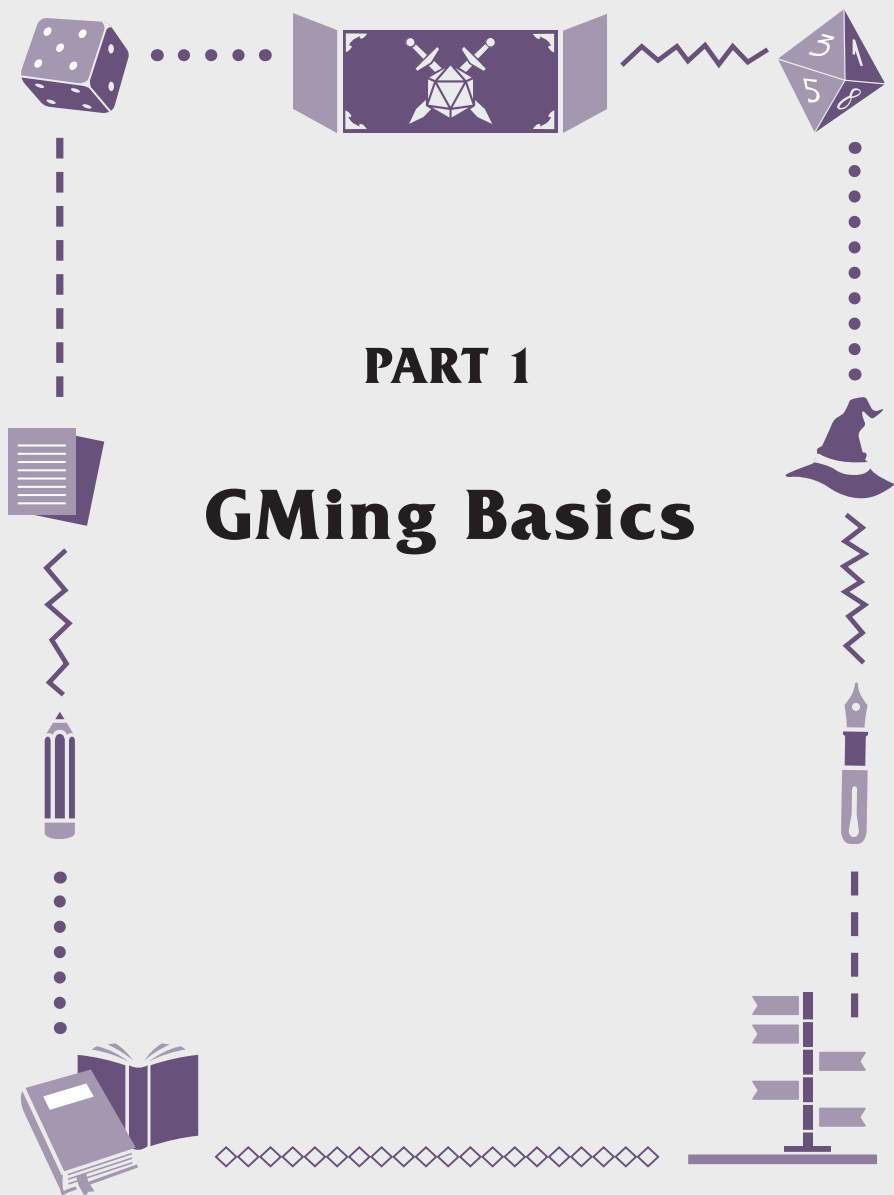
Players in the GM role can have the following responsibilities:

- Determining the appearance, behavior, and personality of NPCs
- Controlling forces in the game world unrelated to characters, such as environment and time
- Controlling the general flow and focus of the overall narrative
- Presenting PCs with challenges that advance their story
- Preparing materials for game sessions
- Understanding the rules of the game and deciding when they apply

Now that we've established who does what in a game, let's explore more about the specifics of the GM role.







Part 1 of this guide homes in on the essential functions of being a GM. In these first chapters, you'll receive basic guidance and tools that will serve you throughout your GMing journey. Throughout this group of chapters, you will: understand the primary goals for successful GMing, take inventory of common misunderstandings that make GMing harder, encounter explanations for different game formats (one shots, campaigns, and everything in between), and receive some tools that will help you in just about every game you run. All of the techniques and concepts discussed in Part 2 of this book will relate back to serving these basics. Part 1 serves as the foundation on which you may build the understanding of your game.



## Goals for GMs

**Y**ou now know what a GM's overall mechanical functions are, but they don't really tell you specifics of what exactly you're "supposed" to do. It's one thing to know that stepping on an accelerator moves a car and another to know that you have to follow traffic rules to arrive at a destination safely. Knowing the functions of driving or GMing doesn't help you perform your role *optimally*. If you're reading this book, optimization must be at the top of your mind!

This chapter will define some fundamental goals that are important for most GMs. These goals are a good place to start and act as a foundation that serves most games. How important these goals are to you will vary based on your game system and what your group wants from the game. After all, once you know how to drive, you can plot your own routes and maybe even go off-roading.

### Facilitate the Game

Not every RPG includes a specialized GM role. Although the position of GM is traditionally considered a standard component of RPG design, there are plenty of systems that work without one. In short: Having a GM is a specific design choice for the game systems you run. Your most basic goal as GM is to fulfill the function required by your game of choice.

The first RPGs evolved out of tactical war-gaming. In those games, the “game master”—sometimes called an arbiter, facilitator, or referee—was a neutral, third party between competing players. GMs existed to represent the rules of the game in a way that felt impartial and authentic to everyone. The RPG GM is an evolution of that war-gaming role.

In many RPGs, the rules can’t call for themselves to be implemented. For example, if a party of adventurers has to make rolls to avoid being caught in a landslide, the GM chooses when rolling the dice becomes necessary. Similarly, games need someone to control antagonistic forces like monsters for the PCs to challenge and overcome.

Of course RPGs are more complicated than who you’re fighting. It’s possible, and even likely, for players to end up in situations game designers never anticipated. In these cases, GMs use their knowledge of a game and scenario to apply novel solutions to complex problems. Should a smuggling vessel be able to use a tractor beam and the gravity of a moon to slingshot an asteroid at a capital ship like a rail gun? What happens if they do? It’s an overly specific question for a rule book to answer, but not impossible for a GM who is skilled at thinking on their feet. Scenarios like this are not aberrations; they are the heart of the game. The creativity needed to navigate what no one can anticipate is what draws so many people to RPGs, and the reason the game needs you.

## Enable Choices

RPGs are built to be interactive and creative. To be interactive, an RPG needs to allow players to make choices that have a meaningful impact on the game. To be creative, an RPG needs to empower players to make choices that are unique, exciting, and authentic to their vision of their characters. In many cases, setting the stage for the PCs to make interesting and impactful choices depends on the GM. You provide the circumstances for players to interact with and validate their contributions by incorporating game mechanics and narrating their results.

 **As the GM, one of your goals is to answer these basic questions:**

- Where are the players?
- What is this place like?
- Why are the players here?
- What are they hoping to do?
- What do they see in their way?

Your answers to these questions combine with PC choices to create a story. The smallest push from you gives PCs the momentum they need to drive an adventure!

In some ways, the mechanics of an RPG validate the decisions of the players. It's not very satisfying to simply declare, "I am playing a character that owns five hundred gold pieces." It's more exciting and story driven if that character acquired the gold by facing a squad of reanimated skeletons in a haunted tomb. If the PCs made strategic choices and rolled contests to overcome those skeletons before claiming the gold, the gold feels like a valuable reward. As a GM, you are there to establish that there is a tomb to search, skeletons to guard it, and potential treasure to find. You enable PCs to make choices within the game world in a way that makes those choices interesting, exciting, and fun.

Sometimes you'll enable player choices indirectly by introducing details through your narration that PCs respond to. Whereas other times you'll enable those choices directly by telling a PC which of their abilities they can use to overcome different obstacles, and what the results of their attempts are. In all cases, your goal is to move the game by empowering the creativity of the players at your table.

## Neither Leader nor Follower

A lot of the language around GMing implies that it is a leadership role. It's said that you are "running" the game, or many times there are references to your "authority" at the table. It's best to toss aside hierarchical thinking when comparing the GM and PC roles. Sometimes you'll lead; sometimes you'll follow. This book's advice centers around the GM's role as a collaborator, because that makes the game stronger.

## Curate a Safe and Comfortable Environment

One of the golden rules of gameplay is that games shouldn't hurt players in real life. This doesn't mean that players will never experience disappointment, stress, or other negative emotions at the table. After all, RPGs are a form of artistic expression, and many people enjoy being challenged and affected by art. However, players need to opt in to the kind of discomfort they want to face during a session.

The creative nature of RPGs means anything can happen, even things players and GMs don't expect. A player can join a spacefaring sci-fi game without knowing there are aliens inspired by spiders on the surface of a planet. If they have severe arachnophobia, that detail could ruin the game for them. Social pressure can make it difficult for many players to recover on their own. When everyone else is having a fun time, no one wants to be the person to derail it.

It is not solely the GM's responsibility to make everyone at the table feel safe. Every player is responsible for voicing their concerns and shares the responsibility of looking out for others. However, your role as GM gives you unique tools to help manage safety. You control narration, as well as the rules and which details need mechanical attention. Sometimes keeping safety in mind is just a matter of swapping one detail for another or making exceptions on the fly. For example, instead of the aforementioned alien spiders, they could be alien octopuses. You also carry some actual and perceived authority that can help diffuse social tension.

One of your overall and most important goals is to look after the people at your table. Chapter 3: Safety and Conflict Resolution, provides tools to help you keep those around you as comfortable and happy as possible. However, as a GM you'll come to learn you can always count on the unexpected. Treating safety as a goal sets you up to make the best calls when you need to make them.

## Make It Fun

It's important to remember that ultimately RPGs are games, which means they should be fun. Every group is a little different: Some people prefer to joke around and roll dice, others want a grueling tactical gauntlet that pushes their characters to the brink, and some find themselves gripped by emotionally devastating drama. However, it's all still fun. As the GM, you have tremendous influence over what happens at the table—fun is a part of your responsibility!

Within this goal of keeping the PCs (and yourself) amused exists a multitude of tasks and skills. Making a game fun can mean setting up exciting scenarios, facilitating interesting and rewarding challenges, creating and portraying compelling characters, and dressing up each scene with compelling narration, props, or other atmospheric aids. It also might mean reading the room and giving up an element or two if they aren't working.

When your game is compelling and fun, the stress of making something amusing will become invisible. You and your friends will be invested in the game and will be enjoying and building the story with ease. You won't be worried about fun because you'll be too busy having it! On the other hand, when things *aren't* working, it's a challenge to assess what needs to change and how best to make that change.

Remember that fun is completely subjective: What feels fun will vary group to group and even person to person. A fun game involves fostering an empathetic connection to your players and reacting to their feelings in the moment. This is the kind of skill that you will hone over time. The most important part of the “make it fun” goal is

to remember your priorities. You aren't there to build a perfect continuity, represent physics faithfully within game mechanics, or produce brilliant fiction—you are there to share an experience with your friends. All those are fine things to lead you to fun, but they should never get in the way of it.

## **Make Sure *You* Have Fun Too**

Part of the way you experience fun in your group also has to include looking out for yourself as a player. It's easy to get caught up in GM responsibilities and worry if you are doing a good job. You certainly have more to juggle than players in the PC role, but your fun is still important!

There will be moments as a GM where you have less fun than others. That's only natural. Sometimes your game needs you to do something even if you don't love doing it. During your journey as a GM, you will eventually find yourself outside your comfort zone. This is okay occasionally, but you don't want it to be your entire experience.

In order for you to avoid burnout, GMing has to be something that you *want* to do. While you can coast for a while on obligation or routine, the only thing that keeps you in the game is the fun you have in-game. That's why prioritizing your own fun has to be a goal. Figure out what you like to do and create opportunities for doing it. This will naturally lead to better games and make you a better GM.

## **Why It's Fun**

Players stepping into the GM role for the first time might feel intimidated—but that's perfectly okay. GMing is *very* different from playing as a PC. You carry more of the game, you have to put in more effort to each session, and even with a book like this spelling out your responsibilities, those responsibilities are pretty big and pretty vague. It's not wrong or a bad sign if that's intimidating.

That said: This experience should be fun! While GMing carries unique responsibility, it also provides opportunities to indulge your



creativity that you barely touch as a PC. Remember the moment RPGs first clicked for you—after all of the weirdness from the dice, the character sheets, or the playing pretend faded way—the moment you realized just how amazing these games can be. You have another discovery like that ahead of you.

## **Total Creative Freedom**

The thing that truly defines GMing is freedom. There are no limits on what you can create. In so many other creative disciplines, you are limited by budget, scope, and supervision. As a GM, much of what you make is informed only by your interests and the feedback of other players at your table.

Moreover, you don't have to put in too much effort to make things happen. You get to speak your ideas and the PCs get to enjoy them instantly. The GM role focuses the maximum amount of conceptual creativity imaginable toward fun. While some of what you create might have to be statted out to fit within the confines of the game system you're using, you have the license to bend or simply not engage with the rules. As you play and master your role you can take your creative freedom to new heights.

## **BRING YOUR FANTASY WORLD TO LIFE**

Depending on the games you have played, you might have dabbled with worldbuilding a little already. However, you will find that worldbuilding from the GM's seat is a completely different experience. You are empowered to do anything you like—emulate your favorite worlds, challenge long-standing tropes, or make changes for the sake of individualism. It's all in your hands. Even when you collaborate with your group, you set the parameters. You decide when to invite folks to contribute and how to incorporate their ideas. Finally, worldbuilding in an RPG environment allows you to instantly present your ideas to an audience. Your players essentially interrogate your creation from angles you might never have imagined.