Odyssey

The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management

By Phil Vecchione & Walt Ciechanowski • Foreword By Kenneth Hite

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In memory of Lynn Willis

With special thanks to Robert M. Everson for coming up with the title—a task which the authors and publisher agree was more difficult than naming our children

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to all the players in all the campaigns I have managed over the years. With special thanks to the original Amber group, the Eagle Eye cell, the Heist crew, and the Heroes of Elhal. You are the great ones. – Phil Vecchione

To my beloved Zoeanna, whose odyssey is only just beginning. – Walt Ciechanowski

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Foreword

I've been "GM for life" since I came back from a Slurpee® run to find all the PCs in my D&D campaign riding pegasi and wielding vorpal swords. My co-DM Dave had only the faintest idea how this had happened. If he'd read this book, he might have headed it off at the pass, and I might have played more than a handful of characters over the next thirty-odd years.

If I'd read this book, I might have known better than to run *Traveller* for accounting majors, or to try and improv my way through a D&D 3rd Edition campaign, or to let the players in my *Nobilis* game suggest a side quest through the entire Tree of the Sephiroth. But mistakes aside, I have learned one or two things about managing RPG campaigns in the course of my thirty-odd years as GM for life.

Pick a day and stick to it: The key to any campaign is continuity: the same players coming back for the same adventures. You can't have that if you can't play regularly. Pick a game night; play on that night come hell or high water. Don't let each week's game night be a negotiation: make it a plan everyone plays by. I picked Monday nights when I moved to Chicago, because back then Letterman was in reruns on Mondays. I still run on Monday nights. "When is game?" "Monday." Now you can bicker over loadouts for the heist mission instead.

Actions have consequences: Not everything the PCs do spawns a sequel, or blowback, or a story arc. But some things do. Pick one action per session, or per adventure, and make a note: "Brad angered the dwarves." "Erin drank from the skull goblet." "Zach got a critical on that Fast Talk; the cop is really impressed." Then, when you're stuck for a story beat or a scene or a mini-adventure, a note comes back: The dwarves give Brad cursed armor, Erin gets weird prophetic nightmares, the cop calls Zach with a monster tip. This feeds realism and keeps your sessions out of ruts.

Villains have their own timetable: I learned this from *Masks of Nyarlathotep*. Give the villain a plan, and let the heroes hear echoes of it—rumors, crises, omens, weird guys in taverns—as it unfolds on its own schedule. It's on the PCs to decide when to hunt the Dark Lord: when they first hear about the spider migration, when they first meet the refugees, or when the skies above them turn to purple flame.

Campaigns are like chess games: They have openings, midgames, and endgames, and the things that work in one stage don't work in the next. Keep aware of where you are in the campaign, and be ready to shift when your players are. Also like chess, if you can't see a good game in it any more, there's no shame in knocking your king on his side and starting over.

There should be a book of this stuff, best practices to keep campaigns flowing: Oh, right, there is. Read it now.

Kenneth Hite • Chicago, IL • April 2013

Phil's Introduction

I don't run campaigns. I manage them.

I used to think that I ran campaigns. If you asked me what I was running, I would say something like, "I am currently running a *Corporation* campaign." What I have come to learn is that you don't *run* your campaign, you *manage* your campaign.

What you run are *sessions* of your campaign. When you're running a session, you're at the table with your players and together you tell a story, with each of you contributing parts of that story. As the game master (GM) you're representing the setting, the story, and all the non-player characters (NPCs). The players, acting through their characters (player characters, or PCs), interact with and guide the direction of the story.

Managing a campaign, though, is done away from the table. "Managing your campaign" is the collection of activities and efforts that you, as the GM, work on to advance the campaign and to keep it viable. It is as much about creating things such as plot lines and NPCs as it is about reacting to changes and new elements that are introduced with every session you run—changes like rising and falling player interest, the growth of the characters, and the effects of the passage of time in your game world.

The goal of managing your campaign is the production of good gaming sessions. What you run during your sessions is a product of the management you have done away from the table, in between sessions. Sessions are where the GM interacts with the players and where drama is created, where good battles evil (or evil battles good), where heroes and villains are made, and where characters die. It is during sessions where changes occur as the players react to, and drive, events in the game and the unfolding story.

In the aftermath of a session there are all manner of loose ends that need to be managed: unresolved plot threads, escaped villains, NPC reactions to what happened during the session, etc. All of these are seeds to be gathered and carried into future sessions. Thus, *running* and *managing* are locked in a continuous cycle, one feeding the other and in turn being fed by it.

We manage in order to have something to run, and we run in order to have something to manage.

I'm a project manager by profession, and I spend a great deal of time working with teams and managing projects. It turns out there are a tremendous number of similarities between a project team and a gaming group.

What I want to do in this book is take the techniques that I've learned for managing teams and apply them to the gaming group. There's nothing magical about what I've learned—everything I've learned is a skill that can be taught, learned, and improved. It's my hope that these skills and techniques will help you and your players create stronger and more enjoyable campaigns.

Phil Vecchione • Buffalo, NY • February 2013

Walt's Introduction

I'd like to introduce myself by stating that I'm not Phil.

Phil is a highly organized and dedicated GM who carefully plans out his games and keeps a tight rein on managing them. He's even written an excellent book about session preparation, *Never Unprepared*.

If I'd written that book, it would've been called *Barely Prepared – Maybe*.

I've never been the type of GM that spends a lot of time preparing for my sessions. I rely heavily on improvisation and my players' interest in the campaign to keep my sessions moving. For me, a page or two of notes is enough; I improvise the rest as necessary.

When Phil first proposed this project I was tempted to pass; compared to Phil I'm a slacker. As I thought about it, however, I realized that there are a lot of GMs like me who enjoy running campaigns but don't do heavy preparation. After all, regardless of whether you wing it or prep extensively, you still encounter the same challenges when managing a campaign. GMs who wing it simply have to think more on their feet, and even prep-heavy GMs know that no prep survives the gaming table unscathed.

For me, roleplaying is a journey, an odyssey, shared amongst friends around a gaming table. GMing should be a labor of love, not a chore, and a well-managed campaign eases that burden. It is my hope that, regardless of your GMing style, you find this book helpful when managing your own odysseys, from beginning to end.

Walt Ciechanowski • Springfield, PA • March 2013

How to Use this Book

Odyssey: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management is about managing your campaigns. It's about what you, the GM, do away from the gaming table that keeps your campaign going, helps it grow and mature, and makes it fun. The list of potential activities involved in managing a campaign is long, but we've grouped like activities and divided this book into three parts:

- **Starting Your Campaign**—A lot of the success of a campaign comes from setting it up correctly. This part of the book is dedicated to talking about what goes into setting up a campaign, and getting everyone on board and excited about playing.
- **Managing Your Campaign**—Once a campaign begins, it's all about managing the story and/or world, characters, and players as well as anticipating problems and dealing with things that arise during play—all the while keeping the campaign entertaining and healthy.
- **Ending Your Campaign**—Every campaign ends. Some end with glorious conclusions, some are shelved with hopes of returning another day, and some die suddenly. We'll close the book by showing you how to end your campaigns well.

Every campaign in every game system starts, requires management, and ends at some point. Campaigns are one of the cornerstones of tabletop roleplaying, and for good reason: There's something special about the campaign structure, a unique blend of elements that combine to make a compelling experience. That's what *Odyssey* is about: what makes campaigns tick, and how to make your campaigns awesome.

Whether you've been GMing for a week, a year, a decade, or since the dawn of the hobby, you'll find something—hopefully many things—in *Odyssey* for you.

What this Book Isn't

Odyssey isn't a guide to running individual sessions within your campaign, though that topic will be discussed when it relates to campaign management. That isn't to say that improving your ability to run a session isn't important—it is. Running gaming sessions is a topic that gets a lot of attention in books, on blogs, and on podcasts, as it well should. Engine Publishing also publishes a book on session prep, *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep*, by Phil Vecchione, if you'd like to explore the topic in more detail.

Why a Book about Campaign Management?

We wrote *Odyssey* because campaigns are a unique and central aspect of the roleplaying hobby, with their own lifecycle and challenges, which have never been addressed comprehensively before.

Campaigns are like snowflakes: unique and fragile. Campaigns are unique in that the coming together of you and your players—and the story that you all create—will be unlike any other group's campaign, even if you're exclusively using published material. It's lightning in a bottle, and this is one of the main reasons that many gamers are drawn to this hobby.

A campaign is fragile in that it doesn't take much for it to end prematurely. Campaigns need to be encouraged to grow as much as they need protection from things that can harm them. You culture ideas and stories within a campaign to develop new material for your sessions, but at the same time you also need to protect your campaign from the risks that surround it. When you can't protect it from those risks, you have to shepherd the campaign through whatever changes are necessary for it to remain viable.

Why Campaigns Die

I've been GMing for over 30 years. In that time I have had a handful of truly great and memorable campaigns—the kind that you never forget. I've had numerous enjoyable campaigns that never quite reached greatness, and I've had hundreds of failures. I've seen campaigns die because of the GM's actions and inactions, and I've seen them killed by players' actions and inactions. I once started and killed a campaign before we'd even made it to the first session.

What has been constant in all my campaigns is that I've learned something from them—what worked that I should do again, and what didn't work and should be avoided. I have tried to carry these ideas forward bringing the best ones to future campaigns.

When I started considering the reasons why campaigns have failed, I saw patterns. Although each reason may manifest itself differently (each campaign being unique), when you look at them closely there are only a few reasons why campaigns fail:

- **Lack of consensus**—Not everyone in the game is on the same page within the campaign, leading to disharmony.
- **Failure to manage expectations**—This can occur at a group or individual level, when one or more people have one idea about what should happen and others have a different idea. (This ties into the first reason, lack of consensus.)

- **Inability to deal with change**—Something happens in the game, either suddenly or gradually, and the GM isn't able to manage that change, causing the campaign to fail.
- **Loss of energy**—The players, the GM, or both lose their passion for the game.

All of these problems can be managed, and when they are actively managed a campaign can remain healthy and continue for a long time. It is when we take our eye off the ball, when we get distracted or complacent, that our campaigns can be injured or even killed.

Managing a Campaign is Work

It's no secret that campaigns are work. Managing a campaign isn't difficult when you have ample free time to dedicate to it, but it becomes much more challenging to accomplish as you get older and more of your time is dedicated to work and family. The techniques that we share in *Odyssey* are designed to help you manage your campaign more easily—to get better results while expending less time and energy.

Why Two Authors?

Each of *Odyssey*'s authors brings their own perspective and expertise to the table. Given the material, one author seemed like too few and three-plus seemed like too many; either way you would lose something. Campaign management is a big topic, and two authors felt like the sweet spot for tackling this subject in a clear, concise way that would be useful to as many GMs as possible.

As you read *Odyssey* you'll notice little icons that show up at the beginning of each chapter or section. These icons tell you who wrote that section, Walt or Phil. In case you don't care who wrote which bits ("I'm just here for the advice, man!"), we made them fairly unobtrusive:

Walt Ciechanowski

Phil Vecchione

Show and Tell

Throughout this book we'll use a fictional gaming group to provide examples of *Odyssey*'s techniques in action. This group—Gemma (the GM), Renaldo, Patti, and Adam—will embark on two campaigns, one fantasy and one science fiction, throughout *Odyssey*. The members of this group and their characters in both campaigns are illustrated on the cover and in the interior artwork, and their stories are summarized in the About the Artwork section.

On Campaigns

Artist: Matt Morrow

Chapter 1: About Campaigns

I was raised by a pack of wild TVs as a child. I grew up as an only child in a household with two working parents, and spent a good portion of my childhood coming home from school to an empty apartment. The TV was a friend and companion for me, filling the emptiness with light, sound, and stories. I grew up watching all sorts TV shows: medical dramas, police procedurals, sitcoms, and cartoons.

My favorite drama as a kid was *MASH*. It was in syndication even then, and the local channel would play an episode every evening before dinner. I loved the stories and the characters, but what I really enjoyed was the turnover of characters: Trapper for BJ, Colonel Blake for Colonel Potter, Frank for Winchester, and Radar for Klinger. I also loved how the characters grew and changed: how Klinger grew from misfit to the company clerk; how Houlihan dated Frank, broke up with him, got married to Donald, and eventually divorced. I had a real connection to those characters and the events that brought about those changes.

That enjoyment of a long running series still captivates me today. I love to see the change in characters, to watch them grow and develop. I love catching an older episode and being reminded of what events are coming up in the future of these characters, and seeing the foreshadowing that the writers seeded into the background.

I love the journey the characters take within a long, continuing story. So it's no surprise that I have always enjoyed campaign-style play in roleplaying games.

What is a Campaign?

When it comes to roleplaying campaigns, there are a lot of definitions of "campaign" out there—but they all boil down to this:

A campaign is a series of gaming sessions focused on a group of characters which maintains a sense of continuity.

The definition, while simple, contains four important elements. First, the campaign is about a group of characters. That means that some or all of the characters will be the same during the course of the campaign. Some characters start and finish the campaign, others will leave, some will die, and new characters will join the group.

Second, a campaign involves gaming sessions. These sessions—or adventures, or stories—are full of exciting and often dangerous events that the characters experience. Sessions can be dramatic, funny, somber, or change in tone over the course of the night. The one constant is change: The characters are changed by their adventures, and they change things through their adventures.

Third, it is a series. The characters are involved in more than one adventure, story, or plot. These stories occur one after the other in a linear format (usually; flashbacks and the like can also come into play, but let's not get too fancy yet). The group has an adventure, and then after that adventure concludes they have another, and another, and so on. They change more and more, and they create more and more changes in the game.

Lastly, campaigns feature continuity. The events that occur in one session have a lasting effect on the next, and on future sessions. This continuity gives you and your players the opportunity to learn about the game world, and to feel the passage of time in that world.

Combining these basics elements—characters, sessions, series, and continuity—within the campaign produces three compound elements:

- **Relationships**—Characters and sessions combine to create relationships between the characters. As they change throughout the story, characters align and fall out of alignment with one another.
- **History**—The combination of adventures, series, and continuity create a shared history. Players and characters remember what happened in the past and it affects how they act in the present. Their relationships also tend to deepen because of their common history.
- **Growth**—Characters, adventures, and series come together to create growth. A group of people being repeatedly exposed to circumstances that change them, and who have relationships and history with one another, will grow and change. Characters are affected by the events they experience, and how they react in the next adventure is influenced by their history and their relationships.

These elements, whether understood explicitly or just felt at an instinctual level, are what draw most gamers to campaign-style gaming.

Why Manage a Campaign?

We know what a campaign is—a series of gaming sessions focused on a group of characters which maintains a sense of continuity—but why should campaigns exist? Why do GMs create and manage campaigns? It's easy for people to do things, including manage campaigns, without understanding why they do them—but the why is *important*.

To achieve true mastery over something, you have to understand not only how it works, but also why it works. Campaigns are no different. Here's what we're striving for when we create a campaign and embark on it with our friends:

- **To entertain and have fun**
- **To create a story**
- **To grow and develop characters**
- **To develop a connection**

To Entertain and Have Fun

It may seem self-evident, but it's worth stating that the first purpose of a campaign is for the whole group—GM *and* players—to have fun. Roleplaying games (RPGs) are a form of entertainment and gaming should be fun for everyone involved.

There's no single definition of what fun is, nor a single definition of what's not fun. One group may love total party kills while others shudder every time a character dies; one group might love balanced characters while another couldn't care less about balance. What matters is that for the group, as a whole, the campaign entertains and is fun to play. It's about consensus, something we'll talk more about later on.

As a GM, you should always think about whether or not what you're creating—both your campaign as a whole and the elements that make up your campaign—will be fun for your players. If you're the only one at the table having fun, you've failed. The opposite is also true: Your campaign has to be fun for you, as well.

As a player, you need to consider whether or not an action you're about to take will be entertaining and fun for everyone at the table, not just fun for you. If you cause havoc for your own amusement, frustrating the other players and the GM in the process, you've failed.

It's easy for GMs and players to lose track of the principle that the game should be fun for everyone. Sometimes we get emotional about the events that take place within and around the campaign and suddenly the campaign stops being fun. That's a major warning sign that things have gone off track and some kind of correction is needed in order to return the campaign to a state where it's fun and entertaining for the whole group.

To Create a Story

The purpose of any RPG is to create a story, so perhaps it is better stated that the purpose of a campaign is to create a *long* story. And just as there are many different types of RPGs, there are many different types of stories and even definitions of the word "story."

To consider just two contrasting examples, look at two styles of fantasy campaign. In a plotted epic fantasy game the story might be continuous and fairly GM-driven, like *The Lord of the Rings*. In a sandbox fantasy game, the story might be more episodic—the story is whatever the characters are doing right now. Regardless of the type of game you're running you are creating a story at your table. For the sake of simplicity, when we say "story" in *Odyssey* we mean the term to encompass whatever sort of story emerges at your gaming table.

The second principal purpose of a campaign, then, is to create a shared story. The story starts out as a mixture of one part GM, one part players. Typically, the GM starts the process by presenting a setting and an opening for the story.

The players then take that input and add to it the actions and reactions of their characters. From there the GM creates new scenes or encounters and the cycle continues. The mixture, while often volatile and unpredictable, is a story that none of the participants knew before they sat at the table.

In a campaign we look to create a longer story, something more akin to a television series, whereas a one-shot game is more like a movie. Game designers will tell you that in a one-shot you should write the adventure as the most important moment in those characters' lives, which is the way a movie often treats characters and events. Everything happens in that story and when it's done it's done.

With a longer story to work with in a campaign, we have more opportunities to use literary tools like foreshadowing and flashbacks. We have the advantage of being able to pace our story, to branch off and explore sub-plots focusing on various characters. These tools allow us to tell a deeper and more compelling story, one that draws in everyone at the table.

A longer story also allows us to change the direction of the story as it unfolds. As GMs we can take player input and create plots and locations for them to explore. As we react to the often unpredictable actions of our players, we find that our story has now moved in a new direction.

To Grow and Develop Characters

The growth and change of a character is something that appeals to all of us. We are by nature creatures of growth and change. Our lives are a progression of growth punctuated by times of exciting and sometimes terrifying change. It's only natural that we relate to a character in a story that grows and changes. During a campaign, characters grow on several levels.

Characters grow mechanically. They gain experience points, increase their skills, acquire new powers, rise in levels, etc. As they grow they develop new abilities and often acquire wealth and items that give them more power. As characters become more powerful, the stories they experience begin to change as well. The lowly magic user who once feared a goblin with a rusty dagger now hurls spells of terrible arcane power that can fell the most fearsome of foes.

Characters also grow in role. As stories are created during the campaign, the role the character plays within the story deepens and expands. One such classic arc is "zero to hero," wherein the simple farmer discovers her true potential and over the course of the story develops into a hero. Or the path from adventurer to king, wherein a wandering rogue goes forth to make his fortune in the world and, through his adventures, becomes the king of the realm. The king's days of roaming dark dungeons are done, and new adventures revolve around palace intrigue and making war.

Lastly, characters grow in personality. A campaign is a long story, and within the span of that story the players have the opportunity to develop and define their characters. At the start of the campaign, much like in the first season of a televi-

sion series, the characters are not fully defined. They may start out with a backstory, but they haven't experienced anything in-game to give them a true history. They are characters, but they don't feel like they fit quite right.

As the campaign develops, characters are exposed to many challenges in every session. They react to those challenges, and take actions on their own, and everyone at the gaming table witnesses those experiences. Soon, each character is "flavored" by those shared experiences—and when that happens, they begin to feel more real.

While growth is a natural process that doesn't require GM intervention, the GM can facilitate growth through the stories that she creates and the challenges she places before the characters.

To Develop a Connection

We love to root for heroes and boo the bad guys. When we consume traditional entertainment, such as books and movies, we love it when a character makes a connection with us. Sometimes we connect through experiences we have in common with a character. At other times we connect with a character because that character represents something we wish we could be.

Roleplaying games are an active form of entertainment, unique in that we get to be both actor and audience—no matter whether you're the GM or a player. The dual nature of this form of entrainment gives us the opportunity to make connections on two distinct levels.

We connect to the characters (PCs and NPCs) that we play by portraying them to the rest of the group. There is no greater feeling than that moment when you feel yourself slip into a character. You begin to feel and react as your character, and the events of the story become your experiences. It's exhilarating.

We also connect to the campaign setting, and to the other characters in it. Like the supporting cast in a story, the other characters in the campaign fill out the cast in our games. We want them to feel real and we want to care about them. If everyone at the table is playing well, then all of the characters they're playing will also feel real, and we'll forge relationships with them as well. When you find yourself laughing at the curmudgeonly dwarf who grumbles when forced to march through the marshes, or rooting for the prisoner you freed to make a clean getaway, or feeling frustration as the overly curious rogue pulls one lever too many and triggers a trap, you've made this kind of connection.

Connections are difficult to create and manage. Much like character growth, they tend to arise naturally though play. As a GM you can try to create opportunities within the story where those connections can form. You can create the seeds of shared experiences, giving characters chances to succeed or fail at things the folks at the gaming table, inhabiting the real world, can only dream of experiencing.

The Evolving Complexity of Campaigns

At the dawn of the roleplaying hobby, when *Chainmail* begat the *Dungeons & Dragons*® box set, campaigns were simpler in many ways. There was only the dungeon (and maybe the map from *Outdoor Survival*), although that changed quickly as new options—and new games—arose to explore other aspects of the hobby. At some level campaigns have always been complex, but in the early days things were less defined, less studied. And as new gamers, we often come to campaigns with a kind of "ignorant bliss"—trying new things, learning as we go, having a blast without stepping back to analyze what's working and what's not. (That's certainly how I got my start.)

But as the roleplaying hobby has grown and changed over the years, and people began to not only play RPGs but to study and analyze them, campaigns have become beasts of greater complexity. Many of the components underlying campaigns have been named and defined, making it easier for us to focus on and improve them—and the more things we identify, the more things we can improve. There is a *lot* going on under the hood of your average roleplaying campaign.

The campaign, in its simplest form, is just what we defined at the beginning of this chapter: A series of gaming sessions focused on a group of characters which maintains a sense of continuity. If you play a series of adventures with a group of people, you've got a campaign. For gamers of my generation who grew up playing the Holmes and Moldvay/Cook editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*®, campaigns *seemed* to be that simple. You got a group together, rolled up characters, grabbed an adventure module, and you played. When we finished the first module, we moved on to the next, and the next, and so on. The characters recovered treasure, earned experience points, and leveled up. Lots of other things were happening as well—all of the glorious complexity of campaigns—but it was hard to describe them or figure out what to do about them, so we just kept running modules.

But as the hobby expanded, and new ideas and approaches entered the picture, more concepts borrowed from literature were applied to our games and campaigns. We started modeling our plots with the same structures present in our favorite books and television series—things like foreshadowing and narrative arcs. Campaigns that used these techniques became more complex as we added in sub-plots, story arcs, and NPCs with more nuanced motivations and agendas.

Skip ahead a few more years and psychology, theories of group dynamics, and game theory were all being applied to RPGs. To consider just one example, *Robin's Laws of Good Gamemastering* formalized the notion that almost every gaming group included different types of players with different needs. Some players liked to act in character, immersing themselves in a role; others got more excited about combat, or about unraveling mysteries. Applying *Robin's Laws* to your campaign means tailoring adventures and challenges to your players, which introduces a new layer of complexity.

All this evolving complexity, in turn, means that as a GM you need to be able to manage the many components of your campaign. You need to write up and run sessions, just as GMs have always done, but you also need to tend to the campaign world between sessions. In short, you need to be a campaign manager as well as a game master.

In this context, campaign management means taking charge of tending to your campaign between sessions: making sure that NPCs grow and change over time, showing the effects of the passage of time on the wider game world, advancing background and side plots, and the like. The fruit of this labor is new material for use in future sessions, as well as a believable world that makes it easier for your group to make connections and deepen their enjoyment of the campaign.

True Story: My Hall of Fame

Of the many campaigns I've managed, three of them stand out as favorites. They were all different from one another, and I'll be using them as examples throughout this book, so a quick rundown is in order. (This will be brief, I promise!)

Elhal—A three-year *Iron Heroes* campaign set in a home-brewed world. This was an epic fantasy game starring a group of heroes trying to free a world that was controlled by evil demons.

Eagle Eye—This episodic two-year *Conspiracy X* campaign followed a group of agents as they unveiled various conspiracies and mysteries.

Heist—A one-year *d20 Modern* campaign about a group of career criminals in Las Vegas set around the year 2000, this game focused equally on the characters and the jobs that they pulled.

The roles of game master and campaign manager are intertwined, but also separate—much like the roles of singer and songwriter. The songwriter's labors offstage enable the singer to shine onstage; and just like a singer-songwriter (an artist who fills both roles), as both GM and campaign manager you'll be doing work offstage to enable yourself, and your campaign, to shine on game night. When it all comes together, connections will be made, growth will occur, shared stories will emerge, and everyone will have a blast.

With that in mind, let's take a closer look at what's involved in campaign management in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Management

I mentioned in the introduction that GMs often refer to "running" campaigns, but that in truth what we as GMs do is better described as "managing" campaigns. Let's save the use of *run* for what we do at the gaming table (we run sessions) and take a closer look at *manage*.

Why Does Saying "Manage" Matter?

You may wonder why I'm so picky about what verb GMs use to describe what they do when it comes to campaigns; I'm picky because words have power. "Manage" is a much more accurate description of what a GM does during a campaign than "run" because using "run" makes it sound like all the work the GM does is at the table, when in actuality you usually do as much or more work away from the table. "Write" is even worse. Saying that you're "writing a campaign" gives the false impression that the GM is the only person involved in developing that campaign—which we know is inaccurate because the combination of GM and players is what makes a good campaign.

Artist: Christopher Reach

Using "manage," on the other hand, addresses both concerns. It communicates that the GM isn't the only one responsible for the campaign, and that the work that goes into the campaign doesn't only happen at the table. Instead, it speaks to all of the activities involved in keeping the game moving, growing, and changing. Management by definition is not hands-on, but rather is done through others. It's a coordinated process that, when it's handled improperly and becomes too hands-on (too focused on the individual manager, not what she's managing), turns into micro-management.

Management is a constant process that starts when a campaign is first forming and ends when the campaign is completed. There are times when it doesn't involve much work and times when it involves a lot of work; there are things to manage at the table as well as things to manage away from the table, between sessions. As GMs we're always managing something.

To truly gain mastery over all of the things we do as GMs to keep our campaigns healthy, it's important to think of the overall activity as *management*, with all of the expectations that term carries with it.

What Does Management Get Us?

I know a lot of people, both in gaming and professionally, who don't always see the value of management. They often see management as getting in the way of getting the actual work done. In one sense, they're right: There's plenty of bad management out there, making things harder rather than easier. But if we remove that from consideration, does good management make things faster or easier?

Most often it doesn't make things faster. In fact, adding management to most processes makes them go slower. That's not exactly a ringing endorsement for management, but it's true. The act of adding a level of management to a process adds both additional steps to be completed and complexity to the process as a whole. If you look to management to speed things up, you will be disappointed. If you want a process to move quickly, go by instinct and don't check your results, and it will move quickly. So what's the value of management?

What management does is trade instinct and speed for consistency. Following a process that incorporates checks and accountability isn't faster, but it ensures higher-quality output every time the process is completed. Consistency begets quality and repeatability.

Let's consider how this applies to campaigns. Without some sort of process or management, I can run a campaign ("run" is the right term in this case). I can come up with an adventure on the fly and just hit the table; sometimes I'll get it right and we'll have a great session—or I might even get it right enough times that we'll have a great campaign. But I'm going to blow it just as often. My players will "spoil" what I had planned, PCs will bicker and cause the action to stall, or something else will go wrong that sours the evening. If I take this approach, without management or a process, it will result in some good campaigns and some stinkers.

If instead I use my understanding of what goes into a successful campaign and how to manage all of the various components, it will be more work and require that I take a more active role in the campaign, but the campaign will benefit in numerous ways. The time I spend managing the campaign will help to ensure that the whole group has the same expectations about the game, that the characters have opportunities to grow and change, and that the whole venture has the best possible chance of becoming a memorable and fun experience for everyone involved. And when that campaign ends, I can run it again for a different group or using a different RPG if I like, because the time I've invested in it makes it repeatable.

Back when I first started gaming, as a kid, I gamed so frequently that I could afford to tank campaigns and start new ones at my leisure. There was no pressure to manage things better. Today, with a wife, children, and a career, every failed campaign is costly in terms of the time it took me to set it up and the time it will take me to get the next campaign going. As your free time decreases, the importance of getting a campaign started off right, and keeping it running smoothly, increases dramatically. Poor campaign management can even lead to GMs and players leaving the hobby.

When you do things consistently, you can easily see what's working well and what could be working better. You can then focus your energies on improving specific parts of your craft while leaving the other parts alone—and you'll be able to measure the results. By analyzing, focusing, and measuring you can hone your craft and become a better GM, improving your ability to facilitate more and better campaigns.

The Layers of a Campaign

Most GMs don't realize the number of things that they manage during the course of a campaign. When you understand what you're managing you can manage it actively, but if you don't understand something the tendency is to manage it by instinct—if at all. Not understanding the components of a campaign which need to be managed results in management with uneven skill and without consistency. Consciously or unconsciously, people tend to avoid things they're not good at, in the case of a campaign that also means ignoring the consequences of poor management of that particular area.

It's human nature to avoid things we don't understand, or that we're bad at. This procrastination lets problems grow until they flare up and we're forced to deal with them—and with any fallout they've created. Without fully understanding all the moving parts that comprise a campaign, you can't develop skills and processes for managing them and those unmanaged aspects of the game will explode, forcing you to react. Sometimes you'll be able to keep the campaign on track, but sometimes you won't be able to manage the change and it will spell the premature end of the campaign.

A campaign can be thought of as a series of layers that build upon each other to form the whole. The layers are:

- **People**
- **Setting**
- **Player Characters**
- **Story**

Each layer has needs that must be met in order for it to be successful. Each layer requires its own type of management, and each layer influences the layer above and below it. We'll start at the bottom—the foundation—and work our way upwards through the layers.

People: The Root of It All

Fundamentally, roleplaying is a social activity. A group of people, each with different beliefs, motivations, and goals, get together to play, and they likely each want different things out the game (with some overlap, of course). Alongside those individual needs are the collective needs of the group. Like any group of people, your gaming group has its own social dynamics and conventions.

Stronger personalities exert their influence on the group, people align and get into conflicts with each other, and weaker personalities fade into the background or grow resentful. Feelings can be hurt when a character dies. Frustration can build when a story encounters another complication. No team can be functional without managing the dynamics of the group as well as managing the individual players, and the same is true of your gaming group.

In order to manage this layer of the campaign, you need to manage the people in your group. Much like a host at a party, you must tend to the needs of your players. You have to communicate clearly, help set expectations, acknowledge players' feelings, and when necessary adapt the campaign to fulfill the needs of the group.

Setting: Where It All Happens

Every campaign has a setting, the world where the game takes place. Everything that happens during gaming sessions happens within the context of the setting. Settings can be published or homemade (often called "homebrewed"). Just like the real world, a setting isn't a static construct; it's an ever-changing backdrop. In order for a setting to feel real to your players, the setting must experience change. While PCs will be the primary driver of changes in the foreground, in the story of the campaign, the GM is responsible for ensuring that the setting changes in the background as well.

To meet this layer's needs, you need to take on a role much like that of a traditional author. Change the seasons, have the blacksmith's daughter marry the farmer's son, and otherwise address changes that aren't directly related to the PCs. This layer also involves adding details to the world, either from scratch, from supplements, or both.

Player Characters: Part Player, Part Rules

Each PC is a combination of player and setting—a player's avatar in the game world. While often influenced by the personality of the person playing them, PCs are their own entities with their own personalities and goals. The group of PCs in the campaign—the party—also has its own group dynamics and challenges, just like a group of real people. PCs are also constructs of the game's mechanics, and in most RPGs their power in mechanical terms increases over the course of the campaign.

This layer of the campaign requires you to manage a number of different things. You have to design story elements to engage the personalities and individual goals of the PCs, both in the main story (more on this in a moment) and in sub-plots.

The GM has a number of different things to manage at this level. First, the GM must design story elements to engage the personality and individual goals of the characters. Some of this will be done in the main story (see below) but others will occur as sub-plots. Second, the GM must manage the group dynamics of the party making sure that the party is functional. Third, the GM must manage the mechanical aspects of the characters, including making sure the party is viable in terms of required roles as well as scaling the challenges of the game to meet their ever-increasing mechanical power levels.

Story: A Cauldron of Change

The outermost layer is the main story, the one that is the focus of the campaign. Whatever form the story takes (a tightly plotted drama in a more scripted campaign, "whatever the PCs are interested in right now" in a sandbox campaign, etc.), it will involve you writing things down that show up in game sessions. During sessions the story and the PCs come together and things change.

For the story of the campaign to progress from session to session, you have to ensure that it changes based on what happened in previous sessions. The story changes because of the PCs, but also because of NPCs and events within the game world. Because you're in charge of both the NPCs and the game world, NPCs don't get their own layer—they're aspects of the story. As the GM, you're responsible for continuing the story between sessions.

Managing that process, like managing the setting layer, involves taking on an authorial role. The difference is that you have far less control over story than setting, and you'll spend more time managing outcomes and reactions to what has taken place than scripting changes. At the same time, you have to decide how mutable the overall story is—how much change it can handle. Will you incorporate short-term changes but always guide the campaign back to the main goal or story, or will you allow changes to drive where the story ends up? The answer depends on the nature of your campaign, but the immediate goal is always the same: Prepare the next session, where the next round of changes to the campaign will take place.

Artist: Daniel Wood

Risk and Change

Within the layers of a campaign there are two forces at play: risk and change. These are project management terms with no direct analog in roleplaying terminology, but they're entirely applicable to campaign management. The management of each layer of your campaign requires thought about both of these forces and the interplay between them. Many GMs, even very experienced ones, don't think of risk and change as things that can be managed—but they are, and they're both important.

Risk

Risk, to oversimplify, is the chance that an event will occur and have negative consequences. In campaign management, the negative consequence associated with most risks is that the campaign will become less fun—or even come to a halt. The nature of the risks in your campaign—and whether something is a risk at all—depends on the kind of campaign you're managing, and on the game system you're using. For example, in an old school fantasy campaign the PCs killing or disposing of a major villain earlier than you anticipated might be a fantastic outcome—a hallmark of your players' skill, not a negative at all. But in a tightly plotted space opera game with many narrative layers, killing an important villain too soon could cause several enjoyable plot arcs to grind to a halt, making the campaign less fun for everyone.

Once you've identified a risk, you can take two steps to manage it. You can reduce the risk by taking action—managing—so that the risk doesn't occur; and you can make a backup plan for what to do in case you can't stop the risk from occurring. When you're being proactive about them, managed risks never have as much impact as unmanaged risks. Unmanaged risks will blindside you, forcing you to be reactive (with the usual mixed results).

Each level of a campaign has risks associated with it. By understanding the risks involved, figuring out how to minimize them, and making backup plans should they occur, you're more apt to be able to keep your campaign running smoothly.

Change

Change is a constant, driving force in any campaign. Everything changes: The seasons change, characters change, the story changes, and the world changes. Most of these changes are to be expected, and they'll just take place without causing you any concerns. Sudden, unexpected changes, though—like those often associated with risks—can be unsettling.

You can't fight change, but you can manage how changes occur. A change that happens suddenly will startle people and put them on the defensive, making them resistant to the change. Changes create uncertainty about what to expect, which in turn engenders a fear of the unknown; this too creates resistance to change.

When you take control of a change, and you use tools like communication and collaboration, you can make that change seem less startling. This tends to make people more open to the change. Your campaign can weather most changes provided that the group works together to assimilate them, return to a "new normal," and continue playing. As the GM, you will most often be the member of the group who manages the change.

Managing by Phase

A campaign, like any odyssey, has a beginning, middle, and end. Your role, and what needs to be managed, will also vary during each phase. Each phase has a purpose, and your goal is to manage your campaign so that each of these purposes is fully achieved. The most memorable campaigns are those which are managed properly across all three phases.

Starting Out Right

Much like starting the day with a good breakfast, if you want your campaign to have any chance of longevity it needs to start out right. It is in this phase that the setting, characters, and story are created. For them to last throughout the campaign, each one needs to be aligned with the others, and overall the players need to be excited about all three of them. To achieve this, the GM needs to manage two very important things: creating consensus and managing expectations.

When you start a campaign you make all sorts of decisions that will frame that campaign, from what system to use to what setting to play in to what the PCs, broadly, will be doing in the campaign world. In order to get everyone to buy into the campaign and invest their energy and emotions into it, these decisions need to be made as a group. As the GM you're the mediator, listening to everyone's input and helping the group build consensus. Consensus creates focus by getting everyone to head in the same direction with the same purpose.

Similarly, everyone in the group will have expectations about the campaign, and part of your job is to make sure that everyone understands what the campaign is going to be like, and to address any questions or concerns your players might have. Common questions include things like: How much combat will there be? How long will the campaign last? How powerful will our PCs be at the start of the campaign? When someone's expectations aren't met, they can become detached from the campaign and wind up eroding the consensus that keeps the campaign moving forward.

Stuck in the Middle

Once the campaign is underway and sessions are being run, your role as the GM changes. In the middle phase, your goal is to keep the campaign progressing. There are lots of things to manage, so this involves a lot of juggling and plate-spinning.

The easiest thing you will manage during this phase is the continual change of the setting. This will require only a small portion of your time, but when done well it adds true depth to your game.

From there, you will need to manage the overall story. You need to do the work that keeps the shared story going: NPCs will have reactions to what the characters have done, random events will occur. Your cast of NPCs will grow and change as new characters are introduced and existing NPCs grow, change, or die. You will also need to keep planning the story forward, making changes to bring your story closer to its climax and conclusion.

While you're doing that, you also need to manage the characters. Like the main characters in any novel, they need to be given opportunities to grow and change, so you have to create those opportunities. At the same time, the PCs will be changing mechanically as well, and you need to manage the game to ensure that it remains interesting given their enhanced abilities, power, and influence.

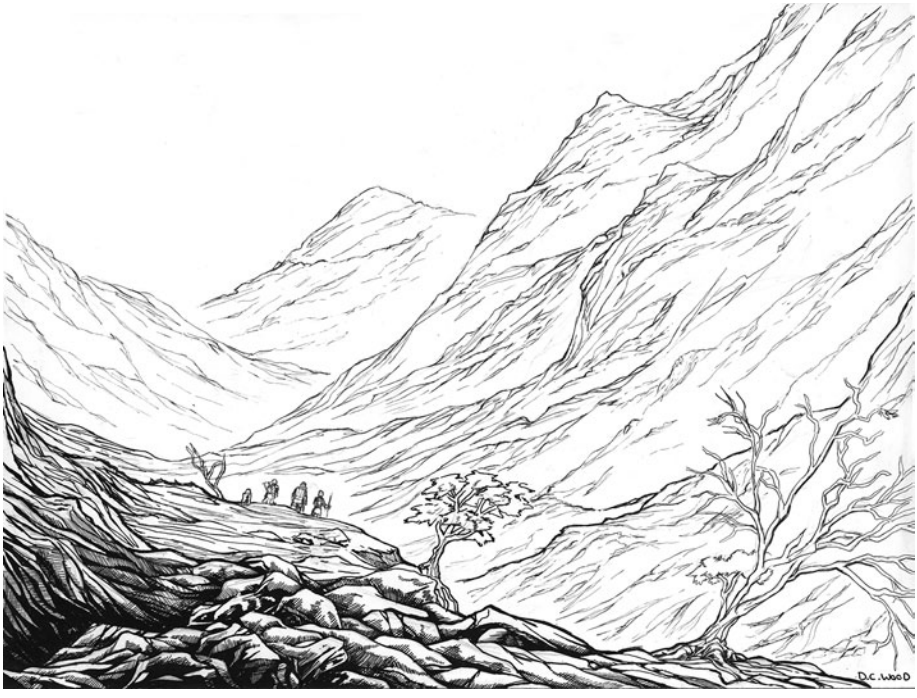
Got those plates spinning? Now let's consider the players themselves. The more a group of people works together as a team, the greater the chance that disagreements will occur. There will be differences of opinion about what course of action to take, or one characters' actions may offend or upset the group. Events outside the game may flare up at the table, or a new RPG will come out that everyone wants to try. As the GM, you'll often be called upon to be the "leader of the table," to help to resolve and mediate these disputes and return the group to a level state.

Remember those risks and changes we talked about? Some of those are going to come up as well. These will be the things that you were hoping wouldn't happen, and now that they have you're going to have to figure out how to keep the campaign going. One of your key players just got a job in another city, or the character you built the next story arc around just got killed unexpectedly, or that NPC you were saving for the climax was ambushed and killed by the PCs. Get ready to do some fast thinking to get things back on track.

Every Campaign Ends, Some Better than Others

Campaigns always end. It's inevitable. But they don't always end well. You will know when it's time to end the campaign by looking at the story, by taking the temperatures of the players, and through introspection. In this phase, your focus will turn to the story, the characters, and the players. You want your story to conclude with an exciting and satisfying ending. When you're sure that it's time to end the campaign, you need to exercise your skills of consensus building and expectation management (from the first phase).

Should the campaign end right after the climactic battle? Or should we just end the game now, and forget about reaching the climax? Will the wizard become an Archmage before the campaign ends? Will there be scenes to wrap up each PC's loose ends? Campaigns need to end the way they started—with group consensus—and once again as the GM you will be the mediator who brings that about.



Artist: Daniel Wood

A well-ended campaign is satisfying for everyone involved. A satisfying ending gives everyone a sense of accomplishment and closure. It also gives the players a chance to disconnect from their characters, and to say goodbye. After playing a character for a long time, many players become deeply emotionally invested in their alter egos. A planned ending to the campaign allows players to put their characters away and get ready to move on to the next campaign.

Spinning Plates

By now, you might be thinking that you'd have to be crazy to undertake all the work that goes into creating and managing a campaign. The good news is that campaigns *are* manageable. GMs have been managing them since Gary and Dave started spinning plates in their own campaigns back in the early 1970s, and we'll keep managing campaigns until the stars go out.

Odyssey is about taking the many-headed hydra of phases, skills, and challenges, putting a leash on it, and getting the beast under your control. Every aspect of managing a campaign is a skill that can be learned and improved—and that's true whether you've run a thousand campaigns or never run a single one.

True Story: Smart People . . . Smart Things

A few years ago when my son was five, he asked me what I do for a living. I'm an IT project manager, but I knew that wasn't something he would understand. So I told him, "I help smart people do smart things." He seemed to grasp that. As a project manager I sit with teams of highly intelligent and passionate people and we solve complex problems through brainstorming, collaboration, and compromise.

As it turns out, I've been preparing for this job since my first *Dungeons & Dragons®* campaign. I have spent most of my free time GMing (*managing*) gaming groups (*teams*) playing roleplaying games (*solving problems*). The people I game with are highly intelligent and passionate as well.

I've taken the skills I learned through all of those years of gaming and applied them to work, and I've taken the skills I have learned at work and applied to them to my gaming group. Both groups have benefited from this cross-pollination, though I do sometimes wish there were some orcs around the table in the meeting room . . .

Starting a Campaign

Artist: Matt Morrow

Chapter 3: Starting Campaigns

Starting a campaign is like the first day of school: full of possibility. There are new rules and settings to study, new characters to meet, and of course new supplies to buy. Having just come back from vacation—or in this case, off a break after your last campaign—your personal energy is high. You're looking forward to seeing how this campaign will turn out.

The start of the campaign is an exciting, anxious, and critical time. It's during this stage that the seeds for a highly successful campaign are planned, but also where micro-fractures can be formed that eventually cause the campaign to crumble. How you manage starting up the campaign plays a large role in its ultimate success.

The Goal of Starting a Campaign

Isn't the goal of starting a campaign to start the campaign? Well, yes, but if that's all there was to it you could just grab a game off your shelf and start running it. Campaign started.

But the goal of this stage is deeper than just starting to play. Specifically:

> *The goal of starting a campaign is to create a shared vision for the campaign that is mutually agreed upon, interesting to everyone, and sustainable.*

Let's break that goal down section by section.

"To create a shared vision that is mutually agreed upon . . ."

This stage is about laying the foundation for the rest of the campaign. The decisions you and your group make, and how you collectively make them, will have an impact on the campaign. There are numerous decisions to make: game system, setting, style of play, the role of the PCs, frequency of play, length of the campaign, and more.

Your ability to make those decisions as a group determines how strong the campaign will be. As many people in the group as possible should agree on every decision, and there should be a feeling of consensus throughout this stage. Strong campaigns can withstand changes, missed sessions, disagreements, and other issues that arise. Weak campaigns, those that lack a good foundation, fall apart over rules issues, lack of direction, and lack of interest.

". . . interesting to everyone . . ."

Starting a campaign is like the initial push that sends a sled down a hill, or pressing the gas pedal when the light turns green. The campaign goes from being a concept to being a game. How connected the players are to the campaign, and how committed they are to it, is grounded in this stage. That connection and passion will give the campaign a forceful launch with the momentum to propel it forward. A campaign lacking these elements often starts softly and, if you're lucky, builds up speed as the sessions go on; if it never picks up speed, it will likely sputter out at some point.

". . . and sustainable."

As you plan out the campaign and the group makes the decisions that form its outline and contours, attention must be paid to ensuring that the campaign can last as long as you're planning for it to last. Campaigns can be unsustainable because of the availability of the GM and players, the range of power levels within the game rules, and the type of story the campaign is going to tell. Sometimes a group comes up with a fantastic or wild idea for a campaign only to find out after a few sessions that it's no longer fun to play, and the campaign is canceled. Planning for sustainability can prevent these problems.

Phases of Starting a Campaign

While it often seems that a campaign just starts up *de novo* (fresh, from the beginning), the process of starting one involves four discrete phases:

- **Campaign Concept**
- **Campaign Framework**
- **Campaign Creation**
- **First Session**

Campaign Concept

As soon as you intend to start a campaign, you've begun the campaign concept brainstorming phase. In this phase, the first ideas about the campaign are discussed; they form the campaign concept. The campaign concept is a high-level summary of the campaign, often called an "elevator pitch," so-called because you should be able to deliver it in its entirety during an average-length elevator ride (under two minutes).

This phase is all about learning what everyone wants out of the campaign, and then determining a game system, choosing a setting, and establishing PC roles that match those desires. This is done in broad strokes, leaving room for further development. Your campaign concept should be detailed enough to describe the major elements of the campaign but not so detailed that you could start playing right then.

Campaign Framework

After you have a solid campaign concept, the next phase involves fleshing that concept out in more detail by creating the campaign framework. When this phase is complete, the whole group will have a good idea of what the campaign is about, where it takes place, and how the game will be structured.

If your game system of choice has multiple editions or a host of supplements, this is the time to choose which version and add-ons you'll be using in the game. You should discuss the story of the campaign in more detail, and the role of the PCs in that story. For example, will it be linear and tightly plotted, open-ended, episodic, or a true sandbox? If you're using a large setting, or developing one from scratch, talk about what sorts of places interest everyone. Logistics are also part of this phase: how long the campaign will last and how often the group will get together.

Campaign Creation

With the campaign framework developed, you can now start creating the material necessary to get the campaign rolling. This includes prepping adventure notes for the first session, developing the starting location, and general planning. During this phase the players will create their PCs, including both game mechanical and conceptual elements. When the creation phase is complete, all of the components you need to begin the campaign are in place.

First Session

The final phase in starting the campaign is the first session, sometimes called the "pilot" (after the pilot of a new TV series). There are three goals during the first session:

- **Introduce the setting**
- **Introduce the PCs**
- **Begin to establish the story that will be explored in future sessions**

If this is the first time the group (or anyone in it) has played this RPG, then the first session is also the time to teach them the game system. For most RPGs, that means including elements like skill checks, different types of challenges, and combat, and you'll need to plan accordingly during the creation phase. When your first session ends, the campaign is underway and you can shift from creator to manager.

This four-phase process is common to most campaigns, but it's not universal. Some groups will perform these phases deliberately and in discrete phases; others will combine the first two phases. Some may go straight from brainstorming to creation, and then go back to answer the questions needed to establish the campaign framework. One group might have a session or two leading up to the official first session (often called preludes), while another handles those activities online before sitting down to play.

As in all processes, different groups will do a great job at some phases and fall short on others. Because each phase has a specific objective and is linked to the others, it's important to execute each phase as well as possible. Subsequent chapters in this section will go into each phase in more detail, and will address the benefits of executing them well and the consequences of executing them poorly. To establish a baseline for delving into the individual phases, though, we need to talk about your gaming group and the core skills involved in starting a campaign.

The Gaming Group

Starting a campaign involves work, and your group will all share the workload during the concept, framework, creation, and first session phases. You and your players don't have exactly the same role in this process, though.

The Role of the GM

At this stage of the campaign, your job as the GM is to guide the process along and to help create consensus within the group. You need to be an investigator, discovering what your players want even if they're not up-front about their desires. You also need to be a mediator, handling situations where the group can't agree on an element of the campaign. And you must be the leader, taking the group through the whole process and making sure you reach the first session.

While you're fulfilling these roles, you need to take into account that you're also a member of the group. Your likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses need to be taken into account alongside those of the players. One common mistake many GMs make is to go out of their way to please their players while forgoing their own interests and desires. When a campaign starts out that way, the GM quickly finds that he isn't interested in or able to sustain it, and the campaign collapses.

Before and during the process of starting a campaign, you need to be introspective and consider your own needs. What do you want out of the campaign? Think about the things that will make you excited and invested to be GMing the campaign. Once the campaign starts, the bulk of the work will fall to you, so you have to be as passionate about the campaign as your players are—and at times, even more passionate—to make the work worthwhile.

The Role of the Players

Players come to a new campaign with their own preferences and interests, and they won't always agree with each other or with you. Because of their role as forces of change within the campaign, it's important that your players are invested in and passionate about the campaign. Players who are invested not only show up to the game ready to play, but between games they keep the excitement going by talking about the campaign with the other players. Players who aren't passionate about the campaign may make it to the table, but their participation will often be lackluster because their hearts aren't in it.

For a player to be invested and passionate about a campaign, that campaign will have to appeal to her likes and desires while avoiding her dislikes. That's only possible if she knows what those are, which is why players also need to take some time to gain an understanding of themselves as players. What type of player are they (in the *Robin's Laws* classification system or any other)? What kinds of games do they like? What sorts of stories appeal to them? And what are their limitations? The more a player understands what she wants out of RPGs, the better she'll be at contributing to the group's efforts to start the campaign.

Key Skills for Starting a Campaign

As the GM, your role in managing the campaign at this stage is to guide the group through the four starting phases. Two skills are critical to this effort, and if you don't possess them or are weak in either area you should work on improving them in order to make this stage of the campaign successful.

Negotiation

The first two phases of starting a campaign, brainstorming the campaign concept and coming up with the campaign framework, involve a series of questions that need to be answered by a group of people in order to define the campaign. Sometimes consensus will come easily and questions will be answered quickly, but at

Artist: Christopher Reach

other times answers will be contested and you'll need to find a way to reach consensus. As the GM you need to be a negotiator, working toward answers that everyone agrees on or at least is comfortable with.

Whole books and classes are dedicated to teaching negotiation skills, so it's obviously not possible to teach you how to become a good negotiator in *Odyssey*—we'd need to devote the entire book to that one topic. I can cover some important basics based on my own experience, though:

- **Seek to understand**—When disagreements arise, take the time to learn from each side why they like their answer and what they don't like about the other options. Delve below the surface reactions and look for the root causes of the disagreement.
- **Separate wants from needs**—There are things that people would like to have in a campaign and there are things that they need to have in a campaign (their deal-breakers). Wants can always be given up as concessions, but needs rarely can.
- **Look for the win/win**—Negotiation isn't about one side outright winning, it's about creating mutually beneficial outcomes. Win/win outcomes happen when each side gives up something they want but gains something from the other side.
- **Everyone is an equal**—If one side of a disagreement is made up of three members and the other is a single member, the larger group does not get more of a win than the single person.
- **Take the temperature before moving on**—Once a solution has been agreed upon, check to see that everyone is comfortable with it before moving on. Nothing undermines a consensus like someone who is harboring ill feelings about the solution because they felt forced into agreeing on the outcome.

Communication

During the phases of starting a campaign, you have to be able to manage the expectations of the group. Many questions will come up during these phases, and people being people (and groups being groups), members of the group will sometimes hear the things that are important to them and forget the things that aren't.

In order to make this process go smoothly, you need to be the information repository and communication hub for the group. You have to document things clearly, with little to no ambiguity, and you'll be asked to convey information about the campaign concept and framework in person as well as via email, phone call, or text. To avoid confusion you want to be as clear and consistent as possible with every member of the group. If you answer questions or establish things in the campaign ambiguously, that will breed confusion and disrupt consensus.

While *Odyssey* can't hope to serve as a course on effective communication unto itself (like negotiation, this is a huge topic that could—and does—fill many books), I can share tips based on my experience:

- **Have a single source of information**—Avoid having multiple sources of information as much as possible. Multiple copies of documents or multiple emails with answers create confusion on where to look for answers, especially when they're not in sync. Find a central repository for your information.
- **Document, document, document**—Memory is fickle. When decisions are made, write them down. Always. And then put them into your repository.
- **Refer, don't rewrite**—When you're asked a question for the second, third, or hundredth time, don't rewrite the answer, particularly from memory, because you run the risk of writing it incorrectly. Instead, reference the source material (and if applicable paste your responses from there—into an email, for example).
- **Use clear language**—When storing information and conveying it, don't dress up your speech and try to be fancy. Use simple, clear language and avoid passive or ambiguous language.

Getting Started

The other chapters in this section of *Odyssey* cover the four phases of starting a campaign in much more detail. In each chapter we'll look at how to do things well, how to identify areas where there's room for improvement, and how the questions you ask and answer during each phase help to form the campaign, set its course, and lay the seeds for its success.

Chapter 4: Campaign Concept

Four friends sat around the table in the local restaurant. Orders had been taken and while everyone was waiting for their meals to arrive, they started talking about the modern horror campaign that they had played for the past year, which had just ended.

Their next game night was still a week away, but Gemma knew that her players wouldn't wait that long to start talking about the next campaign. Honestly, she couldn't wait either. Last week, after the final session had wrapped up and everyone had gone home, she'd gone through the stack of games that she had picked up at her last convention, thinking about which ones she might want to run next. She was sure she wasn't the only one in the group who had started thinking about their next game.

The next few minutes were filled with talk about crowdfunded RPG projects and the latest episode of Doctor Who. *Gemma decided to bring up her ideas for their next game during dessert. A moment later, Renaldo put down his beer, looked up, and said, "What are we playing next?"*

I can't count how many times I have asked or heard that question, or something close to it, in the past 30 years. Just uttering those five simple words invites consideration of so many possibilities: what game system we'll play, what kind of world we'll play in, and what stories we'll tell. That question has brought me the best experiences I've ever had in gaming, as well as some of the most frustrating times I've had as a gamer.

The Campaign Concept Phase

This phase begins as soon as your group decides to get together to play any game longer than a one-shot. It ends when you have a campaign concept. To get to that point, you need to answer seven questions. The first three are often glossed over or assumed to be answered in the affirmative from the outset:

- **Who is GMing?**—Many groups have one regular GM, in which case the answer is generally "That person." Other groups may have multiple GMs, making this question more important.
- **Who are the players?**—Some groups have a fixed membership that rarely changes, while others recruit players from their community, online, or both.

- **Do we actually want to play a campaign?**—Sometimes a bit of discussion will suggest that the group really just wants to play one-shots, and not a full campaign—not often, perhaps, but often enough to make the question valuable.

Even if you suspect you know the answers to all three of those questions, it's worth running through them and making sure the whole group is in agreement. The other four questions are far less likely to have been answered already:

- **What game system are we going to use?**—A campaign is influenced by the game system you use. Each system has its own tone, pace, and feel. For example, *Rolemaster* and *Savage Worlds* will tend to produce different styles of fantasy campaign.
- **Where will the campaign be set?**—Sometimes the game system will dictate this (if you let it), but often you'll need to choose a setting.
- **What will be the central story of the campaign?**—You need to define the story at a high level, in the form of an elevator pitch (more on this later).
- **What role will the PCs play?**—At a similarly high level, you need to have a rough idea of what the PCs will do in the game world—operate a tramp freighter for profit, serve in the queen's Royal Guard, etc.

The answers to these questions form your campaign concept—the high-level summary of the campaign. This concept should contain enough detail to give everyone a good idea of what the campaign is about, but not so much detail that you all understand exactly how it will be played.

The Campaign Analyst

In software development, a business analyst is someone who meets with a client and asks them questions about what functionality they want from the software. He gets the client to tell him what they want in plain English, without any technical explanations. He then takes the client's requirements and translates them into technical requirements that the programming team can work with.

In the campaign concept phase, you're going to do the first part of the business analyst's job: gather the group's requirements, in plain English, in order to create the campaign concept. In the next phase—framework—you'll take those requirements and translate them into more concrete gaming terms, just as the business analyst translates client requirements into technical terms.

You gather everyone's requirements by asking the seven questions above; it doesn't matter what order you ask them in. Some of the questions may be answered organically (if your group has one regular GM and three regular players, you've likely just answered two of them), while others will need to be actively considered and then answered by the group. Both kinds of question lead to the same end result: the campaign concept.

Let's look at four specific ways to approach the brainstorming process, using Gemma's gaming group (Gemma, the GM, and her players: Renaldo, Patti, and Adam) as an example. Gemma's group already knows the answers to two of the seven questions: Who's GMing (Gemma) and who's playing (Renaldo, Patti, and Adam). That's not a prerequisite to using any of the four methods we're about to cover, though; starting with no pre-answered questions is just fine.

Exploration

Exploration is the loosest method of brainstorming: You start out with few or none of the seven questions answered, and as a group you discuss what you want out of the campaign in general terms that don't define a specific RPG, story, or role for the PCs. Once you have some requirements pinned down, you begin to determine what RPGs, settings, and types of stories would fit those requirements. When you're done you've created a campaign concept that meets the requirements you defined at the outset.

This method can sometimes overlap with the next two, Spitballing and The Pitch. The overlap occurs when the group uses Exploration to gather requirements and limit possibilities, and then switches to another method to come up with the rest of the campaign concept. There's nothing wrong with blending techniques in service of the ultimate goal: coming up with a campaign concept that matches your requirements.

The main advantage of the Exploration method is that you start by learning what's important to the group about the campaign and then fit the system, setting, story, and roles to those needs. This approach has the best chance of creating a strong connection with everyone in the group. Using this method you also have the greatest chance of arriving at a combination of system, setting, and story that's unexpected, since the group's requirements led you to the final concept.

The disadvantage to this technique is that it can be time-consuming. Gathering everyone's requirements and then matching system, setting, roles, and story to those requirements takes time. If you're looking to get a game started up quickly, this isn't the ideal method to use.

GEMMA was able to hold off the campaign talk until after dinner, figuring that everyone would focus better then. Once coffees had been poured and Adam and Patti had their desserts, Gemma said, "So what kinds of stuff is everyone looking for in the next campaign?"

"I would like to see something with some kind of political angle," said Patti. "Something where we can plot and scheme."

"Something with some long-lasting NPCs so we can interact with them over time," Renaldo said, putting down his coffee.

Adam finished the last bite of his apple pie and said, "I'd be fine with all of that, as long as there's something cool that we're fighting against, like some common enemy."

Gemma nodded, taking it all in. "I think my only requirement is that I would like to run something else besides modern, since we just finished up a modern campaign."

The four friends went around the table talking about their requirements until the check arrived. As they worked out the bill, Gemma said, "Okay, how about a Burning Empires *game. It's going to have a political component, a good focus on NPCs and relationships, and for sure there is going to be struggle against the worms. And it's sci-fi, not modern. What do you think?"*

Spitballing

Spitballing is raw brainstorming. Members of the group toss out campaign concepts, whole or partial, based on what they find interesting. Some concepts build on others, some get set aside, and some are shot down right away. In the end someone will hit on a concept that everyone agrees on.

The advantage to Spitballing is that it's quick. Everyone just throws out ideas until something sticks. It also works well when you're not face-to-face, such as over email. The disadvantage is that it doesn't take into account everyone's requirements directly. There's also a risk that someone could have their feelings hurt when ideas they're excited about are voted down by the group.

As the server walked away, Gemma said, "So does anyone have any ideas for the next campaign?"

Adam was quick to reply. "How about a 4e game, Eberron*, just after the war?"*

"Meh. I'm not digging 4e," said Renaldo. "What about an L5R *game, all one clan?"*

"Possible," Patti said, finishing a bite of pie. "What about a GUMSHOE *game?* Night's Black Agents*?* Mutant City Blues*?"*

Gemma smiled, tilting her head back and forth as she thought over their ideas. "I am not sure I want to do something modern, and I don't know if I can pull off L5R. *What about something in* Pathfinder*?"*

The Pitch

This method is a more refined version of Spitballing, a single campaign concept presented to the group. Some thought has already gone into the campaign concept and some effort is made to hook the group with a compelling description of the concept. Sometimes the GM makes the pitch, and sometimes everyone in the group makes pitches. Often the initial pitch is modified based on group feedback in an attempt to reach consensus.

The advantage to this method is that the concepts tend to be better thought-out and more refined, making it easier for the group to evaluate them. The disadvantage is that fewer potential concepts get discussed, which can make it harder to find a concept that the entire group likes. Sometimes the person making the pitch is too committed to it and can be resistant to altering it, or could be disappointed if it gets rejected outright.

As the server walked away, all eyes turned to Gemma. She smiled. It was time. She'd been thinking about this all week, and she hoped they liked her idea.

Artist: Daniel Wood

"Okay. Imagine a kingdom after a magical apocalypse. There are storms of wild magic, and all kinds of monsters have invaded the realm. You are in a small walled town, trying to survive the days and months after the apocalypse, striving to restore some kind of order. I am thinking of using Pathfinder*."*

Patti said, "Do we know what caused the apocalypse?" Gemma took a sip of coffee and shook her head.

Renaldo smiled and nodded. "So there will be a town with townspeople for us to know and work with. That's cool."

Adam scratched his head and said, "What about using 4e rather than Pathfinder*?"*

Gemma thought it over. "I don't see why not."

The Short List

This method involves the GM doing some advance work and presenting a list of games that she wants to run for the group. The items on the list can be RPGs or complete pitches (system, setting, etc.) structured just like those used in The Pitch. Typically the GM presents 3-5 choices and then lets the players select the idea they like best.

The advantage of The Short List is that every selection represents a game the GM wants to run. This avoids a problem that can arise when using Exploration or Spitballing: The group wants to play a game or explore a concept that the GM isn't interested in running, and she has to turn it down. The disadvantage, much like The Pitch, is that the GM came up with all of the options and they may not be to everyone's liking. If someone has to select the lesser evil, that player's investment in the campaign could be jeopardized.

As the server walked away, Gemma looked around the table. Everyone was settling into their desserts and coffee. "Okay, I have a few ideas for the next campaign. Ready?"

"Shoot," said Adam.

Gemma nodded. "Here we go. Pathfinder *with a megadungeon setting. A* Savage Worlds Realms of Cthulhu *game set in the 1950s. A* Corporation *game where you're all agents from different corporations. Lastly,* Technoir*. It's a classic cyberpunk noir-style game."*

The group mulled the ideas over. Gemma knew there would be a round or two of voting before dinner was over. Things were just getting started.

Start with What's Important

When using the methods above, you can start with any question you like as long as they all get answered in the end. It's best to start with what your group considers most important.

For some groups the system might be the most important thing. Groups like this tend to play lots of different RPGs. They usually have favorite systems as well as systems they know they don't like. Some groups, like my own, rarely play the same system again, preferring to move from one system to the next.

For other groups the setting might matter most. Groups that care a great deal about settings often have a favorite system, like *Dungeons & Dragons*® or *Savage Worlds*, and already know that's what they're going to play—it's just a matter of where. When you're playing D&D, it makes a big difference whether the campaign takes place in the *Dragonlance* setting or in *Eberron*.

There are also groups that care more about what the PCs do in the game than anything else. These groups generally want to explore a certain kind of experience. They may want to enforce the law on the frontier, for example, which could mean playing soldiers in D&D, security officers on a space station in *Traveller*, or marshals in a *Deadlands* game.

If your group has played together for many years then you'll know what matters most to everyone. In new groups you should ask everyone what three things are most important to them about the campaign, in order of preference. Knowing these things will be a big factor in coming up with your campaign concept.

There Can Be Only One

In the end, after all the negotiations and debates are complete, the group should have a campaign concept that everyone likes. The concept should describe the system, setting, story, and the role of the PCs, as well as identify the GM and players. Write it down; now you have the first artifact from your campaign—and the core of what will emerge from the next phase: the campaign framework.

The Campaign Concept Phase Done Badly

In a bad campaign concept session, chaos reigns. There's no leader, so no single method of brainstorming is used. Half the group is using Exploration to figure out what they want; two people are Spitballing ideas back and forth, rapid-fire; someone is making The Pitch; and the shyest member of the group isn't saying anything. No one is really listening to anyone else.

Without a leader, disagreements tend to escalate until people start taking things personally. When an idea takes hold with a portion of the group, it gets pushed through and the less-vocal members of the group are ignored.

After the session, the members who are excited about the campaign concept want to get the game rolling and everyone else grudgingly goes along with them. The quieter players are detached from the concept but may not be too worried about it; it's clear that this campaign isn't likely to go far.

The GM is now forced to take some responsibility. He decides that when the group meets next they can roll up characters and get started. What else do they need to talk about? Nothing; they're all set.

The Campaign Concept Phase Done Well

In a good campaign concept brainstorming session, the GM, acting as the facilitator, begins the process by selecting one of the methods above. No matter which approach you choose, you need to make sure that every player has a chance to speak and contribute to all of the ideas that are presented, that the session is organized, and that discussion is civil.

As questions arise, the group answers them. When there are disagreements, you help to find compromises that are agreeable to everyone in the group. Make sure that everyone in the group is comfortable with the decisions that are made, and that no one person—yourself included—dominates the discussion or tries to force their agenda on the group.

When a good brainstorming session ends, the group is excited about the campaign concept and ideas are starting to percolate. You write the concept down and then work out a time when everyone can meet to discuss the campaign framework.

> *The discussion lasted well beyond the first cup of coffee, and Gemma was now on her third. Good thing tomorrow was Sunday, because there was little chance she was getting to sleep by a reasonable time tonight.*
>
> *The discussion was lively. Wanting to be as inclusive as possible, Gemma went with the Exploration method of brainstorming. The group talked about the things they wanted from the campaign. Their requirements were straightforward: a common enemy, some complex recurring NPCs, and a conspiracy.*
>
> *What was not straightforward was their choice of game system. Gemma made some suggestions:* Savage Worlds, Eclipse Phase, *and* Burning Wheel. *There was a lack of consensus about how much crunch they wanted in the game.*

Gemma worked with Adam, Patti, and Renaldo to find out what was most important to them, and by the second cup of coffee she had gotten to the root of the disagreement.

Renaldo was shying away from heavy crunch because he just wanted to play his character, not memorize complex rules. Adam was associating high crunch with having exciting combat scenes. Gemma explained that Savage Worlds *had very exciting combats while still being an easy system to learn. With that, they had a system.*

After clearing that roadblock, picking the setting was much easier. Patti did some checking on her phone and found a list of Savage Worlds *settings, and in a few minutes the group had chosen a sci-fi setting that looked perfect.*

Gemma used her phone to type the campaign concept into an email and sent it to everyone so that they'd all have it for easy reference. The group decided to get together next week to start discussing the details of the campaign.

True Story: 872 Words

Several years ago I had just concluded a campaign that was not working and told my group that I really wanted to run *Iron Heroes*, but I had no idea of a setting or purpose for the campaign. I spent a day or two mulling over what I thought might be enough of an idea to pitch to the group.

On my lunch break I wrote a single scene 872 words long. In it the town storyteller, speaking to a group of children, framed the campaign world and gave a broad indication as to what the role of the PCs would play. I sent it out and finished my lunch. Within minutes emails from the group started to come in.

Fifty-two emails later the campaign concept for our Elhal campaign was finalized and the campaign breathed its first breath of life.

Chapter 5: Campaign Framework

GEMMA was tidying up the living room before the group arrived. She was tired from a long day of classes and work, but excited to have everyone over to discuss the new campaign.

It had been a week since they'd met at the restaurant and come up with the concept for their sci-fi Savage Worlds *game. In that time she'd been reading up on the setting and developing some initial ideas for the story she wanted to run based on the group's requirements.*

She didn't want to come up with too many specifics yet, but she had rough ideas of how she wanted to set up and manage the campaign. Earlier in the week, she had taken the time to make some notes in the group's shared campaign framework document, but there were still a lot of questions that they would need to answer together. By the end of tonight's session she would have all the answers she needed to start putting together the campaign, and her friends would have what they needed to start making their characters.

Lost in her thoughts about the upcoming campaign, she was startled by a knock at the door. As she rolled towards the front of the house, she could hear muffled voices outside; that would be Patti and Renaldo. Adam was running late, as usual.

Now that you have your campaign concept—the high-level elevator pitch—it's time to refine it, add details, and flesh that concept out into a full-on campaign framework. The campaign framework phase is when most of the questions about the campaign are answered. Answering those questions is a group activity, with you leading the group.

The material you create in this phase sets the tone and direction of the campaign, so it's important to use a tool that will capture this information and retain it for future reference. That tool is a campaign framework document.

The Campaign Framework

Your campaign framework consists of the answers to a series of questions, grouped into categories that help to define the campaign: what's in it, what's not in it, what it's like, etc. This framework is the foundation of your campaign, and it provides direction to you and to your players.

You should spend a session creating this framework, or create it by asking and answering questions online (via email, etc.), and write it all down. Once it's written down, review it with the players, incorporate their feedback, and store it somewhere everyone has access to it. (Cloud services like Google Drive and Dropbox are great for this.)

The framework has different uses for you, your players, and the group as a whole. You'll use the framework as a starting point for developing the campaign setting and the story that will be introduced in the first session. The players will reference it for information about PC roles and character creation rules. And for the group, the framework defines how often the game will be run and how long the campaign is expected to last.

The framework isn't etched in stone for the duration of the campaign—it should change over time, and it probably will. It's an agreement your group made about what was important to them at a particular moment in time, early on. After the campaign is underway elements of the framework may turn out to be a bad fit, or might stop being relevant. Later in the book, we'll talk about how to change it during the game, but for now just know that it's not intended to be immutable.

Frameworks and Social Contracts

A social contract is the set of rules, often implicit but sometimes explicit, under which your gaming group operates: when and how often you game, how much out of character discussion is allowed at the table, whether sex scenes are played out off-camera, who brings the snacks, etc. If your group doesn't have a defined social contract, you probably have an informal one built up over years of gaming together, but it's still worth spending a session devising one. (Gnome Stew has a number of articles on this topic: http://goo.gl/VRn7i.)

Social contracts differ from campaign frameworks in several ways. A social contract is primarily about the behavior of the people around the table, and is established for the group; it applies no matter what game the group is playing. A campaign framework mainly addresses a specific game and the characters in it.

There can be some overlap, though, which is why it's worth bringing up social contracts here. Elements of your campaign framework may override your group's social contract, and that's just fine—but you need to make sure that the group is comfortable with those temporary deviations from the norm as you develop your framework.

Elements of a Campaign Framework

While there's no single set of framework-establishing questions that applies to all gaming groups and all situations, through trial and error over the years I've found that the most common questions relate to four broad topics:

- **Rules and supplements**
- **Setting**
- **Story**
- **Roles and characters**

Your group may tackle other topics when establishing your campaign framework, but you'll probably at least touch on these four. Because every group assigns importance to different elements of a campaign, the questions you'll ask about each topic will be unique to your group (though again, there tend to be commonalities).

As we delve into each topic, we'll see how Gemma and her group create campaign frameworks for a variety of different campaigns. Two things are consistent across all of these examples: Gemma is the GM, and Renaldo, Patti, and Adam are the players.

Campaign Concept

Your campaign concept is the foundation of any campaign framework; you can't have a framework without a concept. When you start working on your framework, put your campaign concept right at the top of the page. As you answer questions to establish the framework, refer back to the concept and make sure you're staying aligned with what you've already established.

If you start drifting away from your campaign concept, stop and reevaluate the situation. It's possible that your initial concept was a good starting point, but needs some tweaking and refinement to match the positive direction you're headed in now. If that's the case, cross out the original concept, write down the altered or new one, and use that as your new point of reference.

It's also possible that you've drifted away from the concept in unwelcome ways, and would rather stick with the original. If this happens, go back over the questions you've asked and answered as part of the framework creation process and bring your answers back into alignment with the campaign concept before moving on.

Rules and Supplements

Many games have gone through multiple editions, each with its own version of the core rules and its own supplements, and players of those games have their own preferences, favorite versions, etc. Some have a single edition but numerous supplements, and others might consist of a single core book. Add to that the fact that many groups use house rules, and it's easy to see how many options might be on the table when considering what rules to use in your campaign.

When you're pinning down the rules to use in a new campaign, consider these four questions (and a couple of follow-ups):

- **What version of the rules are we going to use?**
- **What supplements will we use?**
- **Are there any supplements that won't be part of the campaign?**
- **Are we using any house rules?**
    - What are they?
    - Where will we keep them for easy reference?

Because the rules of your game of choice form the mechanical skeleton of the campaign, it's important to define exactly what set of rules you're using in your campaign. I believe strongly in the notion that rules inform play. The rules, the version of those rules, and the supplements you use will have an effect on the campaign.

"What game system are we going to use?" is one of the core questions used to come up with a campaign concept, so you should already have your system picked out at this point. But you might not have talked about which version of the system to use (assuming it has multiple versions), so now's the time to do that.

Next up is supplements. If you've picked a game without any supplements, you're all set. But more than likely it has at least a few, and some games have a *lot* of supplements (quick, name all the supplements for second edition AD&D). Supplements usually contain additional rules and options that are outside of the core rules. Their inclusion in, or exclusion from, the campaign will influence the overall feel of the game, as well as have an impact on character creation options (more on this later).

In many groups, the decisions to use supplements (and which ones) falls to the GM; in others it might be a group decision. Some people prefer to play with no supplements, using only the core rules. Others like to allow every option in the game, which runs the risk of diluting the campaign setting or story, or unbalancing the game—what I call a "kitchen sink" campaign. My preference is to allow a minimal number of supplements into the game, with each one bringing something meaningful to the campaign, enhancing the overall concept and the story being told.

The final aspect of this topic is house rules. House rules include additions to the game (adding an element that was absent, like a car chase system) and rulings on existing rules (changes to what's already in the game, like "No elves"). Rulings are more common in old school games, like basic D&D, because those games often have fewer rules and require GMs to decide how things work on the fly. Gamers like to tinker, though, so most groups wind up with house rules of one sort or another.

Whether they originate with the GM, have been part of the group's play style for years, or are developed for this campaign, it's important to make sure the whole group knows which house rules and rulings—if any—are in effect before the campaign begins. When I start a new campaign, I make a new house rules document and keep it somewhere accessible to the group so it can be referenced during the game.

> *Gemma's group tended to follow her lead on game rules, so she let her players know what she was considering for their upcoming fantasy campaign. "I'm thinking* Pathfinder, *so of course we'll use the core rules.* Advanced Race Guide *and* Ultimate Equipment *for you guys and* Bestiary *1 and 2 for me. I want to add in a house rule for Action Points, like in* d20 Modern."
>
> *Renaldo, Patti, and Adam were fine with that, so Gemma noted the rules and supplements in their framework and created a new document for their lone house rule.*

Setting

Setting has a profound impact on your campaign. It will influence the two remaining cornerstones of your campaign framework, characters and story. Like systems, settings come in lots of flavors, but there are two basic divisions: published or homebrewed (i.e. created, not bought). There are some in-between cases, like "It's the real world, but . . ." settings and published worlds that have been heavily modified by the GM, but they can be considered under whichever umbrella—published or homebrewed—fits best.

Your campaign concept should include at least a general idea of what setting you're going to use, but it might be as broad as "a fantasy world" or as specific as a "Moonbase 32-Alpha in the Cassius System." Even if you already know exactly where the campaign will be set, though, it's still worth considering what aspects of the setting you want to foreground. This section will address both ends of the spectrum, knowing a lot in advance and knowing just a little about the setting.

Choosing a Setting

There's no one best choice when it comes to settings, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both published and homebrewed settings. There are five core questions to consider when choosing one for your campaign, though:

- **What's interesting about this world?**—What are the elements (locations, situations, NPCs, history) that make this world stand out as an interesting choice for the campaign?

- **Will this setting be fun for the GM and players?**—What makes it fun to manage as a GM and fun to experience as a player? Will it allow the group to tell a particular type of story or enjoy a certain kind of experience?

- **How will this setting convey what makes it fun in game terms?—**It's all well and good for a setting to be fun to read about, but how does it influence the game system? Are there classes, abilities, or other mechanical elements that are unique to this world?

- **What opportunities or limitations are inherent in this setting?**—Are there types of stories you won't be able to tell? Restrictions on the kinds of PCs the players can play? Elements of the game system which aren't present in this world?

- **Does this setting create too much work for the GM?**—Published worlds can save GMs time, as much of the heavy lifting has been done, but you still have to read the parts you want to use. Homebrewed worlds tend to involve more upfront work, but they can also be more personal.

In the end, you should choose a setting because it allows you to add value to the campaign. Perhaps you've always played D&D in the *Forgotten Realms*® setting, so as the GM you're able to convey a rich and detailed world based on past experience. Or perhaps Moonbase 32-Alpha will let the group tell a specific kind of story—hard science fiction with a noir tinge, for example.

Choosing a setting should be a group process, too. Everyone should have a chance to offer opinions, ask questions, and discuss the details. Once you have the basics down, you need to consider a second set of questions, which applies to both published and homebrewed settings, and then a specific set that applies to your type of setting.

Framework Questions for Any Setting

Regardless of what setting or type of world you're using, your group should agree on the answers to the following three questions:

- **What's the overall tone of the game?**—Heavier on action or drama? Light and cheery or dark and brooding? In order to get immersed in a game, everyone has to know the tone and try to play accordingly. Playing a sparkly vampire in *Vampire: The Masquerade*® isn't going to feel right.

- **What restrictions does this setting impose on the PCs?**—An empire with a draconic ruler and severe punishments for every crime is going to restrict gonzo action and violence in public. Your players should know about these kinds of limitations before you get into PC roles and character creation.

- **Will sensitive topics be explored, and do they conflict with your social contract?**—Some games, especially horror games, include themes that may not be common in the kind of game your group usually plays: graphic violence, children in harm's way, religion, sexuality, etc. If your group considers any of these topics taboo, everyone needs to make it clear where their limits are. You also need to decide whether to include these elements and how to handle them in play—for example, by including some of them "off-screen." It's best to have complete consensus about the answers to this particular question.

Framework Questions for Published Settings

When using a published setting you may also want to consider three additional questions:

- **What is canon?**—Novels and comic books have been written about some settings, while others are based on hundreds of TV episodes. How much of that material is considered to be true, or to have happened, in the setting as it stands in your campaign? If the group has played campaigns in this setting before, are the events of those campaigns part of the canon?

- **Does anyone or anything have "script immunity"?**—If you're playing a *Star Trek* campaign, can a PC marry Captain Picard? In a campaign set in Victorian London, can the PCs catch Jack the Ripper even though in real life he was never caught? If not, then script immunity is in effect for those aspects of the campaign—those things can't be changed, or at least can't be changed much.

- **Is anything different from the setting as written?—**Many groups like to make published settings their own, and if major changes are going to be made it's good to establish them up front. Sometimes this takes the form of "What if?" mode, as in a historical campaign wherein a major figure is killed off, while in other games it could mean replacing an entire region, removing a specific normally-playable race, or the like.

Framework Questions for Homebrewed Settings

If you're playing in a homebrewed setting, there's often quite a bit that needs to be defined up front. In most groups the GM develops the setting, so these questions might be directed solely at you (and you should tell your group the answers), but in some groups setting creation is a collaborative process.

- **What do the PCs know about the world?**—Whatever the PCs should know, the players must know. At a minimum this usually includes a basic overview of the setting. How much is known at the start of the campaign also ties into how much work you'll need to do, because you have to create the known elements.

- **What doesn't work the way one might expect?**—Particularly in homebrewed games, there's always a risk that players will make assumptions about how the world works based on past experience. If there's magic in a fantasy setting, for example, players might reasonably expect that it's based on arcane energy; if it's actually a mysterious force that no one understands, that needs to be made clear from the outset.
- **Who will create the setting?**—Usually this is part of the GM's job, but some groups create the game world together (perhaps using an RPG like *Microscope*) and others have the GM create the major elements and the players add things to that foundation, usually with GM approval. Whether and how much player-created material will be part of the game world is an important thing to establish early on.

> *GEMMA went over the Hidden Menace setting with her players, and they all seemed to be comfortable with her overview. They'd decided that the tone would be dark but heroic, and because no taboo topics were part of the setting Gemma would be running the game under their informal social contract.*
>
> *She then addressed the issue of canon with the group. "So you know that the setting book goes out to Year 255, but I really want to start with the fall of the Outer Ring in Year 199. So anything up to 199 is canon, just the way it is in the book, but after that your actions will affect history so things in 200 and going forward may be different. Is everyone cool with that?"*

Story

In the context of starting a campaign, there are four aspects to the story: source, content, structure, and length. Story is often less influential than rules or setting, but it depends on your group and your game. Four broad questions should be answered at this stage:

- **Will the GM be using published adventures, creating her own adventures, or both?**
- **What kinds of stories will play out during the campaign?**
- **How will the campaign be structured, story-wise?**
- **How long will the campaign last?**

Source

Much like settings, you can use published adventures or create your own. Some GMs and players prefer one over the other; some like a mix of both. Time-crunched GMs often like published adventures because they usually save time. GMs who love to create things for their games usually prefer to write their own adventures.

Consider your available free time when deciding whether to write an adventure or use a published scenario. While published adventures make some things easier, you do have to spend time integrating material into your setting and adapting it to your characters. Material you write yourself will be much more customized to your campaign, but it also tends to take more work to create. (*Never Unprepared* offers some tips on how to reduce the work involved.)

If you're going to use published adventures and you think your players might unknowingly read them on their own, consider telling the group what adventures you'll be using. Of course in some games just knowing the titles could spoil things, so the same approach won't work every time.

Content

Telling your players about the stories you're using in the campaign—whether those are adventures, dungeons, or elaborate social plots—can give things away that make the game less fun for them. At the same time, you want to make sure that everyone likes the types of stories in the game. So what's the best solution?

Artist: Matt Morrow

Rather than telling your players specific things about the stories you're planning, talk about kinds of stories that could be told within the campaign. Give them a few examples—bug hunts, dungeon crawls, mysteries, courtly intrigues, etc.—and see what resonates with them. If they shy away from any of the suggestions, avoid those kinds of stories.

Structure

There are lots of ways to structure the stories in a campaign, and each one will give the campaign a different feel. It's best to make sure that everyone understands the primary structure, that the structure fits the types of stories you want to include, and that it matches your players' expectations.

Here are four common structures and some details about how they play:

- **Serial**—In a serial campaign the story can stretch over several sessions, and the main plot may last for the entire campaign. Serial stories often feature sub-plots woven in with the main plot, and they tend to have long-lasting plots and recurring NPCs—especially villains. The original *Star Wars* trilogy (episodes 4-6) is a good example of this structure.

- **Epic**—An epic campaign is one with a serial structure where the main plot has world-shaking ramifications, often threatening the existence of the entire setting. The characters start out as ordinary people who rise to become heroes and save the universe, or they start out as heroes and have to immediately contend with major threats. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is a good example of an epic (of the former variety).

- **Episodic**—In an episodic campaign, every story is resolved in a session or two and stories don't generally connect to each other; the common element is the PCs. There's no main plot and there usually aren't many recurring villains, but there can be recurring NPCs. The TV show *Star Trek: The Next Generation* has an episodic story structure.

- **Sandbox**—Stories in a sandbox campaign are emergent: What the PCs do becomes the story. There's generally a geographical region—the sandbox—that the PCs explore, uncovering stories and adventure sites as they travel. These campaigns have a strong random element to them, in that the movements and actions of the PCs determine the next story.

Length

The final consideration is the length of the story and, to a larger extent, the length of the campaign. Some GMs start campaigns with the intent that they'll last forever, spanning the ages until the group is still playing the same campaign in the "old gamers' home." These campaigns exist, but they're few and far between; I've never seen one. What I see far more often are campaigns that end at an awkward point because no one talked about campaign length up front, and the group ran out of steam before the story could be brought to a satisfying conclusion.

Take time to discuss the length of the campaign, keeping in mind how often you plan to play. The campaign could be open-ended, continuing until the group loses interest. It could be closed or goal-based, ending when the Demon King is slain and the kingdom is free at last, or when the PCs are all 20th level. It could even run for a certain number of sessions, much like a season of a TV show. No matter what approach you choose, it's good to have an initial estimate of the campaign's length before you start playing. That way everyone will come to the table with the same expectations.

If you do set the length up front, you're not obliged to end the campaign when you reach that point. Instead, use the endpoint as a checkpoint and decide as a group if you want to end the campaign or continue playing. If you continue, discuss the length of the campaign anew. If not, then you can end things neatly—a topic Walt will cover later in the book.

> *LOOKING around the table, Gemma said, "I was thinking that with your characters being the guardians of this outpost, the campaign would be more episodic. Various threats would appear and you would go out and deal with them. When one was done, another one would appear some time later. What do you think?"*
>
> *Patti said, "I like one threat coming up after another, but what if there was something else, a force or something that was pulling the strings, and that only after a few of these threats was it clear that there was something larger at play?"*
>
> *"Hmm . . . I like that," Gemma said. "I could create a larger arc around that puppet master, but not have it come up until later. Love it. What do you guys think?"*

Roles and Characters

With rules, setting, and story addressed and noted in your campaign framework document, it's time to tackle character creation and PC roles in the campaign. A strong campaign features PCs that fit well into the setting and match the tone of the game. Answering these questions will ensure that your players have what they need to create their characters:

- **What roles do the PCs play in the setting?**
  - Has the setting, story, or role limited any character concepts?
- **Are there any required roles in this campaign?**
  - Are the players willing to fill those roles?
  - If not, can they be made less important or should the GM play an NPC in the party?

- **How powerful or experienced will the PCs be at the outset?**
  - Do the PCs get any bonuses during character creation?
  - Are there any house rules that affect character creation?
- **How quickly will the PCs advance?**

Role

You should work with your players to establish the roles of the PCs on two levels: as a group in this campaign setting (the party), and as individuals within the group. At the group level, are the PCs the most important heroes in the world, or ordinary folks? Do they have a defined occupation within the setting, like space marines, a starship's crew, or the king's musketeers? As a group, who are the PCs and what do they do in the world?

At this level it's important to consider whether the setting and story place any limitations on the role of the party. For example, if the campaign is about hard-boiled cops in New York City, then the PCs won't be rum runners in Chicago—the role of the group in the campaign has been defined. But in a sandbox fantasy campaign, the PCs might be mercenaries, a theater troupe, noble knights, or just about anything else.

On the individual level, are there any specific roles that are required within the group in order for the party to work well given the rules, setting, and story? For example, the classic D&D party consists of a fighter, a thief, a wizard, and a cleric, while most *Shadowrun* parties need a decker.

It's also important to consider the effect of the setting and story on individual roles. If you're playing in a setting where wizards were wiped out, does that mean there can't be any wizards in the party or that the PC wizard is one of the only survivors?

While some groups don't like to worry about having specific roles in the party, it's worth noting that many published adventures assume that certain roles will be filled. In those cases, you'll have to do extra work to adjust any adventures that you use. Similarly, some RPGs assume that you have access to certain types of abilities, like clerical healing magic in D&D. While you shouldn't feel confined to "default" roles, when you go a different route make sure that everyone understands the ramifications and, if needed, consider using house rules to compensate for unfilled roles.

The GMPC

With regard to PC roles, there's also a special case worth talking about separately: the GMPC, or "game master player character." If a party is too small or lacks a crucial role, the GM can play that role by including an NPC in the party—the GMPC.

GMPCs are usually created with the same rules as PCs, advance with the group, and are considered members of the party. This is in contrast to, say, hirelings or others who join the party on a more limited basis.

Adding a GMPC to the party should be a group decision. Some groups don't like GMPCs because it can feel like the GM is encroaching on part of the game usually reserved for players. There can also be fears that the GM will fall in love with his GMPC and either fudge things to keep that character safe or make the GMPC outshine the PCs.

When handled correctly, a GMPC can help balance a party, be entertaining for you to play, and make the game more fun for everyone by filling an undesired role. Done poorly, a GMPC can cause resentment among players, create havoc, and even ruin the campaign. Tread carefully.

Character Creation

This element of your campaign framework helps to shape the PCs in mechanical terms, including constraints, power level, and any house rules that apply to creating characters.

Constraints

Constraints can be placed on the PCs by your group's choice of rules and supplements, while others can come from the setting and story. If you allow only a limited number of supplements, that limits your players' character choices. There's also an old gamer axiom that if you exclude a specific supplement, at least one player will want to use something from that supplement.

This stage of the framework creation process is a good time to make sure that your players are happy with the options available to them based on the supplements you've agreed should be part of the game. If someone wants to play a character using rules from an excluded supplement, you can consider adding just those rules or including the whole supplement. If this supplement would cause problems, you may want to have the player look for an alternative.

Constraints can also come from the setting and the story. For example, some settings don't include races or professions or spells from a game's core rules, removing those options from the campaign. The same axiom applies here: If it's excluded, it's a safe bet someone will want to use it. Talk this over as a group and decide whether to make an exception (adjusting your framework document accordingly) or leave the restriction in place.

Power Level

Most RPGs have a default starting point for characters, whether it's based on level, build points, or tours of duty, but your campaign doesn't have to start there. Particularly for longtime gamers who play the same RPG often, it can feel limiting to always start out at the same power level (although some players love that aspect of the game).

You should agree on the PCs' starting power level as a group. Start out by sharing your recommendation based on the setting and story, and then make sure everyone likes that approach. If not everyone agrees, work out a compromise: adjust the starting level, speed up character advancement, etc.

Alongside this discussion comes consideration of starting currency, gear, and special items. Do you want to use the default values, or modify them? Sometimes giving the PCs something far out of their price range—a magical artifact, a starship—makes sense in order to support the setting or story.

Lastly, you should talk about the rate of advancement in the campaign. Some players like to plan ahead, others like to imagine how cool their characters will become, but everyone benefits when players know how fast their characters will advance. Some groups like to house rule advancement (for example, ditching experience points in favor of advancing based on plot milestones), while others prefer to stick to the default rate.

House Rules

If your group has house rules about character creation (how stats are rolled, whether cyber-gnomes get infravision), now is a good time to remind your players of them. If you want to create or remove existing house rules to better support the goals of this particular campaign, then that should also be a topic of discussion.

ADAM started things off with a question, "So we're the crew of a starship? What if I wanted to be a space marine?"

"Well, you can't be a space marine who is active in the Imperial Navy, but you could be one who has mustered out, retired, or been kicked out," Gemma said.

Adam smiled and nodded. "That's cool. I could be kicked out for something. Now what about starting level? I don't want to be some level one grunt. Can we do something mid-level?"

Gemma knew Adam had a thing about playing first-level characters and had expected this. "I was thinking since you are part of a starship crew that you wouldn't be rookies, and would start at fifth level. Would that work?"

Adam laughed, and Patti and Renaldo cheered. Gemma smiled at them and said, "Okay, with that covered there are just a few more things to hit before we are done."

Campaign Framework Template

Once you've created your campaign framework and written everything down, take an extra few minutes and create a template for use in future campaigns. Jot down the questions you asked about each aspect of the campaign—rules, setting, story, and roles and characters—and save that list as a new document.

Some will be specific to this campaign, but many of them will come up again and this template will save you time down the road.

The Campaign Framework Phase Done Badly

In a bad campaign framework session, the GM decides not to waste time on discussion and just wants to get the game moving. The GM has already written the first session, so everyone gets together to create characters.

Most of the players are making characters using the core book, but that changes when someone breaks out a supplement with a game-breaking class in it—the Über Death Crusher—and announces that's the class she's going to play. Now everyone is passing around that book and seeing what else is in it.

The GM panics and bans the supplement from the game. Three of four players are bummed because they can't play something cool from that book, but the player who brought up the first supplement pulls out another one. She asks if she can play a *Mega* Death Crusher from this one; another round of book banning ensues. Now that player is annoyed that she can't use any of her books.

Everyone puts their heads down and makes characters, but the GM forgets to remind them that the group will be a party of church-sanctioned guardians protecting the realm from evil. When PCs are done, two of them are the wrong alignment, one of them worships an evil deity, and one has a background that reads "Hates all gods." The GM, still annoyed about character creation, just starts the first adventure.

The group never makes it past the opening scene. While the PCs are getting their assignment from the high priest, they get into a fight with him and have to flee when the town guards arrive. They decide being guardians is lame and become a band of brigands, instead. Frustrated, the GM rolls with it and runs a game about brigands. It lasts two sessions.

The Campaign Framework Phase Done Well

In a good campaign framework session, you guide your group through the questions for each element of the framework, adding questions unique to your situation as needed. Everyone has a chance to share their ideas and the group as a whole is in agreement about all of the answers you come up with together.

At the end of the night, your campaign concept has been fleshed out to the point where the group is ready to start creating the campaign. The group knows what system you'll be using, and which supplements, as well as the setting for the game. You have enough input to begin creating the first story and you know how long the campaign is supposed to last. Your players understand what role their characters will play in the setting and in the party, and know enough to start creating their characters.

Your group shares the same expectations for the upcoming campaign, and based on the work that's been put in so far everyone's excitement level is high. You're ready to start up a great campaign.

It had been a productive evening, and the group's campaign framework was now written. While Gemma helped Patti clean up cups and plates, Adam threw out the trash and Renaldo flipped through the core book looking at character options. Gemma thought back on the evening.

Parts of it had come easily, like agreeing on rules and supplements and choosing a setting. The story and the role of the PCs had required more discussion. They weren't what Gemma had imagined when she'd put together her initial notes the night before, but in many ways what emerged was better than what she'd come up with on her own. It would require a bit more work, but she was sure with a little extra planning she could handle it.

Artist: Matt Morrow

The final discussion about characters had been interesting. It turned out that everyone wanted to make PCs above starting level. She had thought that was just Adam's thing, but Patti and Renaldo brought up wanting to have more options during character creation so that they could build more proficient characters instead of growing into them. That worked well with the story they'd all agreed on.

Gemma's mind was flooded with ideas and she was already starting to make connections. She knew she'd have to jot down some notes before she could get any sleep that night.

True Story: The Slippery Slope of Supplements

I was putting together a new campaign and the group had decided to use the *WitchCraft* rules, an excellent game with a great vibe. I had originally expected them to make characters form the core book, which are balanced but not over-the-top in the action department. I wanted the campaign to be a horror investigation game, but didn't do a great job conveying that to the group.

One player asked if we could use some of the character options from a supplement, specifically the vampire. I wanted to be as accommodating as possible and said yes, tossing open Pandora's Box. Another player, who had played *WitchCraft* before, wanted to take a power from a supplement about mystical Kung-Fu.

Before too long my vision of a street-level game of subtle horror investigation turned into Blade and Chuck Norris rolling up on supernatural horrors and putting the hurt on them. Needless to say the campaign didn't last long. In the next game we played I was much clearer about my intentions and the role of the PCs.

Chapter 6: Campaign Creation

Gemma's table was littered with books and papers, and her favorite note-taking application was running on her laptop (which had somehow managed to stay above the rising tide of papers). This was the first free time she'd gotten to work on the campaign all week, and she was happy to let the DVR record her shows for the night. She had bigger things to do—like creating a world.

She ran through a mental checklist of things she needed to create: a sector map with details for all the major planets, stat blocks for the aliens, an initial conspiracy to cloak them under, and an image of and deck plans for the PCs' ship. She wasn't sure if she could get it all done today, but she only had a week before the group's character creation session.

Gemma took a sip of her energy drink, tabbed up the volume on her media player, and spread her fingers over the keyboard. She tapped a few keys, her mind abuzz with ideas, and a new world was born.

The creation of a campaign world is an exciting time for any GM, and it can be one of the most creative stages of the campaign. It's exciting for players as well, as it's the moment when their characters are created and they fully engage with the game. It is in this phase that the campaign goes from being a topic of discussion to being a reality.

Up to this point the campaign is represented only by its framework, a document detailing the results of one or more discussions about the nature of the campaign. That document will be your guide for this phase. It will assist you in your creative processes as you bring the campaign world together, and it will guide your players through character creation.

While the campaign framework can do a great deal to define what makes up the campaign, it's still important to be vigilant during this phase to ensure that no mistakes or problems are introduced into the game. Mistakes made early in the formation of a campaign can lay dormant for sessions before they cause something to weaken and break.

During this phase two main components of your campaign will be created: your campaign material, a collection of notes and documents about the setting and story; and the player characters. This phase can roll seamlessly into the next and final phase, the first session, as you prep for the kickoff of your new campaign.

Creating *Your* Campaign Material

Your campaign material is the sum of all of the notes, images, maps, and references that represent your campaign setting and the stories you create. This is likely to be an eclectic mix of media, some of which was created by you and other elements of which were written or published by others.

The purpose of your campaign material is two-fold. First, this material needs to provide the tools you need to convey the word to your players; to do that, it has to evoke images and impressions of the setting in *you* when you read and view it. Players experience the game world through the GM, so you need to be able to see it yourself in order to describe it vividly to them.

Second, this material is the encyclopedia of your campaign and the game world, and an archive of past events, NPCs, regional details, plots, and more. When you sit down to work on an upcoming session you'll refer back to your campaign material for information about locations you haven't used in a while, NPC motivations, etc. If you curate your campaign material well, it will help you maintain continuity—a key aspect of campaign management.

Every campaign is unique, so every GM's collection of campaign material will be unique as well. Campaign material does tend to fall into some common categories, though:

- **Setting description**—The description of the campaign world, whether it's your hand-written notes about a homebrewed world or the core book for a published setting.
- **Maps**—Floor plans, world maps, space sector maps, and other maps used in your game. Your maps might be professionally made, hand-drawn, or created using a cartography program.
- **NPC and monster information**—Stats and other information about NPCs (allies and adversaries) and monsters, which could be a mix of excerpts from published bestiaries, NPC books, and original material.
- **Research**—Articles that provide you with extra details about the campaign, from Wikipedia pages to inspirational images from gaming blogs to world books for other settings.
- **Session notes**—Your actual notes from each session. They contain your prep and in-game notes about what happened during the session.
- **Story information**—Material outside of the session that makes up the rest of the story, like a description of an evil cult, a relationship map of a starship's crew, or the secret backstory behind the campaign. This information generally isn't shared directly with the players.
- **Tools**—Random name lists, encounter tables, tavern generators, and other tools that assist you in creating your campaign material.

This information can exist in a variety of forms, including books, print-outs, PDFs, digital images, music, audio files, and text saved on your computer. The format of a given piece of campaign material depends on your personal preferences and on what's available. For example, maybe you prefer printed notes when running a session but buy your gaming books in PDF so that they're easier to transport and search for specific information.

Make a Shopping List

Shortly after the campaign framework is complete you can start to work on your campaign materials. The framework will provide you with a solid idea of the makeup of the campaign. From there you will need to determine what campaign materials you need to get the campaign started. Don't attempt to prepare all your material at once; this can lead to GM burn-out. Instead, focus on the things that you need to kick off the first session. The rest of it can be created between future sessions.

Take some time to brainstorm a list of things you need, using the list of categories above as a starting point. Keep in mind the two things your campaign material needs to do: help you convey the world and act as a reference library for the campaign.

You should also take into account areas where you might be weak as a GM, and make sure you devote some of your campaign material to shoring up those weak points. For example, I'm terrible at making up names, so the Tools section of my campaign material for every game I run includes some kind of random name generator, be it a list of names or a link to a name generation website. If you have trouble remembering dates, include a timeline of campaign events; if you're bad at drawing maps, include links to mapping websites and map archives among your tools. Your campaign material should work for you, not for anyone else.

Go Shopping

Once you have a list of things you need you can start to assemble your materials. Your list will tell you what you can create yourself and what you'll need to purchase.

As long as you get everything on your list, it doesn't matter what order you acquire it in. If you're writing your own material, make sure you leave yourself time to prep as well as a separate block of time to write the first adventure. Try to avoid lumping those two activities together so that you can devote the proper attention to each one.

If you don't dedicate enough time to creating your campaign material, you'll head into the first session with too little material to properly convey the world to your players and the campaign will get off to a rocky start. You want your first session to be bursting with imagery that inspires your players.

There's a balance that needs to be struck, though. You also don't want to create *too much* campaign material, which can cause its own problems. Spending too much time writing campaign notes means less time for writing your first session. Detailing every aspect of your world leaves little room to expand it during play. Players are agents of change, and they will take things in directions you don't expect—so, to paraphrase *Dungeon World*, "Create but leave blanks." This will allow you to return to your material and adapt or expand it based on changes that came about through actual play.

Over-creating at this stage can also burn you out. If the task feels overwhelming you're more likely to skimp on the important pieces or even abandon the campaign altogether. Lastly, if the campaign doesn't last as long as you expect then much of your time creating campaign material will be wasted unless you can reuse some of that material in a future game.

To save time, rely on the Internet to help you find the material you need. GMs all over the world have put their material online, much of it for free, and a few carefully worded searches can yield a treasure trove of inspiration, material you can modify to suit your campaign, and even items like maps that can be dropped into your game as-is. (On the flipside, be generous about sharing your own material—you never know who might be able to make use of it.)

Along those lines, don't be afraid to raid your own campaign material from games past. I often transfer things from one campaign to the next. Just make sure you file off the serial numbers and re-skin whatever you're reusing so that your players don't recognize it.

The "What's Really Going On" Document

The guys who produce the Fear the Boot podcast (*fearthebоot.com*) use a tool in their campaign prep called the "What's Really Going On" document. This document is written by the GM and is for the GM's eyes only. It tells the complete and detailed story of what's happening in the campaign world, including every secret, conspiracy, and cabal. In the hands of your players it would ruin the campaign, but for you it serves as a canonical document to help you keep straight all of the events that transpire in your campaign. Your campaign material should include one of these documents.

When you're confused about who did what or whose brother the queen is in love with, or can't recall which galactic superpower that spy really works for, this is the document you'll turn to for answers. It will help you avoid lapses in continuity—or worse, unintentionally revealing something hidden to your players. It has a fringe benefit, too: At the end of the campaign you can show your players what a scheming bastard you are by revealing that you had everything planned from the outset.

Organizing Your Material

Your campaign material will likely be a collection of different types of electronic and paper documents. If it's an unorganized heap of paper or a chaotic mess that's full of missing pieces, it will be a terrible reference tool. Giving some thought to organizing your material now will help you in the long run.

Some GMs love to use a GMing binder, putting everything on paper, inserting it into a ring binder, and organizing it with dividers and page protectors. Others prefer to use a file box, a plastic treasure chest of paper neatly divided into different folders. Some go all-digital and store their material on their computers, or online in the cloud, with different folders holding documents, images, and gaming PDFs. This can be taken a step further by using a note-taking platform that houses all of your materials in a single application, be it local or cloud-based, or by using a web portal or wiki to build an online archive of material.

Regardless of how you chose to organize your material, here are some factors to consider when selecting your tools:

- **Portability**—You're likely to need some of your campaign materials on hand wherever you run your sessions. Whether you bring the pieces you need or just take it all with you, you need a tool that's easy to transport.
- **Access**—If your material is stored electronically, you need a way to access it where you play; considerations include battery power and Internet access. If you can't secure access, you'll need a way to use your material without it.
- **Protection**—Your campaign material is important, and some or all of it will travel with you to and from sessions, so you need to ensure that your chosen solution protects it from wear and tear.
- **Backups**—You'll also want to consider backing up your material. If it's all digital, there are lots of ways to do this (flash drives, cloud backup, etc.), but if you use paper it's worth finding a way to make copies.

Look over your list of campaign materials and consider how you're going to organize and store them. The better organized they are the more valuable a reference archive they will be during the campaign, and the better the souvenir they'll make when the campaign ends.

Sharing Material with Players

Finally, you should consider what campaign materials can be shared with your players. While you'll be the main conduit for conveying the setting to your players, it's often beneficial to provide the group with items that help them understand the world.

The rule of thumb I like to use is to provide my players with information about anything an inhabitant of the setting would know. This includes maps of local areas, descriptions of the major kingdoms/factions, notes about the prevalent religion, and the like. Providing things the characters don't know is usually a bad idea, as it can make the story less interesting.

If time permits, you can make documents specifically for the players—things like dossiers or player guides. These items are often a big hit with players. You can write these from scratch or use selective copying and pasting to create them from existing documents (just be careful to remove secrets and spoilers). I often create my materials in two parts: a shareable part and a separate page with secret information. This way I only have to create the material once and I know exactly what I can give my players.

Character Creation

At some point during this phase it will be time for your players to create their characters. Exactly when depends on a variety of factors, but it can happen any time after your campaign framework is complete. How character creation proceeds will be driven by the rules of your chosen system and the details you've included in your framework document.

In most campaigns the PCs need to be believable, fitting, mechanically correct, and satisfying to play and the party needs to have group cohesion. Some groups may care less about one aspect than the others, but in general these are good goals to strive for in every campaign. Your role as the GM is to guide your players to the achievement of as many of them as possible.

Believable

Most good characters are believable; you might also call them "realistic" or "three-dimensional." They feel real. Believability comes from having a personality, a defined appearance, and a background that includes family and friends, successes and failures. It doesn't matter that real people can't use magic and spaceships can't travel faster than light; those things are part of the game world's fiction, and are realistic within the context of the campaign. Mecha pilots aren't real, but a mecha pilot PC should feel real—just like any character in a good book, movie, or TV show.

Believability gives you, the GM, material to use in creating personal connections for a PC. It gives you an understanding of who that character is, what matters to him, and some idea of how he'll react in a given situation. A rich background is a treasure trove of ideas you can use to create story hooks. It's worth noting, though, that some players don't like creating backgrounds and others prefer to grow into their characters through play; don't sacrifice fun on the altar of believability.

The best tool that I've seen for fleshing out characters comes from *Amber Diceless Role-Playing*: 20 questions the GM asks the players about their characters, aiding them in creating backstories and personalities. I wrote an article about creating 20 questions for your campaign on Gnome Stew (*http://goo.gl/0kY0Z*); 20-question lists can also be found elsewhere online.

Fitting

A fitting character is one that makes sense given the campaign setting and story, and that is compatible with the rest of the party. An assassin in a party of paladins isn't a fitting character; neither is a ninja in a game set in medieval Europe. There are times when exceptions are appropriate, but in general a fitting character is believable within the context of the setting, isn't one of a kind, is explained by the setting, and meshes well with the other PCs.

Having fitting PCs is important because it's more difficult to write for characters that don't fit the setting. You'll have to bend and stretch the setting to keep accommodating them, and the more of this you do the less realistic the setting feels—you're breaking the fourth wall, in theater-speak.

Review character concepts as a group and seek consensus about each of them. If anyone in the group doesn't feel that a character is a good fit, ask that character's player to make changes or come up with a new concept. If that fails, you're within your rights as the GM to tell the player to make the needed changes. Some GMs avoid doing this because they don't want to confront a player and wind up having an awkward conversation, but I assure you that the awkwardness of that conversation is far less painful than doing nothing and having your campaign unravel because of an ill-fitting character.

Mechanically Correct

Every PC needs to be created by using the right rules and applying them correctly. This sounds like common sense, and it is, but it's easy to make mistakes during character creation—especially if you're playing a new game for the first time. Mistakes can be in a player's favor or detrimental to that player.

When an error is in a player's favor, it can make her character more powerful than the other PCs, and more powerful than the GM was expecting. When one player has an advantage it can make the others resentful or unhappy, and the surprise appearance of this advantage in play can halt the game while everyone debates the problem. Disadvantages are worse because they can cause something bad to happen to a PC unexpectedly, which may lead to that PC's player becoming dissatisfied and disengaged from the session.

The best way to avoid this problem is to audit everyone's characters when they're first created (which, conveniently, is also when they're the least mechanically complicated). If your group uses a tool like Hero Lab® (*wolflair.com*), you can save a step because the software is programmed to create characters correctly.

Artist: Christopher Reach

Satisfying

A character should be fun for the player to play. They should be able to do fun and exciting things in the game, both mechanically and from a pure roleplaying standpoint. Players who are having fun playing their characters stay engaged at the table as well as away from the table. Players who are frustrated with their characters will be frustrated at the table, impeding play for the group.

Every player has a favorite type (or types) of character to play, and if he doesn't know what this type is then it's important for him to figure it out. Sometimes a player isn't aware he has a type, but the rest of the group knows that he does. In that situation they can help him understand what types of character he seems to favor, like lovable rogues or brutish brawlers. Once a player knows his type, he should give some thought to what makes that type of character so much fun to play.

When a player is playing to type, she will most often be having fun. There are times when a player wants to break out of her mold and try a new character concept, though, and you should encourage this kind of experimentation—it gives players a chance to grow and to expand their horizons. There's a risk that she won't like her character and will want to create a new one after the game begins, but don't worry about that for now; we'll talk about that risk later on in the book.

The easiest way to ensure that a player will be satisfied with his character is simply to ask him if he thinks playing that character will be fun. If the answer is "Yes" then you're all set, but if he hesitates you need to probe him a bit more. Ask questions like, "What aspect of this character is going to be most enjoyable for you?" and "What's going to be the biggest challenge when it comes to playing this character?" to help figure out whether the character is really a good match.

Group Cohesion

Unless you're playing a game that's fueled by intra-party conflict with a group that enjoys that style of play, the PC party should be a healthy group with a sense of purpose. There can be some intra-party tension within the group, but overall there should be a sense of group unity and loyalty to one another. The party should have a reason to exist. Why are they together? Why do they stay together? What are their goals? What's their shared history?

Unified parties with common goals will progress through the campaign in a productive manner. Sessions won't stall because of intra-party arguments, and fights won't break out because one PC has betrayed another, ruining the mood of the game. These types of conflict can lead to actual arguments between players (not characters), and can even kill campaigns on the spot.

The Fear the Boot podcast has an excellent solution to this problem: the Group Template questionnaire (*http://goo.gl/3lWQB*). This template is a series of questions that the players, along with the GM, answer as a group. The questions are designed to bring about group cohesion and head off potential intra-party issues.

Alone or in a Group

The last thing to consider is whether character creation will be handled individually or as a group. Having done this both ways, I prefer to create characters as a group.

A group character creation process, where a session is devoted to making characters, allows for the most collaboration among the group to ensure that character concepts make sense and the PCs will fit together as a party. It also makes it easier for players to catch each other's mistakes if any rules errors are made. The downside is that group character creation only proceeds as fast as the slowest player. Depending on the RPG, it can fill an entire session.

Solo character creation is faster, but characters are created in a vacuum. This makes party unity more difficult to achieve, and you run the risk that someone will show up with an off-the-wall character or one that's mechanically incorrect. These problems have to be addressed, leading to delays. If you can't create characters as a group, whether because you don't have time or everyone isn't in the same place, discuss character concepts and get buy-in online before the PCs are completely created.

The Campaign Creation Phase Done Badly

The GM has gone full-tilt in putting together her campaign materials. She wrote a tome of information about the world, including detailed descriptions of all the major NPCs in the main town. She spent hours working on maps of the starting region and the world, and devoted two full days to building the ultimate campaign binder.

That work consumed virtually all of her free time before the first session, so the GM told the players to create characters on their own and bring them to the first session. They asked a few questions via email, but she gave cursory answers because she wanted to write backgrounds for all of the local goblin tribes. She's sure the PCs will all work well together.

There's not much time to prep, but she's got an epic plot planned for the first session, including a massively complex story that the PCs will join at its midpoint. Not knowing anything about the PCs, the plot has nothing to do with them, and because it's so complex the GM is planning to skip PC introductions to save time. That time will be better spent wowing the players with detailed descriptions of the campaign world so that they can marvel at her encyclopedia of campaign material. The first session is also the last.

True Story: Campaign Material Overdose

Years ago, I wanted to run a superhero game where supers were discovered in World War II and the world was completely changed by their existence. I spent the next few weeks writing an alternate history of the world from the late 1940s through the present day. I extrapolated the effects that supers would have on technology, the economy, and society. In all I wrote about 150 pages of material, far more than I needed to launch this campaign world—enough to write a supplement.

I was so enamored with creating the campaign world that I overlooked the fact that I wasn't writing fiction, but was writing a setting for a campaign. I neglected to make the setting something that was both playable and enjoyable for the players. I had instead created a world where superheroes had to get insurance and licenses to fight crime, and had built societal counters to most of the things that make supers fantastic. The setting was rich and deep, but not playable.

In all it lasted six sessions, far less than the time I spent writing up all the material. In retrospect, my time would have been better spent writing less setting material, focusing only on the critical elements, and funneling that energy into making sure I had crafted a playable setting and story.

The Campaign Creation Phase Done Well

Before getting together with your group to create characters, you listed what you need to have ready before the first session of the campaign. Your list wasn't exhaustive, so you had enough time to assemble your material. This material provides enough information that you feel comfortable with the game world and are sure you can convey it vividly to your players. Everything is organized so you'll be able to find things when you need them later on.

You create a Group Template for the party and 20 questions to ask your players, and then guide them through a group character creation session. By the end of that session, you have a party of well-rounded, believable, mechanically sound characters that your players are excited to play. So as not to lose that momentum, you schedule a short session to test drive the system and make sure everyone is happy with their characters once they've seen them in action. Based on the characters your players created and the campaign material you came up with, you've got tons of ideas for the first session.

PATTI looked around the table at Gemma, Renaldo, and Adam. "Is anyone else as psyched as I am to play this game?"

There were smiles all around the room; everyone could feel the creative energy in the air. They had just finished a character creation session where they all rolled up their characters, ran through a Group Template, and did 20 questions for every PC.

"Totally. I love these characters and I can't wait to see them in action next week," said Gemma. Ideas were already coming to her so quickly that she'd started carrying a small notebook and paper to jot them down. They'd started the night with just the campaign framework and some rough notes, but after character creation the first adventure was already taking shape in her notebook and she could see how to tie elements of each of the characters' backgrounds into the initial conspiracy.

Gemma said, "Okay, we have a week until our next official session, but are you guys free to do some mock combats and stuff to break in the rules on Wednesday?" Everyone nodded.

"Very good then, Wednesday it is."

Chapter 7: The First Session

GEMMA could feel the pre-game rush starting to build—that sense of excitement of the launch of a new world and a new campaign, mixed with an equal dose of anxiety about whether this setting, this story, and these characters would work. She'd spent hours learning the rules, putting together her initial materials, and prepping the first session. If the campaign didn't take off . . . No, no. She clamped down on her anxiety.

She reminded herself of the brainstorming the group had done to come up with the campaign concept, the framework they'd built around that, and the main story she'd come up with. Her confidence began to grow. Everyone had provided input, and she'd taken that input and used it to create the campaign. They were going to have a blast. Now if everyone would just get here so that they could get started . . .

The final creative act you must undertake to start a new campaign is writing the first game session. The first session is the gateway to the campaign. All the work you've done alone and with your players was to get to this session.

Now you'll take everything you learned and created during the first four phases and, through the lens of the campaign framework, you'll create the first session. A solid first session will give the campaign a strong start and impart the momentum to carry it forward. A rocky first session isn't the end of the world, but it will mean working that much harder to keep the campaign moving forward.

A great first session isn't an unattainable goal. If you know what you need to accomplish and you deliver it at the table, it's quite attainable. There are two components to a great first session, preparing it and running it, and we'll talk about them both in this chapter.

Prepping the First Session

The first session of a campaign is often the hardest to write because it needs to accomplish a lot and there's no background material to leverage yet. Much like the pilot of a TV series, it will probably be somewhat awkward. You'll be getting used to conveying a new world while at the same time the players are trying to establish their characters in it and get a feel for them. Toss in a new game system for everyone to learn, and the first session can be a bit of a mess—but don't worry, because that's the nature of the beast.

As the GM, your task is to achieve four critical goals during the first session:

- **Introduce the setting to the players**
- **Introduce the PCs to the group**
- **Start the first story**
- **Have fun**

If you achieve these four goals, then there will be a second session—and likely many more to come.

Introducing the Setting

The first session is your first opportunity to convey the world to the players. If the campaign takes place in an established setting, whether a published world or a setting you've played in before, then the players will likely have a feel for the place before the campaign begins. If the setting is homebrewed or is completely new for the players, you need to convey the setting to the group in a way that helps them understand it as well as more accurately portray their characters.

It can be tempting to describe the world in a data-dump, a bulleted list of facts about the setting. Resist that temptation—this isn't Social Studies class. Show rather than tell. Roleplaying games are a dramatic medium, and the first session should give you opportunities to portray parts of it as the PCs interact with the world.

As part of your prep, make a list of important elements of the world—things that you want the characters to experience. Then work them into the first session through what the PCs see, are told by NPCs, and experience directly in the game.

Take extra time to include descriptions of things like the geography, architecture, and clothing the PCs will see in the world. You want the players to experience the setting in a visceral way, which means providing them with as much detail as you can while keeping things moving.

Introducing the PCs

The most important thing that the first session must accomplish is to introduce the PCs and establish them within the setting. One good way to do this is by introducing each character individually, then bringing them together as a group.

A PC's individual introduction should be a personal scene highlighting important aspects of the character, allowing his player to demonstrate the PC's strengths and personality to the group. While the whole group may have been involved in character creation, this gives each player a chance to don his character's role and perform it for the others. A good scene will help the player establish his character and will give the other players a glimpse of who this person is and why they're part of the party and the campaign.

Either in parallel or following the individual introductions of the PCs, the story should bring the PCs together and provide an opportunity for them to establish a party. If the PCs were created as part of an already established group, like a scout unit in a rim world military organization, then you should give them time to banter, make jokes about their shared history, etc. If they're strangers with a common purpose, you need to create a situation where they come together in service of that shared goal.

The First Story

The third goal of the first session is to start the first story of the campaign. Based on the campaign concept and framework, you should already have an idea of the story that you want to tell. After the PCs have been introduced, either as they're coming together as a party or afterwards, you can launch into the first story of the campaign.

In the first session, less is more when it comes to revealing the story of the campaign (if you're running a campaign with an overarching story, of course). A good approach is to create a simple plot or a set of encounters that unites the party around a cause and gives the PCs clues to lead them deeper into the story in subsequent sessions.

Challenge and adversity are excellent ways to unite the PCs. Your campaign framework should tell you what kind of party they are (or are about to become), whether they're heroes or mercenaries or investigators. Challenges should appeal to that type of party. Heroes will come to the aid of those in trouble, so put someone in trouble. A mercenary group takes jobs for money, so have someone hire them. A party of investigators won't be able to resist a mystery, so drop one in their laps. Once they take the bait, whatever it is, you can draw them to the plot of the adventure.

Making it personal is the fastest way to get player and character engagement in an adventure. During character creation your players probably created backgrounds for their characters, even if only a sentence or two; mine that information and use some of it in the first story to grab their attention. A merchant getting robbed on the side of the road is interesting, but Uncle Celios the merchant getting robbed is personal. Backgrounds are like spices: best used in small amounts, so don't feel compelled to put a personal connection for every PC into the first story (unless the campaign is a massive conspiracy where it's no accident that the PCs came together).

The introduction to the first story should feature a situation the PCs can resolve and an element that draws or drives them deeper into the story. For example, the heroes track the bandits back to their hideout and defeat them, resolving the situation. Upon investigation, the bandits all bear a mysterious mark on their arms—a symbol the party's apprentice wizard once saw on his former master's arm. That sense that something larger is afoot will draw the players into the campaign.

Artist: Daniel Wood

Have Fun

The most important goal of the first session is for everyone to have fun, so do your best to make the session as much fun as possible. Don't worry about getting every rule correct, or that one of the players forgot about an ability that would have changed something important; that stuff will all come more easily the longer you play. Focus on bringing the PCs into being inside an interesting setting and engaging them with a compelling story and the campaign will be off to a good start.

Learning the Rules

If you're playing an RPG that's new to the group, you need to address learning the rules by or during the first session. The better everyone knows the rules, the smoother the game will go. The more often the rules are referenced during play, the choppier the session will feel.

Everyone in the group should read and become proficient with the core rules of the game, particularly the resolution system (skill checks and the like) and the combat system. As the GM, you'll need to do that as well as acquire at least a passing familiarity with all of the rules. The players should become experts in the rules that are relevant to their characters.

Depending on available time, the complexity of the game, and the group's experience level, you may want to set aside time to test drive the rules before the first session. You can do this using a published adventure or quick-start rules, or by

writing a simple scenario. The players can use pre-generated characters or create their own. Treat sessions spent this way as dress rehearsals, not as part of the campaign.

Learning by doing is always superior to learning by only reading, so whenever possible make an effort to test drive the rules. Try out the core rules, experiment with what the PCs can do and, for complex systems, consider breaking out each aspect (social combat, aerial combat, dreamscape travel) and trying it on its own. Test drives are also a great way to keep your players engaged while you assemble your campaign materials and write the first session.

If you don't test drive the rules, then you'll be trying them out for the first time during the first session. To keep the first session as smooth as possible, limit the amount of the system you use by focusing on task resolution and combat (or scene framing and stakes, or battles of wits and psychic combat—the core of the system, whatever it is). You can introduce other aspects of the rules in later sessions. Also, as you write up the first session, write in opportunities to use the rules during the PC introduction and party introduction scenes. For example, have a couple of PCs make skill checks and then have the group get into a minor scuffle on their way into town.

Running the First Session

If you've prepared well for the first session, actually running it should be fairly straightforward. Remember that you want to focus on the setting, the PCs, the first story, and having fun; that alone will take you a long way. As a GM who has started a lot of campaigns, though, there are five other things I like to do to help make the first session successful:

- **Start with Q&A**
- **Go slow**
- **Lift the curtain (just a little)**
- **Saturate your descriptions**
- **Be the tour guide**

Start with Q&A

Before you begin the session, open the floor to questions from your players. Spend a few minutes answering questions about their characters, the system, or anything else related to starting the game and everyone will feel more comfortable.

Go Slow

Your excitement for starting the campaign may drive you to move quickly and plow through your session notes. Don't—instead, slow down. The first session can be overwhelming for the players, who have to assimilate the campaign world, get used to their characters, try out the rules, etc. Take it slow and make sure that everyone at the table is following along.

Lift the Curtain (Just a Little)

When you engage the mechanics of the game, take a few seconds and explain what you're doing. If an NPC makes a skill check, tell the players the difficulty of the check; if an NPC gets shot, take a moment to go over the armor rules. The more times someone is exposed to game mechanics the faster they'll learn them.

Saturate Your Descriptions

While you're introducing the world for the first time, make sure that your descriptions of things are more detailed than usual. You want to fill your players' imaginations with as many details about the world as you possibly can without overwhelming them. For example: The locals in the tavern aren't drinking ale, they're drinking pinebrew, fermented mead made from the sap of the giant pine trees found in the region. It's thicker and sweeter than ale.

Be the Tour Guide

While you describe things, take a moment to act as a tour guide and explain why something is relevant to the scene at hand—something the characters would know, but that the players do not. Take that pinebrew: Fermentation always begins in the spring and ends in the autumn, but most towns brew enough to last all year.

The First Session Done Badly

The GM didn't manage his time well and went overboard on campaign creation, leaving too little time for prepping the first session. He was so psyched to launch an epic story that he jammed too much material into the first session, including plans to reveal a deep conspiracy. He didn't include any scenes to introduce the PCs as individuals, so he takes a shortcut and makes a single group introduction before launching into an intense and complex plotline.

He's so excited about the setting that he lectures the players for over an hour about the world; he doesn't notice when their eyes glaze over. Now short on time, he plows ahead at a harrowing pace. The players can hardly understand the setting or the plot. Rules have to be hand-waved because there's no time to slow down, so no one learns much about the system.

By the time the session ends, the players are confused and frustrated, and they don't "appreciate" the brilliance of the GM's plot. The GM senses their lack of enthusiasm and becomes dejected. Everyone goes home not entirely sure what went wrong.

The First Session Done Well

Having written your campaign materials and worked through character creation, you're brimming with ideas for the first session. Taking care not to overdo it, you create a simple adventure with an interesting twist that will showcase some important aspects of the campaign setting. You include a scene where each PC can show off before they all come together to form a party and head into the main part of the story. The twist at the end is mined from the PCs' backgrounds, and will end the night with a bang.

Before the session begins, you give your players an overview of the world and the system, giving everyone time to ask questions before starting in earnest. During the session, you work hard to describe as much of the world as possible while making sure everyone understands how the game's core mechanics work in play.

You take your time getting through the material you prepped, giving every PC a chance to be in the spotlight. As the session winds down, you spring the "big reveal" and give the PCs a glimpse of the larger plot that's afoot. Everyone is excited to see what happens next—and to play again.

True Story: Playing to Tropes

I started my Eagle Eye *Conspiracy X* campaign in the fall of 1996, at the height of *The X-Files*' popularity. Some GMs would have worked hard to make their mark and distance themselves from the show, but I decided that I wanted to do the opposite.

My players were all huge fans of *The X-Files* and knew the tone of the show, so I set my campaign firmly in the world of *Conspiracy X*, using its mythos, but wrote a first session that was a very close approximation of *The X-Files*. It featured a small mystery that, when solved, revealed a much larger government conspiracy.

With just a bit of care to make sure that my tropes weren't recognizable as coming from *The X-Files*, I was able to take the feelings that the players had about *The X-Files* and leverage them for my campaign. That allowed me to take a shortcut and invest less time introducing the setting, giving me more time to focus on the story and the rules. Don't fear tropes like this—embrace them.

"Axel fires another bolt and the cloaked man falls to the ground, his back smoldering from where the bolt burned through his cloak and his strenium armor. Prentiss rolls the man over and you see something in his hand. It is a black sphere with shifting patterns on its surface. It is clearly alien tech, but what it is," Gemma said with a smile, "you will have to find out next week."

"Aw, man, he is one of them. I knew it!" Renaldo said, shaking his fist.

Patti said, "Awesome first session, Gemma. I cannot wait to get that sphere to the lab and see what it does." She flipped through her notes to make sure she'd gotten everything.

Gemma smiled again. The pre-game rush was over and the first session had been a success. The big reveal in the last scene was just what she needed to get them on the hook for the next session. She wouldn't be going to bed early tonight—too many story ideas were already bouncing around in her brain. She was going to be tired at work tomorrow, but the campaign was off to a good start.

Managing a Campaign

Artist: Matt Morrow

Chapter 8: Campaign Management

GEMMA finally had a chance to organize her thoughts about her new Invasion from the Aquatic Empire fantasy campaign, which she'd been hoping to run for months. It had been a rough couple of weeks with her therapy and new job; although she'd hoped to devote 10 hours a week to prep she'd made do with three hours total, four if she counted this hour right before the session.

With so little time to prepare Gemma chose to run a published adventure that she could shoehorn into the campaign. She didn't have time to read it, so she hoped the challenges were appropriate. She also hoped Renaldo, who'd continually whined about having to play "yet another fantasy campaign," wouldn't be too distracting tonight. She sighed and started flipping through the adventure so she could see what abilities the characters would need to complete it. The doorbell rang.

She quietly cursed. Patti tended to arrive early, but not usually this early. Gemma shrugged and closed her book. She'd really be winging it tonight. This definitely wasn't what she had in mind when she committed to this campaign.

It would be a huge relief if we could just design our campaigns, set them into motion, and then sit back and reap the rewards as our players run through the session smoothly and efficiently without any further need for management. Unfortunately, that's not often the case—heck, it's rarely the case.

More often, you're going to need to keep your manager hat on throughout the session. Sometimes the adventure drifts off course, the PCs evolve differently than expected, or a player has an issue that is affecting play. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, something unexpected manifests in the campaign that threatens or changes it. All of these issues need to be managed.

How you handle managing your campaign has a significant impact on how much fun everyone has at the table and how healthy the campaign remains moving forward. It also affects your future campaigns because how you manage your current campaign becomes your résumé when pitching new ones.

The Goal of Campaign Management

As Phil stated so succinctly in his introduction, when we talk about *running* campaigns what we're really talking about is *managing* campaigns. After all, running a campaign would be easy if you didn't have to worry about those pesky players mucking up your grand designs! Of course, that would make you a storyteller more than a game master, and you probably wouldn't be reading this book.

Still, unless you're truly winging it you do most of your campaign management away from the table (a fact poor Gemma laments in the chapter opener). All of your prep work is designed to make the game flow naturally and grow organically through your interactions with the players. Obviously, the more thought and preparation you've put into the campaign, the easier it is to run at the table.

Danger Ahead!

One of the problems with truly winging it is that you're forced to do campaign management while running the campaign. This divides your attention and can really harm the flow of the session when you reconsider an NPC's purpose, present a plot element in a way that conflicts with your goals, or confuse your players with conflicting clues.

While I'm a "wing it" kind of guy, I always jot down a page or two of notes for each session just to give me a bit of structure to work with. These notes don't need to be heavily detailed; they're just mnemonic prompts for my brain while it's preoccupied with running a session.

Management Is an Active Process

Managing a campaign isn't like creating a computer game—you can't just write the code and then let the players explore it. In fact, that's not even desirable; if it were, you'd be spending your free hours in front of your computer rather than putting together a campaign.

Campaign management requires that you actively manage the campaign from the time you were inspired to run it to the time when you thank your players for participating at the end of your last session. Between those two points, which can be separated by months or years, there are a lot of factors to manage.

Remember, campaign management may take a bit of work, but it's also a lot of fun. It's deeply rewarding to craft worlds and stories, present them to your players, and watch them interact with and reshape them. It's only when it starts to feel like work, or when we've allowed our management to suffer to the point where we've lost interest or the players have lost interest, that it becomes a problem.

Tales from Walt's Table

I can't tell you the number of times that I've seen a promising campaign collapse because the GM didn't do the work or interest was lost in the campaign. One example that springs to mind is from many years ago, when my GM had purchased an adventure that he was enamored with; his enthusiasm was infectious and we all couldn't wait to play it.

It was a high-level adventure (this was a fantasy class-and-level RPG) and the GM insisted that we start as beginning characters and work our way up to it. We begged him to just let us create characters at the appropriate level, but he was insistent. Unfortunately, rather than do a little prep and seed elements from the plot into the earlier adventures, he just strung us along in a series of random adventures that paled in comparison to what he was promising would be the payoff.

You may have guessed the ending: We never made it to his awesome adventure. The players gave up on it about half-way through our "journey to prove ourselves worthy" and never looked back. It was a shame and I know the GM was heartbroken about it, but looking back he did little to keep us invested. He'd forgotten to make the journey as exciting as the climax.

What to Manage

When managing campaigns, we generally focus on five areas:

- **Story**
- **Player Characters**
- **People**
- **Risk**
- **Change**

Each of these areas has its own peculiarity and wrinkles, which is why we're going to deal with each of them separately in subsequent chapters.

Story management is what most GMs consider "creating" or "developing" a campaign. It's usually the first or second element you deal with when you decide you want to run a campaign (vying for top spot with the rules system). This is where you develop your plot lines and generally set the stage for the players.

Player character management involves determining the types of characters appropriate for the campaign and how you help and enable the players to shape their characters accordingly. Character management isn't the same as character creation; you still need to manage how the PCs change and grow as the campaign unfolds.

People management is all about interacting with your players and ensuring that they're getting the most out of the campaign without infringing on the other players' fun. Generally, when a character isn't working well within a campaign it's more often a people management issue rather than a character issue.

Risk management is how well you manage the element of risk in your campaign. Virtually all campaigns have conflicts that the characters need to overcome, and for conflicts to matter there need to be risks involved. All risks have the possibility of failure and those failures need to mean something. Sometimes a player doesn't appreciate a risk when taking it; sometimes you misjudge the difficulty of a task and need to manage it.

Change management is what occurs when you realize something needs to change, no matter what it is. Maybe the story isn't what you'd hoped, or a character just isn't gelling or died because of a bad roll; maybe a player needs to leave the group. Whatever the case, change management is a critical part of campaign management and it's tough to plan ahead for it.

While these five areas—story, player character, people, risk, and change management—are listed roughly in order of occurrence in a campaign, they're all equally important. At some stages one may seem more important than another, but this will change frequently. You might be surprised, for example, to find that while you thought story management was the most important element at the beginning, it ends up falling to the bottom of the priority list once the other elements get involved.

In any event, don't panic. All of these different elements blend and work well together. Over time, you may even lose your ability to distinguish between them; you'll simply be doing all of these things as part of managing your campaign. That's why we use the umbrella term "campaign management" to describe several different forms of management.

Adventure vs. Story

It ruffles some people's tail-feathers when what goes on at the gaming table is referred to as a story. After all, isn't the "story" what's created rather than what's developed beforehand? If the GM creates a "story" prior to the session then didn't he just minimize the players' input? On the other hand, "adventure" carries connotations of its own. I know several gamers who equate "adventure" with "dungeon crawl" or the old-school term "module."

In practice, the two terms are as interchangeable as the various terms for "game master." Players tend to think of having adventures while GMs tend to think of crafting stories, especially if intricate plotting is involved. We use these terms interchangeably in *Odyssey*.

Being Agile/Flexible

You have to be prepared to amend or change any of the five major elements of a campaign (story, player characters, people, risk, change) at any time. One of the worst things a GM can do is continue to press on when she's been warned about a problem, like Gemma did despite Renaldo's concern in the chapter opener. Staying true to your initial vision doesn't mean you're going to get your hoped-for outcome, especially if it rubs your players the wrong way.

Continuing Gemma's example, she should have recognized that she didn't have enough prep time for an aggressively plotted campaign. While postponing her time in the GM's chair is probably the best choice, she could instead lower her prep time by running a published campaign or staying within her comfort zone by sticking to adventures that require less design work.

Players may be intrigued by part of your campaign pitch but not all of it. Be prepared to take their considerations to heart. Maybe they don't want to play bridge officers on board a starship, but they like the idea of exploring strange new worlds; if that's the case then perhaps you should take your inspiration from *Stargate SG-1* rather than Star Trek®.

"Published" Is Not a Dirty Word

There's a common misconception that you aren't a "real GM" if you need to use materials created by someone else. Nothing could be further from the truth. Published adventures are generally written by people with intimate knowledge of a particular game system and often showcase what the designers of a particular game system and/or campaign setting intended. Thus they are full of flavor and tend to tick the right boxes. If you're lucky enough to stumble upon an interesting, well-written adventure or series of adventures, then why reinvent the wheel just for the sake of reinventing the wheel?

Perhaps the more dangerous issue is when GMs feel that they have nothing to manage if they're using a published campaign. As long as the players create appropriate characters, what's left to manage, right? Wrong. No matter how good a published adventure is, the author designed it for a theoretical gaming group. He doesn't know your group's quirks, nor can he anticipate how your group will react in particular situations. The adventure probably won't tell you how to handle character death or how to modify the dungeon if your group lacks healers.

Using published material is just like winging it: You've reduced your story prep, but all of your managerial duties remain in place.

Artist: Christopher Reach

The Railroad vs. Traveling on Foot

One of the most common mistakes GMs make when running campaigns is the dreaded "railroad." Simply put, a railroad is exactly what it sounds like: The characters are put on a track and have nowhere to go but forward. While they may occasionally be given a choice, those choices are generally pre-approved by the GM and may even lead to the same outcome. Some choices are clearly illusory as one option is made so unappealing that the only real choice is to go in the obvious direction.

No matter how much the players think outside the box or want to deviate from the One True Path, the GM directly and often obviously resists their efforts. This generally leads to player apathy. Why get invested if your input is meaningless?

So if railroading is so bad, why do GMs do it? There are many reasons, but the two most common are vanity and lack of confidence. Vanity kicks in when you become so enamored with your creation that you want your players to experience it as you intended; it simply wouldn't be as good otherwise. In this case you're acting like an author writing a book, not a GM managing a campaign.

Lack of confidence comes into play when you become afraid that you're going to crash and burn if the players do something that you didn't anticipate. So long as they stay the course, your prepared notes are there to help you. If they move into uncharted territory then you have to think on your feet. This can be intimidating, especially for inexperienced GMs.

One ironic thing about railroading is that it often requires more work on the GM's part. Without meaningful choices, the players are simply going to let you take them to the next step, meaning that you've got to come up with enough material to fill the time. If you don't, then you'll find that players burn through your material pretty quickly.

When you give players choices, game time is going to be consumed—enjoyably—by players debating courses of action, often leading to fun roleplaying opportunities in the process. These discussions also tend to provide you with invaluable insight into your campaign, as they telegraph just how lost or on point the players are. Sometimes they may even give you better ideas to incorporate into your notes.

Rather than creating railroads, try to design footpaths. A footpath is similar to a railroad, except players are free to step off it and onto the grass. They may choose to follow a parallel path (in other words, following the adventure but in a way you didn't anticipate) or they may chase a butterfly off the path. When this happens, don't panic. If they've inadvertently gone off in the wrong direction they'll realize it soon enough and come back. If they don't come back, then you may want to call a break and discuss it with the players (and be ready to consider making a change).

Danger Ahead!

In spite of the negative associations most gamers have with the term, not all railroading is *badwrongfun* and not all linear adventures are railroads. A mystery scenario, for example, may feature a succession of clues that lead the PCs from one scene to the next with the ultimate solution plotted well in advance. A ruined temple or derelict starship may have a linear sequence of rooms, but exploring them is hardly railroading in the traditional sense.

Similarly, your group may be perfectly fine with a railroaded plot so long as they get to do what interests them. Maybe they're superheroes content with roleplaying through their normal lives until you inevitably drop a menace on the city and they pull on their spandex and confront it, or maybe they enjoy roleplaying the day-to-day life on a medieval estate until their lord gives them another mission.

When Campaign Management is Done Badly

Poor campaign management is like playing a sport with an injury: It's not going to be pretty and you just hope you can get through it. More often than not your play suffers and you end up quitting early. Being disappointed in your own management before the session starts is only going to chip away at your confidence.

Gemma's campaign in the opening of this chapter is a textbook case of poor management. Gemma obviously has a great campaign in mind, but unfortunately she wasn't realistic about her prep time. She also didn't make it clear to Patti that she needs that final hour before the game to prep.

Gemma also failed to take into consideration Renaldo's distaste for playing another fantasy campaign. This is likely to cause friction and distractions throughout the campaign. Renaldo could be a good sport and he may even enjoy the new campaign, but as he's predisposed to disliking it a mismanaged campaign is only going to reinforce his initial dissatisfaction.

Finally, Gemma risked starting off on the wrong foot by using an inappropriate adventure. She's equating "published" with "enjoyable," but she hasn't ensured that it fits with the plotline of her campaign nor has she assured that the challenges and risks are appropriate. Depending on how she pitched the campaign (if she bothered to pitch it at all), a poor opening adventure could derail the whole thing before she introduces the "real" campaign.

Tales from Walt's Table

One of the dangers of "playing for time" by using published adventures is that the players may anticipate the rest of the campaign being run in the same vein. Once they've formed their opinions you're stuck convincing them that your campaign is better; this may even spell the end of your campaign.

A few years ago I planned to run a game of *7th Sea* that was supposed to delve into the darker elements of the setting; essentially it was *Call of Cthulhu®* with rapiers. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to start it off properly and decided to buy some time by running a couple of published adventures first.

These adventures were heavier on the swashbuckling and more lighthearted than what I'd planned. My players found these adventures exciting and entertaining; they wanted more. When we finally got to the darker elements, they felt that the campaign had "jumped the shark," or turned into something they weren't as interested in playing. My initial campaign was over at that point; I had to change it to accommodate the players' interests and lost my own interest not long thereafter.

When Campaign Management is Done Well

Sometimes taking on a campaign, especially if you're new to GMing, can feel like an incredible burden. GMs sometimes make it worse by trying to plan for every contingency, which just stresses them out. Thankfully, good campaign management is the exact opposite of a burden. It allows you to focus on what you need to do and spend more time on the parts that excite you.

One of the easiest ways I can tell I'm properly managing a campaign is by seeing how relaxed I am just prior to and during the session. I have my notes, I'm one step ahead of the players, and I can help guide them along towards the session goals. I'm better able to deal with issues and problems that crop up because I'm not worried about trying to manage the story; I've already done the work.

When you start a new campaign, just keep the five-point checklist in mind: story, player characters, people, risk, change. If you're considering these five things before you pitch your campaign, then you're already on the right track. The rest is gravy.

GEMMA smiled as she set her tablet, GM's screen, and dice on the table. Having realized that her therapy and new job were going to consume a lot of her time, she was glad she'd asked the group for another couple of months to prepare. Now, rather than run that published adventure whole, she stripped out the parts that worked and properly integrated them into her overall campaign.

She was also glad she'd had a conversation with Renaldo. It turned out he wasn't really burnt out on the fantasy genre, he was just tired of the sameness of the last few campaigns. Thankfully, Gemma had a prepared mini-campaign that she'd run to scratch Renaldo's sci-fi itch, and he was now ready to come back on board with a fantasy campaign—especially one with a lot of diplomacy and intrigue.

Gemma had just finished going over her notes for this evening's session when the doorbell rang. Thankfully, Patti had taken Gemma's request to heart and now only showed up about 15 minutes early. Calm and prepared, Gemma knew this session was going to rock.

Chapter 9: Story Management

"Okay, you enter the bar on the promenade of the space station and . . ." Gemma checked the adventure text. "Regina Starbender walks up to you with a proposition."

Renaldo said, "Wait, how? Didn't she get blown up three sessions ago when the pirates attacked that derelict freighter we were investigating?"

"Um, no. That was Ace Templar, wasn't it?" Gemma sounded uncertain. She was using a published adventure because her personal life had eliminated most of her prep time, and she was only staying a few pages ahead of the players.

"No," Patti said, shaking her head. "It was definitely Regina. That means she's an imposter. And didn't she always have that shadowy man following her?"

"Mr. Hologram!" said Adam. "He's here, isn't he?"

Gemma was completely confused, but she tried to stay the course. "Well, yes, he's sitting in the back, but you see him get up and head towards the back door . . ."

"Not so fast!" Adam grinned. "I've got Instant Initiative and Fast Draw, remember? I pull my stun gun and shoot him. Then we're going to give him one thorough interrogation!"

Gemma sighed as her adventure collapsed around her. It was going to be a long night.

Story management is how well you prepare your adventures for play at the table. It's been my experience that story management is what most gamers equate with game mastering. If you mostly play with GMs who wing it, then this isn't far from the truth, as most of what a highly improvisational GM does is create stories on the fly. Story management is also what keeps many potential GMs from getting their feet wet: The idea of creating adventures simply seems too daunting.

In this chapter we're going to parse your campaign and focus on managing the individual adventures that make it up. How do we parse them? Traditionally, a

campaign is a series of adventures, so if you're running a traditional campaign it's fairly easy to divide it into adventures, or stories. If you're running a sandbox campaign, then each "toy" in the sandbox is an adventure.

It's a little more difficult when you're running a campaign where events are so tightly interwoven that it's almost a single long adventure. What differentiates a campaign from an adventure is that there are significant milestones along the way that could constitute discrete stories. How you divvy that up is a matter of taste, but if it's too difficult then you'll simply have to treat the entire campaign as your "story" for the purposes of this chapter.

Danger Ahead!

One of the easiest ways of winging it is to use a published adventure. It's easy to fall into the trap of believing that the work has been done for you, but this is absurd. Managing a published adventure can often be more daunting than managing a story you designed, simply because in the latter case you completely understand what you wrote. There's a lot to keep track of in a published adventure, and sometimes it isn't written in an easy-to-reference manner, especially if your design tastes vary considerably from those of the author.

As a rule of thumb, you'll want to read a published adventure from cover to cover twice, making notes each time. You also want to re-read the portion of the adventure most likely to see action in your next session, to refresh your memory. Don't be afraid to put notes in the margins, especially for things that might need addressing. Finally, drafting a quick outline enables you to see the flow of the adventure at a glance and acts as a convenient checklist so you don't miss something during play.

The Goal of Story Management

The goal of story management is rather simple: Be prepared to run a session. By this point you've designed the campaign, guided your players through character creation, and written your adventures. Now that you're all sitting around a table, the magic begins.

If you're running a prepared adventure, then story management is about shepherding your adventure through the session, keeping track of your story arcs, and ensuring that the adventure moves along at an appropriate pace. It also involves adapting your story according to the actions of the players, but we'll cover that in the chapter on change management—it's a big topic.

If you're winging your adventure, then you'll want to brainstorm a few plot threads and opening scenes just to get the ball rolling. Keep your plots simple; you and your players will build on them as the session unfolds.

Whether running a prepared adventure or winging it, you should, through good story management, remain in control. That doesn't mean you can't be surprised by your players' actions or the results of the dice, but you should have enough working knowledge of your story to adapt and move through them.

Artist: Daniel Wood

Name Your Adventures!

A technique that both Phil and I use to set our adventures apart from the campaign as a whole is to give each of them a title, much like published adventures or episodes of a TV series. I've found that giving my adventure a title is akin to giving it an identity. I stop thinking of it as "Part 3 of the Fifties Fears campaign" and instead start thinking of it as "The Mercurian Invasion," which has its own distinctive flavor and style, whereas the former just conveys the overall flavor and style of the campaign.

A good adventure title also helps me visualize what I need for the campaign. Knowing that "The Mercurian Invasion" is a 1950s B-Movie style alien invasion from the hot planet of Mercury instantly gets my creative juices flowing. It gives me ideas about what the Mercurians look like, their mode of travel (flying saucers, of course!), and their potential weaknesses. I also have several ideas forming for NPCs based on old invasion movies. While I'd certainly do the same for "Part 3," it's not nearly as evocative or as easy to get immersed in.

Finally, an adventure name gives you something to reference with your players. Saying, "Professor Wainwright walks into the diner. You remember him from the events of 'The Giant Grasshopper Menace'" stokes their memories better than saying, "You remember him from the events of Part 2. What? Oh, that was the one with the giant grasshoppers."

Setting up Story Arcs

Story arcs are plots that run through your adventure, often from beginning to end, although some story arcs may start later in the adventure or wrap themselves up before the end. For example, one story arc may be about Caesar, a local crime boss, aggressively moving into new territory in the city. The story arc involves the PCs, who are masked vigilantes, trying to stop Caesar's power grab. When they stop him, they discover that Caesar is being controlled by the Mind Master. At that point Caesar's story arc ends, but the adventure doesn't end until the PCs confront the Mind Master.

Story arcs tend to fall into three types: proactive, reactive, and independent. They each work differently.

Proactive story arcs begin because the PCs want to get involved in something. These often start with adventure hooks, or elements that spark the PCs' interest. If the PCs are the bridge crew of a starship tasked with enforcing galactic law, then a distress call is the adventure hook that spurs them to action. If the PCs are mercenaries, then the hook might be a client with cash.

Reactive story arcs inflict themselves on the PCs. A group of fantasy heroes may be captured and imprisoned by marauding giants; the story arc is about escaping before they become dinner. A superhero team may find their headquarters preemptively struck by a supervillain's latest weapon. A group of police detectives may get orders from the chief. The defining difference between a proactive and a reactive story arc is whether the PCs are free to ignore it without repercussions.

Independent story arcs happen without PC involvement. These are behind-the-scenes stories that happen in parallel with the PCs' adventures but only touch them tangentially. The PCs can still affect an independent story arc, but they aren't the primary drivers. For example, a minor boss in a crime syndicate is slowly building her power base to take control of the syndicate by undermining the bosses in her way. The NPC is driving that story arc, and without PC interference it will go as planned; the PCs could become involved at any point in the arc.

The Dinner Analogy

"Winging it" can be a bit of a misnomer at times, since it suggests that the GM walks into a session cold and just starts riffing on whatever springs into his head. While some GMs can do this, I'm certainly not one of them. Instead, I use the "pantry approach."

If you think of designing an adventure like making dinner in a kitchen, a prep-heavy GM is working to a recipe. She only buys the ingredients she needs and uses them when the recipe calls for them. Occasionally she gets inspired and tosses something else in but, for the most part, she cooks what she's designed.

By contrast, a GM who wings it creates a pantry. He stocks it with ingredients he thinks he might need, but he doesn't necessarily attach them to specific adventures. When walking into a session, the GM knows what he has in stock and improvises a meal with items from the pantry. Sometimes he has a better idea of what he wants to cook than others, but ultimately a good improvisational GM can make something edible with what's at hand.

When you wing it, be sure to create a usable pantry. If your PCs are going to spend a lot of time in a particular town then you may want to flesh out some of the main locations and NPCs. I usually attach a plot hook to each NPC just to keep them interesting. This can be as small as "Waitress with a great voice doesn't believe in herself enough to become a singer" or as big as "The mayor is actually a ghoul that preys on the city's homeless at night."

Working with Story Arcs

In the chapter opener, Gemma didn't even get a chance to hook her players into the adventure she wanted to run because of a continuity error (more on that later). Had she prepared properly, she would have had an NPC offer the PCs a job for a significant sum of money. This is an example of a proactive story arc.

The key to proactive story arcs is that an adventure hook need only give the illusion of choice, rather than a real choice. Unless you're running a sandbox campaign, your players almost certainly suspect that you arrive at the table armed with only one adventure. All they want is a believable reason why their characters would follow through.

So what happens when your players don't bite? Consider one of these options.

From Proactive to Reactive

This one's a bit tricky as it smells of "GM railroad," but there are creative ways to rope the PCs into the adventure. If the PCs decide not to pursue the pirates, maybe the pirates come to them, attacking their vessel or an allied NPC's ship. Maybe the NPC hiring them is so desperate for the PCs' help that he's willing to resort to blackmail, kidnapping loved ones, or injecting the PCs with a designer virus in order to ensure their assistance (and changing the nature of their relationship in the process). Maybe the PCs come upon a village that was just ravaged by the hobgoblin horde that they ignored while taking an artifact to their liege.

Sweetening the Offer

Many a PC group has turned down an adventure hook until the potential client, realizing the type of people she's dealing with, offers them a bucket of money or assets. It's mercenary, but it works.

The Sob Story

Maybe the PCs felt that saving one village from marauders wasn't worth delaying their journey to the Mountain of Death, so they turned down a villager's plea for help. What if that villager returned, but with injured children in tow? What if he pleaded with them, offering everything the village had of value in exchange for their help? Could they turn him down so easily this time?

The Connection

Sometimes a hook seems more interesting when the PCs find out that they can advance a cause that they care about by following up on the hook. Learning that the pirates just looted a convoy and obtained something a rival NPC wants is a good way to add a connection; so is making the head of the bandits an old antagonist who humiliated the PCs before.

The Mouthpiece

Sometimes the players just aren't grokking the adventure hook. Having a nearby NPC point out the obvious can help, especially if done in an off-handed way. For example, you offer a plot hook about a bandit group, the Black Skulls, holed up nearby. After the players give a collective yawn, a barmaid puts their drinks on the table and says, "The Black Skulls, you say? Weren't they the ones that wiped out that elven village a few months back?" Of course, two of the PCs are from that village . . .

The Honest Approach

Sometimes it just works best to shrug and say, "Sorry, guys and gals. I only have this adventure prepared. If you don't want to play it that's fine, but I don't have anything else prepared for tonight. Is there something else you want to do or should we wrap up early?" This approach works best when the players are simply giving you a hard time with your adventure hook, or they got so far into character that they didn't realize they were cutting themselves off from the adventure. It doesn't work so well when the adventure hook was clearly a bad fit and the players are simply hopping aboard the railroad train because you begged them to.

Independent story arcs are different. You aren't worried about hooking players, but you do have to make sure you launch them on time. It's surprisingly easy to forget to mention something related to an arc, only to go for the connecting reveal later and get embarrassed by your players' blank stares because you forgot to seed something in advance.

Tales from Walt's Table

I was playing in a cyberpunk campaign where the entire second half of the adventure hinged on the players being curious about a computer disk we were hired to find, and then discovering that our employer wasn't who he seemed to be. This ostensibly would have led to another two or three sessions of adventure.

By the time we'd acquired the disk, however, we'd been put through our paces pretty hard and the team was exhausted. Just happy to have the disk in our hands, we returned it to our employer with no questions asked. We just wanted to collect our money and move on, and he was more than happy to oblige.

The sad part was that our GM had gone to the trouble of making a prop that contained interesting "anomalies" on the cover of the disk. He'd thought that would be enough to prompt us to investigate further and had no Plan B when that didn't happen. Instead, he ended up losing half his adventure and the campaign folded soon thereafter.

One technique I use is to bold or otherwise mark my independent story arc steps in my notes. Making them as conspicuous as possible means it's easy for me to check them off while running the game. Be warned, though: If your players catch a glimpse of your notes, conspicuously bolded items will stand out for them, as well.

Story Structure

How your campaign is structured will help you decide what kinds of adventures to write and use in the game. There are four basic types of story structure:

- **Episodic**
- **Linear**
- **Branching**
- **Sandbox**

When you sit down to write an adventure, you'll need to decide how it fits into your campaign. Does it stand alone or is it part of a greater story? Can the PCs' decisions alter the course of the larger story? Can the PCs determine adventure or scene order? How you answer those questions will determine which story structure will work best. Let's look at each of them.

Episodic stories are self-contained. Each adventure is a complete story that isn't part of a greater narrative apart from The Continuing Adventures of the PCs. Each episode has a distinct beginning and ending. Most published adventures are episodic by design, made to be plugged into any "standard" campaign.

In terms of management, episodic stories are great because you only need to stay one step ahead of your players. It's also easy to accommodate player absences, especially if you can limit your episodic adventures to one or two sessions in length.

In a linear story, adventures connect to each other to form a chain. Even if the PCs fail somewhere along the way, they'll get to the end of the chain. For example, a group of pulp heroes may go up against three or four of an evil mastermind's lieutenants before the climactic battle with the mastermind herself, but whether they foil the lieutenants or not they'll still get to fight the mastermind.

If you want to include a larger story in the campaign but are worried about complexity, a linear structure is a good option as you can basically plot it out as an episodic story but add links between the adventures. Stories that involve problems with a single source are a good fit for this structure, such as an R&D facility dumping mutagenic waste in a river, a cult accidentally releasing various minor demons while trying to reconstruct a summoning ritual, or a powerful figure that is driving tribes of monstrous humanoids out of their homes and into civilized lands. If you like to improvise, this approach gives you a ready plot thread to use as needed.

Branching stories feature adventures that are dependent upon the actions of the PCs. For example, the chieftain of an orcish horde wants to claim a mountain pass that would allow his warriors to invade human lands. If the PCs stop him, then in the next adventure he invades a nearby dwarfhold so he can use their tunnel network to go under the mountains instead. If the PCs fail, then the next adventure involves protecting keeps along the border from the advancing horde. Should the PCs foil enough of the chieftain's plans, he may challenge them directly.

Branching stories can be among the most satisfying, but they require a lot of work. When you don't know how an adventure will turn out, you may have to scramble to prep for the next session. From a management point of view, it's best to prepare some episodic adventures ahead of time that you can use as buffers between branching adventures as needed.

Sandbox stories are emergent: You create a region for the PCs to explore, and how they explore and interact with it is up to them. You might dangle some plot hooks to pique their interest, but by and large the story of the campaign is determined by the PCs' actions. They might traipse around plundering ruins, or they could decide to set themselves up as local warlords. You just roll with it as they go.

The most important part of a sandbox story is the box itself. PCs are usually limited to traveling within certain boundaries, enabling the GM to concentrate on designing elements within those boundaries. Some GMs also gently nudge PCs away from areas they can't handle at their current power level, while others don't. Unless you're using random generators as fuel for improvisation, sandboxes take a lot of preparation to run well.

Tales from Walt's Table

As an improvisational GM, I love the linear model. It gives me the freedom to quickly come up with adventures around a basic concept. For example, I ran a campaign where the Big Bads were experimenting with time travel so that they could break their brethren out of a dimensional prison. The experiments weakened the dimensional barrier enough to warp reality and let things slip through from the past and present. Cue numerous plots about prehistoric animals or people from the future coming through the temporal hole.

At the same time, I also use the sandbox model for sub-plots. I like to seed NPCs with personal plot threads that the PCs can ignore or explore at their leisure. This help makes the world feel real and allows for some improvisation within the context of the larger linear story.

Artist: Christopher Reach

The Three-Act and Five-Act Models

When designing adventures, and especially when winging it, it can help to think of adventures in terms of plays or television shows—specifically, using a three-act or five-act model. Both of these models can simplify story management. If you write a sentence or two about each act before starting an adventure, you can improvise a lot at the table using that simple foundation.

When using this technique it's a good idea to randomly determine whether a particular adventure will have three acts or five. This keeps players from trying to anticipate a twist in every adventure and it makes them question whether they're taking down the true villain or if someone else is behind it all.

The Three-Act Model

Three-act adventures are the simplest type to design, and this model is excellent for single-session adventures. Here's the basic structure of the three-act model:

- **Act 1: The Hook—**What gets the PCs involved in the adventure? Does the old man in the tavern offer them a map? Are they police detectives summoned to a crime scene? Were they attacked by space pirates while traveling aboard a luxury space liner?

- **Act 2: The Journey—**The PCs need to clear a few obstacles in order to confront the main threat. They travel over dangerous terrain, investigate clues to discover the murderer, or stay one step ahead of the boarders and reduce their numbers while looking for a permanent solution.

- **Act 3: The Confrontation—**The PCs finally confront the main threat. They explore the Caves of Doom to get to her lair, force the murderer to confess, or figure out how to destroy the space pirate vessel and force the remaining pirates to surrender.

The Five-Act Model

The five-act model is a slightly more complex version of the three-act model. This model is great for two-session adventures as you can end the first session with The Twist and then finish the adventure in the second session. The five-act model is also a good choice if you tend to run longer sessions. Here's the basic structure:

- **Act 1: The Hook—**As in the three-act model, the PCs need a reason to get involved. A new supervillain terrorizes their city, or a starship carrying the governor of an outer rim system attacks merchant ships without provocation.

- **Act 2: The Journey—**Again, as in the three-act model, the PCs need to clear obstacles to confront the main threat. The PCs have to stop the supervillain's next heist or find the renegade starship.

- **Act 3: The Twist—**Here things diverge from the three-act model, as all is not what it seems. The supervillain is actually a hero, forced into working for a villain who is holding a loved one hostage; the starship's AI took over, leaving the passengers and crew in need of rescue.

- **Act 4: The New Journey—**With the twist revealed the PCs have to investigate the new threat. They find the supervillain's lair or devise a plan to sneak aboard the starship to rescue the prisoners.

- **Act 5: The Confrontation—**The PCs confront the main adversary and tie up loose ends. They defeat the supervillain and rescue the hostage, or they free the prisoners and destroy the rogue starship.

Redundancies

Whenever you have a scene that requires investigation or interaction, remember that you're managing a game and sometimes things fall through the cracks. A player may miss a critical dice roll, fail to recognize the importance of a clue, or simply take an NPC at her word without pushing her for the truth. These issues can seriously derail a campaign if you don't have a back-up plan.

When creating back-up plans, you have to be careful about your presentation. While it's true that a second player might succeed at the roll the first player failed, you're only going to make the first player feel bad if other players have to cover her tail. You also don't want to make it seem like you're dragging the PCs through the adventure like a railway engineer; that will only bug your players. Here are a few ways you can build "stealth" redundancies into your campaign.

Competent characters never need to roll for the obvious. If you have clues that are critical to move the adventure forward, never tie them to a successful skill roll. Criminal investigators should be able to pick up any necessary clues when examining a crime scene; the only things they should be rolling for are extra clues that might cross off a red herring or two.

People around inscrutable NPCs can drop hints, apparently unintentionally. "Please don't pay any mind to Mr. Gummage's behavior. He's been rather irritable of late, especially since he's started going to that gentleman's club regularly. It's funny; he once told me he wouldn't be caught dead there."

When characters are stuck for a clue, let them roll a missed skill check again. In this case, a sudden flash of inspiration makes them reconsider an old clue. "Wait a minute! When we examined the crime scene we never checked to see if the fireplace had any hidden compartments, and I now recall that one of the bricks seemed newer than the others."

One Adventure or Two?

When writing adventures I often use the "A-Team" formula, named after four ex-soldiers wanted for a crime they didn't commit. It follows a five-act structure: 1. The PCs take on a mission, 2. They investigate some minions, 3. They defeat the minions, 4. The Big Bad makes his presence known, and 5. The PCs defeat the Big Bad. There's one key difference between this structure and the five-act model: There's no real twist.

In gaming terms, the A-Team formula describes two linked adventures, not a single adventure. In the five-act model, the PCs haven't finished the adventure in Act 3; The Twist prevents them from resolving it. Using the A-Team Formula it's easy to separate defeating a group of minions from defeating the Big Bad because this formula is really two three-act models woven together.

Why is this important? Because the A-Team formula doesn't require the players to remember as much between sessions. The PCs have defeated one set of villains; now they're going after another. With the five-act model, the players have to remember details from the previous adventure (or be brought up to speed by the GM) in order to smoothly finish it.

Sometimes, all you need to do to get players' creative juices flowing is to restate what they already know, out loud. "So, you've established that Ms. Nakamura left the restaurant at 8:30 and arrived at the club at 8:45, so there's no way she could have been at the crime scene." Since the players know the club is 30 minutes from the restaurant, unless Ms. Nakamura's cab was really speeding they now see that someone must be lying, and they have a direction to go.

Bookends

Another technique I like to use when designing adventures is to bookend them with colorful scenes that aren't necessarily related to the main plot. The opening scene or scenes might simply provide a window in to the PCs' lives, possibly sparking a sub-plot or two, while the closing scene returns the PCs to normalcy with a final wrap-up (possibly tying up sub-plots as well).

An opening bookend is also perfect if you want to get started and are waiting on a player to either show up or get ready to play, as bookend scenes often don't rely on a particular order or involve more than one or two PCs in each scene. Everyone has something to do while they wait, but the absent/unprepared player doesn't miss out on anything critical.

Session Breaks

While you can certainly run an entire adventure within a single session, chances are that many of your adventures will span at least two sessions, if not more. It doesn't matter why an adventure lasts for more than one session; what matters is how you keep the adventure flowing from one session to the next.

Tales from Walt's Table

I once ran the first half of an adventure right before we took a month-long break for the holiday season. We'd planned on getting back together after New Year's, but unfortunate circumstances doubled the length of the break. As the game had ended on a cliffhanger in the middle of an investigation, I decided to provide a little help to jumpstart the session.

When we finally got to play, I handed my players a sheet listing all of the clues that they'd discovered so far. It turned out to be quite handy and the players enjoyed wrapping up the adventure. Afterwards, one of them admitted to me that he was really lost during the first adventure, but seeing all the clues together in black and white made things click for him. If I hadn't made that handout, the adventure might have dragged on for another session or two.

It's nice to think players hang on your every word and spend the time between sessions determining their next moves (and it can happen), but it's more likely that real life is going to take up most of their time. If I had a quarter for every time a player showed up at a session and said, "So where were we again?" I'd be a wealthy man.

Pacing

Pacing is one of the most important tools of story management. Proper pacing ensures that your players enjoy the game session from start to finish, with little time spent spinning wheels or dragging out scenes. Remember that session where the players were stumped and argued about which course of action to take for three hours? Remember that insignificant battle which took a whole session to resolve because those stubborn kobolds just wouldn't die? Or that adventure which was supposed to fill three sessions but barely filled one because you didn't create enough encounters along the way? Bad pacing makes sessions less fun.

Even for experienced GMs, pacing can be difficult to manage properly. What works for one group may not work for another (and your group changes every time a new player joins or someone can't make it) and what works for one game system may not work for another. Here are a few tips on how to keep your pacing on track:

- **Establish your actual session time**—If your game session is scheduled from 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. but you don't really sit down and play until it's closer to 6:00, then your actual session time is four hours, not five.

Danger Ahead!

If you don't prepare adequately for a session, pacing problems can end it prematurely. I once played in a modern fantasy campaign where an extra-dimensional gate opened up in the middle of the city. The GM had only prepped one step ahead: He expected us to spend a session examining the portal, taking readings, and doing research, so he hadn't decided what was on the other side of the portal yet. You can guess what happened next.

Within minutes of learning about the portal, our group loaded up a minivan, headed to the site, asked the mayor for permission to enter the portal, and drove right through it. All of this took a whopping five minutes of real time. All the GM could do was sheepishly admit that he hadn't planned that far ahead, and the session was over before the cheese on our pizza had cooled.

- **Give yourself a release valve on the back end**—I like to have a half-hour buffer in case something drags during the game, so for a four-hour session I plan on three and a half hours.
- **Employ a session goal**—Knowing what you want the PCs to accomplish by the end of the session goes a long way towards keeping them on track to get there. This goes hand in hand with watching the clock, below.
- **Watch the clock**—I can't tell you the number of times I thought a battle only took half an hour only to look up at the clock and see that it was closer to an hour and a half. Check the time.
- **Note hard scenes and soft scenes**—Hard scenes are encounters that need to happen for the adventure to move forward. Soft scenes are fun and may reinforce the hard scenes, but ultimately they're expendable. Add or delete soft scenes as necessary to slow down or speed up the session.
- **Remind your players of things their PCs should recall**—You likely remember little details from session to session because they're in your notes, but real life intervening between sessions often means that players won't. When players spend half the session struggling with a clue because they forgot a detail from three sessions ago, it's no fun for anyone.
- **Use the 10 minute rule**—I usually only give my players a short time to debate a course of action, although it isn't always 10 minutes. After that I start feeding them hints, refreshing their memories, or allowing them to use a PC ability to gain insight into the situation.

Maps

One of the most difficult things to manage, especially for improvisational GMs, is creating maps. It can be a chore, so much so that one of my main motivations for becoming a "story-oriented" GM was to get away from the work involved in designing dungeon crawls. No matter what genre of game you're running, you'll need to have an idea of how buildings, terrain, or vehicles are laid out, and that means you'll need maps at some point.

Here are some tips to help reduce the workload associated with mapmaking:

- **You don't need to map out entire floor plans**—Just map the areas where action is likely to take place.
- **Use your memory, especially for scenes that don't need a detailed map**—You can probably recall the basic layout of a fast food joint, a bowling alley, a family restaurant, and an amusement park, and it's easy enough to re-skin those to be more appropriate to your setting.

- **Beg, borrow, and steal**—A quick Google search can turn up a variety of floor plans. You can steal maps from adventures, as well as use plans from dedicated map supplements. Remember that modern games often involve old buildings, so that awesome country home you found in a 1920s *Call of Cthulhu*® scenario can easily become the beachfront home of an NPC in your modern-day espionage game.

- **Recycle**—Your group probably won't care that you've used the same ballroom or space freighter three times, especially if you come up with some window dressing on the fly that differentiates them.

Designing the Supporting Cast

Almost all adventures involve a supporting cast of NPCs. Sometimes you'll write these characters into the adventure; at other times you'll create them spontaneously as needed. "Okay, you sit down in the diner. The server is a short woman in her mid-40s with a name tag that reads 'Sally.' She doesn't smile when she asks for your order." Some NPCs are designed to be used once and discarded; others may stick around for several adventures.

Creating NPCs can be a daunting task, especially if you're using a rules-heavy system. As an improvisational GM I use a few different tricks to simplify my supporting cast; these can be just as useful to prep-heavy GMs because NPCs are often created on the spot during sessions.

Keep a list of names handy. Nothing tells your players that an NPC is unimportant like not giving her a name. Baby name websites are great for historical and modern names. For fantasy names, come up with a simple formula you can apply on the fly—for example, men and women in this region have names that end in "ion" and "ulu," respectively, with "cor" meaning "child of." Tack a letter or two onto each suffix and you're all set: Vulu cor Darion, Skrion cor Dulu, etc.

Come up with a descriptor and a hook for each NPC. A nervous tic, a slight limp, exceptional good looks, an abrasive personality, and refusal to make eye contact are all good descriptors. Hooks give the PCs something to play with. This could be a whole sub-plot (Benny is a small-time con artist looking for a big score so he can retire) or simply a trait to exploit (the bouncer is wearing fancy shoes—she has expensive tastes and the PCs can use this to get past her).

You don't need to write up a whole character sheet for each NPC—just define what's likely to be used during play. You'll probably need to know a palace guard's physical attributes and combat abilities, but won't need all of his advantages, disadvantages, and skills. You can also fake NPC stats on the fly using a prepared cheat sheet of archetypes showing average and above average scores for common attributes and abilities.

Make a flowchart that references all of the major NPCs, their relationships to each other, and their connections to your plots and sub-plots. Not only will this give you an easy reference for how NPCs interact with various plots, each other,

and the PCs, but it will also show you whether you have too many things tied to one NPC, not enough things tied to an NPC, or too much overlap. It will also show you whether your plots are appropriately connected or whether you need to attach more NPCs to them.

Maintaining Continuity

Gemma's main problem in the chapter opener is that she didn't keep track of continuity. It's likely that she was either using published adventures or that she winged an earlier scene and then forgot the details. Worse, she may have rationalized a reason to use Regina Starbender again but forgot what it was because she never wrote it down.

Keeping notes about what happened during sessions is critical to maintaining continuity, and doubly so if you do a lot of improvisation and don't write much down before sessions. It's easy to forget details between sessions, and getting called on it isn't just embarrassing—it can cause problems. I've run sessions where a single mistake along these lines forced me to scuttle the rest of the adventure and scramble madly to make something up on the spot.

A closely related concept to continuity is consistency. If you've established that two towns are right next to each other in one adventure, then you can't put them on opposite sides of a mountain range in a later adventure. This is especially important if you're sharing a world with multiple GMs; make sure you're all on the same page about things like this, and about how to track them.

Tales from Walt's Table

There have been several occasions when continuity and consistency caused issues in my campaigns. Early on in one campaign I introduced a government agent who was doing what she thought was the right thing, but had a callous disregard for collateral damage. When she returned later, I portrayed her as an ice queen—something that wasn't reflected in her personality the first time around. My players were disappointed as they found the original interpretation more interesting.

In a live-action RPG event I was running with other GMs, a vampire PC was stuck in the back of a police car and wanted to escape. A GM told him he was on a deserted back road, so he seized the opportunity, broke free, and killed his captors. Unfortunately, there was no back road—he had been arrested at a convention center and the police station was three blocks away according to the map, but the GM involved hadn't bothered to check.

The Passage of Time

Noting the passage of time helps to immerse your players in the adventure at hand, and is useful for skipping over stretches of time when nothing dramatic is happening. It's a simple thing that enriches the story, and there are several ways to reflect that time has passed in the game.

Depending on where the adventure takes place, weather can change dramatically from day to day. I live in south-eastern Pennsylvania, where the weather can change by as much as 20 degrees Fahrenheit between two days and back again on the third. Adverse weather conditions can also reflect the passage of time; clear skies one day can become a raging thunderstorm the next. Such weather conditions also have an impact on the PCs' travel plans as well as outdoor combat scenes.

Day and night, apart from the obvious effects, also have an impact on social environments. A city business district may be bustling during the day but become a virtual ghost town at night, while downtown restaurants will certainly have a different clientele during lunch hour than at night. The countryside is practically vacant at night, while farmers and travelers are plentiful during the day.

If an adventure spans a long period or simply starts at the cusp of a season change, seasonal variations can color a journey. A fleeing NPC can hide quite easily in a summer cornfield, but that same field is stripped bare in winter or early spring. Travelers aren't as identifiable in winter clothing and snow not only offers places to hide but also disguises dangers on the ground, such as sudden drops or frozen pools.

Tales from Walt's Table

Not too long ago I ran an adventure without spending enough time to troubleshoot it or consider possible PC actions. As a result, the session played poorly. Although it wasn't a total failure, it was in some ways worse than a failure. After all, a failure causes you to stop and stanch the bleeding, while a boring but serviceable adventure keeps the game going at the expense of fun.

Bad sessions happen. When they do, make sure you evaluate what went wrong and try to fix it. Be careful when soliciting feedback; you already know the session went poorly and negative reinforcement isn't going to help. Instead, simply ask your players what they felt would have made the session run better, and try to work on that next time.

When Story Management is Done Badly

Bad story management makes it easy to lose control of an adventure. When things go badly during an adventure, it can be tempting to wrap it up quickly and move on. This might not be a bad option if you're winging a session and just don't feel like you're firing on all cylinders, but if you've done a lot of prep then scrapping an adventure means tossing all that work in the toilet.

Story management problems can also pile up. In the chapter opener, Gemma's problems started when she introduced an NPC who she'd forgotten was already dead. She compounded the problem by letting the players lead her into a scene she wasn't prepared for, and now Mr. Hologram, an NPC who wasn't supposed to be featured until later on, could potentially enable the PCs to make an unsatisfying jump right to the end of the campaign.

When Story Management is Done Well

Writing adventures can be burdensome. Many GMs wing it because they simply don't have the time to devote to writing highly detailed adventures. Unfortunately, this can leave you with little help when managing a game session.

Fortunately, managing a session doesn't have to be a big burden or time sink. By sticking to a simple structure, populating it with interconnected NPCs, and only designing the scenes that you absolutely need, you can have a great framework from which to improvise the rest of an adventure. It won't even seem like you're winging it.

"OKAY, you enter the bar on the promenade of the space station and . . ." Gemma checked the adventure text. "Ace Templar walks up to you with a proposition. He has a broad smile on his face."

"Well if it isn't our new favorite smuggler," Renaldo said. He knew Adam already had Axel's gun warmed up in case this was one of Ace's trademark double-crosses. They hadn't exactly parted on good terms last time. "Why the broad grin?"

Speaking as Ace, Gemma said, "Why the over-abundance of caution? I bear no ill will towards you. If anything I should thank you. Business has been booming since Ms. Starbender had her unfortunate . . . accident. Now I'm the only game in town and I could use a few good mercenaries for a little job in the Antares cluster."

Chapter 10: Player Character Management

ADAM printed out the latest version of his character, Ah Nold, and handed it to Gemma. He was proud of how he'd spent his XP, so Gemma's reaction came as a surprise.

"You're a monk, now?" She looked at Adam incredulously. Up to this point, Ah Nold could be best described as a "barely civilized dwarven berserker," hardly a candidate for cloistered monk-hood.

"No, not really," Adam said, "but I was thumbing through the player's book and noticed all the cool buffs monks get with their fists and weapons. Since I'm allowed to dip into other professions I figure Ah Nold spent some time between adventures visiting a monastery."

Gemma groaned. Between this and Patti's sudden desire to push her character, Prenda, towards necromancy ("Her experiences with the undead during that ruined temple delve really changed her!") most of her notes no longer made sense. These weren't the paths she'd expected them to follow, especially since monks and necromancers didn't get along in her campaign setting.

Player character management is traditionally left to the players. After all, a player's character is the one piece of the game world over which that player is assumed to have direct control. Players are the ones who bring their characters to life and shepherd them through the adventures that make up the campaign. Presuming that your chosen game system has a growth mechanic (not all do), players are expected to use their experience points to make mechanical changes and improvements to their characters.

This change is usually reflected by the game world and the PCs' experiences. One PC might be working toward a goal, like becoming a Knight-Templar of Fantastica or a Techno-Ranger of the Three Suns. Another player might improve abilities that fell short in previous adventures, like making a frontline warrior proficient with ranged weapons or strengthening a piloting skill after nearly crashing the party's space corvette three times in the last battle. Some players may simply choose new abilities that sound neat even if they hadn't considered them during character creation, such as a warrior learning a new martial art technique or a frontier space marshal developing psionic abilities.

Artist: Daniel Wood

Murphy's Law

Unless this is your first rodeo as a GM, you're probably well aware that players are going to surprise you all the time with how they grow their characters. They aren't going to be slaves to what they laid out during character creation if they find more expedient ways of doing things. Sometimes unanticipated growth can disrupt the rest of an adventure.

I've generally found that a two-part process works best here. First, I question the growth. Oftentimes what seems irrational to me will also seem irrational to the player once he has to justify his change. He's also put on notice that what he's doing is something I didn't anticipate and this is going to have an impact; for some players that's enough of a reason to back off. (Alternately, once the growth is explained I might see why it's rational after all.)

If that doesn't work I move to the second part of the process which is to simply allow the growth (provided it's not game-breaking or banned). While it may negatively impact the current adventure, it will be no more disruptive than an unhappy player. There's plenty of time to adjust things between sessions to take the new growth into account and, if there are immediate in-game repercussions in the meantime, just roll with it!

The GM has a role in character management as well, however, and it's an important one. It's your job to oversee the evolution of the PCs, first and foremost by awarding the points they need for advancement.

You need to question dubious point expenditures and ensure that changes to PCs are rational and don't break the game (unless of course you're playing a game, like *Toon* or *Paranoia*, where none of that matters).

Not all management headaches come from mechanical growth. Sometimes an evolution of personality can throw a spanner in the works if you don't plan for it. The players may have formed an honorable party at the start, but after a few experiences where their honor got them into trouble the PCs may turn into hardened mercenaries. A character with a love interest in her background may find someone else along the way, which in turns means she won't come running just because you threaten her old paramour's colony world.

In this chapter we're going to take a look at managing player characters throughout the course of the campaign and how you can help shape their growth without railroading their evolution.

What's the Goal of Player Character Management?

The goal of player character management is to ensure that the player characters grow with the campaign, rather than abrasively brush against it. I can't stress enough that it's a bad idea to micromanage growth, especially when it comes to personalities. If a player isn't allowed to interpret her character, then it really isn't her character.

Character growth is the evolution of a PC over the course of a campaign. Sometimes this is called "zero to hero," as PCs in many RPGs (but particularly older editions of D&D) begin the game relatively weak and grow stronger over time. Characters also grow because of their adventuring experiences: A cowardly rogue may make a last stand to save her friends, a roaming warrior may marry and put down roots in a dukedom he aided against a dragon, a space pirate may replace several body parts with bionics after a particularly grueling incident that also wiped away some of his swashbuckling swagger.

Dynamic and Static Characters

When creating sub-plots or character arcs, you'll need to know how much the players expect their characters' personalities, desires, and goals to change over time. Some PCs are wide-eyed innocents about to enter the big bad world; others have been in the big bad world for so long that nothing changes anymore. Some may appear to be one when they're really the other.

From Pilot to Series

I usually treat the first few sessions of a new campaign like a pilot for a TV series. While the players usually have strong concepts for their characters, some elements of their backstories or character sheets may not "gel" as the campaign moves forward. This is very similar to how elements in a TV pilot often disappear by the second episode.

I generally allow the players to make adjustments to their sheets and backstories throughout the first few sessions as they assimilate into the campaign and become more familiar with the game system. I prefer that these adjustments take place before experience points are spent, but that's not a hard and fast rule. If a skill hasn't been used at all after several sessions I'd probably allow the player to cash it in, especially if there's a glaring need for something else on her character sheet.

For me, this rewriting extends to dropping a character and bringing in a new one if the player feels that he has a concept that fits better with the group, especially if the old character shares many similarities with another player's character and the group agrees that the new character would be a better fit.

The best way to determine whether a PC is dynamic or static is to simply ask the player. Players tend to change their minds during campaigns, so the answer might not always be the same. At the start of the campaign, pay attention to how a player develops her character. A player that wants particular abilities but doesn't take them "because my character wouldn't know about that yet" is probably looking for growth, while a player that does everything to justify the abilities on her sheet probably has a good vision of what the character will be like throughout the campaign.

In addition to dynamic and static characters there are special cases for each: blank slate characters and cipher characters.

Dynamic Characters

Dynamic PCs are created with the expectation that their personalities and outlooks will be shaped and changed over time by new experiences. While this is often the standard "farm boy or college girl heads out into the unforgiving world" character type, this may not necessarily be the case. A grizzled and hardened police detective who has served the force for 15 years may change his views after his first encounter with genuine vampires or werewolves. A female human warrior reincarnated as a male elf won't look at the world the same way again.

Players of dynamic characters are looking for ways to grow. Sub-plots and character arcs need to be forward-thinking; you should honestly not know how the

character is going to emerge from them. Strip away elements of the PC's past in order to replace them with new friendships and values, and occasionally bring in someone from his past to highlight how the character is changing—and whether he should.

Dynamic characters also change in relation to the party. For example, in a modern horror campaign, a dynamic character may start out as an idealistic college student who's never encountered the supernatural. She follows the other PCs because they understand this dark world better than she does. As the campaign moves forward, she becomes an experienced member of the group and loses her idealism as she realizes how pervasive the supernatural threats are. Towards the end of the campaign, she may even become the cynical party leader, ready to sacrifice her life in order to destroy a major demon.

Fair warning: Sometimes, based on a shift in personality, values, or priorities, the player of a dynamic PC will want his character to exit the campaign because he feels that that's what the character would do. If you insist that he keep the character, or if he assumes that you want him to, you run the risk that the character will become a cipher (a special kind of static character described below).

Blank Slate Characters

Blank slate PCs are a special subset of dynamic characters. The player really has no idea of what she wants to play and does the bare minimum to create a playable character. She assumes that she'll sort it out as the campaign moves forward. For the first few adventures, the blank slate character is constantly changing as the player learns more about the style of the game and adapts to it.

Tales from Walt's Table

I once started a campaign featuring two PCs who were lovers, one of whom became a supernatural creature. I planned on their shifting and evolving relationship becoming a major part of the campaign, but unfortunately it didn't play out that way. For various reasons, the players of those two characters just didn't gel and the campaign suffered for it.

Initially I tried to preserve the relationship by highlighting it with new characters and plot elements, hoping to bring the two players together. When that didn't work, one of the players decided to change characters.

Rather than simply swap them out, however, I ran a final adventure that dealt with the character's departure. This adventure wrapped up the loose plot threads and the overall story arc between the two affected characters. It was a much more satisfying send-off than simply having one character disappear and be replaced by another. I then used the next adventure to introduce the replacement character.

It's difficult to introduce personal sub-plots and story arcs related to a blank slate PC until the character is more fully formed. Instead, focus on introducing the blank slate PC to various elements of the campaign world in order to help the player shape the character. As the character takes shape, the player may wish to change some of the character's abilities in order to better suit an emerging concept.

One thing to keep in mind is that once the player becomes more familiar with the system she may want to replace the blank slate character with one that better fits the campaign. I generally allow this so long as the plot threads attached to the character are easily dumped or transferred. In a sense, it's no different than if a character died in the course of the campaign.

Static Characters

The opposite of dynamic characters, static characters aren't expected to change during the course of the campaign. They begin the game well-suited to dealing with the threats and plot elements that are likely to come up. Static PCs are often grizzled veterans, or at least professionals. They're most commonly found in campaigns that don't presume much change throughout the adventures, like those based on TV shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Stargate SG-1*, which tend to have relatively static models. Players who create detailed backstories and pick relevant abilities are often looking to play static characters.

When designing sub-plots and story arcs for static characters, you need to be backward-looking. Instead of asking "How can this character grow?" ask instead "How did the character become this way?" NPCs and sub-plots should highlight the choices, trials, and tribulations that the PC made and went through in the past. The best of these offer tantalizing hints about how the character could have turned out if he went left instead of right at some point in his past.

This is not to say that a static PC can't change, just that it's very difficult for him to move beyond where he's settled. A sub-plot may offer an opportunity for change, but will usually reinforce the character's decision to remain as she is. Good sub-plots also challenge a static character's beliefs, but in the end the character usually stands fast and remains true to himself.

Cipher Characters

A special type of static character, a cipher PC is one that was created by a player who just wants to play, not explore personal aspects of the character or engage in deep roleplaying. A player who creates a cipher PC just wants to fit in with the rest of the party and have adventures for a few hours; he's happy to play whatever role the party needs—priest or warrior, fighter jock or secret agent, it's all the same to him.

It's tempting to avoid sub-plots and story arcs with cipher characters, but creating and playing a cipher character doesn't mean that the player isn't interested in the campaign. While this might be the case, I've often found that players of cipher characters simply have busy schedules and are just looking for a release with some friends. They'll gladly participate but don't have time to dwell on character-related details.

When you develop personal plots for cipher PCs, try to focus on the player rather than the character. Don't introduce an old flame; instead let the cipher character notice something out of place that's worth investigating. Fall back on genre tropes. If the cipher PC is a superhero, then have him be at the bank in his secret identity when a supervillain tries to rob the place. How will he stop the villain without revealing his identity? If the PC is a warrior, then have a young villager decide to follow her in the hopes of becoming a squire, even though the youth is ill-suited for it. These kinds of scenes give the player something to play with "in the moment" without going too deep.

Danger Ahead!

Players of static characters can be quite resistant to change—after all, they have pretty well-defined visions of their characters' place in the universe. Sometimes, however, they can't help but change, especially if the campaign world itself changes. For example, a police chief who believes in "the system" is going to change during a zombie apocalypse. A star-liner captain looking forward to having social adventures aboard the ship is going to change if he gets drafted into a war against a ruthless alien enemy.

While some players roll with the punches, I've seen many players lose enthusiasm for their characters and the campaign as a whole when such a seismic plot shift occurs. This can happen in as little as one session if you set up the campaign as a bait-and-switch by starting a campaign with one premise and then substituting another, as in both examples in the preceding paragraph.

The best way to protect a campaign from loss of enthusiasm is to know your players. If you don't, then you should warn them early on that the campaign may change on them. For example, "We're starting this campaign off as a straight police procedural, but I'm warning you now that it will become something unorthodox soon."

Even players of dynamic characters aren't immune to loss of enthusiasm. A player who designed a rookie police detective may expect her to grow and change throughout the campaign, but not have counted on dealing with werewolves, warlocks, and space aliens.

Growth during Stories

One of the greatest experiences for a player in a roleplaying game is to watch his character grow with the campaign. From the doe-eyed country youth that has to grow up in the big city, to the cynical police detective that never believed in creatures of the night until she was dragged into their world, characters are expected to change over time.

Mechanical growth, absent old age or other setbacks, is generally always positive; characters get better at doing things. Personal growth, however, may make the character "better" or "worse" based on his personal choices. Those choices may slow or speed up mechanical growth, but growth will still take place. Personal growth, on the other hand, may result in the character losing everyone and everything she loves.

A character's growth is generally based on his experiences during the game. These experiences occur within three types of story: group stories, personal stories, and interlude stories.

A group story is usually the main plot of an adventure. If the party is hired to rescue a member of the royal family from an evil warlord, that's a group story. If the starship encounters a strange being that causes chaos amongst the crew, that's also a group story. A character grows as she experiences these stories with the other PCs, and her growth is also affected by her evolving relationships with them.

Personal stories only directly impact a single PC. Sometimes a PC brings a personal story to the table at the start of a campaign; other personal stories develop over time. Personal stories really rely on the player's interest, as they are easily dropped if the player doesn't wish to pursue them.

Interlude stories take place between game sessions or adventures. Often they are personal stories used to justify character growth in an area that seems incongruent with how the character has been played in the campaign thus far. Such stories can be anything from a quick explanation to an entire mini-adventure played out between the player and the GM between sessions.

As the GM, you usually initiate group stories, and these carry a bit more weight if only because they showcase what the party needs to be good at in order to complete the adventure. Personal stories are either initiated by the GM to complicate a PC's life or by the player in reaction to what the GM has put on the table. They're usually more about personal growth than mechanical growth. Interlude stories are generally initiated by a player when he wants to justify new mechanical growth or a change in personality.

You're in charge of managing group and personal stories, as both are played out at the table. In terms of time management group stories should take precedence, as they involve all of the players. You should usually limit the amount of time devoted to personal stories to blocks a few minutes in length, as they only involve one player.

You also need to decide how to handle interlude stories. If you have a busy schedule, you probably don't have time to answer 60 emails between sessions or set aside time for a one-on-one session (but if you do, more power to you!). Also, you need to keep fairness in mind: If you allow one player to get extra experience points through interlude play then players that don't have the time or inclination to do so are going to feel cheated as their characters fall behind.

Danger Ahead!

Once you establish a habit of interlude play, you run the risk of offending players in the future. At various points in my GMing life, I've had gamers that wanted to play between sessions because they loved their characters so much, even if I wouldn't give them mechanical benefits for doing so. Unfortunately, those players tended to bring their experiences to the table, drawing raised eyebrows whenever the interlude player referred to something the others hadn't heard before.

Fostering Character Growth

How a PC grows is generally left to the player, although you can play a role in helping players decide where to focus their attention. From stating what the PCs will need to succeed at the start of the campaign, to providing personal sub-plots that focus on a PC's desires and problems, to creating encounters that highlight PCs' weaknesses, you have a lot of input into character growth whether you realize it or not. If you want to foster character growth, look for opportunities in these four areas: character creation, PC backgrounds, in-game reactions, and cool powers.

Players typically design their characters to fit the scope of the campaign, and it's your job to guide them through character creation. You should suggest appropriate backgrounds, abilities, skills, and advantages that will make the PCs successful. You'll also want to dissuade players from making inappropriate choices. Finally, you'll want to note any disadvantages that you can incorporate into the campaign; players may work to overcome these later on.

The background a player gives her PC has a huge impact on what she's likely to focus on in terms of growth. If the PC is a fighter pilot, she'll probably want to keep increasing the character's piloting and gunnery skills. If she's playing a wizard, she'll probably want her character to learn new spells. If the PC comes from a primitive society, she may want to spend experience on technical skills to reflect time spent in civilized lands.

Player experiences at the table, and PC experiences in the game, will also shape character growth. Early on in campaigns players often discover abilities they wish they'd put points in, like observation skills. In-game, an occult investigator PC who initially had no knowledge of magic might, as he learns more about the supernatural, start down the road of becoming a magician.

A player may also want to grow her character based on something that's caught her attention since character generation or something that was banned at character generation but achievable through experience. I once played with a GM who never let anyone start play as a Jedi Knight in his *Star Wars*® campaign, but PCs could become Jedi in-game. Interlude stories can be a good way to accommodate the desire for cool powers (or "kewl powerz," if you like).

Tales from Walt's Table

Once while managing a game of *Victoriana*, I had a player who gave his character the complication (disadvantage) that a sprite followed him around everywhere. I roleplayed this to the hilt and everyone was amused by the PC's little friend. When the time came for experience points, however, the player immediately bought off the complication.

When I asked him why, as the complication was fun and didn't mechanically hinder the PC in any significant way, I was shocked by the reply: He only took the complication because he needed the extra character points and intended to remove it as soon as possible. He'd never integrated it into his character concept. I felt that was a cheat, but let it go. From that point forward, I insisted that all disadvantages be incorporated into character designs and wouldn't allow them to be bought off immediately.

Niche Protection

Just as character creation should never be done in a vacuum, character growth shouldn't happen in isolation. Every decision a player makes about changing her character can have a significant impact on how the rest of the players change and grow their characters. Nowhere is this more evident than in niche protection.

If a player designed his character to be the party's computer expert, he might not take kindly to other PCs learning the Computer Hacking skill. It doesn't matter if he's still better at it than they are—as long as they're proficient enough to succeed fairly regularly, then the value of the original character's skill has diminished. Where possible, you should dissuade players from stepping into others' niches.

Not all niches need protection, though, and some aren't niches at all. "I'm the shooter in the group" isn't likely to fly in a Western campaign, where all the PCs can likely use a gun, although being the party's gambler or trick-shot artist might.

Dealing with Failure

Virtually every RPG involves risk, and where there's risk there are opportunities for failure. No PC will succeed 100% of the time, and chances are every PC will fail at the most inopportune time at some point during the campaign. Such occasions are usually drivers of mechanical growth, as they tend to expose failings or weaknesses that players will want to plug up.

Failures not only promote mechanical growth, they also promote critical thinking. Now that the character has failed, how do the PCs adjust their plans accordingly? Some of the best sessions I've ever managed occurred when a failed die roll resulted in the adventure going in a direction I hadn't anticipated.

Failures can also remind players that the world in which their characters live can be an unforgiving place at times. When tracking a serial killer, missed clues may result in more victims losing their lives before the PCs finally catch her. A ruthless warlord may slaughter a friendly village because the PCs decided to negotiate with neighboring villages before taking on the threat. A supervillain may annihilate an entire city because the PCs called his bluff and he followed through.

When failures do occur, it's a good idea to remind your players that these are opportunities for growth. It takes a bit of the sting out of it if they know that it's okay for their characters to fail and that this can be incorporated into the larger narrative of the campaign.

Danger Ahead!

One of the risks of failure is that a character may no longer appeal to a player once the impact of that failure is felt. I once played a superhero that came from a privileged lifestyle and took a very light-hearted approach to being a vigilante. The character was a lot of fun to play until a villain she was up against used a weapon that caused significant collateral damage, killing dozens of bystanders.

The incident was like dumping a bucket of cold water on my character. All of the light-heartedness and humor was sucked out of her, to be replaced by grim determination. For all intents and purposes, she was a completely different character from that point on. I could no longer play the character I created because circumstances had so utterly changed her.

As a GM, I've had players walk out or deliberately try to get their characters killed because something happened in-game that made their characters less fun to play.

Mechanical Growth

While PCs certainly grow and develop in personal ways over time, most of the character growth that you have to manage as the GM will be mechanical. How your players spend experience points can have a big impact on how you manage future adventures. With mechanical growth, what matters is speed and type.

Speed is how fast a character changes, and most RPGs take one of three approaches:

- **Incremental**—Many games are designed to encourage regular growth over time. Points are spent to improve one skill, or bump up an ability score. The world around these characters can stay fairly static because PCs don't change dramatically all at once—you aren't going to modify challenges too much just because a PC gained an extra skill rank in Driving. *GURPS*® is a good example of an incremental system.

- **Power-ups**—In some systems, a PC's abilities change only rarely, but when the change comes it upgrades the character across the board. Old challenges are no longer a struggle for such characters; the world has to change to accommodate them. Earlier editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*® are a good example of this style of game.

- **Hybrid**—Some games blend power-ups and incremental changes: PCs normally increase abilities incrementally, but occasionally they get a power-up. In some games, like *Savage Worlds*, this is based on your overall accumulation of experience points. In others, like *Vampire: the Masquerade*®, an in-game act—draining a more powerful vampire—makes a PC considerably more powerful.

What kind of mechanical growth a PC undergoes also plays a role in how you manage future adventures. There are two types of mechanical growth:

- **Increases in potency**—When experience points are used to make a character more potent, the character simply gets better at something he can already do or loses an existing disadvantage. Adding a point of Strength, raising the Bluff skill by one rank, and removing the disadvantage Arachnophobia are examples of increases in potency.

- **Additions**—When experience is spent to give a PC new abilities, that's an addition. Learning new spells, taking a point of Craft, and manifesting a telepathic ability are all examples of additions.

From a GMing perspective, growth speed and type present different challenges. In a class-and-level game a power-up may increase a PC's potency while also adding new abilities to the character. While at first glance incremental changes may seem less disruptive to a campaign than power-ups, context matters: If a private investigator gains the Mind Probe psychic ability, that change will seriously impact a mystery campaign.

Also, power-up growth tends to be relatively uniform across the entire group, while incremental changes can create wildly different power levels. A PC who concentrates on improving combat abilities will soon outstrip her comrades who focused on increasing investigative or social abilities. Creating an opponent who can challenge the former player may result in a foe that can grind the other PCs into paste.

Here are few good ways to manage mechanical growth:

- **Showcase needed abilities—**Players generally prefer to spend experience points on useful things. If your adventures are combat-heavy, then that's where they're going to spend their points. If your adventures require investigation and social interaction, and you don't allow the players to work around not having those skills, then chances are they'll spend points in those areas.

- **Offer advice—**Sometimes a player may spend points on something because it's an easy pick, but doesn't think too much about it. If you mention that the difference between a 14 and a 15 (in a 3d6-roll-under system) is pretty small, percentage-wise, but the difference between a 10 and an 11 is about 12%, the player may make a choice that proves to be more satisfying in the end.

- **Set boundaries—**Just because something is in the rules doesn't mean that you have to allow it in the game. If telepathy would kill an investigative campaign, then simply outlaw it (with an explanation). Similarly, you can set maximums if you don't want characters to become hyper-focused in a single skill, and you can always adjust the boundary later. It's been my experience that players are much more receptive to boundaries up front than when you arbitrarily impose them later.

- **Share your concerns—**This is a softer version of setting boundaries. If one PC's growth is forcing you to increase the power curve or boost challenge levels past what the party can handle, letting your players know that gives the driving player a chance to slow his PC's growth and the other players a chance to build to that character's level.

- **Reward usage—**Offer a "price break" on increasing skills PCs actually use, or raise the cost of increasing abilities that aren't used in play. This encourages specific choices without closing the door on other options.

- **Ask for updates—**Ask your players what they're planning to spend their experience points on in the future. They may not all know, or they might change their minds, but you'll have an idea of what to plan for down the line.

- **Watch for warning signs—**Sometimes "inconvenient growth" means it's time to end a campaign. If you find yourself banning more and more options or having significant trouble challenging the PCs, that could mean it's time to change things up or that's it's time to end the campaign and start a new one.

When Player Character Management is Done Badly

It's ironic that one of the biggest draws of roleplaying games, character growth, can often cause the biggest headaches for GMs. Nevertheless when handled poorly character growth can harm a campaign or even deal it a mortal blow.

In the chapter opener, Gemma didn't plan for her players to change direction with their PCs. She wrote the next adventure assuming Ah Nold would still be a barbarian warrior and Prenda wouldn't be studying necromancy. Now the challenges in the adventure may be unbalanced or the PCs might short-circuit aspects of the scenario in ways that make it less fun for everyone.

When Player Character Management is Done Well

Satisfying character growth is the hallmark of a healthy campaign. If the players are reacting to your plots and sub-plots and their characters are growing accordingly (both personally and mechanically), then the campaign feels vibrant and alive.

Targeted Growth

While most RPGs grant the players a set amount of generic experience points, some systems channel mechanical growth in a limited number of areas. *Call of Cthulhu*® only allows PCs to increase skills they use, *Warhammer*® *Fantasy Roleplay* limits advancement based on career, and *WitchCraft* includes an option to reward experience points in three broad categories, with spending limited by category.

Making experience "targeted" in this way is a softer approach than setting hard boundaries on what players can and can't buy with their points. It doesn't eliminate all potential problems ("Hold on guys, I need to mug that pedestrian so I can check off my melee skill for advancement"), but it does limit the number of surprises you'll have to manage.

Just as your engagement in the character creation process helps ensure that the PCs are capable and well-suited to the campaign, taking the same role when your players spend experience points will further strengthen the GM-player relationship. A character is only created once, but she continues to grow throughout the campaign.

GEMMA smiled at the group and said, "Now that you've updated your characters, let's get started!" She was glad that she'd had the foresight to ask them, at the end of the last session, what abilities they were going to take for their next level, because that had enabled her to craft the adventure accordingly.

Patti said, "Prenda's new teacher informed her that a rogue necromancer was threatening the Scorpion's Tail region, especially the trade city of Corbruk. He did this as a warning, as necromancers, especially new ones, can be seduced by the powers of the Other Side. As it turns out, Richard Depalm received a commission from the Trader's Guild to root out this new threat."

"Great!" Renaldo said, smiling. "Maybe now Guildmaster Tyress will allow me to court her son!"

Gemma nodded. "All you need now is your old friend Ah Nold. Unfortunately, you know that he's spent the last few months in quiet meditation at the Shining Light Monastery. It will probably take some convincing to get him to come with you."

"No problem," Patti said. "Let's stop at the tavern for a flagon of Galwick's finest mead!"

Chapter 11: People Management

GEMMA smiled as she lit the last candle. She'd been building toward this session for months and now all of the Machiavellian intrigue and mysteries were finally going to pay off. She was so excited that she'd decorated the gaming table with a black tablecloth and pentagram she'd bought last Halloween, wooden mugs she'd gotten at the Ren Faire, and, of course, her large candelabra. Tonight was going to be perfect.

That was until she realized that the session should have started 10 minutes ago and no one had arrived yet. When the doorbell finally rang, it was Adam, clutching his player's book with a character sheet dangling out in one hand and a greasy bag from the local hamburger joint in the other. When he saw the table, he looked confused. Gemma also noted that he had the wrong player's book in his hand.

Adam said, "Oh, we aren't doing the sci-fi campaign tonight?" He looked disappointed. "I thought we were doing that the first of the month?"

"We were," Gemma said, sighing, "but we ran over last week. Remember when I warned you about that three sessions ago?"

"I guess." Adam shrugged as he walked to the table. Gemma almost closed the door when Patti, who was usually the early bird, meandered in. She muttered an apology to Gemma as she walked in, giving Adam a withering stare. Obviously, she hadn't gotten over that blow-up they'd had two days ago.

Gemma tried her best to keep her spirits up. She hoped Renaldo would be in a good mood, given the importance of his character to . . . And then she remembered that it was Yom Kippur. Renaldo would be at the synagogue tonight.

There's a running joke in my gaming circle that "This campaign would be great if it weren't for my players!" And although it's a joke, there is an element of truth to it. Every gaming session involves collaboration between everyone at the table, and everyone has needs that must be met in order

for the game to run smoothly. While it's easy to see a gaming group as "players vs. GM" because of the tensions that can arise in that relationship, your players likely have issues with one another that can turn out to be more damaging than any tension that might exist between you and your group.

The Goal of People Management

The goal of people management is to keep everyone around the table, including you, happy. It's a simple definition, but actually doing it—and doing it well—isn't always easy. (If it were, it wouldn't get a chapter to itself!)

People are unique, and each player at the table has a different personality and different wants and needs. Just because they all agree to play a particular game doesn't mean that they're looking for the same experience. It can be difficult to juggle all those wants and needs in order to find a consensus that keeps everyone happy.

Never forget that people management includes you, the GM. Your wants and needs are just as important as those of your players—though not more so. You shouldn't devalue your own enjoyment of the game just to keep your table full of players, but neither will your players put up with you placing your interests above theirs. People management is about striking a balance that works for everyone.

Tales from Walt's Table

Chemistry can be a fickle thing and compatibility doesn't always translate from one table to the next. I learned this the hard way early on. I was managing a campaign for a bunch of my friends, and we played well together. I was also a player in another campaign, and an offhand comment about something in that game piqued the interest of one of my friends. I contacted the GM and got permission to bring him along to the next game.

For whatever reason, my friend didn't take to the game. His interactions with high-powered NPCs got more and more ridiculous even as the GM gamely tried to rein him in, but to no avail. The GM ended up removing my friend from play and I couldn't blame him. Nothing short of that would have salvaged the night for the rest of the players.

While I learned a valuable lesson that night, I'm not implying that one session of awkwardness is enough to remove someone from a game. What I am saying is that when one player's actions hinder the fun of the group and he shows no desire to change, you aren't going to be able to manage that away. It hurts, but sometimes you just have to cut a player loose.

Protecting Your Campaign from Real Life

Wouldn't it be great if you had all the time you needed to prep and every game session happened exactly as scheduled with 100% player attendance? Of course it would, but unfortunately real life often gets in the way: shifting job hours, lack of a babysitter, conflicting events, illness, and a host of other factors can impact whether you get to run a session and who shows up. You can't eliminate those complications, so you have to be able to manage your campaign to minimize their impact.

Sometimes these complications arise just minutes before a session, which is especially frustrating if you gave up something else enjoyable in favor of game night. Accidents, blown tires, missed alarms—things happen, and you won't always have a timely heads-up when they do. Even good intentions can lead to scheduling issues: I once had a player who was sick try to make it to the game but realize at the eleventh hour that it just wasn't going to happen. He meant well, but inconvenienced the rest of the group in the process.

First and foremost, it's important not to overreact. Every gamer has had to bail on a game at one time or another, possibly without being considerate about it. As the GM you put a lot of time and preparation into the game, whereas players generally don't have to think about the game between sessions, and it can be hard not to take last-minute complications personally.

Fortunately, there are ways to manage these complications, many of which can be included in your group's social contract:

- **Keep up-to-date copies of the PCs' character sheets—**If a player can't show, you've got her sheet for reference.
- **Establish a protocol for cancellations—**If someone knows they can't make it, they should tell the whole group. Cell phones, email, and texting make this simple.
- **Make rules that cover absent players—**Does a cancelling player's character still get experience points and a share of the loot? Can another player play the missing player's character? What happens if a character dies while the player isn't there?
- **Set a minimum group size—**Let your group know the minimum number of players needed for any given session. This frees you from scrambling to make a six-player adventure work with only two, and it also encourages players to decide whether they still want to play if a couple people can't make it.
- **Define the timetable—**If the session starts at 6:00 p.m., will you wait until 6:15 for a late player or start without him? When players arrive late, can they jump in immediately? Is the session end time a hard stop, or can it go over?

- **Establish a routine for starting sessions—**Putting up your GM's screen, lighting candles, and playing the campaign theme song are all good ways to alert the group that it is time to start. Using a theme song is particularly good because it gives everyone a couple minutes to settle down and get into a gaming mood.

- **Be flexible in your plotting—**Don't create hooks or plot elements that require a specific player to be there for the game to move forward.

- **Create redundancies—**If the adventure requires a hacker, make sure there's a hacker NPC available for hire in case the party's PC computer expert can't make the session.

- **Make your threats scalable—**Have a plan in place for "downgrading" threats if fewer players show up.

Kids and Game Night

If you play with "seasoned" gamers, one or more of you probably have kids. Children, particularly young children, can be huge distractions on game night—doubly so if their parent or parents are at the table. In my experience most parents would rather keep their kids with them than hire a babysitter, especially if they can get the group to meet at their home. Unfortunately, this often means that the game is constantly interrupted; I've played in games where we were lucky if a four-hour session involved one hour of actual play.

Apart from "Don't game with children around," the best advice I can give you is "Grin and bear it." My players are also my friends and I do everything I can to make them feel welcome, even if that means dealing with the occasional (okay, sometimes frequent) disruptions. Thankfully, my players have done the same when it was my turn to have small children around on game night.

There are ways to minimize the disruption, though:

- Don't let story hooks hinge on a parent who may have to step away from the table for several minutes at any time.

- Build redundancies into the other PCs so that critical skills aren't concentrated in a parent's PC.

- Keep plots simple enough so that the parent, when she returns to the table, can easily reintegrate herself into the game.

- Have a system in place to handle a parent's character while he's away from the table. You or another player can roll his dice and make "incidental" decisions, such as what the affected character does when his turn comes up in combat.

To make that last tip work well, you may want to give your players a list of common in-game occurrences (combat, chases, etc.) and ask them each to determine what their characters would normally do in those situations. If a player has to step away for a couple minutes, you can pull out her list and work from it. Possible list items include:

- What does your character usually do in combat? Shoot, brawl, or hide until it's all over? Does he follow a sequence, like buffing the other PCs and then launching fireballs?
- What conditions might make you change your default course of action? For example, a brawler might retreat to shooting distance one she loses half of her health.
- Does your character prefer first, second, or third watch? What does he do during his watches? Come morning, how does he prepare for the day?
- Where does your character like to stand in the marching order?

Problem Players

Players who consistently make the game more fun for everyone at the table don't need their own section in this chapter—you don't have to manage them. "Problem" players are a different story.

The best way to handle a problem player is the most direct approach: Take him aside, gently tell him that he's disrupting the game, and ask him to change his behavior. It helps if you have ready suggestions to facilitate that. Too often in the past I've avoided the direct approach in favor of "legislating behaviors," hoping that there was an in-game solution to an out-of-game problem. Even when this works, though, you run the risk of alienating the rest of the group, especially if they feel like they're being treated like children.

Use the advice in this section sparingly. If you feel that the direct approach is called for, don't be afraid to use it. If you aren't accusatory and give the problem player the benefit of the doubt, then you'll probably find her amenable to change. No one wants to get caught with their hand in the cookie jar; it's embarrassing when it happens, and if you don't make the player feel worse about it you're more likely to achieve a positive outcome.

Common Problem Player Types

In my many moons as a GM I've observed a number of problem player types that recur fairly frequently. Sometimes a player will fit cleanly into one of these types, while other players may exhibit several of them. A player who is otherwise a great contributor might also manifest one of them on occasion. Let's talk about the most prevalent types (in alphabetical order), including techniques for dealing with them.

Bully

The bully is a force of personality. He's the loudest voice in the room and often browbeats the rest of the group into doing things his way. He often couches his demands in terms of logic, maintaining that his way grants the best chance of survival or will more quickly solve the mystery.

Many bullies don't realize that they are, in fact, bullying. This is especially true when there are less-experienced players at the table; the bully may simply think he's "teaching them how to play." Other bullies may just want to get to the "meat" of the adventure and effectively veto any attempts by the group to "dally" or follow red herrings.

The direct approach often works best with bullies. Regardless of what he thinks, the bully isn't the loudest voice in the room—as the GM, you are. You have the bully pulpit (pun intended) and generally just asking the bully to pipe down and let other players speak is enough. Another method I've used to great effect is to challenge the bully by pointing out the weaknesses in his plan and the strengths of someone else's approach. Done right, this persuades the bully to consider other possibilities. Done wrong, this can lead to the bully feeling like you're picking on him. Posing questions can be a good way to accomplish this: "You did remember the guard in the tower?" or "The crime boss knows you; do you really want to just walk into his nightclub as a patron? You may want to consider something more discreet."

Artist: Matt Morrow

Cheater

She's the player that always rolls critical successes and only fails when it doesn't matter. She probably has a few more points on her character sheet than she should, and she "overestimates" her bonuses most of the time. There's no polite way to say it: some players cheat. Even if a cheater wouldn't be allowed in your home group, you may run into them when you GM at conventions, in game stores, or outside of your usual circle.

Cheaters can really poison a campaign, from gaining unfair advantages in character creation (especially when die rolls are part of the process) to overshadowing the rest of the group during a game session due to incredible "luck." Unfortunately, calling cheaters out directly usually doesn't end well.

Instead, put systems in place to discourage cheating in order to minimize the problem. For character creation, simply go over everyone's character sheets to ensure that there are no mistakes (I've made plenty of honest mistakes over the years; it happens). Keep a copy of all character sheets for your records and make sure you keep them up to date.

You can also be obvious about anti-cheating measures during play (all rolls have to be made in the open, all results have to be checked by another player, everyone rolls giant dice), but like confronting cheaters this tends to cause more problems than it solves. I usually stand when I'm GMing, which provides the illusion that I'm watching dice rolls. I often don't announce the target number for successes, as cheaters are less likely to give themselves extra bonuses if they don't know what they need. Finally, I try to use systems that reward failure, such as extra karma points or experience points, so there's less of an incentive to cheat.

Drama Queen

Drama queens love the limelight. The drama queen doesn't just purchase equipment in town; he haggles with merchants over every last copper piece. He falls in love with the daughter of the local noble and proceeds to spend much of the session wooing her. He makes small talk at every opportunity during dinner parties, and he indignantly argues with anyone that looks at him askance for hours . . . all while the other players build dice towers out of boredom.

The drama queen is a difficult problem player because he often adds a lot to the game. He's usually immersed in the setting, he does his best to ensure that his character dresses and acts appropriately, and he eagerly plays up his character's flaws. In short, he's the kind of player that most GMs would want at the table. His problem is that he often goes overboard and effectively shuts the other players out while he's performing. Worse, he often talks over other players and hijacks their scenes as the mood strikes him.

I've found that the best way to deal with a drama queen is to ask him to dial it back. Sometimes this can be done indirectly by asking "What are you trying to accomplish in this scene?" This forces the drama queen to be succinct and point

to the appropriate resolution mechanic for the situation. When the drama queen is stepping on other players it's best to address this directly, as this not only solves the problem but also reassures the other players that you care about their enjoyment of the game.

A word of caution: The drama queen enjoys roleplaying and you should give him room to breathe and enjoy being in character; this adds color to the game. Shutting down a drama queen too often can push him into becoming a fatalist or reluctant problem player (both covered below).

Fatalist

Whether she rolled badly one too many times, the last few clues turned out to be dead ends, or the party's clever plan to infiltrate the base ended in miserable failure, the fatalist has had enough. She's decided that the adventure, or at least her character, is doomed to failure, and she responds in a passive-aggressive manner. Her moodiness and bad attitude drag the session down, and she likely realizes this but for whatever reason she just can't shake her mood.

This is a tough one. In my experience the only way to deal with a fatalist is to give her a chance to step away from the table for a few minutes to cool down, or to take a short group break. She's upset because nothing seems to be working, so point out her successes prior to the string of bad luck and make a mental note to boost her confidence in future scenes by giving her opportunities to shine again.

Lone Wolf

A lone wolf player rarely acts in concert with the other players; he prefers to do his own thing. Like the drama queen, this often results in a lot of time sidelining the rest of the group while the lone wolf pursues his own interests. He rarely shares information or treasure, which puts him in competition with the other players.

The easiest way to deal with a lone wolf is to simply not humor him. As with the drama queen, ask him what he's trying to accomplish and then use the appropriate resolution mechanic. Keep resolution to a single roll or a short series of rolls. If it isn't all that important in the grand scheme, simply tell the player he succeeded and move on. Eventually, the lone wolf will get the idea that the game is only being played when the group is together.

Monkey Wrench

The monkey wrench player thrives on chaos and derives her enjoyment from watching others, including the GM, squirm. She insults the alien ambassador because she thinks it's funny, or she purposely tips off the Big Bad to the PCs' planned infiltration of his fortress just to watch the other players try to scramble and salvage the plan. She unleashes the trapped demon in spite of the numerous warnings not to do so, or she shoots the henchman who surrendered before he can give the PCs valuable information.

Unfortunately, there isn't much you can do with a monkey wrench player but ask her to cut it out. Chances are the other players tolerate her behavior because the only alternative seems to be kicking her out of the group. While that's certainly an option, I've found it best to simply engage the problem player and ask her to tone it down. At worst I simply disallow chaotic antics that disrupt the session for the sake of being funny (unless, of course, it's that type of campaign).

Munchkin

Also known as a power gamer, the munchkin breaks the spirit of the rules by creating the most effective character possible, at least in his mind. Munchkins are often "combat monsters," maximizing their abilities so that they can quickly turn any opposition into paste, in which case any effort on your part to provide challenges for the munchkin tends to overwhelm the other PCs. While the munchkin's character is often woefully inadequate in other areas, he gladly makes that sacrifice in exchange for raw power—after all, if you really need the adventure to move forward then you'll find a way to make it happen, won't you?

The biggest problem with munchkins is that they generally play within the rules; their characters are unrealistic but technically fit within the confines of the game system. Other than disallowing such characters entirely, your best recourse is to set limits during character creation. When setting limits, remember that the munchkin will meet them, so it may be best to set limits based on character concepts—for example, "Ahmed's the heavy weapons specialist, so he's the only character who can have a Heavy Weapons skill higher than 13."

The Inadvertent Munchkin

Sometimes a player falls into power gaming by accident. I once played a "face man" character in *Shadowrun*® who used data chips to acquire skills the character didn't actually have, swapping them in and out as needed. I decided that he loathed fighting and was only going to be good with one weapon, his pistol; given that I wasn't spreading points around, I gave him a pistol specialization. I also invested heavily in just a couple skills, since I could jack in new ones as needed; I was a walking skill arsenal.

It became obvious how munchkin-y this character was in the party's first firefight. True to his personality, my character ducked and hid while the other characters fought. Unfortunately, they were losing and my hand was forced. I fearfully poked my head out, aimed—and dropped a bad guy in one shot. Within moments, my character was striding through the room like a combat machine, casually dropping bad guys right and left to the exasperation of the players who had created combat-oriented PCs. Since they'd spread their skill points around, my character was effectively the most potent fighter in the group.

The Quiet One

Apart from rolling her dice when called on to make a skill check or participate in combat, this player doesn't seem to contribute anything meaningful to the group. Every attempt to engage her in roleplaying fails miserably; every clue or mystery you send her way stops cold. She just doesn't seem all that interested in playing even though she makes the time to show and rarely complains about anything.

The funny thing about the quiet one is that she usually isn't a problem player at all. Many quiet ones are simply that: naturally quiet people who would rather sit on the sidelines than take the spotlight. If this is the case, then you don't have a problem. Don't engage this player in ways she doesn't enjoy, and she'll be happy.

Sometimes a quiet one is quiet because she feels lost. She may be a novice gamer, unfamiliar with the tropes of the campaign setting or genre, or she may simply feel drowned out by the louder voices at the table. The solution is to encourage her by highlighting her role in the group with scenes and encounters that showcase her character's strengths. Engage her through an NPC when the other PCs aren't around so that she has a chance to find her voice, and don't let other players talk over her. She'll come out of her shell.

Rules Lawyer

When most gamers think of problem players, the rules lawyer is number one on the list. This is the guy who thinks he knows the rules inside and out and won't hesitate to quote chapter and verse if the GM isn't following them to the letter. While his rules expertise can be beneficial, rules lawyers can become "system munchkins," exploiting the game's holes and weaknesses in order to trump threats with little risk or to "power up" his character by exploiting gray areas.

Dealing with a rules lawyer is especially tricky, as invocation of Rule Zero—"The GM trumps the rules"—is likely to be met with derision and makes it look like you don't have a handle on the rules. Further complicating matters, widely played games like *Dungeons & Dragons®* have been trending towards "rules, not rulings" for the past decade, lending more authority to rules lawyers.

When I'm called on a rule, I do one of two things. If the rule is likely to be revisited in the current session (i.e. grappling rules in an adventure with multiple battles) then I'll take time to check it on the spot. If not, then I'll make a ruling and promise to look it over in detail between sessions. This latter technique is especially useful if there are gray areas or a rule is particularly tricky to interpret.

Slayer

Slayers play to kill things (and maybe take their stuff). At best their PCs are aggressive adventurers who take no prisoners; at worst they turn every scene into a combat encounter. (I've seen slayers assault the NPC who was trying to hire the

party.) While the munchkin and the slayer often go hand in hand the slayer may not care much about manipulating the rules as long as she gets the opportunity to fight and win regularly.

Managing slayers often requires a firm hand. Don't be afraid to tell a slayer player that she needs to back down in a particular scene; merely telling her that this wasn't designed to be a combat scene is usually enough. When slayers do fight, however, make sure that their love of battle is satisfied—they enjoy good challenges and hard-won victories.

Special Snowflake

Does a particular player always have to play a katana-wielding ninja or a psychic girl? Does he always play a grim loner who packs a Desert Eagle? Is every character he plays a backstabbing liar who's antagonistic towards the other PCs, no matter what it says on his character sheet? If so, you're dealing with a special snowflake.

Broadly speaking, roleplaying games are a form of escapist entertainment. While many players enjoy the escape for its own sake, others want to escape into a particular archetype. This archetype tends to bleed across genres and the player will do anything he can to shoehorn his archetype into the game at hand.

This isn't always a problem that needs managing; sometimes the player's favorite archetype is perfect for the game. If the player's archetype of choice doesn't fit the campaign the group has settled on, that's a problem best resolved by talking to him directly. Sometimes all it takes is a little re-skinning of the archetype in order to make it work. Maybe a ninja character doesn't work in your fantasy campaign but an elven blade-dancer assassin would, or maybe a psychic girl PC would ruin an investigative game but not if she can only sense emotions instead of reading minds.

Problems with Relationships

Unless you're GMing for an ad hoc group at a convention or on game night at your local hobby store, your gaming group is a web of personal relationships. At a minimum you're all acquaintances, but some of the people in your group may be good friends, coworkers, or romantic partners. Some of these relationships predate the campaign, while others may develop over the course of the game. Sometimes relationships promote party unity, or a stronger bond between specific characters, while at other times the players involved specifically agitate each other's characters. Relationships can get even more complicated when the GM is involved, as charges of favoritism may be alleged.

As a GM who has gamed with his wife for over a decade, let me say this: of course there's favoritism! You're always going to give your significant other or best friend's opinion more weight than that of the other players; to a certain extent, the other players probably expect it. Just remember that you're striving for fairness, not equality. If a dispute arises between players then base your decision

on what's fair, not on the relationship. When I have to rule against my wife during the game, I know she'll understand my decision (. . . eventually); your significant other will as well.

If a relationship dissolves during the campaign, you may have players coming to the table with axes to grind. It's never a good idea to ignore this problem when it arises. Even if the players involved agree to "keep arguments away from the table," those arguments are still going to bubble to the surface, people will look to other members of the group for affirmation, and everyone will have to choose sides. When you discover that a dispute exists, ask the players involved to step away from the game until it's resolved.

Tales from Walt's Table

Even when disputes between players are resolved, you still have to be sensitive to lingering feelings afterwards. Case in point, several years ago I gamed with two players who had a dispute that changed the nature of their relationship with each other. Both saw an opportunity to mend fences with a new campaign, and one even reached out to the other by playing a love interest that was necessary for the other player's character concept to work within the campaign.

Unfortunately, both players had different ideas on how to move forward and tensions were reignited. They didn't want to confront each other about the problem, so I got stuck being the mediator and both sides accused me of playing favorites. While the situation was ultimately resolved, the dispute tainted the rest of the campaign. In retrospect, I should have built a failsafe into the situation (e.g. "I'm glad you two are trying this out, but let's have a safe word that ends the relationship. How can we do that and keep these two characters in the party?").

When the Dice Cause Angst

Gamers understand intellectually that dice introduce randomness into play, and that randomness in conflict resolution means that sometimes their characters will fail. When a player really needs to make a roll and fails repeatedly, though, things can get touchy—especially when it was his PC's chance to shine.

It's easy for a player to fall into a fatalistic funk or overcompensate when the dice aren't going her way. She might get passive-aggressive or provoke situations just to "prove" how unfair the game is. Once this happens it can be difficult to get her back into the game.

I've found that the best thing to do in this situation is to stop play until the player calms down; it can be patronizing to the player and unfair to everyone else if you change the outcome to let her succeed. Let her know that her participation is important and that bad dice rolls are simply part of the game. The player will usually realize that she's overreacting and start participating more fully again.

Keeping GM and Player Interest

There's a reason why TV shows struggle to maintain initially high ratings, and why people drop out of ballet, ice skating, or martial arts classes. Interest and enthusiasm are generally high when people engage in a new experience, but wane over time. This is true for campaigns, as well.

Interest will wane over the course of any campaign. You simply can't maintain the initial level of anticipation and excitement forever, and some sessions will be better regarded than others. Still, you don't want interest to evaporate before you're ready to conclude the campaign. If you or your players are losing interest, here are five common causes and solutions:

- **An unsatisfying character**—Sometimes a character concept sounds good in theory but turns out to be un-fun in play. Maybe the player thought that his hyper-linguist PC would be useful in a campaign about deep-space exploration, but the campaign focus has been on preventing a civil war within the Galactic Commonwealth and his character just doesn't have a chance to shine. In these cases, tweaking the character or letting the player create a new better-suited character may be enough to recapture his interest.

- **An overlooked character**—If everyone's into the game except one player, who seems bored, create an adventure that plays to her strengths. If she's used to letting others take the lead encourage her to run the show once in a while. Give her something that only her PC can handle to showcase her importance in the group.

- **Lack of variety**—Even if your players love dungeon crawls, anything can become repetitive over time. Sometimes all it takes to rekindle interest is to play a different kind of adventure for a session or two. Mix it up; variety can spark new interest. If the PCs are usually exploring dungeons, trap them in a castle under siege or wreck their ship on a remote island.

- **Experience vs. expectations**—If the group agreed on a campaign set during a major war and featuring plenty of battles but the last three sessions focused on establishing a supply line for the resistance, player interest may flag. Consider what was promised, write an adventure that delivers on that promise, and you'll be back on track.

- **Familiarity**—Sometimes a campaign just needs to be shaken up a bit. If your players are used to getting information about a new dungeon to explore by listening for rumors at a local tavern, destroy the tavern. Have a villain kill a friendly NPC, or an NPC ally turn on them. While this approach can run the risk of "jumping the shark," sometimes a change in the status quo can rekindle waning interest by giving players new angles to explore.

Tales from Walt's Table

Back when Roger Moore was still James Bond, my gaming group wanted to play an espionage game in the 007 mold. The first adventure that involved infiltrating the stronghold of a megalomaniac bent on world domination was thrilling. The second adventure involving infiltrating the stronghold of a megalomaniac bent on world domination was still fun. The third adventure . . . well, not so much.

The problem was that the campaign was too limited in scope, and failure to deviate from that formula led to a quick demise for the campaign. Looking back, I'm still not sure if we could have sustained anything longer than a mini-campaign, but more varied adventure plots might have helped it last longer than three adventures.

The Dreaded Shiny

Your campaign is going swimmingly until a player shows up one session with a brand new book full of shiny new things and wants to adapt his character to use what's in it—or worse, he wants to scrap his current PC and create a new one from scratch. If you're playing an RPG with an expanding product line, you'll almost certainly encounter "the shiny" at some point.

Whether to allow new supplements into your campaign is your call as the GM, but it generally introduces more headaches than benefits to the campaign. You might assume that the supplement is balanced with what already exists in the game, but that's often not the case. And once you allow one new supplement, you've opened the floodgates for others.

If you do want to add new books to an existing campaign, allow yourself some time to become familiar with any supplement before including it. This can cause some sour grapes, but it's worth the trade-off to avoid something that could derail the campaign.

The Alternate Campaign

When real life makes it hard to manage a campaign, or hard for some players to attend sessions regularly, it might be time to introduce an alternate campaign. The alternate campaign is another game, possibly with a different GM, a different schedule, or even a different mix of players with some overlap, which alternates with sessions of the current campaign. While this can alleviate pressure on you or boost attendance on game night, it can also create a bit of a rivalry between campaigns.

It's likely that each player will enjoy one campaign more than the other. If the group is divided on which game they prefer, or both campaigns are enjoyable in different ways, then all is well. If one campaign is the clear favorite, though, then it can be hard to sustain interest in the other game. You might find that players miss sessions more frequently, or are less engaged at the table.

If you're managing the "losing" campaign, look at the other campaign. Can you emulate something it does better? Is it simply a matter of genre preference (the group usually plays fantasy, but you're running a modern noir campaign)? Should you wrap up your campaign and start a new one that's better-suited to the group? If you want to change anything, ask for player feedback first. Your players will be more receptive to your changes if they've been given an opportunity to shape them.

Artist: Christopher Reach

Player Feedback

Player feedback is one of the most important tools in your people management toolkit. If your players don't tell you how they feel about the campaign, then it's hard to know whether they're happy. A good feedback session can help you track your progress, and it's worth dedicating some time (likely not a full gaming session) to soliciting feedback.

The timing of a feedback session is critical. If the game was supposed to end at 10:00 and it's now 10:30, asking your players for feedback while they're scrambling to get out the door isn't likely to be productive. Similarly, you probably won't get quality feedback if it's been three weeks since the last session.

Feedback sessions don't have to be formal or complicated. Just ask your players what they like and dislike about the game, either in person if your group is comfortable with it or via email if not, and see what they say. Ask follow-up questions, foster dialogue, and encourage everyone to contribute.

You can also get valuable feedback during the game by watching your players. All players show enthusiasm in different ways, but you can usually read something into changes in habits or behavior. If a player who's normally early has starting showing up late or missing sessions, it could be due to an issue with the game. If a player who's usually creative and invested in the game during play starts "phoning it in," he's probably not enjoying the game in some way.

On the other hand, what you're reading as lack of enjoyment could be due to a change in work hours, trouble finding a babysitter, tiredness, or needing more time with a significant other—real-life concerns, not problems with the game. When in doubt, ask (politely).

Danger Ahead!

When asking for feedback, criticism is far more important to improving your campaign than affirmation. Affirmation is important too, but it only makes you feel better about the way you already run games. Criticism tells you where you need to improve.

We all need affirmation and getting it isn't a bad thing. I don't think I'd still be GMing if I didn't get affirmation on a regular basis. Still, I also understand the value of criticism. The trick is in how to solicit criticism without chipping away at your affirmation, and receiving it in the spirit that it's intended.

Safety Nets

Some players don't like certain things to happen in a game, such as their characters dying or being permanently injured. Some draw the line at "adult content" or bad things happening to children. When a player's "thing" happens in the game, she may tune out, start playing passive-aggressively, or even leave the table. Everyone is entitled to these preferences, and those preferences should be respected at the table.

The best way to manage this issue is to have open and frank discussions about what can happen in the game. Sometimes these assumptions are obvious. An old-school dungeon crawl requires the risk of PC death to work well, but it may not occur to a player running a high school-age PC in a four-color superhero campaign that his character might actually die. A player might have no problem with most horror tropes, but when a cult kidnaps a baby for a demonic ritual that crosses a personal line. If you talk about these things with your players, you'll learn where those lines are.

As a GM, you should have a handle on what might qualify as questionable material; chances are you thought it was questionable when you wrote it. If you include it in the game and no one says anything, don't assume that it's okay—sometimes shock and peer pressure prevent people from speaking up. Instead, privately solicit feedback and apply it to the rest of your campaign.

For things like character death, you can always replace death with a different penalty. Maybe experience points get docked for the session, or perhaps the character is simply "recovering" for the rest of the session. You can do the same with permanent injuries: They may be "funny bone" injuries that recover after a few sessions or abstract injuries with no other mechanical elements.

When People Management is Done Badly

People management can be a tricky thing, especially when the players around the table are your friends. No one likes confrontation and sometimes you might ignore problems until they've poisoned your campaign. To some extent, this is understandable; friendships should be stronger than any game. That said, it does your friendships no good if one friend is constantly aggravating the others.

Gemma did three things poorly in the chapter opener. First, she failed to take into account Adam's obvious boredom. He loves action scenes and the sessions of social intrigue have taken their toll. Unfortunately, he's normally such a reliable player that Gemma doesn't give his concerns much weight.

Secondly, Adam and Patti obviously have an unresolved issue that Gemma is hoping won't infect the table. While she doesn't need to play mediator, Gemma hasn't insisted on them resolving their differences before returning to the table nor has she gotten assurances that they can set their differences aside during the session. Instead, she's simply hoping that they can play together.

Finally, Gemma forgot that her third player had to cancel. As a holiday is something that can be planned for, she shouldn't have scheduled the pay-off for a night Renaldo wasn't available, especially since he was likely the player having the most fun with this type of campaign. Also, without Renaldo there's no one around to keep Adam and Patti from allowing their issue to derail the campaign.

When People Management is Done Well

Roleplaying is a shared commitment that involves everyone at the table, and you'll do best as a GM when you treat your players as a community of equals. The campaign isn't more important than any player and you should always take each player's needs into consideration.

In Gemma's case, this would entail knowing about and respecting her players' obligations away from the game. It would also mean knowing what her players were looking for out of the campaign and adjusting things to accommodate their interests, as well as ensuring that out-of-game issues don't impact the game or the other players.

In short, when player management is done well you'll have a happy group of players who are at the table and contributing positively to the campaign. Having standard procedures in place for dealing with things like campaign start times, cancellations, and safety nets will ensure that your campaigns run smoothly with a minimum of fuss.

"That was a great session," Renaldo said, beaming. "I'm so glad you held off for me."

Gemma smiled. "Did you really think we'd play on your holiday?"

Patti looked at Adam and smiled. "Actually, I'm glad we skipped a session. It gave me a chance to cool down. I'm also glad we had that talk, Gemma. You helped me to stop making a mountain out of a molehill."

"Me too," Adam said. For him, that spoke volumes. Overall, Gemma was quite happy about how things worked out. She loved gaming, but her friends' needs came first.

Chapter 12: Risk Management

"Come on, not now. Just start, you stupid computer!" Gemma pushed on the edge of the table and rolled back slowly in frustration. Her laptop stared back at her, dark and inert. Her session notes and campaign materials were trapped on its hard drive, inaccessible.

Adam looked over the laptop for Gemma, but all of his efforts to fix it were fruitless. Patti and Renaldo were sympathetic, but all the same the energy for tonight's game was fading fast.

From the moment a campaign begins, all sorts of changes lurk in the wings waiting to shake up the delicate ecosystem that is the campaign. Some changes may only create minor complications that are easily overcome. Other changes are major enough to pose a threat to the continuation of the campaign.

All change that impacts your campaign needs to be managed. In the context of *Odyssey* and campaign management, change you can manage in advance is called "risk" while change you can't plan for, or neglect to plan for, is simply "change." Just like all thumbs are fingers but not all fingers are thumbs, all risks are changes but not all changes are risks.

You can choose not to think about these things, and placate yourself by saying that you'll deal with changes as they come along—or you can be proactive, taking time to think about potential issues and solutions in advance. When these previously unexpected changes occur (and they always occur), you won't be forced to react; instead you'll be able to act based on a plan you formulated earlier on. After all the time and effort you have put into creating this campaign and nurturing it, why not devote some time to preparing yourself for these situations?

This chapter and the next, Change Management, draw heavily on my project management background, and they include terminology ported over from project management. These chapters are written under the assumption that you're not a project manager by profession, though, and they focus squarely on things that happen to campaigns.

Risk Comes in Two Flavors

What is "risk," anyway? Most industries have their own definition of risk, but outside of the risk/reward cycle that's part of many RPGs—a very different context than what we're talking about here—it's not generally considered in relation to gaming. Consequently I'll use a basic and broad definition of risk in *Odyssey*:

Risk is the uncertainty surrounding a decision, action, or goal which results in a positive or negative outcome.

That means that when you make a decision, take an action, or set a goal there are things that can happen which may be fortunate or unfortunate with regards to the result you desire. When risk generates a favorable outcome we call that *opportunity*. When risk generates a negative outcome we call that a *complication*.

When a risk creates an opportunity you want to be able to capitalize on that opportunity and turn it into a positive change to your campaign. When risk creates a complication, you want to get around or go through the complication and still come as close to your desired outcome as possible.

The Goal of Risk Management

Risk management is comprised of the actions you take to control the uncertainty inherent in the decisions you make in your campaign. You want to be able to capitalize on any opportunities that arise and make your outcomes more favorable. Being able to capitalize on an opportunity comes from being able to recognize the opportunity and having some idea of what to do with it when it comes along.

You also want to minimize any complications so that they don't jeopardize your goal. In an ideal world, you eliminate all risk outright, but in the real world you're generally going to be working to minimize the chance that risk will occur. At the same time you will plan for what to do should your attempts to avoid the risk fail.

The tricky thing about risk management is that it's a rabbit hole of paranoia and conjecture. It's easy to get caught up in looking for risk everywhere and trying to plan for every possible thing that could potentially go wrong. That course of action will result in a large expenditure of energy or in doing things to avoid risk completely, which is neither possible nor desirable.

In gaming terms, you will either spend precious time that you could be using to manage your characters and story (or prep your game) worrying about things that might happen, or you will avoid making risky decisions in the campaign, draining it of everything that makes it interesting. To avoid all that you need a process to guide you, one that will help you manage risk without going down the rabbit hole.

Artist: Daniel Wood

Super-Streamlined Risk Management

The actual practice of risk management is a full-fledged career that requires training and certification. Expertise in risk management is like a katana crafted by a master sword smith: precise and beautiful to behold. *Odyssey* can't make you an expert in risk management, but what we can do is give you a simple, practical tool that's crude but effective—a rusty box cutter, to continue the previous analogy. You can get a lot done with a rusty box cutter, and what follows is a crash course in risk management for your campaign intended to teach you to do just that.

We're going to cover a four-step process for managing risks in your campaign:

1. **Identification**
2. **Likelihood**
3. **Mitigation**
4. **Contingency**

Ready? Hang on tight, here we go.

Step 1: Identification

Every choice you make involves some risk, so considering them all would be impossible. Instead, consider your campaign framework document, your story notes, and your "What's Really Going On" document. Most of the critical decisions made about the campaign are in your campaign framework; those not found there are likely to be in one of the other two places.

Now look for decisions about your campaign that, if they were to suddenly change or become untrue, would have a noticeable impact on the campaign. Consider whether each change would result in an opportunity or a complication. It's easy to worry more about complications than opportunities, but it's important to identify both.

Let's use an example to illustrate this process (and the other steps in this chapter), one in which Gemma makes a specific decision that has some risk associated with it:

> *DURING the campaign creation phase of starting their new campaign, Gemma used a list of 20 questions to facilitate character creation. Patti's answers to those questions for her character, Prentiss, resulted in a detailed background with some great hooks into the story Gemma was planning.*
>
> *Those details gave Gemma a burst of inspiration for the climax of the story: Prentiss would be the key to defeating the aliens. Excited about her idea, Gemma got to work making changes to the story and her campaign materials in order to reflect Prentiss' new role in the campaign.*

There's nothing wrong with a plot that focuses on a particular character, but this approach carries several risks. The most significant risk is that Prentiss could be killed before the climax of the story, and the campaign setting doesn't offer any way to resurrect dead characters. Without Prentiss there would be no key to defeating the aliens—the climax of the story.

Step 2: Likelihood

Once a risk has been identified the next step is to determine how likely that risk is to occur during the course of the campaign. To keep things simple, rate each risk: **low** (not likely), **medium** (possible), or **high** (likely). The rating will tell you how much more thought and work you should invest in managing a given risk.

If the rating is low, then you can stop here. Just knowing that there's a possibility of that risk coming into play is good enough. If the risk does occur, you can deal with it when it happens. Just by identifying it—naming it—your subconscious will work out some ideas for how to handle it. Save your time and brainpower for the higher-rated risks.

If the rating is medium then at a minimum you need to undertake step three; if time permits, follow step four as well. If the likelihood is high you need to do both steps three and four, since you're almost certain to face this risk at some point during the life of the campaign.

GEMMA gives it some thought and, while the tone of the campaign is not deadly, there is at least one battle scene in every session. She also takes into account the game system, which is pulp-oriented, and concludes that in general PCs have good odds of surviving most battles. She considers the risk of Prentiss dying before the climax of the story a medium risk.

Step 3: Mitigation

Mitigation is a step specific to complications (negative risks), and doesn't tend to be relevant to opportunities (positive risks). A risk can only become a complication if it occurs; mitigation is the first line of defense to lessen the likelihood that the risk will occur. When you mitigate a risk you decrease its rating: from high to medium, from medium to low, and from low to no longer being a risk at all.

Look at a specific risk and think about the factor or factors which could cause it to manifest. For each factor, ask yourself if there are actions you could take to control the factor so that the risk never occurs.

In some cases there will be clear actions you can take to reduce the likelihood that a risk will occur. These will generally be actions within the game, since that's the area over which you have the most control. When you've identified these options, consider the in-game impact of mitigation—you don't want preventing a risk to be more disruptive than the risk itself. The best mitigation plans are those that don't affect the game while still minimizing risk.

In other cases there won't be anything you can do to lower the chance that a risk will occur. This happens most often with risks related to the real world, not the game, where you have far less direct influence. If there's no way to mitigate a risk then you need to move on to the next step.

GEMMA was concerned that so much rested on Prentiss, so she started thinking about what she could do to minimize the risk of Prentiss dying during the campaign. She didn't want to pull punches during combat because that wouldn't be fair to Adam or Renaldo.

Then it hit her: Prentiss is just as valuable to the aliens as she is to humanity—the aliens would much rather capture her than kill her. This approach gave her a good reason not to kill Prentiss outright, and would create added drama if Prentiss did get captured at some point.

Step 4: Contingency

No matter how much mitigation you do, there's always a chance that a risk will manifest and you'll have to deal with it. Having a plan of action before you need it will help things go more smoothly. Planning ahead means that you don't have to react, but rather can take the time to think through possible next steps. This plan is the contingency, and contingencies apply equally to opportunities and complications.

To come up with a contingency, first imagine that the risk you're considering has come to pass. Then ask, "Now what?" For an opportunity the next step is typically an action you can take to capitalize on the opportunity and have it benefit the campaign.

For a complication, your plan will most often be about getting past (or through) the complication and coming as close to your original goal as possible (or, failing that, the next best goal you can achieve). The best contingency plans are the ones that are the most plausible in relation to the setting and story. A contingency that doesn't fit the setting will come off as you overtly manipulating the campaign, whereas one that fits the setting and story will be believable.

The next chapter, Change Management, offers lots of advice about managing changes when they occur. If you come up with a contingency and wind up using it, you can apply that advice to managing the resulting change.

> *GEMMA decided she needed a plan to deal with Prentiss getting killed during play. Looking back over notes from previous sessions, she noticed an NPC who she could repurpose as a contingency. This NPC, who is close to the PCs, will turn out to be something other than what she appears to be: a friendly alien observer, sent to watch over Prentiss and make sure that she lives.*
>
> *The NPC can heal Prentiss using its advanced technology. In order to make this seem plausible, Gemma retroactively changed a few aspects of the NPC's background so that it would appear to the players that this character had been an alien from the outset.*

Keeping Track of Your Risks

While I consider the risks that are present in my campaigns, I don't track them in writing. I follow the four steps in my head, which works for me. If it works for you, too, there's no reason not to take that approach.

If you want or need to track your risks in writing, I recommend making a table with four columns: Risk, Likelihood, Mitigation, and Contingency. Write a risk on each row in the Risk column, and then address each step for that risk in its respective column (as applicable). You can then add this document to your campaign materials, updating it as often as necessary.

Common Risks in Campaigns

Some risks are more common than others, cropping up in many campaigns. These are some of the most common, all of which I've run into in my own campaigns over the years. How you address them depends on your group, campaign, game system, and GMing style, but you can apply the four steps above—identification, likelihood, mitigation, and contingency—to all of them.

- **PC death**—A common occurrence in some campaigns and a rare and solemn event in others. Depending on the role the dead PC played in the party and the story, her death can have an impact on the story.
- **Losing a player**—The departure of a player can disrupt your gaming group and the PCs' party, perhaps even making the group too small for the game you're playing. This issue often has to be dealt with at both the player and character level.
- **New PCs**—Adding a PC to the campaign can disrupt the party, which may impact the progression of the story.
- **New players**—Be it an old friend or someone you just met, adding someone to the group, especially during the course of a campaign, can cause issues within the story and at the table. This is compounded if the new player also introduces a new PC.
- **Players in a relationship**—Members of the group who are in a relationship can have disagreements that spill over into the game, sometimes even leading to the loss of a player.
- **Death of a major NPC**—The players surprised you and now the Big Bad is dead well in advance of the climax of the story. How does the story continue?
- **New supplements**—New rules can impact the "rules ecosystem" of your campaign. Do you ban the new book, allow parts of it, or use it all?
- **Loss of campaign/session materials**—Some risks aren't part of the game. A hard drive crash or a binder lost at the coffee shop can spell disaster for a campaign. How are you backing up your campaign material, and how will you recover it in case of a disaster?
- **Technology failure**—If you run an online game and there's a service outage, do you cancel the game or switch to another platform?

When Risk is Managed Badly

The GM doesn't have time to worry about what could go wrong with the campaign—he's having a hard enough time just keeping the game running. Playing "What if?" is a waste of time.

During the course of the campaign the GM is blindsided when something goes wrong. The problem could have been avoided with a little planning, but instead it comes crashing into the campaign and derails the whole session. Thrown out of his comfort zone, the GM reacts quickly and acts on instinct to fix the problem.

His reaction is heavy-handed and turns out to be more disruptive than the original problem. The players react badly and the session grinds to a halt as a debate breaks out about what just happened. The debate quickly becomes a heated argument.

When Risk is Managed Well

In your free time you've thought over the most important elements of your campaign—the ones that could destabilize the campaign if they were to suddenly change. You've made a list of risks and rated the likelihood that each of them will occur, given some thought to how to mitigate the most serious risks by making subtle changes, and come up with contingencies in case they can't be avoided. Now you take a few minutes to jot down your plans in your campaign materials.

As the campaign progresses, you mitigate risks as much as possible but never do anything drastic that could jeopardize the story or the campaign. When a risk occurs, you're prepared and you put your contingency into action. The contingency is measured and makes sense in the context of the setting and story, so much so that the players barely notice that a risk was just managed.

> *"Don't worry about it, Adam; I know what I am going to do," Gemma said, closing up her laptop and setting it on the side table. She picked up her phone charger and plugged in her phone, unlocked it, and opened an app.*
>
> *"My cloud backup syncs with the files on my laptop, so I can access my notes from my phone. The screen is a bit small, but it will do. Now get your characters and your dice because this game is on."*

True Story: The Vessel

In my Elhal campaign, I decided early on that one of the PCs, Kelven, was really the avatar of the deity of Elhal sent to the world to rid it of the Demon King—by becoming a living prison for the Demon King's soul. There was just one problem: Kelven had to stay alive until the end of the campaign, and the system was *Iron Heroes*, a game of intense combat.

Having committed to this plot, I had no choice but to come up with a contingency should Kelven die in battle. Elhal doesn't have divine clerics performing healing miracles, let alone resurrection. I decided that should something happen to Kelven, the All-Father would bring him back to life and his true nature would be revealed. The resurrection would happen through a mystical artifact known as the Sand Temple, which had the ability to appear anywhere in the world at will and contained a pool of healing water.

I never had to use my contingency, though there were a few touch and go moments, but I always felt comfortable knowing that I had that in my back pocket.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Chapter 13: Change Management

RENALDO stared at the subject line of the email; it was from his school's Semester Abroad program. He believed that until he clicked on the message its contents were a digital Schrödinger's cat; the news could be good or bad. He hesitated until he could wait no longer.

Taking a deep breath, he clicked on the message. His heart jumped when he read the first word: "Congratulations!" He was going to Spain.

Spain! That was awesome. Less awesome would be telling Gemma that he'd be unavailable to continue the campaign which, after four months, was going great. The story was picking up pace, everything was well-established . . . he wasn't looking forward to calling Gemma.

Campaigns are in a constant state of flux, always changing. Most changes are small, occurring within each session as the PCs interact with the story. Those changes are natural and expected. But there are also moments at the table, and away from it, when a significant change occurs that will have far-reaching consequences for the campaign.

In the previous chapter we talked about risks—changes that you can plan for in advance. All risks are changes, but not all changes are risks, and in this chapter we'll talk about the other kind of change: changes that were never considered or managed as risks. This type of change can arise from within the game or outside of it.

While change is inevitable, it's also manageable. As the GM you'll be expected to lead the group and the campaign through changes when they occur. The extent to which a significant change disrupts your campaign will have a lot to do with how well you manage that change.

The Goal of Change Management

The ultimate goal of change management is to keep your campaign intact. Ideally you want changes to happen, impact the group and the campaign in the least disruptive way possible, and then fade into the background. Major changes threaten to disrupt your campaign by altering some aspect of the game from what is known and acceptable to a state that's either unknown, unacceptable, or both.

Managing change means accepting it, but guiding it to an outcome that the campaign can absorb, creating a new, sustainable normal.

When it comes, change rolls over everything in its path. It's human nature to want to put your head in the sand and just let it sweep over you, rather than get out in front and do something about it. When you choose not to manage a change you become victim to it, dragged along to its conclusion. Rather than being a helpless passenger, you want to take charge and guide changes toward the best outcome you can find. To do this, you have to be ready to take action.

Change Management for Your Campaign

The steps involved in managing change are relatively straightforward and applicable to most situations. The actual solutions may not be so straightforward. Managing change requires you to make decisions, and not every decision will be easy or fun to make.

As in the previous chapter, we'll use Gemma's group as an example of how to manage a change—in this case Renaldo's upcoming absence from the group. And like risk management, there are four steps involved in change management:

1. **Acceptance**
2. **Planning**
3. **Communication**
4. **Action**

Step 1: Acceptance

The first step sounds easy. If it were, then the word "denial" might not exist. In order to manage a change, the first thing you have to do is acknowledge that it's taking place. Particularly when a change is difficult, it's natural to not want to admit that it's a big deal—or even to think that it will just blow over.

To use an example from *Gone with the Wind*, you need to avoid Scarlett O'Hara's tendency to "think about that tomorrow." Often the difference between managing a change and being swept up by it is whether or not you hesitate when the change occurs.

> *GEMMA is truly happy for Renaldo, since a semester in Spain sounds incredible, but her inner campaign manager has just gone to red alert. After giving him a big hug, she looks at him, smiles, and says, "So, you're going to be missing a few sessions?"*

Step 2: Planning

Knowing that a significant change is at hand, you must now determine what your new normal is going to be and come up with a way to get there. Start by determining whether there's any chance you can get back to the campaign's original state after the change, or if the change makes that impossible. If it's the latter, your goal is to find a new, acceptable normal.

Once you know the goal you're working towards, you need to figure out what will have to happen to go from where you are, at the cusp of the change, to the desired state. You can figure this out alone, with part of your group, or with the whole group. The change has to be considered at every level: player, PC, setting, and story. Some changes may only impact one level while others may affect them all.

Gemma and Renaldo talked before Renaldo's first class of the day. She offered to put the campaign on hold until he got back, but he insisted that she not do that because Patti and Adam were having a really good time.

When Gemma got home that night she spent some time thinking about what Renaldo's departure would mean for the game. The group would be smaller, but Gemma was comfortable running the game with just two players. But the absence of Rav, Renaldo's character, would leave the party without their negotiator and interrogator.

Gemma looked at the story and determined that she'd have to make some changes in order for the PCs to have a chance to reveal the final clues to its climax. Originally she'd counted on Rav getting an alien sympathizer to confess, a scene Renaldo would have loved to play out. Now she would have to embed the same information into a puzzle that Patti's character could unravel. She jotted down a few notes about what to change in the next three sessions, and none of the changes were too major.

Writing Rav out of the campaign was even easier: She would have him transferred to another division at the end of Renaldo's last session.

Step 3: Communication

People fear the uncertainty of change. Fear causes people to act in ways that aren't always best for the group. The best way to combat uncertainty is to blast it away with information. When people know there's a plan, the uncertainty of the change fades away and they remain calm.

As soon as you've got a plan to deal with a specific change, communicate it to your players. Do this face-to-face if at all possible; the tone of your voice and your body language will emphasize what you say. If that's not an option, communicate in writing but be more verbose than normal—don't be terse. Sending out a lengthy email full of details will be more effective than sending a text that says, "I've got it covered."

In your communication, cover the steps you've already taken. Start by explaining the change and how it disrupts the campaign. Then explain what the desired outcome is and the plan to get there. As the leader of the group and the manager of the campaign, your tone needs to be positive and reassuring. Don't sugar-coat things, but be sure to let your players know that there is a solution.

There will be times when you have to communicate before you have a plan, such as when news of the change has already spread and players have questions or are concerned about it. If this happens, communicate that the change has occurred, how it disrupts the campaign, and that you're working on a solution. This will let everyone know that you're aware of the change and are working on how to deal with it.

Artist: Christopher Reach

GEMMA knew there wouldn't be a good chance to talk about Renaldo's semester abroad in the next few days, so she sent her group an email about her plans.

In it she wrote: "Renaldo will be leaving next semester for Spain and obviously won't be around to play in the campaign. That would leave just Patti and Adam to continue on. I had originally thought of putting the campaign on the shelf, but Renaldo and I talked about it and he insisted that we keep playing.

"That is what we will do. There were a few things in some upcoming plots that I will have to tweak, but I am not worried about it. Give me a weekend and a few cups of coffee, and I should have it all worked out.

"If you guys have any questions or other concerns, let me know. Otherwise we have three more sessions with Rav, and I have a few things in store for him. ;-)"

Step 4: Action

The final step could also be called *Do It*. Once you've made a plan and communicated it to everyone, put it into action. Don't assume that because you have a plan the change will take care of itself; you have to stay engaged. Follow the plan and see the change through.

When the change is complete, assess how close you are to the desired state—your campaign's new normal. Then communicate the results back to the group and let them know that the change has passed and things should go back to normal now.

AT their first session after Renaldo had left for Spain, Gemma talked to Patti and Adam while setting up for the game.

"I spent last weekend working on a few changes to my notes, and I think we're all set. It took less time than I thought, and it didn't really affect the story much as I only had to change a few details here and there," she said. "So with Rav gone, it's just the two of you. You guys still have the ship and, with the Colonel in your debt after last session, if you need some help along the way you can go to him. So, are you guys ready to get started?"

The Many Faces of Change

Changes can occur in four major areas related to your campaign:

- **Story**—Changes in the story represent events that cause the story to go in unexpected directions.
- **PCs**—Player characters can come and go and PCs can change who they are, the role they play, and their desires, interests, etc.
- **Players**—Players also come and go, causing changes, and those changes often affect the PCs as well.
- **System**—Your game system may change when a new edition or supplement comes out.

Some changes will be localized to just one area, while others will affect two or more. You may encounter changes specific to your campaign, but the ones below are the major changes that I've experienced as a GM. For each of the four areas I'll address the nature of changes in that area, what needs to be managed, and how to manage those changes.

Story Changes

Story-related changes often come about as a result of an action taken by players which makes the story you were running, as well as material you've brainstormed or prepared, cease to be relevant. In a serial game this may mean the unexpected death of a major villain; in a sandbox campaign it might be a decision to stop exploring and instead establish a base of operations. In both examples, the story you had planned needs to be altered because of the change.

When dealing with changes in the story, you have a few options. The first is to attempt to return to the original storyline. In this case you accept the change and then make course corrections in future sessions in order to bring the campaign back to the original storyline.

The second option is to alter the original story by incorporating the change and letting it guide what the story becomes. To accomplish this you accept the change and then rework upcoming adventures or events based on the change and where it takes you.

Lastly you can abandon the current story and start a new one. Start by accepting the change and bringing the original story to a logical conclusion, and then design a new story that takes into account that change that took place.

One of the most powerful tools for managing story changes is retroactive continuity, or "retconning." Retconning involves reinterpreting past elements of the campaign in order to come up with explanations for future events. For example,

if the major villain got bumped off before the climax of the story you can retroactively decide that the real threat is her seemingly innocuous underling. The "major villain" was just her puppet, and the story can continue with her in the role of Big Bad.

PC Changes

From a change management perspective, there are three major ways that PCs can change:

- **Significant alteration**—The character changes classes, gains or loses powers, or swaps bodies. Background and personality stay the same, but what she can do within the game has changed.
- **Leave the story**—The PC is killed, the player leaves the game, or the player no longer wants to play that character.
- **Join the story**—An existing player may make a new character, or someone new may join the group.

These changes can also have an impact at two other levels: party level and story level. When a PC undergoes a change, that change can affect the makeup of the party. On the story level, a change to a PC can alter the progression of the story if any plots are tied to that character.

Significant alterations to PCs are often driven by the story. At the party level, you need to consider how a change affects the composition of and roles within the party. If a role is no longer being filled, decide whether it's a serious problem and whether to address it by filling the gap somehow. At the story level, changes can invalidate current plots as well as open up new ones that can be incorporated into the game. Either way, you'll need to account for those changes.

When a PC leaves the story his departure will create a gap at the party level, as the PC's role is now unfilled. As with a significant alteration, you must evaluate and address that gap and make sure that the party remains viable for the game you're playing. At the story level, you need to see which plots or sub-plots were tied to that character and decide whether they can remain or if they must be changed or dropped. If the PC was killed then that character's player may feel a sense of loss, as might other players; this depends in part on how prevalent character death is in the campaign. Experiencing loss most often leads to anger and grief, and you may need to give your players room to express those emotions.

If a new PC joins the story, make sure that she fits in with the party in terms of group dynamics. Revisit your Group Template and review what bonds the PCs and gives them purpose. You should also evaluate the composition of the party and the roles each PC fills, looking for any gaps or imbalances that the new PC might cause, and consider how you want to address them mechanically. Finally, you will want to fit the new PC into the existing plotline as well as create a few plotlines specifically for them; retconning is one good way to handle this.

Player Changes

Player changes occur when someone joins or leaves the group. With respect to the PCs, gaining or losing a player will have the same effects as gaining or losing a PC, as discussed in the previous section. Player changes also impact the group, of course, and it matters how the group handles the change.

If a player left on bad terms, such as quitting the group or being asked to leave, the rest of the group may have strong feelings about the situation. Often your players are also your friends, so someone leaving the group under bad circumstances can put stress on everyone. Take the time to talk to your players, address any unresolved issues, and work them out. If necessary make changes to your social contract, Group Template, or campaign framework to try and avoid this problem in the future.

A new player joining the group can also be a stressful situation. Your current players may struggle if they don't know the new player, and the new player may feel pressure to fit in. As the new player is integrated into the group, these feelings (on both sides) will subside. One of the best ways to introduce a new player is to first meet with her socially outside the game and get to know her as a person.

If your group has a social contract, you'll want to review it with the new player so that she knows the social conventions of the group, how you game, and what you consider acceptable and unacceptable. You also need to learn from the new player what social conventions she has that may need to be worked into your social contract.

Integration is a two way process and the new person adapts as much to the group as the group does to the new player. No one integrates into a new group right away, so be patient.

System Changes

Depending on the game you're running, the longer your campaign lasts the more likely it is that new material will be released for that system. New material can be exciting because of the options it makes available, but before you allow a new supplement in the game you should review it and consider the impact any new mechanical options could have on your campaign. You can then choose to not incorporate the supplement into the campaign, to incorporate it fully, or to incorporate only select parts.

Most often supplements contain new powers, equipment, classes, and similar mechanical elements. All of these can introduce changes at the character level by creating significant alterations or making players to want to switch characters. You can use the techniques detailed in the PC Changes section to address these types of changes.

Changes from one edition of the rules to another can have an even more dramatic impact on the campaign. If a new edition of the game you're playing comes out, you should evaluate it and discuss it with your players. If you decide not to switch,

then you're all set. If the changes are relatively minor—like the differences between *Dungeons & Dragons*® 3.0 and 3.5, or between any two editions of *Call of Cthulhu*® from first to sixth—then you can probably fold them into the campaign with little effort if everyone is in agreement.

In other cases, though, the changes may be more sweeping; the differences between *Dungeons & Dragons*® 3.5 and 4th Edition are substantial. If your group decides to keep playing the current edition, there are no changes to manage. But if you switch editions, you'll need to convert the PCs to the new rules and change elements of the story to account for differences in the new edition. Another popular option is to end the current campaign and start a new one using the new edition of the rules.

Changing the Campaign Framework

Any of the above changes can alter your campaign framework, which was developed and written down way back before the campaign began. It's easy to ignore the campaign framework once the campaign is underway, but that document is the foundation of the campaign and it exists as a reference you can turn to in order to ensure that the game is still on track. If changes affect your framework, it's important to go back and amend it accordingly so that it stays current.

When Change is Managed Badly

The GM is never prepared for change and blames the Fates when things go wrong. He's often blindsided by changes, and his response is to panic. His first instinct is to avoid the issue by ignoring the change and letting it blow over. If avoidance is successful, the change occurs without any guidance from the GM, often creating an even bigger mess. Faced with new problems, the GM grudgingly tries to fix them.

If the change can't be avoided and the GM is forced to react, he takes drastic measures. He's obsessed with getting the campaign back on track and attempts to undo the change by making unrealistic alterations to the story—the one thing he can fully control. These changes come off poorly during the session and result in the players being unsatisfied with the game.

The GM doesn't communicate changes to his players until he has to, leaving the players in a position of uncertainty. He focuses on the impact changes will have on him and how much more work he'll have to do, leaving his players to work out their own feelings about any changes that occur.

When Change is Managed Well

You're prepared for change, and when it occurs you're quick to take control of the situation. You have a plan for what to do and you communicate it to your group. You know when a change will permanently alter the campaign, and when

this happens you adapt the campaign and take it in a new direction. You make sure that this direction is viable mechanically and story-wise. You take the time to make sure your players are comfortable with changes and you give your group time to adjust to them.

ADAM was sitting on the couch with his tablet, video chatting with Renaldo. The game had ended an hour ago and Adam had gotten home just in time to catch Renaldo at breakfast.

"You're missing some great stuff," Adam said. "Gemma is in the zone and writing some incredible sessions. Patti and I have our hands full, but we seem to be handling it pretty well—even if our negotiator is back at Core."

"That's awesome," Renaldo said. "I remember last session you guys shot down that alien shuttle in the wastelands. Tell me what happened tonight."

True Story: The Wolf

In my Heist campaign I created an NPC called The Wolf to harass the PCs. The Wolf was a crooked police commissioner who used his influence to extort money from criminals. The PCs worked to track down The Wolf and confront him. My plan for the session was to have The Wolf offer to cut the PCs in on his extortion racket. This would resolve this specific plot and let me return to writing the material for the next heist. Or so I thought.

During the session, the PCs managed to bungle the meeting with The Wolf, spooking him. The Wolf left the meeting, fearing that he had been exposed, and decided to go underground. At that moment I realized that The Wolf would have an escape plan, but I hadn't prepped one and couldn't ad lib a good plan, so I ended the session early.

I worked up The Wolf's plan and unleashed it on the PCs the following week, forcing them to go on the run and ruining much of what they had worked for up to that point. They took it personally and we never played out another heist. The PCs' actions had caused the story of the campaign to change, and the rest of it focused on finding The Wolf and exacting the party's revenge.

Ending a Campaign

Artist: Daniel Wood

Chapter 14: When It's Time to End Your Campaign

Adam and Renaldo were sitting at the gaming table, discussing a steampunk game Renaldo had picked up on the way over. Gemma pretended not to listen to them as she printed out character sheets in the next room. Patti walked in a couple minutes before the session was supposed to start. Between Patti's near-lateness and the steampunk conversation, Gemma felt like her decision had been reaffirmed.

She wheeled out to the gaming table as her three players were pulling out their character sheets and dice, ready to board the ship that was going to take them to the Island of the Red Death. Much to their surprise, Gemma waved them off.

"No, no, put away your character sheets. I've decided to kill the campaign. I know you guys weren't enjoying it, so I decided to move on to a modern horror game," she said. "Here are your new character sheets." She passed out the freshly printed sheets and tossed her rulebook on the table. "Let's make some characters."

Adam shook his head. "Well this is out of left field! Why are we quitting? I couldn't wait to get to the island!"

"The last few sessions weren't the best," Renaldo said, "but I thought things were picking up last session. I was looking forward to charming the pirate captain!"

Patti was glad the campaign was dead, but she wasn't a big fan of modern horror and after a grim fantasy campaign she was looking forward to playing something lighter. She said, "Why didn't we get to choose the next game?"

All campaigns eventually come to an end. Whether you're running an open-ended campaign or a closed one, it will end at some point. The ending could be planned, real life could intervene, the campaign could stop being fun, or you could run out of ideas. Unless the decision is taken out of your hands, you'll have to manage the end of your campaign.

It's a sad fact of gaming that many campaigns, even those that are planned to run for a certain number of sessions, end prematurely. You may have the best of intentions, but you'll often find that even a beloved campaign needs to be wrapped up for any of a variety of reasons. Don't let this get you down; it happens to every GM. Sure, there are those rare GMs who say "We've been playing the same campaign for 30-plus years," but even those games are often a series of related campaigns rather than a single campaign.

Campaigns can end well or badly. In the chapter opener, Gemma ends her campaign badly; none of her players are happy about how she handled it. If you handle it well, the end of a campaign can be exciting: You get to wrap up your main plot threads and story arcs in a grand finale that hopefully whets the appetite for the next campaign. Before we can talk about how to end a campaign well, though, let's ask and answer an important question: When is it time to end your campaign?

Why Can't I Finish a Campaign? I Must Be a Bad GM!

Don't worry if you don't finish most of your campaigns. Gaming is a hobby and sometimes has to take a backseat to real life. You aren't being paid to GM (if you are, please let me know how you pull this off!), so unlike at work you may not feel like there's a strong incentive to put your best work forward all the time. Or maybe you take a chance on something that doesn't pan out—which isn't unique to GMing, or even to hobbies. Just look at the broadcasting industry: People get paid to write, produce, and act in TV series and many of them never make it past the pilot (or even get aired at all). Even when a series does get on the schedule, it's difficult for it to succeed. Many series start off strong and then falter and get cancelled because they've lost the bulk of their initial audience.

Over the years I've had campaigns die before the characters were fully created. I've also had campaigns fizzle within two or three adventures. And I've had campaigns that have spanned years, half of which are officially suspended, not over. Whenever you start a new campaign there's a good chance it won't end as planned.

Don't get discouraged when a campaign fails before you were ready. Just because it didn't end properly doesn't mean that your players weren't having a great time along the way. If they continue to show up at your table session after session then obviously you're doing something right!

Signs That It's Time to End *Your* Campaign

Virtually all open-ended campaigns have to end sometime, although you don't want to be premature about it (why end the game if everyone is having fun?). If you can't sustain your interest or your players' interest, or you start seeing other signs that the end should be nigh, you'll need to plan to end the campaign. Even closed campaigns with a planned endpoint should be brought to a close when any of the warning signs below start to appear. Some groups may be willing to grin and bear it for a few more sessions to reach the planned ending, but yours may not.

Here are the most common warning signs that it's time to end your campaign:

- **You've lost interest**—Reasons vary, but ultimately they don't matter: A loss of interest is a loss of interest. In my experience, this is the single most common reason campaigns end. As the GM you're the driving force behind the campaign, so if you lose interest then the entire campaign suffers.
- **Burnout**—Every GM gets burned out at some point and just needs to take a break.
- **Your players are losing interest**—Whatever the culprit, loss of player interest is easy to spot. If all of the pre-game chatter is about the next campaign or the players can't be bothered to remember anything about the current one, then it's likely your players are losing interest.
- **Revolving door**—Whether you've been replacing players or PCs, the group barely resembles the one that began the campaign. Motivations feel tacked-on and story arcs have been twisted almost beyond recognition. There's little incentive for the PCs to continue beyond "This is what the GM is running."
- **The campaign has jumped the shark**—You wanted to run a gritty, hardcore space marine campaign, but one too many humorous situations arose in-game and your players rolled with them all, turning the campaign into a space romp.
- **Post-midpoint departure**—Your campaign is more than halfway over and one or more of the players needs to leave the group.
- **Neglect**—While you haven't completely lost interest in the campaign, you're currently neglecting it in favor of a new one.
- **Major gaps**—You discover that you haven't thought things through and there's a big gap in your notes, one that may take a while for you to figure out.

- **Real-life disruptions**—So many factors have kept the group from meeting consistently that you don't even remember where you are anymore.
- **Time crunch**—Real life has stifled your prep time.
- **Malaise**—Someone else is chomping at the bit to take the GM's chair, but you don't mind.

Feedback is Key

If you're still interested in the campaign but you think your players have lost interest, don't jump to conclusions too quickly. There's an easy way to find out the truth: Just ask your players. While they may think you're fishing for affirmation, you can phrase your questions in such a way as to get the answers that you're looking for.

Approach your players at the beginning of a session. You want them to be together, but if you wait until after the session you'll get clipped answers as people clean up and head out the door. By doing it up front, your players won't be tired and their minds will be on the game. You may also reap a tangential benefit: players who are rejuvenated for the rest of the session now that all the cards are on the table.

Asking the players how they feel about the campaign probably won't work. While some players can be brutally honest, many will tell you what they think you're fishing for. If you do go this route, note that answers like "Fine," "Okay," or "Well, I'm having fun" actually mean "Flush this crap, and soon!"

If instead of asking "Are you enjoying the game?" you ask "Is there anything new you want to explore with your character?" then you'll probably learn whether any of your players feel that their characters are played out. This is a subtle way to find out if a player has lost interest in continuing the game (although this approach doesn't work for static characters).

Another good question is "I'm thinking about wrapping things up soon. Do you think it's time or was there something else you wanted to explore?" It works because you've taken the burden of ending the game off of your players. It can also give you some affirmation: Just because the players think it's time to wrap up doesn't mean they aren't enjoying the campaign.

Ways to End a Campaign

Now that you've decided to end your campaign, how do you go about doing it? Hopefully your campaign has been so successful that you can run a managed ending. For closed campaigns, this is the natural end of the campaign. For open-ended campaigns, you can wind things down and go out with some flair.

Unfortunately, most campaigns end prematurely. If you've seen the signs but you don't feel you have the time or good will to end it properly, you may wrap things up quickly and move on. In this case you have two options: suspending the campaign and killing the campaign.

If you think that there is enough interest to continue the campaign at a later date then you should consider suspending your campaign. This is a particularly good option if the players are still interested in continuing but you need to take a break for a while.

If suspension isn't on the table, then your final option is to kill the campaign. This can mean anything from stopping cold to putting together a quick wrap-up adventure. Killing the campaign isn't always pretty, but unfortunately it's how many campaigns end.

In the final three chapters of *Odyssey* we're going to explore each of these in turn, starting with killing a campaign, then suspending a campaign, and finally going out on a high note with managing the ending of a campaign.

Artist: Matt Morrow

For the past couple of weeks Gemma had felt that the campaign was losing steam. Patti's distaste was obvious and even Renaldo seemed half-bored. She'd already decided to move the end of the campaign up several sessions, but she wanted to make sure that the group was on board.

At the next session, Gemma brought up the topic of ending the campaign for discussion. "Before we get started, I wanted to take a few minutes and let you know that I'll be wrapping the campaign up over the next few sessions. Is there anything more you all want to explore with this campaign?"

Adam shrugged. "I'm having fun," he said. Gemma had expected that answer; as long as there were baddies to kill, Adam was usually happy.

"I've been waiting for someone that was Richard Depalm's equal in the flirting department," Renaldo said. "I thought that might be the pirate captain based on our session last week."

"It's probably no surprise that I've been struggling with this campaign," Patti said. "It was fun figuring things out, but lately it's been a slog. But it seems like we're near the end, so I'd like to see us take down the Red Lord after all the trouble he's given us."

Gemma nodded and said, "Thank you for your candor." It was like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She knew that she'd have to tighten things up a bit and shave off a couple more sessions, but now she could manage the ending with confidence.

Chapter 15: Killing a Campaign

GEMMA stifled a yawn as she pushed a couple of miniatures into position and prepared to attack. She was struck by how vanilla this all seemed and how much it felt like the other combats from the past three months.

It was obvious that Patti had mentally checked out; she loved solving problems and mysteries, all of which ended whenever they found a villain's lair. Renaldo, who usually dove into battle with panache, was simply going through the motions. Even Adam, who normally loved combat scenes, spent more time flipping through rulebooks for the next campaign than he did focusing on the battle at hand.

Gemma sighed. Here they were approaching the end of the campaign, and the players were bored. And if she was being honest with herself Gemma was bored, too. While the pitch had been exciting and the initial sessions were fun, the campaign had become a series of dungeon crawls—much like the previous campaign. Gemma hadn't intended that, but she didn't have enough time to prep anything else.

She had stuck to it, though, and with any luck the campaign would be over in a few sessions. That had to count for something, right?

Let's be honest: Despite all the advice you may read or receive, and despite your own experience as a GM, some of your campaigns simply won't work. That's not unique to you, either—it's true for all GMs. Whether it's a lukewarm reception to a pitch that never blossoms, an irregular schedule that keeps the plots from flowing smoothly, the focus of the campaign shifting away from the original premise, or because of some other problem, campaigns sometimes wind up continuing out of habit, subsisting on goodwill, when in reality no one would be too upset to see them end.

When this happens, it's time to kill the campaign.

Tales from Walt's Table

I usually come from the school of thought that if something isn't working, walk away and do something else. After all, why keep wasting everyone's time with something that isn't working? I was surprised to learn that my group didn't see things the same way—they saw a recurring problem, namely that I kept getting them excited about campaigns and then cutting those campaigns short.

I realized that I was being selfish. I was right that those campaigns weren't working, but I should have paid more attention to my players' feelings. They wanted to see plot threads played out, and rather than cut campaigns short I should have refocused and given them solid endings that wrapped up those threads (even if that meant ending the game sooner than I'd anticipated).

How to Kill a Campaign

Once you've decided to kill a campaign, you need to decide how to do it. Sometimes the decision will be made for you: real life issues or an accidental total party kill (TPK) may effectively kill a campaign. At other times, though, you'll have an opportunity to provide some closure in the process of ending the campaign.

There are four common approaches to killing a campaign:

- **Walk away**
- **Wrap up the current adventure**
- **The movie**
- **TPK**

Let's look at each of them in turn.

Walk Away

This is the most tempting but least satisfying option: The campaign just ends. Sometimes this may be inevitable; real life simply forces you to shut down the game. Or you're burnt out and decide to put the game on hiatus, but it's obvious to your players that you won't return to it. And sometimes a campaign just goes so badly that everyone's on board with cutting bait and moving on to something else.

In most cases walking away should be a last resort, as there are more satisfying ways to end a campaign. For any of those other approaches to succeed, however, you need to be in the proper mindset. If you're simply frustrated with the campaign then it's probably better to just let it die and move on rather than inflict your frustrations on the players.

Wrap Up the Current Adventure

This is almost the same as walking away, but not quite: You simply play through the current adventure and then end the campaign. This isn't a bad option for open-ended campaigns; many episodic TV series end this way and are still fondly remembered years later. For closed campaigns with a planned endpoint, however, it's usually not terribly satisfying.

When using this technique you can heighten tension by introducing a game-changer, such as the loss of an NPC friend, a PC, or the offer of a promotion that would remove one or more PCs from the campaign. This approach can overlap somewhat with the next one (The Movie), but in this case the game-changer is more localized. With the game-changer, the adventure would fit comfortably into the campaign.

The Movie

This approach involves a conscious decision to accelerate all of the major plot threads in the campaign towards one giant campaign-ending extravaganza. You'll probably have to play fast and loose with continuity to make this happen, such as jumping ahead several months or years and ignoring plot inconsistencies to pit the PCs against the Big Bad.

This finale is designed to be a spectacle. Beloved set pieces are blown up, PCs are taken to the brink of their ethics and endurance, and the action quotient is pumped up to maximum. Safeties are taken off: PCs and recurring NPCs can be grievously injured or killed, and a PC may finally step too far over the line or even join forces with the opposition.

The result is an amped-up version of your original campaign ending, with the caveat that it stands on its own and you can ignore elements of the campaign that conflict with the ending. Be careful, though: You can probably get away with dropping a thread from early on in the campaign, but your players likely won't enjoy it if an NPC has a sudden personality change or the Big Bad no longer cares about a particular person or plot element. You can account for these things, of course. The friendly city watch captain may turn if he needs an elixir from the dread necromancer to save his daughter's life, and the villain's lieutenant who had been flirting with one of the PCs may simply have found someone else.

TPK

Also known as the *Kobayashi Maru* (a cadet exercise in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* that is a no-win situation), when a campaign ends by TPK the final adventure wipes out the entire party. The campaign may have been designed this way from the outset, with the PCs knowing that they would eventually face a mission that would result in their deaths, or you may decide to kill the campaign and design an adventure specifically as a TPK.

TPKs can also happen by accident, such as when you realize that the threat the PCs are currently facing is too difficult for them to overcome (usually while in the middle of a fight scene). Unless you decide to rewrite the scene, the TPK may take place.

It's not right for every campaign (and it may even seem a bit cruel), but players may enjoy the increased stakes if they know there's only a slim chance of victory. If everyone is into it, they may even help deliver heroic death scenes along the way. Some games, like *Call of Cthulhu*®, practically cry out for this sort of ending.

Tales from Walt's Table

I once ran a fantasy pseudo-historical campaign set in 9th century England, and while the PCs didn't realize it the game was really set in the World of Darkness®. The PCs' own bishop, whose services they had faithfully attended every day, was a vampire. I had planned to slowly reveal the ruse throughout the campaign, but something happened early on that ended it.

While en route to a nearby castle, the PCs were waylaid by two trolls; a third was waiting in the bushes. I had unveiled the third troll before I realized that the first two were already too much for the PCs to handle, and within a couple of rounds I had a TPK on my hands. Panicking, I ruled that the PCs were captured rather than killed, but then threw an info-dump at them about the true nature of the situation. It was highly unsatisfying.

I stopped at a gas station on the way home, called the player who'd hosted the game, and told him that I was killing the campaign. In my panic I took things too far; all I actually needed to do was admit that I'd made the encounter too difficult and re-run the scene with two trolls. Rewrites like that can often be seen as "cheating," but in this case I think it would have rescued a fun campaign.

Learning from Your Mistakes

Any time you kill a campaign it's because something went wrong, whether it was poor planning, un-fun game sessions, or simply real life getting in the way. No matter what your reason was for killing the campaign, doing so gives you a valuable opportunity to learn from your mistakes (if mistakes were made) and figure out how to prevent them in future campaigns.

When you look back on a killed campaign, it can be helpful to have a checklist of elements to analyze for mistakes. The list below progresses from the outside in, casting a wide net at first (by starting with real life) and working its way down to the heart of the campaign, which is you.

There are two reasons for this: one, it prevents you from blaming yourself prematurely; and two, if you happen to be a stubborn person it will prove that if you rule out everything else, the problem may lie with you.

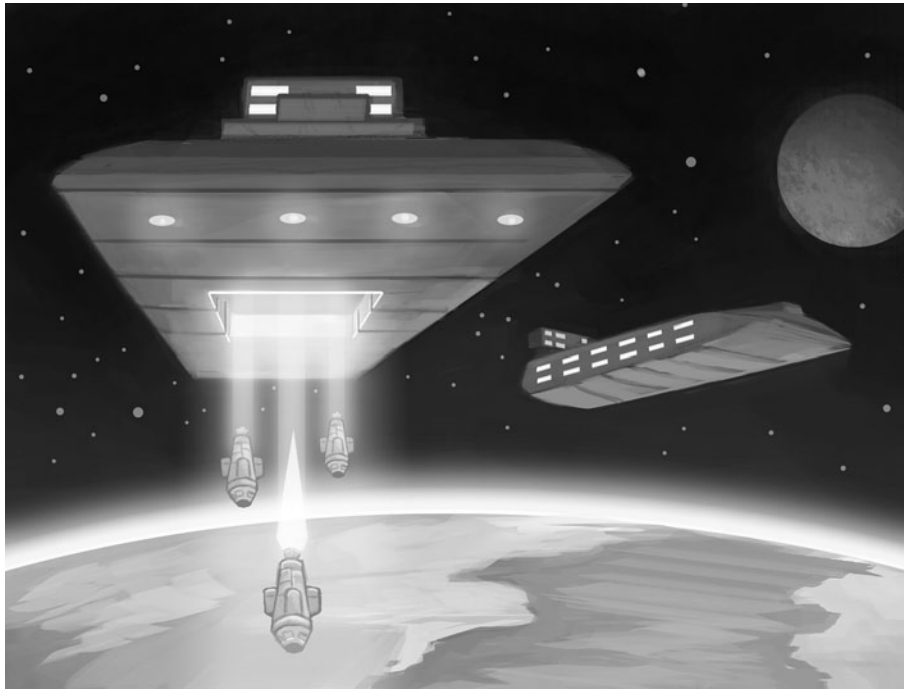
Looking at the brief examples for each topic, you'll notice how many campaign-killing problems stem from mismatched expectations or everyone in the group not being on the same page. This is one reason why the techniques in the Campaign Framework chapter are so critical to the ongoing health of most campaigns.

Real Life

Real life issues are probably responsible for killing more campaigns than any other single factor. Awkward work schedules, too many cancelled sessions, and lifestyle changes can all kill a campaign, as can myriad other real-world problems. What's important to note is that when real life kills your campaign, you didn't make any mistakes. You may be managing the greatest, most fun, and most satisfying campaign in the world and real life can still beat it into the ground.

Rules

Sometimes the rules just don't match everyone's expectations. You wanted a swashbuckling campaign full of witty repartee and lots of social intrigue, but every time there was a fight you had to break out the battle mat and spend half the night adjudicating even the most minor skirmishes.



Artist: Christopher Reach

Setting

Maybe the players never warmed to your campaign world, or they ignored vast swaths of it in favor of the "default setting" of the RPG. Maybe they were anticipating a gritty Viking campaign and didn't appreciate it when you made them "fish out of water" in an Asian-inspired setting.

Campaign

The campaign itself can also be a source of mismatches between expectations and reality. For example, the players thought they would be exploring new lands and fighting unknown monsters, but it's been six sessions and there's no end in sight because they're mired in a city-based intrigue.

Adventures

The concept was "space rangers on the frontier of the Galactic Federation," which sounded exciting, but most of the action involved resolving petty disputes between asteroid miners and agricultural colonists. It could be that everyone wasn't really on the same page at the outset, or perhaps you failed to deliver on the premise.

PCs

When PCs start to strain the believability of the campaign, it's often because you allowed a character into the game that just doesn't fit. For example, letting a new player add an elven samurai to the party in a Tolkien-inspired campaign might have raised a red flag, but maybe you didn't realize just how ill-matched that PC was to the game.

NPCs

When an NPC becomes a primary character, it's usually a problem. You should have seen the warning signs when you introduced that detective into the campaign for a one-off adventure, but now the PCs hire her every time they need to investigate something.

Players

Everyone seemed to be on board with the "Silver Age superheroes" concept, but one player just keeps bashing villains to a pulp like an Iron Age anti-hero. Her actions ended up souring you on the entire campaign.

You

You had high hopes for this campaign, but overtime at work and family issues just kept you from preparing as much as you'd hoped. Maybe the game would've run better if you weren't such a stickler for the rules, or maybe the campaign concept was good for one or two adventures but now you've run out of steam.

Danger Ahead!

Want to throw away all the goodwill you can earn by GMing a campaign? Blame your players when the campaign ends. Nothing frustrates players like being blamed for being themselves—after all, you knew their personalities going into the game, didn't you? By blaming a player for being who he is you're effectively asking him to leave the group. It's often easier to blame others instead of blaming oneself, so this is an easy trap to fall into.

In most cases when it was a player's fault that the campaign ended, it's obvious to everyone. If the group couldn't meet for three weeks because of conflicts with a specific player's schedule, she knows she was the problem. If a player sulked about playing the campaign and contributed little, then he and the other players know that; he doesn't need you calling him out. Simply stating "I need to kill this campaign because the schedule never seems to work" or "I wanted this campaign to be roleplay-heavy but I just seem to be pushing you guys from combat to combat" will get the point across without naming names.

Keep Managing!

This is important: When you kill a campaign, don't let it ruin your confidence. Everyone has off-days and off-campaigns, and many campaigns wind up being killed instead of lasting for years. Just keep your head up high and try to ensure that the mistakes that killed this campaign don't kill the next one.

Also, remember that your players appreciate you. Being the GM means taking a big risk and taking on a lot of responsibility; there's a lot of goodwill attached to that. Your players usually aren't going to consider you a bad GM just because a campaign was killed; they'll still show up for the next campaign. (It's only when they start dropping out *during* campaigns that you need to worry.)

And if you find yourself killing your next campaign, don't worry: You're in good company!

"Wow, that was great," Patti said as she put away her character sheet. "That was an incredible ending. I don't regret wrapping it up early and I was a bit bored those last few sessions, but overall the ending was fun!"

"I agree," Renaldo said. "Richard Depalm did get in some witty banter and that final fight on the castle wall was epic!"

Adam shrugged. "I still don't know why we had to end it early. I was having fun."

Gemma knew Adam wasn't happy, but he was only one-fourth of the group—and the only one who wanted to continue the campaign. Wrapping things up with an explosive conclusion still felt like it had been the right thing to do, and she was ready to move on to something else.

Artist: Daniel Wood

Chapter 16: Suspending a Campaign

"What do you mean we're ending the campaign?" Adam looked incredulous. "We've spent months getting the colonies ready to rebel against the Imperial Core and we're giving up just as the 5th Imperial Fleet is coming through the hyper-gate? That doesn't make sense!"

"Oh, I don't know," Patti said, shrugging. "My character has felt a bit left out ever since she settled her colony on Spiridos V. As far as I'm concerned, this campaign was over when she accomplished that."

"Yes, but that was just part of it," Renaldo said. "Now we have to keep the Empire from seizing it!"

Gemma shook her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to do this, but we all have pretty heavy schedules over the next two months. I want to do the final part of this campaign justice and I just don't think I can when sessions will be over a month apart—or who knows when."

When interest in a campaign is high but something happens that derails it, you may want to consider putting the campaign on hold rather than killing it. Schedule changes, group make-up, and missed sessions can destroy the momentum of any campaign, even one everyone's having fun playing. In-game events can also interrupt the flow of a campaign: too many PC changes, unanticipated actions, and spectacular failures (or successes) can make any GM want to take a break.

Suspending a campaign gives you the time you need to restart the campaign while the group moves on to something else. Unlike a dead campaign, a suspended campaign is one you can actually return to. In this chapter we'll look at why you should suspend a campaign, how to do so, and how to restart it later on.

When You Should Suspend a Campaign

The decision to suspend a campaign rather than kill it depends on your answer to one question: If everything was running smoothly, would you still want to continue the campaign? If the answer is no, then the campaign has fatal flaws and needs to die; if the answer is yes, then consider suspending the campaign.

That's not the only question you can ask, though. Here are several other questions to consider when deciding whether or not to suspend your campaign:

- **Do you have enough material to make a restart viable?**
- **Do circumstances prevent you from shortening the campaign to accommodate an ending?**
- **If the campaign's status quo changed and required a retool, is there still interest in the campaign?**
- **Are your players interested in continuing the campaign?**
- **Will you be gaming with the same players, or at least a majority of them, in the future?**
    - If not, is the campaign worth continuing with mostly new players?
- **Would you feel like something was missing if you ended the campaign now?**

If you answered no to any of the above questions, then you probably shouldn't suspend the campaign (and you should likely end it a different way). If you answered yes to the questions that are relevant to your campaign, then it's time to make plans to put the campaign on hold.

Danger Ahead!

There's a fine line between a dead campaign and a suspended campaign and it's all too easy for the latter to become the former. I have several campaigns that are technically on hold rather than dead, but I no longer have any realistic expectation that I'll pick them back up again. Some simply died in torpor, while others were replaced by their spiritual successors.

If you're serious about returning to a suspended campaign, then try to lay the groundwork as soon as you can. Once you get invested in another campaign, or several, it becomes harder to return to an old one—no matter how popular it was. That said, it's not impossible: I recently returned to a campaign that had been suspended for almost a decade!

Shortening a Campaign Isn't a Suspension

Suspending a campaign means that you're cutting it short so that you can return to it later. If you instead simply tighten up your plot threads and story arcs so that the campaign can end earlier, then you aren't suspending the campaign, you're managing the end of the campaign.

This distinction is critical in open-ended campaigns because you don't suspend an open-ended campaign so much as you end it. Open-ended campaigns generally don't have any plots to follow up on (apart from player-driven plots) and returning to the campaign is more or less the same as starting a new one. The same is true for an episodic campaign, unless there are story arcs connecting episodes that are still unresolved.

Artist: Christopher Reach

The Indefinite Suspension

Sometimes the line between suspending a campaign and just killing it can be a thin one. I know of several suspended campaigns that never got around to being rekindled and a few killed campaigns that ended up getting resurrected. This line can easily be blurred when you've lost interest but your players are enjoying the campaign; it's more palatable to them if you announce a suspension rather than killing the campaign, even if you aren't planning to resume it.

There's nothing wrong with choosing this option so long as you think there's the remotest possibility of resuming it—sometimes a few weeks off is all it takes to rekindle the flame. Be forewarned, though: If you pull this trick too often without a payoff then you risk losing credibility with your players.

How to Suspend Your Campaign

Once you've decided to suspend your campaign you have to decide how you'll manage the suspension. Unlike killing a campaign or managing its ending, you intend to return to a suspended campaign, so you probably don't want to mix up the status quo (although there are exceptions).

With that in mind, here are three ways to suspend your campaign:

- **Cold turkey**—You simply drop the campaign, even if you're right in the middle of an adventure. Sometimes real life concerns force you to use this approach; in other cases a brief campaign break or the need to make adjustments may result in a cold turkey suspension.
- **Finish the adventure**—You wrap up the current adventure and then put the game on hold. Remember that with an open-ended campaign and some episodic campaigns this is effectively a managed ending (the subject of the next chapter).
- **Season finale**—You create a final adventure that emulates the season finale of a TV series. Usually a finale includes something that changes or threatens to change the status quo; this is often the reason why you suspended the campaign in the first place. A player leaving the group or a player wishing to play a new character that doesn't fill the same niche in the party (requiring you to retool) are good reasons for a season finale.

Danger Ahead!

In my experience, an adventure left unfinished due to a cold turkey suspension tends to get forgotten when the campaign is restarted. Sometimes this happens when the GM suspended the campaign because the adventure was a problem in the first place and she couldn't figure out a way to save it. Sometimes it's simply because the adventure wasn't important in the grand scheme of things and rather than forcing the players to shake the cobwebs out of their brains, the GM decides to start fresh.

When you find yourself in this situation, make sure that you preserve any character or plot developments from the abandoned adventure. The easiest way to do this is to inform everyone that the current adventure never happened, but if some players balk at losing those developments then you'll need to work them back into the campaign.

How to Bring It Back

So several weeks, months, or even years have passed and you've decided that it's time to restart a suspended campaign. How do you manage that? Sometimes it can be as simple as picking up where you left off, but the longer you wait the greater the chance that you'll need to tweak the campaign or even quietly kill it. Prior to restarting the campaign you'll need to review your players, their characters, and the campaign setting.

Review Your Players

Do you still have the same players in your group as you did when you suspended the campaign? If one or more have left the group, would they come back for the restarted campaign? If there are new players in your group, are they interested in jumping into a campaign that the other players around the table know more about than they do?

Player interest is critical to restarting a suspended campaign, and that interest changes with time. Some players lose interest in restarting something old, especially when the "new shiny" comes along. Other players may simply have changed their play styles and no longer want to play in the style used in the campaign.

Review the PCs

When restarting a campaign you'll also want to look at your players' characters. Are they still intact? Did any of them become problematic prior to the suspension? Are you going to have to introduce new PCs to fill missing niches in the party? Are the players still interested in playing their characters as they were?

If you want to tweak or change PCs to better fit the campaign then you'll need buy-in from the affected players. No one wants to be told "We're restarting, but you can't bring back your character. Here, I've made one for you." Even if a particular PC really was the problem that caused you to suspend the campaign, take a softer approach.

Review the Setting

Finally, you should take a look at your setting and see if it still fits the campaign. Sometimes assumptions you made for a particular campaign no longer apply and you'll have to decide whether it's worth retooling to fit the changed circumstances or convincing the players to preserve the old setting while ignoring the changes.

For example, a trick I've used often is to set contemporary campaigns "twenty minutes into the future" (with apologies to Max Headroom), or about four or five years from the present day. This allows me to change political landscapes and make threats more real, as I'm not disrupting the current status quo and it's unlikely that my campaign is going to run long enough to "catch up" (at least until I suspend it). Back in the 1990s I played in a campaign set around 2005 with

President Al Gore, no War on Terror, and a distinct lack of wireless technology. Had that campaign been suspended and restarted in 2002 or 2003 it would have felt very strange.

Setting changes aren't limited to the contemporary. A fantasy game world may be altered or more fleshed out in the interim, overlaying the assumptions you'd made or introducing new elements that weren't there the first time around.

Remember too that you don't just need to worry about player interest in the setting, but also your own. GMs aren't immune to the effects of the new shiny and you may find yourself trying to shoehorn in new elements that aren't compatible with where you left off. In this case, you may be better going with a "spiritual successor" to your campaign (more on that topic in a moment).

Kicking It Off Again

Once you've decided to restart a suspended campaign, you have to decide how to re-launch it. This can be as easy as picking up where you left off or as hard as filing off serial numbers and effectively starting a new campaign. We'll look at five common approaches to managing a campaign re-launch, each of which has different advantages.

Let's Finish What We Started

This is by far the simplest method, best used when you have play continuity (largely the same group) and the time between suspension and resumption is brief. The PCs simply pick up where they left off, finishing a suspended adventure if applicable and continuing on as if the suspension never happened.

When managing this re-launch, it can be a good idea to reinforce the campaign themes and overarching plots with exposition, a "cheat sheet," or by integrating them into the first session or two. Even if you and your players think you remember everything, it's easy to forget details in the interim.

A New Dawn

With this style of re-launch, the PCs more or less continue as normal, but there's an acknowledgement that time has passed. A band of adventurers might have returned home between adventures, the police detectives may have been handling mundane cases, or the star rangers may have had a lull on the frontier. When the group reconvenes there have been some minor changes, but the party is essentially the same.

This is a good approach when something pivotal needs to change before the campaign begins anew. Perhaps a new player has joined the group, an existing player wants to change her character, or circumstances have changed the nature of the campaign. This re-launch allows you to start fresh while still resuming the campaign.

The Movie

If there were loose ends when you suspended the campaign, you can use a variant of "The Movie" from the previous chapter—a movie that wraps up the pre-suspension portion of the campaign so you can get back into the game. It's not so much a restart as a big adventure that wraps up stray plots and story arcs from back when you left off, but instead of killing the campaign it allows you to cap it off and then continue.

When planning this type of re-launch, think about how it would be presented in a movie. Don't simply pick up where you left off; restart the plot so that your players can shake off the cobwebs. This can be as simple as a mission briefing or a new plot hatched by the major Big Bad from the suspended campaign.

Movies based on TV series are often excuses for wish-fulfillment; your campaign can do this as well. If a PC has been pining for a particular NPC, have that NPC finally make a romantic gesture. If a PC has been looking for a promotion, give it to him. If a PC has always wanted a particular weapon, let her have it. You don't need to worry about the ramifications of these things because they won't matter once the adventure is over.

Movies also tend to have higher budgets and more explosions than TV episodes. For our purposes, favorite NPCs can die without repercussions, an old enemy may turn ally to help in the climax, and the PCs can be given equipment upgrades. The adventure may even go beyond the confines of the original campaign. This isn't the time for long planning sessions or retrospectives, it's time for action! Let the PCs get a little bloody; some of them may not even make it to the end.

Tales from Walt's Table

I once ran a long-running *WitchCraft* campaign that had fallen a bit off the rails. In order to keep things fresh I'd advanced the timeline and the campaign felt very different than when it had started. While discussing it with my players I came up with an idea. One of the PCs was a psychic and she'd often lamented "What good is knowing the future if I can't change it?" With that in mind, I did a retool.

The psychic PC woke up just prior to the first adventure. Suddenly, she had lots of knowledge about future events and went around "fixing" adventures before they happened, starting with saving one PC from dying and becoming a ghost. She also discovered that the changes altered the future and new events took place when they hadn't happened before. In effect, the earlier events simply became one extended precognitive dream. After a while the novelty of fixing the future died down and we were left with a campaign that more closely modeled the one we'd started with, which had been the plan all along.

Remember that you don't have to tie up every loose end, just the major ones. For the "movie," you'll want to streamline some plot threads and maybe even make connections that weren't there before for expediency's sake. The point is to make it feel like you're capping off the pre-suspension campaign.

The Retool

Sometimes you have a lot of great ideas for continuing a campaign but circumstances make resuming it unattractive. Perhaps your plotlines had gotten twisted beyond recognition, the setting changed too much, you wish you'd run a pivotal scene or plotline better, or too much time has passed and you don't think picking up where you left off is viable.

Rather than completely scrap the campaign, you can retool it. First, you need to cherry-pick elements of the campaign keeping only what you want. For example, maybe your group enjoyed playing city homicide detectives, but four cases down the line you introduced a vampire as a perpetrator and the campaign moved into urban fantasy territory. It was obvious that the players preferred the standard investigative campaign, so now you can simply "edit out" the offending adventures and continue the campaign without any supernatural elements.

Spiritual Successor

This approach isn't so much a re-launch as it is taking concepts you and your players enjoyed and rebranding them in a new campaign. For example, maybe your suspended campaign was about a group of high school students coming to terms with the fact that they had supernatural powers. Rather than re-launch those PCs, you create a new group of PCs that are high school students who suddenly learn that they're genetic experiments, all of whom have new powers.

When creating a spiritual successor you need buy-in from the players. What did they enjoy from the previous campaign that they'd like to see re-skinned in the new one? Is it enough to simply change PCs and/or locations, or do you need to change the basic premise or some plot elements, too?

It's only natural that good ideas which were never properly used will manifest themselves in your future campaigns. By recognizing this you can create new campaigns that retain much of the flavor of campaigns you've suspended.

> *It had been three months since Gemma suspended the campaign, and during that time she'd fended off several questions about why she couldn't start it up again. Now she was ready to re-launch it and finish the battle between the Imperial Core and the colonies.*
>
> *Gemma looked around the table. "Okay, when we last left off you were leading the colonial fleet to the hyper-gate, ready to intercept the 5th Imperial Fleet that's en route."*

"That's right!" Adam said. "I think we can take them, especially with the alien tech we found in the ruins on the new colony world!"

"Indeed," Gemma said, smiling. "Unfortunately, the 5th Imperial Fleet never comes out of the hyper-gate."

"Really?" Patti said. "I wonder why. Did they go to a different hyper-gate?"

Gemma continued. "As you ponder possible reasons, a small distress beacon pops out of the hyper-gate. A recorded message states that the 5th Fleet was attacked by an unknown alien force and sustained heavy casualties. No ships are likely to survive."

"They were attacked in hyper-space?" Renaldo said, his eyebrows going up. "Maybe the aliens sensed our use of their tech? This changes everything!"

Indeed it does, Gemma thought behind her mischievous smile. Indeed it does.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Chapter 17: The Managed Ending

GEMMA said, "So you defeated the two-headed dragon and took its treasure. Well done, group!"

"I can't wait to get back to town and upgrade my magic armor," Adam said, practically salivating.

"Yes, well, unfortunately this is the end of the campaign," Gemma said as she closed her books.

Patti said, "What? Really?" She looked surprised. "Shouldn't we have some kind of closure?"

Gemma was confused. "From the beginning I told you all that this would be an episodic campaign. I decided to end it after this one."

"Whatever you say," Renaldo said, crestfallen. "It just feels like after all this time the characters deserved to go out with more of a bang. I feel like we're just being left hanging."

While all campaigns must end, it's a truly special experience when you get to end a campaign on your terms. If you're running a closed campaign, then this is the big payoff. The PCs have accomplished what you hoped they'd accomplish, the galaxy has been saved, and it's time to move on to another campaign.

If you're running an open-ended campaign, then you likely don't have an ending in mind beyond "We'll keep playing as long as we're having fun." While this is a laudable goal, I've found that players tend to like real endings, especially when their characters are given a chance to go out with a bang or take risks that have real weight. As Neil Young (and Def Leppard and Nirvana and the Kurgan) once said, "It's better to burn out than to fade away."

To close out *Odyssey* we're going to look at how to manage the end of your campaign and bring it to a deeply satisfying conclusion.

Why Should You Conclude Your Campaign?

There are many reasons to consider concluding a campaign. If you're running a closed campaign, the most obvious reason is that it's time; the planned ending has arrived. There are reasons you might end a closed campaign early, however, like wanting to wrap it up before a player has to move away (a move that wasn't in the works when you started the campaign).

Open-ended campaigns are another matter. While it's easy to spot signs that it's time to end the campaign, you may be resistant to doing so if the campaign is moving along nicely and you think you can absorb required changes into the game. Even if everything is going great, however, you're going to want to end the campaign sometime. Maybe the characters and situations seem stagnant and

A Lesson from Star Trek®

Star Trek: the Next Generation is probably my favorite series in the Star Trek® franchise, but the series as we know it should have ended at the beginning of the fourth season with the conclusion of the two-part cliffhanger episode "The Best of Both Worlds." This episode was exciting: A powerful enemy rips Starfleet to shreds; a new officer complains that Commander Riker is in her way for advancement; and the captain is kidnapped and converted into a Borg emissary. Of course, everything was all sorted by the next episode and the *Enterprise* crew could go on to new adventures—except that that doesn't make sense.

Thirty-nine ships were destroyed; presumably many senior officers were lost with them. During the rebuilding, would Starfleet really leave the senior staff of the *Enterprise* intact? Wouldn't it be career suicide for Commander Riker to decline a second command? Wouldn't Lt. Commander La Forge's expertise be tapped to build new starships? Wouldn't Starfleet be worried that Captain Picard might now be a double agent and assign him to a post where he could be monitored? Wouldn't the Federation's neighbors take advantage of the weakened Starfleet and poach a few colony worlds or push boundaries?

If *Star Trek: The Next Generation* were a campaign, "The Best of Both Worlds" should have been a campaign-ending event with dramatic consequences for the main cast. But it wasn't a campaign, it was a successful TV series, so those events became "just another day on the *Enterprise*."

unchanging, or you want to write an adventure that has big consequences and, regardless of the outcome, you aren't sure if you can return to the status quo. Or maybe a PC crosses a line that makes continuing the campaign as if it never happened less satisfying.

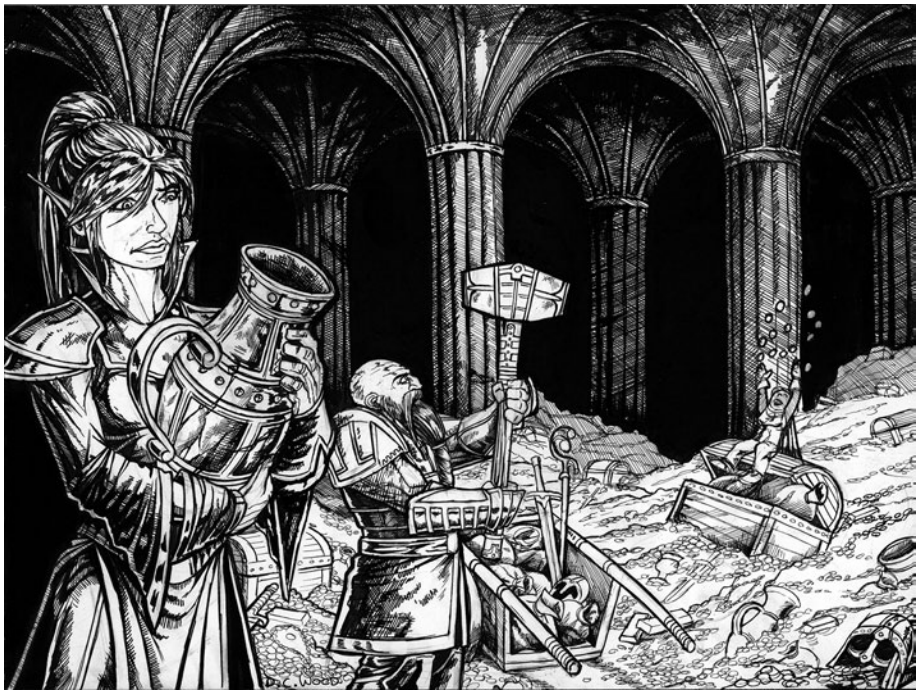
Any time something causes you to wonder if the campaign can continue, you should start managing the end of the campaign.

How to Bring Your Campaign to a Conclusion

Now that you've decided to end your campaign, how do you go about it? It could be as easy as letting the group know that the next adventure will be the last, but it's usually more satisfying to come up with something special to conclude the campaign. Here are some good questions to ask yourself about concluding your campaign:

- **How much time do you have?**—Are you or another GM ready to step in with a new campaign? If not, how much lead time do you need?
- **Are there any villains your players love to hate?**—If your players want another crack at a particularly loathsome adversary (or several) this is a great time to bring her back.
- **Are there loose plot threads to tie up?**—It's inevitable that some plots will fall by the wayside, whether they were poorly conceived ideas, threads that got dropped, or things you meant to pick up later but never did. It's awesome when you can find a way to work them into the conclusion, making it look like you'd planned it all along.
- **Is there something that a player has been dying to explore?**—Maybe one of your players in an occult campaign really thought it would be fun to have his PC turn into a vampire, even though that would guarantee an exit from the campaign. Maybe a player was interested in having her character start a relationship with an NPC, but you were afraid to break the status quo. Now's the time.
- **Do you want to do something special without worrying about the consequences?**—When brainstorming campaign ideas I often discard ideas that would be "campaign changers," like having a valued NPC be murdered or blowing up the PCs' starship. Big events like that are perfect for the finale of a campaign.

Assuming you have time, you don't have to throw all of your ideas into a single adventure; it's okay to spread the ending out across several adventures. This is especially useful if you plan on having any big plot twists. Having a seemingly unimpeachable police captain suddenly turn out to be a corrupt cop in the final adventure will feel off, but if you lay some groundwork in the three or four adventures leading up to the finale then it will feel perfectly natural.



Artist: Daniel Wood

Give Every PC Their Due

The movie *The Return of the King* is sometimes ridiculed for having too many endings, but when you're ending a campaign that sort of approach makes sense. You want to give each PC a proper send-off by hinting at her life after the campaign. Maybe a character receives a promotion, settles down and gets married, is assigned to a new post, or even just walks off into the sunset, hinting at new adventures just over the horizon.

Not all characters need a life-changing send-off. Maybe the crusty homicide detective ends the game with a new partner that echoes (possibly in reverse) his relationship with his old partner. Maybe the crew of the starship simply heads back into the outer reaches of the galaxy for further adventures. Maybe the vampire hunters have finally wiped out the vampire menace, but now zombies have begun to appear.

This applies to important NPCs, as well. Most campaigns feature several major NPCs, even if they're just retainers or background characters, who made an impact throughout the campaign. Each of them should be given a proper send-off.

If you're running a campaign with a large cast, you probably don't want to have a closing scene for each major NPC; your players will revolt long before you get to the send-off for NPC #7. Focus only on those NPCs that had a significant impact on the PCs' lives (if an NPC contributed in almost every adventure, then she probably qualifies).

You can also hardwire some NPC send-offs into the adventure proper. Maybe the police captain is having a retirement party or the commodore of the space station has received news of his promotion to a post back on Earth. Perhaps the local baroness offers a PC knight's squires employment in her castle as full knights. Maybe a PC's son enrolls in college or accepts a job in a different city.

Danger Ahead!

Whenever you manage the end of a campaign there's always a chance of "buyer's remorse." Maybe the campaign had been getting stale but the action-packed finale sparks renewed interest, or a new NPC you brought in to help wrap things up has become so intriguing that the players want to explore her background. Maybe real life has deep-sixed the next campaign and you now have an eight-week window to fill.

When this happens, you have a serious choice to make. Do you stick to your guns and end the campaign, or do you allow the campaign to continue? Neither answer is right or wrong; only you can assess whether continuing the campaign is a viable option. Keep in mind that depending on your choices when managing the ending, you may have introduced new elements that will have to be addressed. A player might feel betrayed if she went along with your plan to walk off her character in the finale only to have the rest of the group continue new adventures, or you might have permanently changed a prominent NPC's role in a way that would be difficult to ignore in the continued campaign.

I once capped off a long-running *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*® campaign with a big, potentially world-changing adventure. While my players had long thought that the PCs had become too powerful to be enjoyable (indeed, they were semi-retired while we ran with their descendants/replacements), they really enjoyed the adventure. As a result, I changed my plans to end the campaign. Unfortunately, without a strong mini-campaign that played to their abilities, I found it difficult to manage. The campaign quickly fell apart and in retrospect I'd have been better off ending the campaign as originally planned.

Conversely, I once started a *WitchCraft* campaign with the intent of simply trying out the system for a few adventures; I even wrote the seventh adventure as the campaign finale. However, as we played we realized that there were a lot more stories to tell with these characters that wouldn't be impacted by what happened in the seventh adventure. The campaign continued for 44 more adventures.

Sowing Seeds for Future Campaigns

While it's usually best to tie up as many loose ends as you can when managing the end of a campaign, you may want to hint at future campaigns, especially if there's still interest in the campaign world. When sowing seeds for future campaigns you'll need to walk a fine line between hinting at something for the future and presenting something that the PCs will want to deal with now.

Throw a Party

One fun way to end a campaign, and a good way to show your appreciation of your players for sticking with it, is to hold a party. After all, you finished according to plan—why not commemorate the occasion? A party is also a nice way to reminisce about the highlights of the campaign and gain some casual feedback about what to fix or do more of in your next campaign.

Properly planned, you don't need to spend a fortune: a store-bought cake, take-out pizza, or an extra-long hoagie (oops, my Philadelphia roots are showing—hero, submarine, or torpedo) will do in a pinch. You can also deck out the play area with party supplies from your local dollar or party store. Download some appropriate music and you're good to go.

Another fun thing to do is to give your players something to take home. You could make and print out a certificate, or you could have custom dice and T-shirts made for the group.

A word of caution: Some players will want to split right after the game is over rather than kibitz over cake and ice cream. This can be disappointing if you put a lot of work into preparing the party. Rather than set yourself up for disappointment, schedule the party within your last adventure or at the beginning of the next session, before launching into the next campaign (if you're switching GMs then you'll need to get the consent of the new GM before stealing half of her session).

An Affair to Remember

One of the best wrap parties I've ever heard about involved two of my fellow authors from Gnome Stew, Don Mappin and Martin Ralya. Don had run a long *Stargate SG-1* campaign and the final adventure spilled over into an additional session. After Don wrapped up the first part of the finale, he kicked the players out of his dining room for a few minutes while he set up a cake decorated with a Stargate. He also had SG-4 hats and patches made for each player (as that was their group's designation) along with commemorative plaques he had printed and framed. It was a great surprise for all of the players.

"WHAT an awesome conclusion!" Renaldo said, grinning. "We saved the kingdom!"

"It got you killed," Adam said. "You didn't have to dive into the dragon's maw with that alchemical powder keg."

"That dragon almost slaughtered the royal family and took the scepter of power," Renaldo said. "Besides, Prenda and Ah Nold were both hurting badly. If we'd done it together, I'd probably be the only one still standing. Richard would never stand for that, even at the cost of his own life."

"It was a pretty cinematic scene," Patti said, nodding in agreement. "I can't believe the three of us managed to hold off the undead horde as long as we did."

Gemma smiled. She'd never intended one last big adventure, but she was happy she'd pulled out all the stops on this one. Everyone seemed happy. Still, she had one last surprise for them: She wheeled into the kitchen and came back with specially-ordered cupcakes.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Phil's Conclusion

As I neared the end of my writing for *Odyssey*, my mind was racing to jam more and more topics into the first draft. My editor was eyeing my draft, somewhat over-long, with his carving knife at the ready. The topic of campaigns is a broad one, and one that could easily fill several volumes. *Odyssey* has a specific purpose, though, and that is to help GMs manage their campaigns.

It's not the complete treatise on GMing campaigns, nor could it really be; that topic is vast and always evolving. For that reason we're fortunate that the podcasting and blogging communities keep this discussion progressing forward. The focus of this book was introducing GMs to a set of active processes that occur outside the actual running of gaming sessions, processes that can be used to grow and maintain campaigns.

I am a firm believer that when one understands and can name the underlying processes that make up an activity, then one can focus on them and improve them like any skill. My goal was to break down those processes and expose them to you, to show you that the things you're likely already doing at an instinctual level are tangible and improvable skills. I hope that *Odyssey* has done just that.

Much of the advice Walt and I gave you will have to be made your own. You'll have to adapt it to your personality, gaming style, and group. Your group will know what questions are important enough to go into your campaign framework. Only you know what subplots will best engage your players. Only your group will know when it's time to end a campaign, and how quickly it needs to end.

Campaigns are special. They can be hard work, and they can be frustrating, but they're still special. The most memorable times I have had in this hobby have been during campaigns where my group and I have been deeply connected to the setting, characters, and story. I can recall scenes from my best campaigns with the same clarity as my favorite movies and books.

Campaigns are worth the hard work, but I hope that this book will help you manage your campaigns more efficiently so that they are not only successful but become campaigns that you remember for years to come.

Walt's Conclusion

Perhaps it's in keeping with the theme of this book—the journey, the odyssey—that I was on a personal odyssey while drafting my sections of *Odyssey*. I reached back to the dawn of my gaming career, when I first opened the Moldvay edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons® Basic Set* and learned to play under my first GM. I pulled stories from various points in my GMing career, many of which found their way into my cunningly named "Tales from Walt's Table" boxes. I recalled the many pitfalls and traps that I've endured along the way as both player and GM and signposted them in my "Danger Ahead!" boxes. I mused over campaigns that I've finished in the last year as well as ones I hadn't thought much about in over a decade. In many ways this was more than just a labor of love, it was a personal journey.

And with all journeys it must come to an end. It got difficult along the way; at first the journey seemed daunting, next I had the end in sight, then I realized that finishing was going to take a bit more work than I thought, and finally I had to step away and end it. In many ways it mapped perfectly to my experiences in managing campaigns. What I've really learned, though, is that the journey to being a better GM never ends.

My hope is that this book helps you on your journey, whether you're a prep-heavy or improvisational GM. Much of this advice may seem self-evident, but sometimes it helps to see it in print and know that the writing comes from the authors' combined 60-plus years of GMing experience. We hope that you find this book to be useful and that you'll reach for it whenever you need inspiration to get you over that next hurdle.

I'd like to leave you where I ended my part of the introduction. Your odysseys are special because they're times shared with friends. I sincerely hope that this book helps you make the most of that quality time that's so often hard to find in our modern world, and that you don't waste those precious moments sweating the small stuff.

Good gaming!

About The Artwork

This is John Arcadian, the art director for *Odyssey*, and I'm here to tell you about this book's artwork.

There are three separate "tracks" of intertwining art in *Odyssey*. Each track was undertaken by one of our talented artists and each tells a different part of the same story, that of a group of gamers going through the journey of their game and coming to a successful conclusion at the end of the campaign. One track illustrates the gamers, another illuminates their fantasy campaign, and the final track shows their sci-fi campaign.

The Gamers

Drawn by Matt Morrow, the gamers track follows Gemma, our GM, who has a great idea for a campaign she would love to run. She puts this idea before Patti, Renaldo, and Adam, who she has gamed with before—although she's never GMed for them. The group begins creating their characters while Gemma considers how best to fit them into her story.

Disputes occur and some characters don't make it to the end, but Gemma navigates the ups and downs of the campaign and successfully reaches the final session. She gleefully imagines the great things she has in store for her players and they all celebrate a successful game, remembering and retelling their great journey.

Fantasy

The fantasy track, drawn by Daniel Wood, shows in-game events in Gemma's group's fantasy campaign. In this campaign, Adam plays Ah Nold the dwarven warrior, Patti plays Prenda the elven magi, and Renaldo digs into the personality of Richard Depalm, a swashbuckler with an appetite for romance. Gemma rolls up her own character as a gnomish rogue, Galena, who sometimes joins the party for a little adventure.

The party investigates a murder, tracing the killer to a snake cult from a far-off land. Traveling the world and facing numerous dangers, they defeat the cult leader and his pet but soon discover greater evils deeper within the ruined city where the cult resides. Pressing onward, the group defeats an ancient evil thanks to Richard Depalm's sacrifice, and claims a great treasure.

Sci-Fi

In the sci-fi art track drawn by Christopher Reach, the group plays a different type of game, one focused on space travel and intrigue. A colony has been attacked by aliens and the PCs find themselves in charge of the evacuation and survival plan. Adam plays Axel, a human security officer always ready for a fight; Patti takes on the role of the colony's scientist leader, Prentiss, who uses technology to research and solve problems; and Renaldo plays Rav, an alien with psychic powers who is full of self-doubt but always curious about the world around him. Gemma plays the ship's AI, the General Automated Intelligence & Logistics System or GAILOS, as an NPC.

The PCs search for a new world in the depths of space, far from the Imperial Core, hoping to start fresh. The party is pursued and their ship crashes on a nearby planet, as does one of the attackers' ships. Finding the planet hostile and full of dangers, they make an effort to contact reinforcements who can help them retake their colony. In the end they stand victorious, having defended the colony they worked so hard to establish.

Artist: Christopher Reach

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Contributor Bios

Odyssey is Engine Publishing's fourth book, and for a fourth time I had the opportunity to work with ridiculously talented people. Take a moment to check out their other work, and if you're wondering whether you should hire them for a project of your own, the answer is *yes*. Many thanks to everyone who helped make *Odyssey* a reality; you rock on toast. –Martin Ralya

John Arcadian stumbled into the RPG industry back in 2003 because of a hobby project. It went further than expected and John is now a gaming blogger, CEO of a small-press gaming company, and freelancer who is proud of his contributions to the gaming industry. John lives in an idyllic, rural part of Mississippi with his girlfriend and a 3-legged cat named Grendel. Rumors that he only wears kilts are mostly unfounded, but entirely true.

Walt Ciechanowski wasn't deterred by *Mazes and Monsters* and has been a game master for over 30 years. Forced to "play outside" during his early years, Walt has developed a Wing It style that relies heavily on roleplay. A LARP survivor, he's been working in the RPG industry since 2003 and is currently a line developer for Cubicle 7 Entertainment. Walt lives in Springfield, Pennsylvania with his wife Helena and three children, Leianna, Stephen, and Zoeanna.

Robert M. Everson, aka "Spenser," is a 30th Level Proofreader for the bloggers at Gnome Stew. He's been gaming for over 30 years, mostly as a player, and wishes he had this book during his previous forays behind the GM screen. This is his third collaboration with Engine Publishing, having previously worked with them on *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game* and *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep*.

Darren Hardy is a longtime lover of the arts, design, gaming, and the great outdoors. A Michigan native and thalassophile, he often finds himself drawn to water, either paddling through it, swimming in it, walking near it, or drinking it. He enjoys spending quality time with family and friends, playing board games, and cooking interesting foods. His life's goal is to use his skill set to help others reach their goals.

Ian Keller is a first-time proofreader for Engine Publishing. He's been gaming for about 12 years, mostly as a schemer or book-reader rather than a player or GM. A long-time admirer of Gnome Stew, he is excited to be part of this project.

Avery Liell-Kok is a painter and artist. A longtime RPG player and character doodler with a fine art and art history background, she got bored of illustrating all of her fellow gamers' games for free and began seeking gainful employment. She lives Indiana with her fiancé.

Matt Morrow has been creating illustrations professionally since 1996. He worked for a computer magazine as an in-house illustrator until 1999, where he crafted hundreds of editorial illustrations. Since then, Matt has been juggling being a stay at home dad with 3 great kids and working on freelance projects in various areas such as newspapers, children's books, and RPGs, drawing subjects from hedgehogs to zombies. You can find a portfolio of his work at www.mz9000.carbonmade.com.

Martin Ralya is a writer, publisher, editor, blogger, and GMing geek. A GM since 1989 (with a pallor to match), he started freelancing for the RPG industry in 2004, blogging about GMing on Treasure Tables in 2005 and on Gnome Stew in 2008, and founded Engine Publishing in 2009. Martin lives in Utah with his amazing wife and daughter, Alysia and Lark, in a nest made from books. He laughs whenever someone mentions "free time."

Christopher Reach has been developing illustrations and designs for science fiction and fantasy games, web applications, and businesses since 2009. He spends his downtime biking, gaming, coding, and reading from his home in exotic northern New Jersey. To learn more about his work or contact the artist please visit his website (*www.Christopher-Reach.com*).

Don't let the tough-guy image fool you; **Kurt Schneider** really does have a soft nerdy core. He's been gaming since the first time disco was cool, writes for the game mastering blog GnomeStew.com, regularly contributes to a number of gaming forums and mailing lists (where he is commonly known as "Telas"), and is a contributing author for Engine Publishing's books *Eureka* and *Masks*.

Phil Vecchione has dedicated over 30 years to sitting behind the screen and tossing dice with friends. He is known for his system promiscuity and looking for the "next great campaign." To feed his gaming addiction away from the table he is one of the writers for Gnome Stew and an author for Engine Publishing. In those moments when he is not gaming he is a husband, father, and project manager.

As long as **Daniel Wood** can remember there was nothing he loved more than drawing people in armor and monsters. So he was quite excited to find out that someone was paid to draw those pictures in his favorite books. Now he lives in Richmond, Virginia, still drawing people in armor and monsters, but getting paid for it.

Odyssey

Do you ever wish you had a guide to help make running ongoing campaigns easier and more fun? Then you need ***Odyssey: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management***—to our knowledge, the first system-neutral book solely dedicated to the art of managing campaigns.

Written by award-winning authors—and veteran game masters—Phil Vecchione and Walt Ciechanowski, *Odyssey* is jam-packed with in-depth advice on starting, managing, and ending campaigns. Whether you're an old hand or are new to game mastering, you'll find a wealth of tips and techniques you can put to immediate use in *Odyssey*.

Odyssey's authors bring unique perspectives to the topic of campaign management. Phil is a project manager and wrote *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep*. Walt is an improvisational game master with years of experience in the tabletop RPG industry. Both write for the award-winning game mastering blog GnomeStew.com, and they collaborated on *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game* and *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters*.

Odyssey is full of practical guidance on campaign management for almost any RPG:

- A guide to starting a new campaign, from coming up with the initial concept to running a smooth first session
- Tips on structuring stories, handling problem players, and making your campaign thrive
- Advice on actively managing every element of your campaign—stories, characters, players, risk, and change—while avoiding common pitfalls
- Examples of how every aspect of campaign management looks when handled well or badly
- How to end campaigns on a high note, including what to avoid

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