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CATEGORIZATION OF INTERACTIVE STORYTELLER TECHNIQUES IN LIVE ROLEPLAY

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ABSTRACT

CATEGORIZATION OF INTERACTIVE STORYTELLER TECHNIQUES IN LIVE ROLEPLAY

By

Amanda Flowers

One of the major challenges in video game writing and in computerized interactive drama is composing an interactive story that follows an interesting narrative arc, while allowing user interaction to guide the flow of narrative. This thesis compares the work of a story director program in an interactive drama to that of the "gamemaster," the authority figure at the head of a pen and paper roleplaying game. Four gamemasters were observed in great detail running roleplaying games in different genres. From these observations, a taxonomy of storytelling techniques for use in interactive environments has been developed and categorized. The paper discusses each technique the gamemasters used, why it works, and gives concrete examples of the techniques in action, as well as discussing the most commonly observed problems that will cause difficulty in interactive storytelling environments.

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1. Introduction

As computer games become increasingly sophisticated, there is a movement to create a stronger element of narrative in gaming. One of the newest fields in generating narrative-based gaming is the creation of interactive drama. The goal of interactive drama is to create an exciting but participatory narrative that can be interacted with and altered by players in a computational space.

The ideal example of this is Star Trek's *Holodeck*. The Holodeck is an immersive computerized, 3D digital world in which the user can see, hear, touch, and even taste. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray focuses her writing about the holodeck specifically on a type of virtual experience called a Holonovel (1998). These holo"novels," as played by Captain Janeway on the series *Star Trek: Voyager*, are an excellent example of an interactive drama. In the virtual world, Janeway plays a particular defined character role, and interacts with other synthetic characters in a dynamically generated story. She is free to explore the world, interact with the other characters, and do anything in that fantasy world that serves to a dramatic arc and a story that is both interesting, and participatory. The world around Janeway structures itself like a novel; characters that Janeway meets are woven in to an overall story which both she and the computer are creating.

The holonovel is an example of what some authors see as a potential direction for stronger story elements in common video games. Video games frequently depend on interaction with computer avatars in ways which involve, as Chris Crawford explains, "precise hand-eye coordination, puzzle solution, and resource management skills" (2005). Many traditional video and computer games have rich and engaging stories that fit

classical narrative structures. These stories may be beautifully constructed, and gradually told in the context of user interaction, but the player of the game has very few points of interaction where the story can be meaningfully changed (Glassner 2004). The story and character development typically occurs in the games' non-interactive sequences, while the actual game focuses on matters not related to story such as battle with enemies. In this sense, there is a strong narrative, but the narrative is being told to the player, while the actual game interactivity encompasses something else. Crawford disparages this type of interactive narrative, calling it a "constipated story" (2005). The game provides the player with a form of story which is pre-written, but interspersed with puzzle or combat sequences; instead of the sequences adding to the story, they serve as obstacles to access the next story unit and slow the process of storytelling down.

Crawford defines interactivity as "A cyclic process between two or more active agents in which each agent alternately listens, thinks, and speaks." In context, he refers to the listening, thinking, and speaking, as metaphorical, meaning that a computer substitutes "processes input" for "listening," but the results are generally the same. A conversation is interactive if both participants are listening and responding to what they have heard. A computer game is interactive if the game "listens," by allowing player input, "thinks," by processing that input, and "speaks," by showing the results of that input in a way that is a meaningful response to the user. In order for a valuable interaction to occur, both agents involved in the interaction must show signs that they are responding to one another in appropriate ways. In order to provide a "deep" interaction, the method of interaction must engage the user in a profound way (2005). Narrative,

being a fundamental of human experience, is one way to engage the user, but balancing both interactivity and narrative can be challenging.

As Young and Riedel write, "A central issue in the development of effective and engaging interactive narrative environments is the balance between coherence and control" (2003). The users can have some control over the narrative experience, which is the interactive part of interactive drama. If the user has too much control, the story may suffer in coherence. If they have too little control, the interactivity element is lost. A successful interactive drama such as the holodeck would have to create a good story, and include the key elements of interactivity, maintaining a perfect balance between the two.

An often-overlooked, but important, parallel to the interactive drama is the "Live Roleplaying Game," or Tabletop RPG, genre of gaming. This type of game involves the participant of a group of players and a leadership figure called the *gamemaster*, whose role is the focus of this thesis. The players in the game all choose a character role to portray; with the gamemaster, they develop a story that involves their characters, aspiring to create a narrative that is interesting for all participants. This hobby lacks the high technology aspects of the holodeck or even video gaming, and uses in their stead pen, paper, dice, and other props such as miniature figures for character representation. Roleplaying games are sold in print form, using instruction manuals to provide a set of rules for conflict resolution, and generation of character and story. Players play these games by sitting around a table; they are part board game, part impromptu theater. The highest authority in the game is given to the gamemaster. Acting as a referee, the gamemaster has the final say on all conflicts between players of his or her game. Acting

as a storyteller, the gamemaster also has the highest burden of responsibility toward story creation and player enjoyment (Wizards 2003).

Many approaches to interactive drama use what is called a *story director agent* to mediate story (Mateas 1997). The gamemaster, in tabletop play, is the agent that fulfills a similar role with regard to story mediation in play. Both a story director program and a gamemaster have the responsibility to create a narrative path for users to follow and to guide them down that path. The gamemaster has a particular story he or she wants to tell, but also has to leave this story open to interaction. The gamemaster and story director both have the responsibility to keep the story flowing and to have it contain an interesting climax. This parallel has been recognized by other authors, though a quantitative study on the techniques of gamemasters at work has not been previously done (Louchart and Aylett 2003, Magerko 2006).

The goal of this thesis is to examine the gamemaster at work. The methodologies that a gamemaster uses, in balancing control and coherence of story with the freedom of his players to interact, has much to teach about how future story director programs can work together with their players to create richly interactive narrative in games. The strategies used by a gamemaster in creating interactive story can be categorized and summarized from the observation of gamemasters during play.

2. Related Work

2.1.Narrative Theory

The exact structure of what makes a good narrative is something many scholars have analyzed for their entire careers. Many types of increasingly complex stories have

been developed in story and on the screen. It is most appropriate for the domain of roleplaying games, however, to look at the simpler forms of story, particularly those that are heroic, resemble fairy tales or folk tales, or transfer well in to science fiction.

Joseph Campbell was one of the first authors to study story structure extensively. He identified a type of story structure called the "monomyth" which exists in many different cultures. In his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, he outlined its underlying principles. These tales almost always begin with the hero being called to action, and a short initial refusal, followed by a meeting with a mentor to show him the way. The hero of the story then undergoes a series of trials, before being reborn and emerging triumphantly. In the monomyth, certain types of story events take place in a certain order, and there are also a few optional story threads such as temptation by evil (Campbell 1968). Primarily a coming-of-age story, the structure generally applies to epic stories and has many parallels in Hollywood and video games as well as classical literature such as the epic poetry of ancient Greece. Glassner analyzes the monomyth structure by exploring the overall parallels the structure has to the story of the movie *The Matrix* as well as the video game *The Legend of Zelda*. The monomyth structure is also frequently compared to the original *Star Wars* movie trilogy, which fits Campbell's outline very well (2004).

A Russian author, Vladimir Propp, did extensive analysis of story structure, studying the construction of hundreds of Russian folktales. Dissecting each story into its basic parts, the Proppian structure divided these folktales in to basic segments as well as identifying the character roles common to the tales, such as the Hero and Villain. Proppian structure has a good deal of variance, but includes a generally male protagonist

who is sent on a quest. He, or she in some cases, is given helpful items by a Donor character, defeats a trial with strength or cunning, then returns home to receive a reward or the branding of a hero. This branding is similar to Campbell's structure's transformation or rebirth. The hero of a Proppian tale may also have to unmask a false or deceitful hero before getting his just reward (Propp 1968).

2.2. Interactive Drama

An Interactive Drama is a type of computer game characterized by both interactivity, and a strong dramatic narrative. As opposed to typical computer games, interactive drama focuses on creating a story with deep character interaction and development. The experience is much like being a character in a play, save that the dialogue developed by the player is impromptu and the player does not perform any particular script.

While technological strides help to made to create more believable and lifelike computer agents and increase language processing and voice recognition, the story script itself provides a unique challenge to developers in the medium. The story must be coherent and adhere to good storytelling principles, while at the same time be flexible enough to allow a true real-time user interactivity. Finding this balance can be the most challenging part of ID for a designer. Current successful interactive dramas have varying strengths and weaknesses.

Façade, developed by Mateas and Andrew Stern, is one of the most advanced examples of Interactive Drama today (Dahlen 2005). It integrates two artifical intelligence characters, called *believable agents*; natural language processing for

interactivity; and a complex story script organized to keep a narrative structure. The story, designed as if it were a short play, follows the rocky marriage of an arguing couple. The player controls the actions of an old friend who is visiting the couple, Trip and Grace, in their home for the first time in many years. Using a natural-language interpreter, Façade allows the player to interact with both Trip and Grace, the game's artificial chracters. The game tracks the player's affinity toward both characters by watching how the player reacts to their dialogue. It uses a system of story "mix-ins," small sections of dialogue which can increase or decrease tension and be dropped in at any time; and dramatic "beats," larger units of story; to keep the pace of the drama, adding new story elements in a naturalistic way with the flow of the character conversation (Mateas 2002). The goal of helping a failing marriage is very different than the usual video game goal of defeating enemies or scoring points. Additionally, deciding to work to save the marriage is up to the player; Mateas sees this as only one possibility, trying to encourage multiple plays of the game and using the dramatic structure as a free-form environment to create different emerging stories rather than seeing saving the marriage as a victory condition (Dahlen 2005). This is an interactive drama; the story is the main focus of play, rather than the goals common to most video games where story is a secondary concern.

The OPIATE engine, created by Chris Fairclough, takes a different approach, by utilizing the Proppian narrative system to create a more folk-tale-like arc for an interactive story. The player in OPIATE becomes a protagonist that who meet characters that fulfill many of Propp's defined character roles. The system attempts to adhere closely to Propp's narrative structure. It redefines which character is to perform which of

Propp's non-hero roles each time it is played, so the actual events of the interactive story vary each time. The player of the scenario can do what is immediately asked, or explore various interactive "subplots" designed into OPIATE's 3D world (Fairclough & Cunningham 2004).

IDTension, a drama engine developed by Nicolas Szilas, utilizes a simple dramatic structure defining characters, goals, and the characters' obstacles to reach those goals. Stories developed with this engine are set up around a theme that the author wishes to develop, in the form of a moral stance on an issue. A sample story involves a murder, where the protagonist, played by the user, believes his wife may be accused, by a witness, of being at the scene of the crime. The player can, for example, choose to kill the witness, or to buy him off (2003).

Several things stand in common among the successful interactive drama systems. All of these systems have character agents, programs with the purpose of developing character personalities and controlling those characters in believable ways. An interactive drama system often also has a story agent, sometimes called the drama manager or *story director* as above, which develops a narrative structure around the sequential events in the game. The story director provides the overall story to an otherwise unrelated event sequence. For example, in IDTension, if the user tries to reach his goal too quickly, another obstacle will be generated by the program to intervene (Szilas 2003). Mateas cites the story director in Façade as being responsible for most of the program's narrative decisions, such as when to move on to the next phase of the story (2002). The story director acts independently of the character agents, but provides them with instructions, creating what is called semi-autonomy, where characters generally

behave in autonomous or self-guided ways unless the story director specifically tells them otherwise. In Facade, the interactive agents behave according to their own personalities and goals, but also get instructions from the drama management program, which occasionally compels them to act in a way that moves the story forward (Mateas 2002). The story generation system Universe uses an approach that is very similar to the one employed by Dungeons and Dragons and similar games, assigning numerical statistics to the various aspects of agent personality, and having the agents generally act according to those statistics unless otherwise instructed by the story director agent (Lebowitz 1984).

2.3. Interactive Fiction

An early type of video game created for the computer is the text adventure, or interactive fiction. The original Adventure, one of the first of these interactive fictions, was a text-based game where the user made decisions while traversing through a dungeon-like maze. User interaction was driven by typed commands such as "pick up wand," and "go north" (Kent 2001). The game owed quite a bit to Dungeons and Dragons when it was first produced, evident in its setting which was the standard fantasy dungeon, and the role that the player played which was an "adventurer" within that dungeon seeking fortune (Aarseth 1997). Later entries to the interactive fiction genre included the Zork series. Each interactive fiction endeavored to tell an interesting story with the participation of the player. These interactive stories told fairy tales that the user participated in, but occasionally bridged with puzzle-solving in the typical video game structure.

Text adventure games became less popular when graphics became easier and more efficient to develop. With that change the emphasis on story was also effected, as

creating games based on simpler interactions was easier for these graphical systems (DeMaria and Wilson 2002). This change in focus results in the type of video game story most prominent today, where the user may be fed a complete and interesting story in a serial method, but that user has very few points where that story can be altered by his or her actions (Crawford 2003).

3. Roleplaying Games

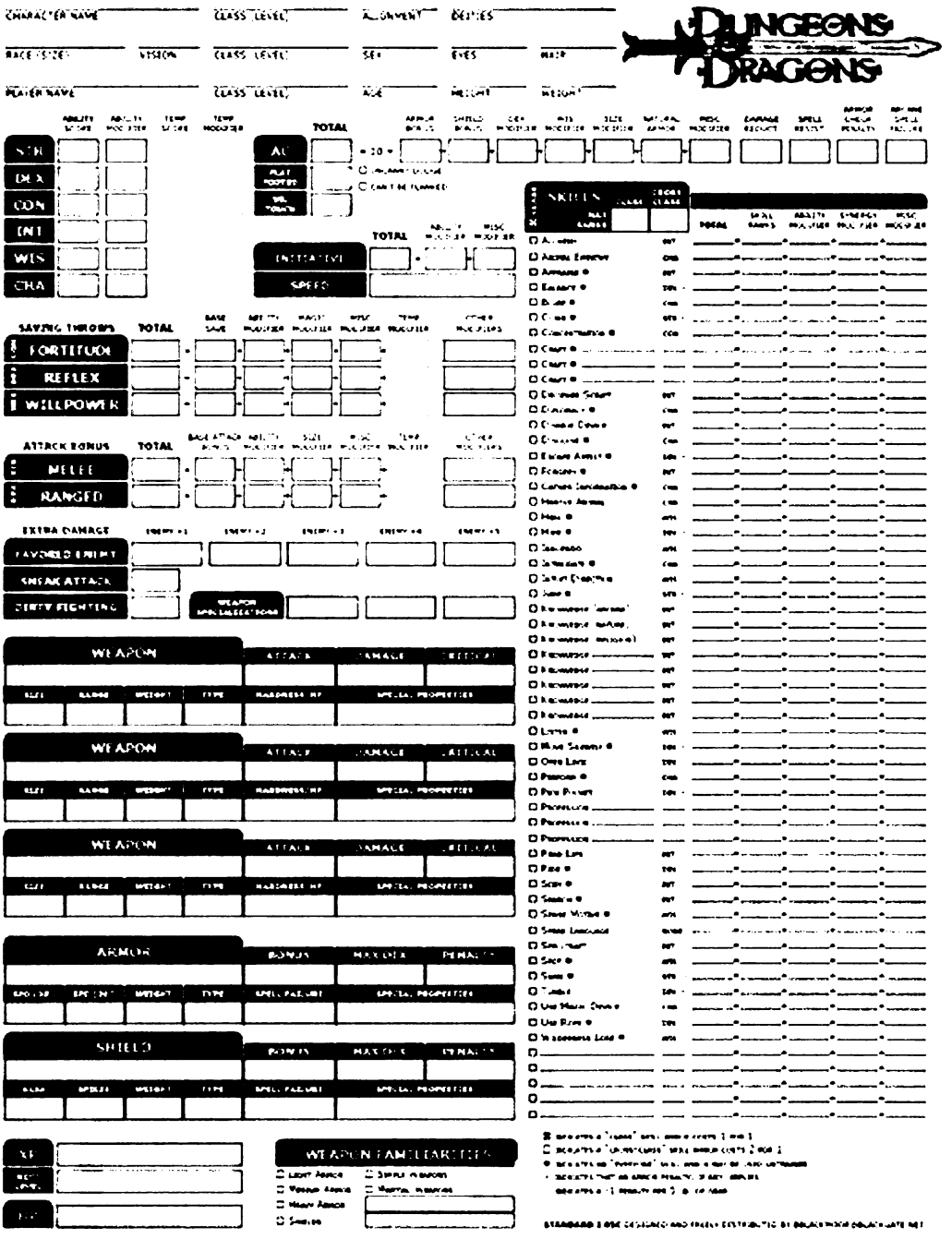
3.1.Overview of Games and Gamemasters

Live action role-play is frequently characterized by high-fantasy dungeon settings, as its oldest form is the pseudo-war-game Dungeons and Dragons, abbreviated D&D, whose original edition was published in 1974 (Edwards 2005). The book was written by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, two authors who had an interest in pen and paper wargames but wanted to incorporate more story into their hobby. Wargames of the time, and many similar games still popular today, had the players control a small army of varying figurines, which did battle with the figurines of an opponent's army. This figurative battle takes place in a board game environment, where the success and failure of armies relies on the rolls of several multi-faceted types of dice. Each soldier or unit on the field of battle has a set of statistics which govern its actions in play, where the object of the game is simply to defeat the other player's unit tokens while losing as few of your own as possible. Wargames differ from war-based board games such as chess, as the representation of battle is somewhat less figurative. Soliders on the field of a wargame tend to be sculpted representations of actual soldiers, and the rules used try to create as realistic a battle experience as possible. The premise of the original Dungeons and

Dragons: what if the player controlled just one, personal character, instead of an entire army? What would that little soldier figurine do if he were alone, and would he have thoughts or feelings? The idea of investing personality and motivation into a character portrayed by the player was the genesis of the tabletop roleplaying hobby.

Tabletop RPGs retain a focus on story because of their ability to engage the players' imaginations rather than suffering the same limitations as software. Since there are no graphics involved, the gamemaster simply tells players what they encounter when moving in to a new place, describing it in terms of all five senses (Rabe 2002, Brucard el al 1997). The gamemaster provides dialogue for secondary characters as well, adding in any role needed for story but not filled by a player character. Each player creates a single character for which he or she has a statistical sheet. The games are sometimes called "pen and paper" RPGs, because the players characters are enumerated on ink on paper sitting in front of them as they play. The sheet may tell the player, for example, how fast the character can run, how smart the character is, how many skills the character has, or how many attacks the character can withstand before the character is declared dead and removed from play. An example character sheet, for *Dungeons and Dragons* Edition 3.5, is provided here as Figure 1. As in wargames, dice are rolled to gauge the success of attempted actions such as attacking. The dice are sometimes different from standard and include many different sizes for different types of randomization. Dungeons and Dragons system is sometimes referred to as "D20" to signify the 20-sided die used to check for successful skills and attacks. Sculpted figurines that signify each character, both player-controlled and GM-controlled, are sometimes used, though with the detailed character sheets that are common in the games this kind of physical representation is not

Figure 1: A Dungeons and Dragons 3.5 Example Character Sheet



always found to be necessary. In a story element that includes combat or exploration, a map or board can be drawn with erasable ink on a grid-lined sheet to form as a temporary game board for the figures to inhabit. In a story element that involves sleuthing, conversation, or another type of interaction where the placement of figurines does not add to play, the board is ignored and the only method of play is a conversation among the players and gamemaster, with the occasional die roll made if the use of a character skill is attempted. In the current climate of roleplaying games, the hobby now includes many science fiction, modern mystery, horror, and multiple other dramatic genres as well as the high fantasy for which the hobby is most well-known. In all of these published games, the role of the gamemaster may be given a different name, but his or her importance in creating game narrative remains constant (Brucard et al 1997, Wizards 2003).

A typical setup of a tabletop RPG involves a Gamemaster and more than one player. Four or five players is a commonly suggested number, though often groups can be smaller or larger (Rosenburg 2002). Louchart and Aylett refer to the gamemaster as a "guiding semi-authorial function" that directs the flow of a game's story while allowing interaction with the players (2003). The gamemaster provides the world and the story, as well as controlling any character not controlled specifically by players. Each player brings only a single character, and he or she guides the actions of that character through the story world the gamemaster provides by making decisions, adding dialogue and taking actions that contribute to an interactive plot.

Characters under control of the gamemaster rather than players are called the non-player-characters, usually abbreviated as NPCs (Wizards 2003). Examples include antagonists such as villains or monsters, allies not controlled by players, or neutral

bystanders. In an article specifically on NPC generation, industry author Lee Gold advises that NPC creation be done by giving the NPCs a long-term goal and developing a plan that allows them to reach that goal (2002). An NPC ideally seems like a real person in the story world to the players of the gamemaster's game. Under the control of the gamemaster, the NPC acts in ways that benefit either the character's goals, or the story structure itself.

3.2. Importance of Narrative

Though individual Dungeons and Dragons characters can be said to have many different goals, for example, to win fights, survive traps, or map dungeons, the game itself has no end which is determined inherently by its rules. In many campaigns, the game finishes when players tire of it and move on to something new. However, if story is the aim, a gamemaster can get a chance to end a campaign on a high note that will provide a much more satisfying conclusion. Game designer Aaron Rosenburg emphasizes this when he writes about roleplaying games and player expectations. "In the end, the players should feel that the story was good—that the plot was interesting. . ." (2003) Generating a narrative rather than a mere sequence of events is a collaborative challenge for all players and the gamemaster.

The *Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide* refers to two main styles of roleplaying gaming, with a continuum in between. On one end of the spectrum, some players enjoy what the *Dungeon Master's Guide* calls a "kick in the door" approach, where emphasis is placed on combat rather than story, and the player characters kick

down the doors of a dungeon in order to move on to the next big fight. On the opposite end of this spectrum is the more story-oriented style that the Guide calls "deep immersion storytelling" (2003). While admitting that the "kick in the door" style can be fun if that is what interests players, most guides on good gamemastering are about how to enrich the deep story immersion and narrative feel of roleplaying games. An often-cited book of gamemastering techniques, *Robin's Laws of Good Gamemastering*, speaks of roleplaying in cinematic terms, evoking "set-pieces" and "plot hooks" as part of good adventuring structure (2002).

In most cases, the enjoyment of the players in the game is paramount to creating an excellent artistic story, but players find coherent story a large part of the satisfaction of play. As explained by Louchard and Aylett,

> "The Game-Master's intervention criterion is what is satisfactory for the players rather than what plot element comes next. The distinction between the two is may not be evident in the sense that the goal of the story manager is, by providing the users with an interesting story, to satisfy them on a narrative plan" (2003).

What this generally means is that the Gamemaster is always free to judge how much entertainment the players are deriving from a particular story or actions taking place in that story. If the story is less than satisfactory or if the players would like to pursue a different path, this is generally encouraged so that the story is more satisfying to their participation. However, providing an interesting story is intrinsically satisfying to players, since story coherency engages them.

Other tabletop RPG authors are quick to identify good, dramatic stories as a primary cause of fun for many players. Steven Long writes that roleplaying actions

which detract from the story can become a bad thing for the general game (2002). Roleplaying games always come with a large rulebook and a concrete set of rules to which the players and gamemaster are expected to adhere, though often gamemasters may be encouraged to bend the rules, alter the written rules, or ignore rules if the story is favored by this action (Rosenburg 2002). Gamemasters may bend the written rules of the system in favor of unwritten rules or more personalized storytelling techniques, such as the techniques this thesis addresses.

3.3. Two Types of RPG Sessions

There are two general styles of RPG game play, with the location of where the game is held being the largest difference between them. One type of RPG is done at home in a long campaign, and the other type done in shorter sessions at gaming conventions. In a home campaign, the Gamemaster is free to ad-lib as she sees fit, pulling together diverse story elements from previous game sessions and catering to the styles of specific players. Home campaigns are serial, like a serial television series, such that one story arc may finish while others continue, and the characters involved are the same from one installment to the next. Convention-style games by necessity are less personalized than home campaigns. Adventure *modules*, which are pre-scripted adventures with specific plots and characters, are written by a central unit and gamemasters are specifically authorized to play them. One example of such a unit is the Role Playing Games Association, the RPGA, who runs serial world-wide campaigns. The RPGA provides the rigid modules to gamemasters and gamemasters worldwide are expected to run them in similar ways without story deviation. Unlike the standard home

campaign, it is far less likely that the gamemaster will alter his given story significantly (Wizards & RPGA 2003).

Though an RPG campaign can in fact go on for many years, the standard seat-time at a convention is around three or four hours. One coherent story can occur in that game session which players can enjoy. Simply due to player fatigue and natural time constraints a home RPG session lasts about as long as an evening, but no more. In long campaigns, gamemasters create story *arcs* which are small stories, like beats of a larger drama or chapters of an interactive novel. An entire story may take place in one session, or be spread out over the course of five or ten sessions. Segmenting the story slightly allows the GM plenty of time between games to prepare for the next story chapter, evaluate what has worked and what has not worked in the current arc of story, add to the story, and make corrections.

3.4. Railroading: The Plot Train

In tabletop gaming, the act of holding players to a prewritten story is referred to as *railroading*. Game designer Ron Edwards defines this term as "the practice of a GM essentially scripting the majority of plot events and structures within a given play session or series of such" (2005). The term was invented for situations where the plot itself may seem to be "on rails," rigid with no real course for movement off of the gamemaster's particular goal for the story. Railroading is often seen to be a hallmark of story-interested gamemasters, but in almost all causes, the term is used pejoratively. Players in tabletop games do not like to be set down one particular story path, and would rather feel that they are in almost complete control of the game at all times. This is what is meant by "fairness" of an interactive story; if the players feel as if their actions make a difference,

they feel that the story the gamemaster is telling is fair to them. If they feel that the story would be the same without their participation, the players consider the story to be unfair. Complete player control, of course, would result in more of a free-form exercise than any particular story. The challenge to a gamemaster is how to create a good story while allowing player contribution to make the difference and avoiding railroading when at all possible.

Dealing with unexpected story actions is described as one of the most difficult problems of creating an interactive narrative. The gamemaster has to balance these concerns carefully. Several documented story structures have become common methods to deal with this problem. One of these is the "branching tree" structure. As defined by Chris Crawford, this is a structure that attaches a series of choices to story, and follows each choice point down all conceivable paths (2004). A Gamemaster running a printed adventure module has access to what is called "Box text": a story element described in detail that is, under optimal conditions, guaranteed to happen. The moments of pre-scripted coherence naturally sacrifice some control. Running an adventure module becomes an exercise in guiding players from box text to box text, reading each story element when appropriate and then setting the players free in order to find their way to the next element. A partial branching structure is employed in many of these modules, with choice points that lead to one set of box text versus another.

Branching structures can become unwieldy quickly if a gamemaster feels compelled to design a branch for every potential decision point or outcome before the game even starts, just in case the players should happen to make these choices. For a longer story, a branching structure is tedious to develop, and unreliable. Robin Laws,

with regards to gamemasters who use branching styles, writes: "... Some players seem to expect adventures which are both prepared in advance and allow a large number of possible outcomes. ... players can reasonably expect one, but not the other." He criticizes many published modules as being "either very loose or very linear" (2002).

Because of the limitations of pre-written adventures, a home campaign does not always make use of modules, or may make heavily modified use of modules. The result is a game which is much more free-form in nature. The plot structure still tends to be clear, though it has more and more free form story generation. Descriptions can be quite evocative if the gamemaster was prepared to give them, but often there is a looser approach to creating atmosphere in conditions were no printed module is used.

The experience at the game table is provided, ultimately, by the gamemaster. The gamemaster has many exterior tools available to him such as modules and game books, but the actual talent and story direction comes from the GM. The gamemaster is central to the experience of gaming and is the ultimate driver of the game's participatory story. While doing this task, he or she must carefully balance the concerns of the player with the concerns of the narrative. Gamemasters use their own techniques to allow this interaction.

4. The Study

4.1.Methodology

In order to examine the gamemaster at work, I enlisted four different gamemasters to assist in an experiment. Gamemasters were initially chosen with no particular preference as to gender, group size, or their preferred rule set. Two male and two female

gamemasters participated, with ages varied from between 20 and 50 years. For the purposes of the experiment, I specifically chose to observe gamemasters running more than one genre of game, in order to explore a variety of different stories. Two gamemasters were running Dungeons and Dragons Edition 3.5. Of the other gamemasters, one ran Chill, a horror game set in a modern, real-world setting. The final gamemaster ran Star Wars: Living Force, a science fiction game set in the Star Wars Universe.

Two of the gamemasters, GM-Goliath and GM-Marlene, were running a home-style campaign. GM-Len, was running convention-style modules only, running two in a row during the course of the observed session. GM-Corwyn used a combination approach, utilizing convention modules but trying to stitch them together in a home campaign story. All four gamemasters ran a gaming session with a standard group for their type of play. Three of the gamemasters ran games with the set of players they usually gamed with. The *Star Wars* gamemaster, who was simulating convention play, gamed with a mixed group, though all the players were experienced players that he personally chose.

The sessions were videotaped, paying special attention to the Gamemaster but incorporating all the players and their actions in the footage. Then, no more than a day after the game, the Gamemaster was brought in for a second discussion session. The Gamemaster and I reviewed the footage of the game session, and specific questions were asked about moments in the game, what the GM was thinking, and about the way he was incorporating the actions of the players.

Game sessions typically lasted around four hours, the average time of a seated convention session. One of the Dungeons and Dragons groups played for around six hours. The post-game recap session tended to take around the same amount of time as the game session itself, but could be slightly shorter in cases where the game had a lot of downtime action such as tallying character experience points or purchasing equipment.

After the second interview, transcriptions from the audio interviews were made. These transcriptions are contained in the Appendix of this document. The transcriptions were coded, marking what techniques the GM was using any time the GM seemed to be leading players toward particular story elements. The techniques were matched with techniques mentioned in literature. Unexpected techniques were also marked and documented. If the reason for player action or GM intervention was unclear from the audio interview, the tape was matched with the original live game footage for accuracy. Any time a GM used a particular guiding technique, the technique was marked and coded into one of several categories. Notes were also taken as to particular trouble spots that occurred in multiple game sessions, and how different gamemasters handed different types of problematic situations.

4.1.1. Game Versus Metagame

Metagame means, literally, the game above the game. Something which happens "metagame" in the context of a roleplaying game is that which happens above the world of the game, and within the real world instead, either in an interaction with the system of rules or between the real people behind the characters (Squire and Jenkins 2003). During the course of any game, a player character is expected to make multiple decisions. If a decision is made based on the knowledge of the player rather than the in-game

knowledge of the character he is portraying, that would be considered a metagame decision.

In the case of tabletop role players, metagame concerns influence the way game decisions are made. It would be ideal in some ways for metagame practices never to be included in any discussion of technique. In this hypothetical system, all practices in-game would be self-contained and no metagame play would ever be required, on the part of either the gamemaster or any players, in order to achieve the desired result. An examination of the actual data indicates this is impractical, however. Metagame context becomes just as important in making decisions as game context, and it would be wrong to ignore it. Gamemaster techniques below are broken into two categories: game, and metagame techniques. Techniques include those which gamemasters self-reported that they were using consciously, as well as any techniques empirically observed by watching and coding the games.

4.1.2. Attractors and Detractors

An attractor is a way of enticing people to behave in the expected way. Typically, it is a reward offered for expected behavior. In programming, attractors are used to help guide an agent toward a particular goal or a particular method for achieving his goal. These become important in the development of virtual agents, such as those in interactive drama programs. When agents are developed as characters in storytelling environments, they are usually given set goals and set upon those goals with attractors and detractors to provide instruction. This is true, for example, of the agents in the Oz architecture (Mateas 1997). In education, attractors are used to help guide learners toward correct answers. In

roleplaying, the gamemaster uses specific attractors to guide players to do wanted actions.

Based on the data, getting players to do things a gamemaster would like for them to do is not terribly difficult, in comparison to getting them to avoid actions that the gamemaster does not want them to do. Getting players to avoid pursuing story threads the gamemaster is unprepared for, however, is generally the essence of keeping the story on track. Like attractors, observed detractors work in a combination of in-game and metagame. Unlike attractors, detractors are more difficult to use and employ, and more often backfire than attractors do. In some situations, a detractor may accidentally occur when an attractor was intended, which is discussed in the detractor which corresponds with that attractor.

If the gamemaster is not using attractors to encourage the players to do something in specific, it is likely that the gamemaster does not have a specific plan for what he or she would like for them to do. In those circumstances, the players have free reign to explore the world, and may dynamically generate story elements depending on what they choose to explore. The gamemaster may occasionally introduce new objects, people, and places for the player characters to interact with, and develop story gradually.

4.2.Hypothesis

Based on manuals written about gamemastering and game hooks several types of wanted interactions were identified before games were observed (Laws 2004, Rosenburg 2002, Wizards 2003, Brucard et al 1997). Most of these interactions had to do with how player characters (PCs) worked among one another, and how they worked with or against NPCs. Other actions were about player interaction with places in the environment, or

Figure 2: Player/Gamemaster Interactions, Hypothesized

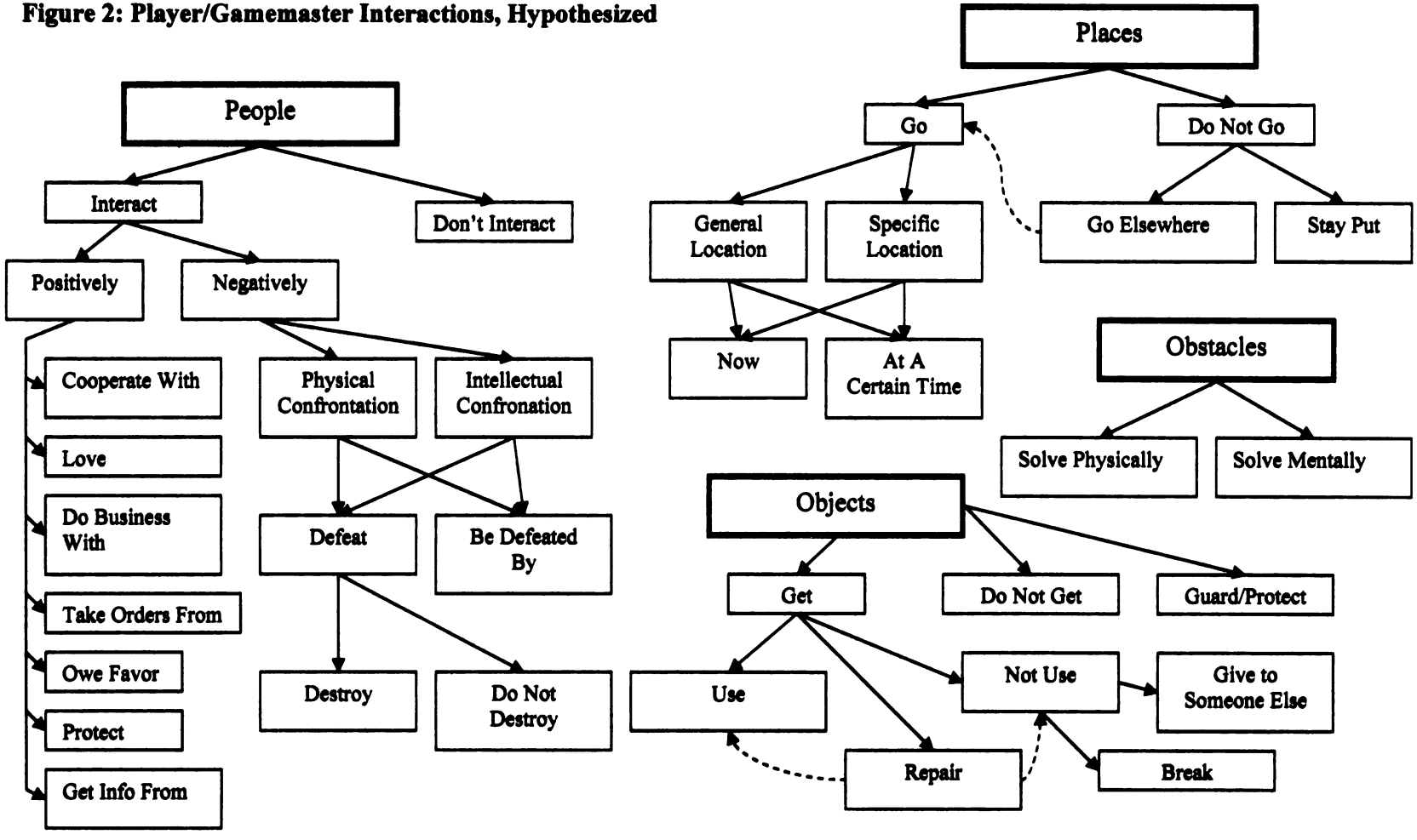
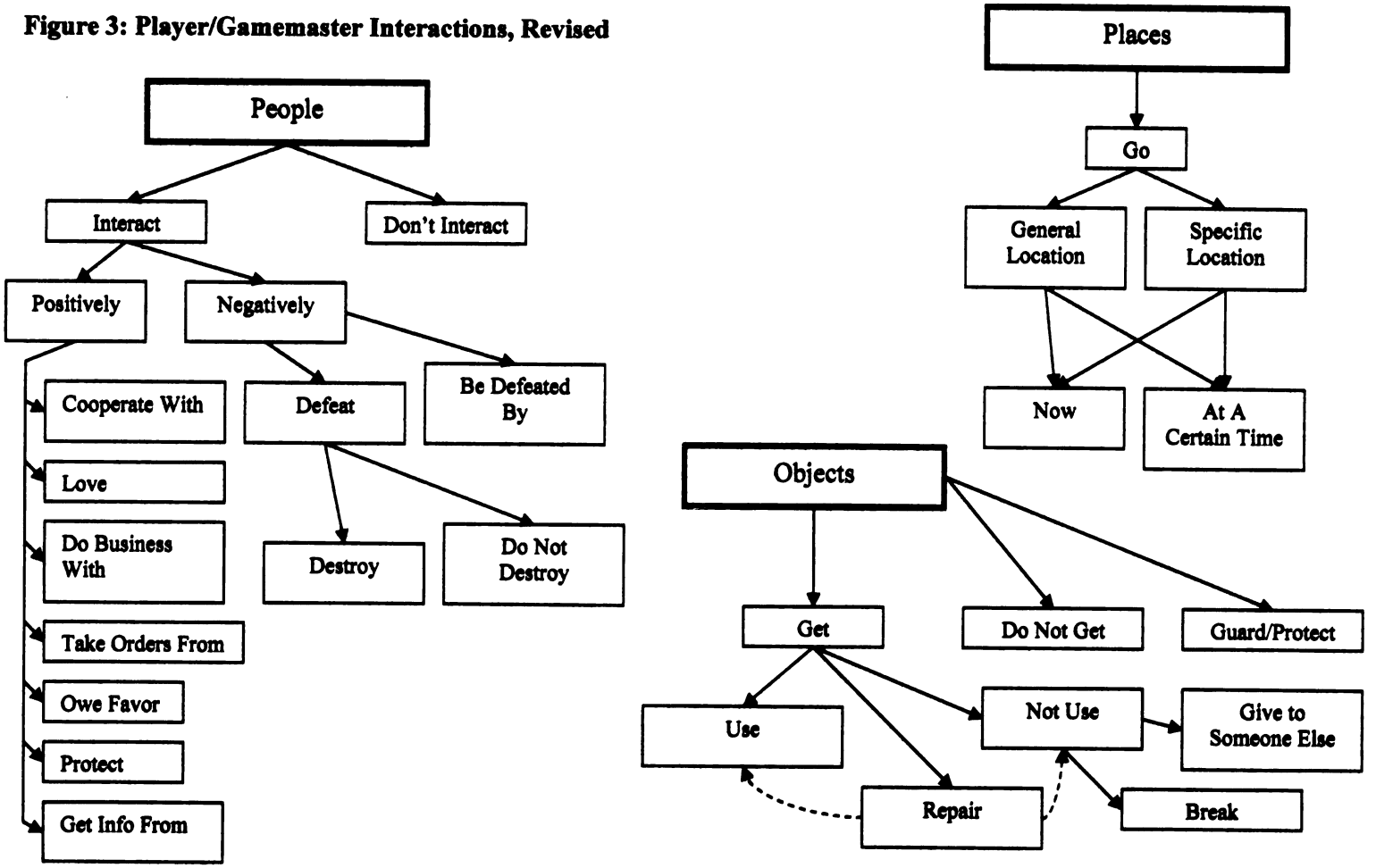


Figure 3: Player/Gamemaster Interactions, Revised



objects that they might encounter, since people, places, and things can all be used as different story hooks and general ways of interacting with the environment. During the study, the list was utilized to compare wanted interactions with the interactions players demonstrated in play. The hypothesis was that a taxonomy of techniques the gamemasters used to encourage these actions could be developed from these observations. Some of the techniques gamemasters use can later applied to programming story director agents for computerized interactive drama, though certain techniques more easily transfer than others.

5. Observations

Watching games and speaking to the gamemasters in this qualitative study, I observed a particular set of trends that related to the thesis. The most important observations are divided into two sections under this main general observation section. The first section deals with the techniques that gamemasters use to develop story during play. Results of this are also shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3 at the beginning of that section. The second, more generalized observation section deals with some common story elements observed which seemed to serve as the biggest obstacles to balancing story and interaction.

5.1.Story Breaks and Gamemasters

A *story break* in this context is any time a player action interfered with the story the gamemaster was intending to tell. From observation, almost all story breaks that alter the gamemaster's plans are accidental on behalf of the player who took the unexpected

action. From video observation it is often easy to see when a clear break has occurred and left the gamemaster in an unprepared position. He or she may pause, wince, check a chart or diagram, or stall for time to otherwise come up with a way to incorporate the unexpected action. Every game that was observed had at least one or more moments where a clear story break occurred. Large breaks occurred between one and three times per game.

Solving the problem of story breaks, as it turned out, was not really a matter of coercing the players into taking wanted actions. Most often, it was the matter of discouraging the players from taking unwanted actions which makes a difference, preventing the break from occuring in the first place. If the players take an action the gamemaster has not accounted for, the gamemaster must either invent an entirely new story to account for those actions, or find some way of attracting the players back to the intended story path (Rabe 2002). Though some gamemasters have developed their story design skills to the point where they can incorporate almost any unexpected action into their story structures, others rely on advance preparation, and those that do so will lose the benefit of that preparation if they are unable to detract players from taking actions which that planning did not incorporate. The difference in levels of preparation was a key difference among the gamemasters observed. From observation, too much advance preparation can disadvantage a gamemaster, as the gamemaster who seemed to have the most advance preparation done for her game also handled story breaks in less elegant ways than those gamemasters who came with less preparation. Some examples of observed story breaks in games are included in section 6.7.

5.2. Observed Behaviors

The chart of wanted behaviors was adapted after observation to include only those elements of interaction which were directly and empirically observed during the experiment. Removal of elements occurred for one of two reasons: either the actions were never observed, suggesting perhaps an incomplete sample, or, the actions listed were redundant. For example, the act of detracting players away from being at a specific location (as shown empirically in one game observed, *Star Wars*) was in practice a matter of simply attracting players to a different location.

When a challenge was abstract, such as a puzzle observed in GM-Goliath's game, the gamemaster showed no preference toward how long it took for players to solve the challenge, as long as they were enjoying themselves. This indicates that puzzles in such games are entirely separate from story. As long as the players were having fun with a specific puzzle and it increased their enjoyment, there was no particular reason to attract them toward the gamemaster's preferred solution for that puzzle. If the puzzle was too hard to solve or its placement dragged down story, the gamemasters would introduce a new story element that focused away from the puzzle. The gamemasters also showed no preference for how an adversary was defeated, as long as the defeat was interesting to players.

Most players, in practice, seem to respond well to attractors, even obvious ones or attractors that are not subtle and seem railroaded. Story breaks rarely occurred, therefore, as a result of not following an attractor. The most compelling and interesting story breaks instead occurred when a player took an action which the gamemaster had not anticipated

or accounted for in his or her narrative design. This will be discussed further in the section on gamemaster detractors below.

6. Results: Taxonomy of Gamemaster Techniques

6.1. In-Game Attractors

These are attractors which happen in the game world itself and do not rely on metagame knowledge. Anything that is directly in-character in relation to the world or how the gamemaster handles the world falls in to this category, including NPC dialogue and setting details. These techniques are organized in **Figure 4: Gamemaster Techniques by Frequency and Type**. All techniques save one were observed during the experiment and for specific instances related to these techniques please refer to the coded notes in the Appendix. In the case of the final technique, Expulsion, it is considered the most extreme and while two Gamemasters interviewed reported having used it in past games, it was not observed in any of the four current games. The frequency of techniques is also indicated, including how many gamemasters used each technique, and how many total times each technique was used.

6.1.1. Instruction

"He hired them to go look at this keep." The simplest form of attractor observed during the experiment is surprisingly common to employ, and was used at least once in every game session observed. Put simply, an NPC agent under the GM's control asks the players to do something for him, and the player characters proceed to do it. That something may be an order from a figure of authority, a favor asked by a friend or even a

Figure 4: Gamemaster Techniques by Frequency and Type

Technique	Type	Domain	GMs Used	Total Number Uses
Instruction	Attractor	In Game	4	10
Inverse Instruction	Attractor	In Game	1	2
Focus	Attractor	In Game	4	14
Character Hooks	Attractor	In Game	4	12
Spontaneous Conflict	Attractor	In Game	4	4
In-Game Reward	Attractor	In Game	3	2
Presence of Authority	Detractor	In Game	2	3
Suspiciousness	Detractor	In Game	4	6
Lack of Reward	Detractor	In Game	4	9
Damage	Detractor	In Game	4	6
Death	Detractor	In Game	1	2
Fate	Other	In Game	4	12
NPC Action	Other	In Game	3	15
System Reward	Attractor	Meta Game	3	3
Rules Knowledge	Attractor	Meta Game	3	6
System Punishment	Detractor	Meta Game	1	1
Hassle	Detractor	Meta Game	2	4
Metagame Admonishment	Detractor	Meta Game	4	4
Expulsion	Detractor	Meta Game	0	0
Knowing the Players	Other	Meta Game	4	4
Social Pressure	Other	Meta Game	4	4
Rebalancing Challenge	Other	Meta Game	4	11
Making Comparisons	Other	Meta Game	2	2
Phrasing	Other	Meta Game	2	3

stranger, or something the player characters are hired to do, with payment. The PCs feel incentive to do this task because they are either friends or allies with the person who requested it, for an offered reward for completing the task, or from the sense of curiosity. Regardless of whether or not bartering is employed, this attractor is the same. Simply asking the PCs to do a task is not foolproof, but is so simple that GMs rely on it quite a bit, mostly to good results.

6.1.2. Inverse Instruction

"The ritual has already begun. ... You can do nothing about it." The inverse of the instruction attractor is to utilize it in combination with a reverse-psychology approach. When this attractor is observed, the GM has a villainous character, or any character the players do not like and know is an adversary. That character tells the PCs not to do something, dares them to do it, or tells them it would be impossible to do.

This works well if the character is sufficiently established as a villain. In the case of the Star Wars game illustrated, the players know from a metagame standpoint that a character in black robes, appearing on a hologram projector, is bad. In-game, where the technique is used, they also associate this figure on the projector with someone who has thwarted them before. His recording tells them there is no way that they can return to the Jedi temple in time to save their allies, and so they are made aware that going to the Jedi temple to do this is the next logical course of action.

6.1.3. Focus

Players seem from observation to be typically attracted to the most interesting thing in the room or scene. If the gamemaster describes one area or person in particular

detail, the players will approach that area, object, or person, especially if there is nothing else interesting to look at or do in the area they have arrived. If the gamemaster wants players to speak to a particular character, having that character have something interesting about him, such as a dark demeanor, a particular sigil, a strange eye color, etc., can from observation be a strong enough attractor to entice players to approach. In many cases, simply describing a character more elaborately than other characters causes the players to realize this character is important: a slightly meta-game version of this same concept.

A focus is also introduced with rumor-dropping in NPC dialogue. If everyone in town is discussing the large caravan leaving by the north gate, the players will be curious to see what it is that everyone is discussing. If one trail sticks out of a description of otherwise ordinary trails, the players will take the interesting trail. GM-Corwyn used this attraction method several times: when asking the players to make a choice as to which of two trails they would take, she emphasized that one trail seemed more interesting and dangerous. She was confident it would get their attention. GM-Marlene used description to focus players by describing the important people at a party in more ornate ways than the background guests.

6.1.4. Character Hooks

Many narrative-driven gamemasters in observation and self-report concentrate much of their effort on the motivations of the players' characters. Gamemasters frequently self-reported that their favorite methods involved using information about the players' characters to write their story. This involves knowledge of the role the player has taken up, and how that role is likely to act in specific situations. Often, a gamemaster

reports that he or she will ask a player, when that player is creating his or her character, to give a character some kind of fatal flaw that the gamemaster can use later to propel the story. The gamemaster will then use character motivations, such as threatening a relative of the player character, or putting a tailor-made adversary into the game for that character, to spur that character forward. Even in a short game session such as that in a convention, a character sheet will typically include some kind of character flaw that the gamemaster is made aware of before play and can exploit.

GM-Goliath had a barbarian player-character in his game, Arkiro, who disliked magic. Because of this, putting a magical book into the game and having one of the villains carry it marked her as a target for the barbarian to kill. A player-character in GM-Marlene's game, Leigh, would always do her best to prevent tragic things from happening to couples who were in love. When GM-Marlene put a dating couple in danger, she knew that this action would cause Leigh to get involved in the fight and kill the monster threatening them.

This attractor works because the characters that players portray in roleplaying games tend to be very well-defined. Even in simpler or more primitive "kick in the door" style play as mentioned in the *Dungeonmaster's Guide*, characters have a certain alignment variable that will serve as a gauge to predict their actions (Wizards 2003). A character whose sheet marks him as Good should be more likely to take heroic actions than one who is described as Neutral. The more narrative-oriented the game is, the more well-defined the player character's role will be.

6.1.5. Spontaneous Conflict

In observed game play situations, spontaneous conflict is placed into the game by a gamemaster who senses his story has gotten boring, and wants an instant way to prod the players to taking action. The gamemasters self-report adding conflict to keep the story in motion. Most often, this conflict occurs in the form of a physical attack, such as having a monster jump in to the characters' path so that they can fight it. The player characters will be motivated to do something in response, usually a combat action where they fight back so that the creature will not kill them. Like other types of roleplaying conflict, spontaneous conflict is not always physical. It can also include a mystery dropped in to the game which will provide a new story arc for characters and force them to think or look for clues.

In GM-Goliath's game, characters who were not engaged in action were attacked by a Carrion Crawler monster that leapt out of a pit in the floor. In GM-Marlene's game, a character got an unexpected phone call, telling him that a friend had suddenly died, and was possibly murdered. Both of these spontaneous occurrences were attractors to particular actions: fighting back, in the first case, and investigating, in the second.

6.1.6. In-Game Reward

An In-Game Reward is any reward given to players which is not specifically designed to interest one particular character. These include the more general attractors such as treasure items, and in-game money, as well as slightly less tangible rewards such as the favor of an NPC. In-game rewards given by NPCs are usually accompanied by some form of Instruction as to what the players must do to receive the reward, such as the NPCs in GM-Corwyn's game who hired player characters to do favors for them with the

promise that they could keep any miscellaneous treasure they should happen to find. Character Hooks are more common than these general Rewards in games where the gamemaster has specifically tailored the story to the characters. In Dungeons and Dragons games, a standard method of payment for a successful adventure is that the player characters may keep any treasure that they find. This was employed by both of the Gamemasters who ran the D&D system.

6.2. In-Game Detractors

6.2.1. Presence of Authority

"Kai Adi Mundi walks into the room." In this detractor observed during play, a figure of authority that the players respect tells them not to do something. Just the presence of such an authoritative figure is enough in many cases to prevent otherwise errant behavior. The players do not want to take unwanted action around an important authority figure, so they are on their best behavior and are more likely to go along with suggestions. The players also know that the authority figure is very powerful and could easily destroy them, so they do not attack him or her.

In GM-Len's game, a powerful Jedi master, as mentioned above, was used as an NPC. Player characters know they cannot kill the Jedi Master because he is an important character, and so, they are humble and careful when he is around. The players were even observed joking as to how much trouble they could get in if they did not behave carefully in that character's presence. GM-Marlene used a similar technique with an NPC. By having Father Andrew, a church figure that the player characters respect, express his disappointment that they had killed the villains in a previous adventure instead of

arresting them, GM-Marlene made it less likely the player characters would kill in subsequent adventures unless they had no other choice.

6.2.2. Suspiciousness

"I turn the mirrors against the wall." If an object looks dangerous, players in observation will avoid messing with it. This detractor in a way the opposite of the Focus attractor, and involves using focus in a particular way to explain why interacting with something may be a bad idea. For example, in GM-Len's game, an evil-looking table was avoided by the player-characters for fear of bodily harm should they do much with it. In GM-Corwyn's game, a book the characters found was full of evil spells, to discourage the players from interacting too much with it. A gamemaster may make an object suspicious if, for example, he or she wants the players to give it away rather than interact with it.

This detractor can sometimes occur unintentionally if a focus attractor is employed incorrectly. This happened in GM-Goliath's game, where a very interesting room that the gamemaster had prepared to entice the players ended up detracting them instead. A room full of mirrors faced the players, and they were very intricate, seeming from prior evidence to be both mirrors, and gates. Supposing the gates lead to areas that were dangerous or full of monsters, the players turned the mirrors against the wall instead of using them or examining them closely.

This is one of the most common detractors that seemed to be employed in the games. Gamemasters seem to understand that if an object they introduce even seems suspicious, players will be reluctant to interact with it. The fact that the detractor can be employed unintentionally, when focus or enticement is instead intended, tends to frustrate

some gamemasters. Game author Steven Long refers to this kind of player behavior as "the demon practicality." (2003).

6.2.3. Lack of Reward

"You don't find any useful information." If nothing happens at all from taking an intended action, clearly it was not the right action to take, and players in the observed games would desist. GM-Marlene used this detractor when her earlier spontaneous phone call threatened to send her main storyline off-track. She had not fully prepared to handle the murder plot that she had briefly introduced that night, and wanted her players to focus more on the conflict with the villain she had extensively prepared, a zombie. Thus, when the detective character, Frank, tried to find security camera footage of the accident that had caused his friend's death, there was no such footage to be found. This was a subtle indication that GM-Marlene was not ready for him to follow this lead, and followed up by a phone call from another character that aimed to guide him back to the story at hand.

Most GMs do not mind if a player spends time on a red herring, however. In GM-Goliath's game, the players spent a good deal of time in a room that was trapped, but lead to no interesting treasure. They spent time in this area because it was elaborate and interesting, a Focus attractor, but the only detractor in place was a lack of reward for engaging with it. They gave up eventually as they were not getting any results, but the gamemaster did not mind the digression from the main story as long as his players were having fun with the red herring.

6.2.4. Damage

"As the spores fly up, you cough and choke. Minus one to your con." Damaging the character, often physically, is an immediately effective way to prevent him from doing that which caused the damage, or at least, continuing to do something which has already damaged him once. In the above example, the constitution-based damage was a detractor that prevented the barbarian character in GM-Goliath's game from moving a spore-infested couch. GM-Corwyn also used this detractor when she prevented the player characters from leaving a particular area by striking them with a fatigue-based spell effect when they attempted to walk away.

Other gamemasters reported that they favor mental or emotional "damage," tying this in to the hooks that players provide for their characters. Emotional damage is, however, a large part of story, and not always something that should be intentionally avoided. Without some sort of damage, mental or physical, a story has no conflict and is uninteresting. Like the practicality problem mentioned above, some players will be shy to walk in to situations where damage of any type may occur to their characters, so damage as a detractor must be employed in such a way that it does not prevent characters from continuing to act in interesting ways.

6.2.5. Death

The most extreme form of in-game detractor is killing the character entirely, during or before he takes a game-breaking action. Gamemasters all self-report being in situations where a character died during the course of the game, either in a game where the gamemaster was a mere player or when the gamemaster was in fact the GM. During one of the observed sessions two player characters were killed. Gamemasters

interviewed mentioned they did not like to kill characters, but would not hesitate if the player had done something that merited it.

GM-Goliath tells a story of when he had no choice but to use death as a detractor. Two player-characters in a previous game started an argument that could not be broken up. The fight resulted in the death of another character who stepped in the middle, trying to break it up. The gamemaster at this point had enough of the argument, and had a spell misfire kill both arguing characters as well. In the observed game sessions, GM-Goliath was the only GM who had characters die during his session. The first death that occurred was unintentional, and caused a visible story break which the GM had to alter his plans to resolve. The second death was not used as a detractor but happened in battle; the gamemaster called this death "appropriate" as it served the story. Therefore, while death can be used as an attractor, it can also be a positive element of story.

6.3. Other In-game Techniques

6.3.1. Fate

This is the type of technique which Chris Crawford refers to as a "Foldback." In a foldback, or using Fate, no matter which choice the players make in a branched situation, the results are similar to what the gamemaster was already planning to have happen. It allows the players to make a decision, but that decision is illusory because no matter what choice is made, the final result is similar (2005). The use of the fate technique was also observed and self-reported during the experiment.

In the example above, GM-Corwyn used this method regarding the trails the players chose to take. If her initial attraction method of describing the trail as dangerous

and interesting failed to get the players to go down the trail, she indicated that they would have encountered the same adventure on the less-interesting trail anyway, regardless of their choice. GM-Marlene also employed this technique to some degree. The player characters planning a wedding ceremony had to choose which hall they would have it at. An NPC suggested a venue, but this particular location worked well in to the GM's plans of having it be attacked by a zombie monster. If they had chosen a different hall instead of the suggested one, that hall would have still been attacked.

Despite the fact that using fate removes real consequence from player choice, this does not seem like railroading at all, if done correctly. In fact, the notion that this removes a certain aspect of player choice does not really occur as much to gamemasters who employ it as simply part of generating story. Roleplaying game author Robin Laws presents one of his ideal game structures with nearly the same diagram that Crawford uses to display an example of foldback (2003).

This technique does can seem unfair to players if the option of replay is presented. Using Fate attractors work very well for tabletop games because every tabletop game session is designed to be played only once by the same group of people creating an emergent story. If the player realizes that his or her decision did not influence the outcome, he or she will feel cheated instead of rewarded. This is one attractor that works very well in tabletop but poorly in a computer-generated system, since most computer-generated systems are designed to be replayed multiple times to get the full effect. Fate attractors are sparsely employed in written modules, which tend to use the classical branching structure of old-style interactive games instead of relying on fate. This is because game modules are, indeed, likely to be played multiple times, and though they

are not designed to be played multiple times by the same group, cross-talk between different RP groups that have run the same module ensures that the module will be regarded as poorly-written if it relies too much on fate.

6.3.2. NPC Action

In observation, non-combat action from an NPC may provide attraction or detraction just by giving the players a small indication what is best to do next. This is typically observed as a combination of in-game approaches. In GM-Marlene's game, a player-character's NPC sister invited everyone to a party, providing Focus to the venue and a potential Instruction that they should go. In another circumstance, an NPC putting herself in danger caused a player reaction. The NPCs will abort their current action if the GM believes that a different action would make a more interesting story, or, they will begin action at a time the gamemaster finds it to be dramatically interesting. The gamemasters report that they use personal judgment if deciding if an action is more dramatically interesting than the originally planned action.

Many concrete examples of this occurred throughout play. In GM-Golaith's game, a situation occurred where players seemed uncertain as to how to proceed. The gamemaster seemed to feel the story was getting bogged down, and purposely placed an NPC in a room where the NPC would not have initially have been. Using an invisibility spell, the Halfling NPC snuck around the area and mysteriously opened doors, giving the players a reason to follow him and solve the mystery of his arrival in a way that advanced the storyline. In GM-Marlene's game, the actions of an impulsive but helpful NPC put her in the path of a monstrous villain at a dramatically convenient moment. This gave the

player characters the impetus to rescue her before the monster killed her or carried her away, where otherwise they may have not realized that the villain was present.

In observed use, the more important the NPC is to the story, the more personal autonomy that NPC seems to have to act according to the NPC's designed goals. Complicated NPCs may have sheets that enumerate their abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and other details about their personality and are similar to the sheets used by players. These primary NPCs are treated similarly to player characters and are positioned by the gamemaster to act mostly according to their predefined goals. If the NPC is not important to the story, the NPC has less of his own personality and is instead used as a filter for the gamemaster's needs and wishes. Many gamemasters rely on these "secondary" NPCs to get the job done where voicing the opinion of the general population is needed.

6.4. Metagame Attractors

6.4.1. System Reward

"Good job. Take an action point." A relatively new system for encouraging players to play along is to offer a predetermined metagame reward for an action the gamemaster likes. This is most often a moment of good in-character play or, in heroic games, a moment of self-sacrificing bravery, which GMs like to reward. Three out of the four gamemasters observed had some form of this; even if the rules system they were using did not originally, it was added as a house rule. These were often called "drama points" or "action points," and sometimes represented by chips or markers handed out to players. They can be spent for bonuses to a roll, a special ability, or a re-roll in a tight situation later, depending on the GM. In GM-Goliath's game, he allowed players to use

them to emulate a feat they did not have. In GM-Marlene's game, players could use them to negate the results of a "Fear" roll on the dice that would have otherwise forced their characters to run. The tokens are awarded infrequently and are seen as a strong incentive if they are given out.

In many ways, offering numerical points for a job well done seems like a step backward. However, players like to be rewarded, and getting an immediate benefit for doing something the gamemaster regards as good encourages additional good behavior. Sometimes these bonus points are handed out for being clever or solving a puzzle quickly; a metagame reward on top of the in-game reward for a good action. The points can also be handed out if a player does something that benefits another character with detriment to himself. This is a way of preventing self-damaging actions from always being a detractor.

An example of using a self-damaging power for a metagame reward occurred in GM-Len's Star Wars game, where a player sacrificed an ability that he could use only once to bring another character back to life. The system gave him a metagame reward for this in the form of an action point. This was a particularly interesting example, because reviving the character who was about to die was not considered in the write-up for the module; for more on this, see the section on reviving characters, below.

Some gamemasters reported that they felt it was not interesting if a hero fails in the most climactic moment of an otherwise exciting story; in most tabletop games, the story is over near the end of the evening's session. Given that, the ability of the players to use the action points earned at the start of play in a later situation benefits the dramatic arc near a story's climax. Those players that earn action points tend to save and spend

them near the end of the story, when the stakes are highest and success contributes more positively toward the narrative.

6.4.2. Rules Knowledge

If a player is aware of the rules of the game, and knows which actions are most likely to net rewards versus other actions, he will be more likely to take actions which he believes will provide a reward. The more rules a game system has which are visible to the player, the more likely this becomes. For example, in Dungeons and Dragons, most players are aware of all of the rules the gamemaster utilizes, as well as the different weaknesses and strengths of the monsters. Since combat rules are complicated, it is not always needed for a player to know every nuance of the rules before playing the game, and it is expected that the gamemaster will helpfully fill in any gaps in knowledge the player has. In some cases it is also disadvantageous to story for the player to know the rules governing his or her actions, such as for example the weaknesses of a particular monster he or she is fighting, if it is not reasonable that his or her character would know those weaknesses. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* warns against showing too much information to players, but since the information is in print, it is typically accessed by everyone at the table (2003). Having knowledge of the rules affects the behavior of players, even if they try not to let it do so. During combat, the players are generally aware of all the rules that are used to guide their actions. They are likely to take actions which will net them a good result, as long as they can find some way to justify those actions in character. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* says that gamemasters should discourage metagame decision-making when possible. On the other hand, it also mentions that players need the ability to check rules and charts, particularly in combat situations, and in

order to do this the players need to be aware of what mechanics govern that action (2003).

GM-Goliath gave a character a choice as to whether a revival spell would work on him or not. Rather than strictly going by the results of a die roll, he presented use of the spell as a dream sequence where the character had the opportunity to go into a glowing light, where he heard the voices of his friends, or to follow the voice of his now-dead mentor in to a dark cavern. In this dramatic sequence, the character chose to go in to the light. This is in fact a use of metagame as an attractor; since the GM did want the character to be revived, he relied partially on the fact that the player would, out of character, recognize the result of either offered choice. Another more typical example of a metagame attractor in this same game was during a battle with a certain monster called a pudding. Metagame, the players know that bladed weapons do not damage this creature. In-game, they attacked the creature once, and then their characters all realized this was futile. The gamemaster praised them in the interview for being willing to take an action they knew would backfire, but thought their sudden discovery they were wrong in using their swords may have happened a bit too quickly.

6.5.Metagame Detractors

6.5.1. System Punishment

Just as action points reward and encourage good behavior, penalty points can be used to punish and discourage bad behavior. The Star Wars system used in GM-Len's game has an element called Dark Side Points which are the opposite of action points. If a player accumulates more than a few of these points, he may lose his character to the dark

side and be removed from play. This bars him from taking evil actions, because the player does not want to be removed for a metagame reason.

This kind of detractor, if it is point-based, does not prevent the player from taking an unwanted action once or twice. During observed play the gamemaster offered a Dark Side point to a player not for taking an action he thought would break the game, but to see if he would take the action anyway even with knowledge of the penalty. The first time a Dark Side point was offered, the player took the point, but, the second time he attempted a more dangerous and unwanted action, he decided not to take further points and backed down. Like in-game damage, metagame punishment points are a way to prevent repeated story offenses.

6.5.2. Hassle

In the case of hassle, another detractor observed and categorized during the experiment, the player is not forbidden from taking an unwanted action, but the player knows, doing so will result in consequences which are annoying, governed by arcane rules in the game, or not worth the bother. This detractor is the opposite of the Rules Knowledge attractor. Using only metagame concerns such as mechanics, the player is detracted from taking an action.

In GM-Corwyn's game, there was a ghost in the basement of the keep the player characters were exploring. The players had the option of killing the ghost with their magical weapons, or allowing for him to atone for his sins, as he would then cease being a ghost. Killing the ghost in the keep may have not been the noblest decision, but when compared to the difficult rules hassle of trying to get him atonement, it was much simpler and provided larger immediate reward.

Three of the four interviewed gamemasters reported that they acknowledge this detractor but try not to use it. Sometimes a Hassle detractor is employed accidentally, when the gamemaster would rather see a player take a more interesting action but the rules for interesting actions are hard to understand compared to the rules for simple ones. In some roleplaying games, there are minute rules to govern every potential action that the player may decide to take, while others leave making up such rules up to the gamemaster. GM-Marlene for example reports that she does not like the rules for disarming an opponent in Dungeons and Dragons, and tries to avoid using them; she favors systems with more fluid rules. Some gamemasters try to rewrite diffucult rules, or reward players for being accepting of a hassle by offering a System Reward like an Action Point if a player chooses a dramatically interesting action.

6.5.3. Metagame Admonishment

An extreme form of metagame detractor is to simply tell the player, out of game, not to take the action he is trying to take. This, obviously, is less than elegant. However, saying something to the effect of "this happens, no matter what you do, so stop" was needed in the case of GM-Corwyn's game to get it back on track when characters were repeatedly attempting a futile action. The ultimate goal of the other detractors listed above is to avoid using Metagame Admonishment as much as possible. However, a quick metagame chat happened once in every game observed, indicating that this technique is hard to avoid using altogether.

6.5.4. Metagame Expulsion

Expulsion occurs when a player is kicked out of a game entirely. Naturally, it did not happen when observed, though some gamemasters had stories to tell about players whom they had expelled. Gamemasters report it is best to combine this metagame technique with in-game consequences, such as a character death, to keep the story progressing smoothly as well despite metagame interference.

6.6. Other Metagame Techniques

6.6.1. Knowing the Players

In post-game interview, all gamemasters said something to the effect that it is crucial to know the wants and needs of your individual players, in order to provide them with the best experience for their personal tastes. A good gamemaster will try to second-guess players by their individual natures, at least enough to anticipate their actions (Laws 2004). All metagame leading techniques are derived from the art of trying to predict human actions, but many gamemasters try to predict the actions of their specific players rather than simply players in general.

GM-Goliath, for example, knows that one player in his game prefers to play support characters, and does not like to be put in to situations where she must lead the group. Another player, he says, can be counted on to take action in the story with only a little prodding, when others are tied up in cross-player arguments. He can use these attitudes to his advantage to write his intended story script.

GM-Len tends to run convention games often, and in a convention situation, the potential attitudes of the players are often unknown, as they sit down at the table as a

group of strangers to one another, and to the gamemaster. Some superficial observations may, however, still be used to predict them. Even in convention play, players oven reveal preferences, making statements like, "I've never played this game," or "I only play wizards."

There is another, slightly less obvious reason for getting to know one's players well, outside of simply predicting their moves. As Robert Cialdini mentions in his book, *Influence: Science and Practice*, the more we like someone, the more likely we are to comply with that person's requests, explicit or implicit (2001). Gaming is a social activity; those who game together either begin because they are friends who find an activity that they all enjoy or become friends because they are able to bond over a mutually-agreed-upon activity. Game groups typically like one another because they all have something in common with each other, a love for roleplaying games, and they enjoy each other's company in that context. "We like people who are similar to us," Cialdini writes, and those who play the same game together at least have the love of the game in common. Therefore, getting to know one's players both in and out of game can improve a GM's performance. The players become, or begin as, the gamemaster's close associates and friends, and therefore are inclined to go along with the gamemaster's suggestions.

6.6.2. Social Dynamics

The game is ultimately a group dynamic of players, and most players do not want to ruin the good time of other players, and will go along with the story they seem to be deciding on as a group. By default, that automatically puts authority in the hands of the gamemaster, since the social norm is that the gamemaster is the leader of the troupe.

Friendship between players and the gamemaster increase social pressure for the players to all cooperate.

The "barfight device," commonly cited as a cheap way of beginning a long-lasting campaign by getting a group together, works because of social pressure on the players (Brucato et al 1997). In this circumstance, the players know out of character that their characters need to meet up and work together, and a good set of players are not going to be difficult about this. So, the gamemaster sets up a situation where there is external in-game conflict on the players, such as a fight in a bar, and the player characters will typically group together naturally. This is considered very trite in gamemastering circles, but it works well enough, though the reason that it does work, out of character social pressure, is never mentioned. Having all of the player characters initially meet in a bar because they were looking for work is the way that GM-Corwyn originally organized her party, though she did not resort to the fight device. The effect of social pressure is not self-reported by other gamemasters, but is more evident in the tapes themselves, when players look around the circle for cues as to the potential reactions other players will have to their decisions.

The physical presence of other players not only encourages a player to follow the rules, it also discourages him from breaking the rules to ruin everyone else's good time. Any player that is in a game to have fun with the group may be detracted from a game-breaking action if they feel it would ruin the experience of the other players at the table. Players are attracted toward actions that they perceive would strengthen group solidarity.

6.6.3. Making Out of Game Comparisons

GM-Marlene used this trick in particular, when describing NPCs or locations; a fast way of making situations seem familiar to the players on a meta level is by associating them with a particular actor, genre, setting, or anything else with which the players themselves might be familiar. If a room in a dungeon, for example, is similar to a room depicted in an adventure movie, or other media element the players are familiar with, the players will approach it with the mindset that they are in the same situation depicted in that movie. The GM uses this technique metagame by referring to carefully selected metagame comparisons in a way that facilitates the action she would like players to try.

Working with a published or well-known setting makes this trick easiest to employ. Since GM-Len used the Star Wars setting, it was implied that he would prefer things be resolved in a manner that reminded the players, and him, of the Star Wars movies. This naturally lead to more movie-like behavior in battles, and problem-solving, since making things *feel* just like Star Wars was within the players' expectations.

6.6.4. Rebalancing Challenge

"Failure is usually boring. It is the credible but unrealized threat of failure that is interesting." This is a quote from one of Robin Laws' articles, which GM-Marlene quoted back almost verbatim during her post-game interview (2005). The philosophy of this quote is that repeated failures are not fun for players and do not make a good story. Andrew Glassner, who discusses adaptive difficulty in gaming systems, phrases this philosophy by saying "Trying and dying is no fun." (2004) On the other hand, the threat of failure is very important to build excitement, or else the challenges are too easy, and

fail to make an interesting story. The challenge level in every way must be enough to keep the players engaged. It must threaten their characters visibly, but not so much as they are failing every turn.

In order to do this correctly, gamemasters report that they are watching their game carefully on the meta level, taking constant measures of how well the characters seem to be doing to keep up with their story. This metagame concern then reflects changes made to the in-game world, often on the fly. A new monster may be added to a future encounter if the encounter before it was too easy. Some traps may be removed depending on whether the players can handle them.

GM-Corwyn removed a trap that was originally going to be on one of the boxes in her dungeon. Since the team's trap-checking character was absent, having them encounter a trap when she wanted them to receive the treasure in the box would have been punishing them for an action she intended them to take, and "unfair," in the sense that it puts an obstacle in the way of the story. GM-Marlene added a new power to her villain to create additional suspense and increase the challenge of defeating it, where otherwise a particular player action may have made it unrewarding because it was too easy. GM-Len rebalanced challenge on the fly multiple times during his own game session, even altering the challenges of different obstacles depending on which player was attempting to surmount them. "I'm a softball GM," he stated, but he also adds that pretending to play against the players when you are actually on their side can add to the players' sense of enjoyment when they finally overcome the obstacles you have presented.

6.6.5. Phrasing

In observation, the way that questions are worded becomes an important metagame factor. Some gamemasters reported that they choose their words or tone of voice carefully, and others noticed while watching video of their games particular things about their styling and posture. When GM-Marlene asks a player if she is going to attack a foe, she gives her a hint as to her preferred action by the way she phrases her question. She wants to hint at what she would like to see, so, instead of asking, "Where are you moving?" she asks, "Are you moving in the general direction of the zombie?" Gamemasters may also use different tones of speech, word patterns, or accents for different NPCs to promote their players liking, or disliking, those NPCs depending on what is best for the story.

6.7. Points of Problem

These are the most commonly observed bad or unwanted behaviors in the sessions witnessed, and what Gamemasters in interview said about them or what they did to solve them in gameplay. They deserve special situational mention because they happened more than once, even with only four games observed.

6.7.1. Death of Non-Player Characters

In two out of the four games observed, a non-player ally was intended to die as a story mechanism, but the players insisted on reviving the ally using mechanisms available in the game. The "dramatic last words," which may be a common device in film and classic story structure, are a difficult device to employ in a tabletop game, as it can probably be assumed that if the players can take action to revive an ally or prevent his

death altogether, they will do so. Campbell lists the death or passing of a mentor as one of the key components in a classic heroic narrative (1968). In observed games, this device was difficult to employ in a lasting way.

The two occurrences of this situation had vastly different results. GM-Corwyn's players found a sick and dying elf NPC along the roadside. Ramus, a player character in the group, immediately tried to use healing magic on the elf, but since the elf was only to choke out his last words, a warning, and then expire, the GM did not want this intended action to take effect. GM-Corwyn responded by blocking the player's action, first having his ability not work properly, then, when Ramus kept trying, having the elf beg to be allowed to die, and then, as mentioned above, saying out of character that the action to revive him would get nowhere. In interview the GM responded that the elf was diseased and, if left alive, would eventually rot painfully. His asking to be allowed to die now was not necessarily illogical or out of character. However, the extended attempt to invalidate the player's actions caused initial dissatisfaction, and it was clear the player felt railroaded into leaving the NPC to die, despite his wishes.

GM-Len took a different approach. A Jedi master had been run through with a blade and was speaking her dying words as was written in the initial module. However, a player had access to a power that would allow him to revive the dying woman, and he used it right away. GM-Len decided not to invalidate this action, and instead, let the Jedi live. Aside, GM-Len remarked to the players openly that the module had not even accounted for this scenario, which he believed from past experience to be an oversight on behalf of the module writer. In interview he replied that this action was especially interesting since the next module in the series was supposed to follow directly after this

Jedi's death, and was a story about getting vengeance for her slaying. Now, she had not been slain at all, removing the revenge motive and added hooks entirely. In a home campaign, the GM would be free to alter the tasks of the PCs into something different, but at conventions, modules are designed to be run as written. GM-Len blamed the story break here on the failure of the module writer to recognize that some characters may have revival ability.

6.7.2. Antagonist Survivability

An antagonist is another important part of classical story structure, in particular the Proppian narrative (Propp 1968). However, a recurring villain can also be a difficult character to use in a violent campaign. Gamemasters interviewed report that if the players have the ability to attack to destroy their adversary, most often, the players will do just that, ending a rivalry long before it really has a chance to start. This being a commonly recognized problem of the genre, all Gamemasters polled had the same advice, stating that if a GM does not want his players to kill a villain, he or she will never let the players get close to that villain.

Techniques in use for this are varied during game observation. In Star Wars, it became simple enough to establish a villainous character by having him appear in holographic projections wherever the characters encountered his work. The players knew that the evil emperor was already one step ahead of them, as he appeared as an image, taunted them about being too late, then set off some kind of mechanical trap all with the players never actually encountering him physically.

In Dungeons and Dragons where there is no high technology, magic may be key. For example, a villain may send waves of undead or minions for the player characters to

chop down, serving as shields so he may make his escape. In GM-Goliath's session, he gave his villain access to a Dimension Door spell. This magic allowed her to teleport away from the scene of a fight with minimal preparation if she was injured, though she was only able to do it once. When the players encountered her again at the end of the session, she was killed. The GM had intended to use her again at a later time, but he allowed the players to kill her instead, feeling that they had earned it; he said that to save her from death at this point may have made the players feel cheated.

6.7.3. Unexpected Abilities

Observably, it can be difficult for a gamemaster to rebalance challenge, as per the metagame technique, when the advantages the players have in a situation come as a surprise to the gamemaster. A character may, for example, have an ability written on his sheet that the gamemaster forgot that he had there, or character may have a useful item that the gamemaster forgot to account for in his or her scenario design. In this problem, a player character has an advantage they forgot to mention to the GM, but which cannot be taken away from the player easily in the logical context of the story. One example of this was security cameras in GM-Marlene's game; the gamemaster had forgotten that the character had access to local security cameras or the ability to check them for information. If he had been easily able to track the monster with technology, this would have made it too easy to defeat and disrupted the story the GM was trying to write. In the case of GM-Marlene, she decided to remove this advantage with a Lack of Reward so the scene could continue as she had planned.

6.7.4. Grief Players

A grief player, or *Killer* is defined as a player who takes delight in causing problems for other players – what causes them to enjoy the game most is for others to enjoy it less (Bartle 1996). In tabletop gaming, the concept of a grief player can extend to one who griefs not only other players, but the gamemaster. The only goal of a story griefer is to find the place where the story can be broken, and to break it, demolishing the work of the gamemaster for his or her own amusement.

Most gamemasters interviewed had past experiences with story griefers they were happy to share. GM-Corwyn, for example, discussed a grief player in her past that was infamous for getting kicked out of other gaming circles for stealing magical items and making a worse time for the other players. In this case, she detracted him by giving him a cursed item, a Damage detractor, and he was later removed from the game: Explusion.

No story griefers played in any of the observed games, however. Everyone seemed very willing to show respect to the Gamemaster's story and follow along with the plot he or she had in mind, deviating only if it was unintentional or the luck of the dice. Grief players are typically considered rare, and make up, for example, only around three percent of the population of an MMORPG (Foo and Koivisto 2004). It was therefore perhaps unlikely that with a small sample, such as in this experiment, that a grief player would be encountered, and in the four sessions observed, no player could be identified as a griefer. All players in the study were aware they were being observed which also may have contributed to good behavior during play.

Upon further review, the reason why no grief behavior was encountered in the experiment became perfectly clear: GMs who run games regularly hand-pick their

players, and griefers are identified, branded, and simply kicked out, just as GM-Corwyn kicked her past grief player out. Typically, if a player is shown to be a griefer, that player is removed from the game after the incidents of griefing occur. Word spreads to other local gamemasters about the problematic behavior, and he is either shunned from sessions entirely, or at least unwelcome until he shows signs of changing his method of play. Roleplaying games are cooperative and are about the enjoyment of the entire group. The difficult player who is disrespectful to environment or story is ejected from the system, and not given another chance to play.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Overview of Results

The observations of gamemasters at work provided an excellent insight into the strategies that these directors use to facilitate narrative and player interactivity. Keeping in mind that the final goal of this research is to transfer gamemaster techniques to a computer environment, the results of the study showed several techniques that may be applied to computerized interactive drama. Among these are multiple metagame techniques such as the use of metagame punishment and reward as well as metagame fortunetelling. The experiment also showed, however, several techniques which may be inapplicable to interactive drama programs or at least very difficult to correctly employ.

One of the strongest findings of the study was that metagame techniques are an equally important factor to in game techniques in order to drive story. Social pressure seems to be a very important part of what makes tabletop roleplaying work well. Sadly, social pressure is one of the techniques that is extremely difficult to transfer to a virtual

environment, as many of the current interactive dramas are designed for single rather than multiple users. The pressure provided by an inanimate computer program is not quite the same as the pressure provided by a human gamemaster, who may also be a friend of his players in the world outside the game. A human intelligence also can look around the table and easily see from a player expression whether or not it may be time to add a new story beat, an NPC action, or to involve another player directly in the next decision the players make. Intuitively gauging enjoyment is something a computerized system has more difficulty achieving.

Another finding of the study is that several of the categorized techniques are more common than others. Other techniques are more personally oriented toward the style of one particular gamemaster; where one gamemaster will only use the technique once or twice, another may use it many times in the same session depending on his personal style. Different combinations of gamemaster styles still create games players seem to enjoy, indicating that different combinations of technique usage can still result in a good interactive story.

The calculated use of both metagame attractors, and the Fate technique where the player actions do not influence the story, are very important and more reasonably transferable observed behaviors. Perhaps the largest variance among the gamemasters was their rigidity of story; while some remained focused tightly on a particular planned path, others played their narrative very loosely with little planning. There is always some give and take between participation and narrative structure and different gamemaster balance these concerns with different priority. All of the games observed had solid narratives even if the players encountered a setback, and this was in part because a few

things were already predetermined to occur, one way or the other, before the session was over. This is not different from how some video games currently handle story elements (Crawford 2005).

The gamemasters' universal use of metagame reward and punishment to enrich the game itself is also an important finding of this study. While most interactive dramas work toward hiding the metagame systems of punishment and reward as best they can, tabletop roleplaying still embraces it to some degree, particularly in the rewarding of beneficial tokens for players who take actions the gamemaster likes. This differing approach embraces the game-like aspects of the otherwise drama-generating structure to an effect that all gamemasters found to be positive. The ability of players to utilize their earlier good choices to cancel later failures, in a purely metagame method, enriches the dramatic arc of the story near its climax. It is definitely a technique that should be experimented with by future interactive dramas to see if a computerized, visible, point-reward system might net similar results.

Despite the limitations that computerized systems still have, the parallels between the gamemaster's work and the work of a story director in an interactive drama are very clear. The work in qualifying the different techniques that gamemasters use should be beneficial to the designers of interactive story systems in multiple ways; for example, it should help to design better attraction systems to get players of storytelling games to follow along with the story director instead of going off on a tangent unintended by the story. The list of problematic events and how they were dealt with in play when observed should be useful in showing both interactive drama designers, and role playing game module designers, what is best to avoid.

7.2. Future Work

A next logical step would be to create a director agent for an interactive drama based on utilization of these specific categorized techniques. Several of the metagame techniques employed by gamemasters, such as meta reward, have not been attempted in designs for interactive drama, but seem to perform well in a tabletop environment. Perhaps a new computerized interactive drama program could incorporate these systems to achieve similar results. One possibility would be to experiment with a computerized version of a tabletop roleplaying module. For example, an interactive drama could be created from the text of a gaming module, and the module could be ran both in a tabletop setting, and on the computer, to see how the different medium impacts the delivery and whether gamemastering techniques still apply when the module is delivered a different way.

With a list of identifiable gamemaster attractors and detractors, it may also be valuable to perform a quantitative study on the use of these techniques in a wider variety of play. Taping and coding another set of different games played along these lines would be a possible methodology, as would a larger survey of gamemasters to see if they utilize the above techniques. A larger volume of games could also be analyzed and coded not from the work of the gamemaster, but from the text of modules that gamemasters use. Since the modules utilize many of the above attractors, a larger review of modules could determine the frequency and percent of usage of these different techniques. A potential way to observe a large volume of games would be at a convention style setting, where hundreds of gamemasters gather to run modules of many varying types.

It may be worthwhile, in the future, to explore the differences between multi-user interactive dramas and single-user interactive dramas. In addition, the difference between a known computer entity versus a perceived human entity may cause alterations in a user's perception of how he should behave. If the user is told he is being "gamemastered to" by a human rather than by a computer, does that change his willingness to go along with what the gamemaster seems to have planned?

Further work and an attempt to program these techniques in a virtual environment is probably the next best step toward examining these techniques in detail. A broader examination of the use of techniques across different story genres and at the hands of different gamemasters with different group dynamics would also be a good indication of whether or not the techniques identified in this paper are universal, as well as revealing more about their potential application in interactive drama.

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9. Appendix: Gamemaster Notes

9.1.GM1 Notes

GM1 has a lot of prep notes today but typically plays the game very loose. These players don't do a lot of 'standard' dungeon adventures, but this adventure is near a close and is more of a dungeon atmosphere. This is a low-magic campaign. There is some dispute occasionally over powers and reward, but not much.

Trap rolls weren't going very well but were important. Sometimes the players take a long time with a single trap.

Some characters died in this session. The GM doesn't "shield" PCs from death, if it is about to happen, he allows it to happen. The villains had a scroll of revival and would use it on one of their own if he had died. This didn't end up happening (more on that later).

The villains might have been recurring villains used again in the game. But since the PCs went to a lot of trouble to kill them the GM was OK with letting them die. This happened because of the players' actions.

The dungeon that was used was taken from an adventure the GM found on-line. He "takes shortcuts if he can." The original adventure was focused on a demon in the

dungeon. The GM didn't think the encounters were very well put-together in the dungeon, but he liked the basic layout of the area and the rooms. So he took the map, but threw out all the monsters and challenges, changing the traps and making it more compatable with his style of GMing.

This game started out with a lot of prep-work not related to story, spending points and such.

The GM used to run Mutants and Masterminds as well. It's a more fluid system, he says, but also rather thick on rules.

A previous character in the party was a mute, but even mute characters can communicate in some fashion.

The GM realizes that pitting players against each other can lead to hard feelings so he does it very sparingly.

Two player-characters were in an argument at the official start of this session. There was a ghost, and the ghost possessed one of the PCs, causing him to act differently. This happened in the previous session, and the player was allowed to roleplay out his character being possessed. The GM is worried a lot about pitting players against one another, but if they care to RP out this kind of conflict sometimes it makes an interesting story. At the

start of this session some of the PCs were not certain if the barbarian was still possessed or not. This made for a bit of an argument near the beginning.

GM Action: Letting it go, No action

"It can degenerate really fast." GM says. He tells a story about an older game where these two players had a similar conflict in a Dark Sun campaign. A fight that started in game turned into a physical fight with one character throwing lightning bolts at another. Another good character tried to break up the fight and ended up dying. He says that the way he stopped the fight was by having another lightning bolt trigger an avalanche, and having both of the battling PCs also die. ("Rocks fall, everyone dies," outcome: GM classic technique.) That's a worst-case scenario. It can lead to hard feelings.

GM Action: PC death consequence

In this conflict, he was certain to keep the argument totally in-game. He allowed the kobold to grasp clues that the Barbarian wasn't acting like himself, as in, he was speaking too articulately while possessed.

GM Action: slipping in clues (focus?)

Knowing your players is very important.

He's been working with the same players for a long time. They've been friends a while. He generally knows their playstyles. "For me, it's a lot easier" to know your players and what "scenes they're going to shine in."

GM Technique: 'know the players/' social engineering

The cleric player is very easy to please, and always has fun. She doesn't like being put in positions where she has to be the leader or make a decision for the whole party. In a previous campaign she was a head of the group (a Jedi) and had to make decisions that put her in charge; she felt uncomfortable with that. She does make a good support-class player or sidekick and is "more comfortable with doing" that.

He tries to keep turns moving so things are exciting.

Any time the players are taking a while just to do anything, or nothing has happened for a while, he might roll dice just to increase the tension. He is watching body posture, if people aren't engaged, or are leaning back, he may suddenly have them make a choice or make a random roll to see if they are paying attention.

GM Technique: Reading the group on the meta level

Last session, the players had just killed a carrion crawler. He introduced the monster because a few players were in a room away from the action and not doing anything. He

didn't want them to be bored, so he gave them something to fight and 'fast cut' from one room to another during the combat sequence.

He discusses this encounter a bit later on the tape. Basically, the Barbarian was fighting a group of villains on another level, but the party had split. The GM didn't want the other half of the party to be bored watching a fight they couldn't reach. So, he randomly generated a monster at about their level to come out of an adjacent room and attack them. That gave the PCs who were not occupied with the primary fight something else to do so that everyone was engaged in the story. Later, he added a few trappings to the underground room to make it seem as if the monster (the carrion crawler) had been in there a while. He knows the party well enough to choose how tough to make a monster to challenge them in case he needs a random encounter to occupy their attention.

GM Action: Forced Conflict

This is something that he says he does a lot. He will spring "mooks and minions" against a split group in the party, and run everything as one combat. He wants to make sure everyone is engaged. If there is a situation where only one player really has something to do, he will, as much as possible, keep checking to see what other players are doing in the mean time. He doesn't want to GM for just one player. Even a red herring can be useful in this kind of situation just so there is story going on all the time.

There was a stairwell that led down into the trap room, and then an illusion that the stairwell continued, where really it only continued down five feet.

There is a trap in the room below the carrion crawler. The Kobold jumps into the hole right away without looking before he leaps. The GM is very surprised. He knows that below that, there is a reverse-gravity trap that might kill the kobold if he isn't careful. He describes the room in some detail and mentions the bones that are on the ground from the monster. In doing this, he forgot about the reverse-gravity (if the entire room was rev-grav, the bones would be on the ceiling and not the floor). In a split moment therefore he decided that the rev-grav only happened on squares of the floor where he did not draw bones. This ended up giving the player a valuable clue and also helped him avoid the trap he almost jumped into accidentally. The kobold saw the bones in an unusual pattern and didn't go in the room any further (which saved him).

GM Action/Detractor: Suspiciousness

Players are sometimes unwilling to let go of a red herring or hook. That was the case with the trapped room which he introduced early in the night. It took about an hour to clear the trapped room. He went ahead and 'let this ride' allowing them to take their time with the room until they came to the conclusion themselves it wasn't working. As long as they were having fun, it was all right.

It's pretty much so that if a red herring seems thought out or intricate the players won't recognize it as a red herring. After a while, he handwaved the time spent, allowing the rouge to "take 20" on searches in the area and so on.

GM Action: OOC advice to move on

Detractor: Lack of Reward

It's hard in D&D to have recurring villains the players don't kill. Tonight's villain was someone they had met only once previously. The players were after a spellbook that the villain had. (The barbarian calls it the "shiny book.")

The bad guys had just done battle with the players prior to this but escaped, via a convenient spell called Dimension Door. The DD had been in the GM's plans; they had that spell available so they could escape.

"If you want a recurring villain, it's best not to put them in combat at all." Have the villain show up and send minions, then leave. It's easier with mages who might have a teleport spell or a contingency. A melee-based combatant doesn't make a good foe for a high-level party because if he gets into a fight either he will die or the party will. (Neither works well for the story.)

GM Technique: NPC Design

Arkiro (barbarian) dislikes magic so he chased the magic-using bad guys. This is what caused him to be captured and later possessed by the ghost. The bad guys sent two invisible party members down to kill the rest of the party while they were in camp. However, Arkiro escaped, and attacked the bad guys back. (this all happened in the prior session and is the backstory behind the bad guys).

GM Technique: Using Character Hooks

The spell-book was an Electrum-plated book.

Last time the players had a very difficult puzzle that took two hours to solve: a language puzzle with a secret password written on a door. The GM didn't mind that it took 2 hours, it was better for him to let them figure it out themselves.

Language use: the door puzzle was a cast iron door with "typewriter keys" on it in elven script. It said "a sword in its sheath is no less sharp," and given this they had to figure out to type the keys that spelled 'open.' The party couldn't figure out this puzzle even though several of them could speak elven, because they had to guess the code word to type, and then had to spell out the proper word in Elven. Originally a player said "how about typing open?" but that clue was dropped when the GM just let them play and guess as to what to do. They eventually returned to that guess later. The door had several traps on it; any time the wrong thing was typed it might set off a trap.

Rolling for events sometimes means the story will be based on luck.

The kobold's master was a master trapsman, and the kobold is supposed to be excellent with traps, but today in the trapped red herring room he made several bad rolls that made his skill questionable. He would have needed average rolls to figure out the rev-grav room but wasn't rolling well for the beginning which slowed him down. A player isn't normally allowed to 'take ten' on any roll involving traps because there is always the chance the player will do poorly. If he had encountered one of the reverse gravity fields he was going to fall up to the ceiling.

GM Action: None

The kobold ends up discovering which areas have rev-grav due to the bones. Everything the GM draws is "kind of filled-in at the time" so he occasionally randomly chooses room details.

The kobold hid in the trap room arguing with the barbarian before he found the trap.

During the argument between those two characters the GM turns to other players and asks what they are doing.

GM Technique: Social Pressure/Engineering

There are two Halflings in the party, the cleric and the wizard.

The book the party is looking for is in the backpack of one of the villains.

Sometimes loot is invented on the fly.

"That's probably one of the last things I really design." The GM mentions there is a treasure room in the dungeon that he knows the content of. In the alchemists' lab he really was winging it. For example, in the lab, he had a list of various alchemical things that may or may not be in there. "Improvisational stuff." He won't randomly penalize a player. (He calls that being "unnecessarily punitive".)

GM Technique: Fate (the players would find whatever they needed)

The barbarian is from a flying race. This might cause some unique challenges but "he doesn't fly very well." At this level, the mage spell for flight can also be a concern, so having a flying barbarian isn't terribly imbalancing to scenarios.

The GM says the player has a hard time with the mechanics of his flying race and doesn't fly as much as he can. He can glide and can't really fly terribly well. If he triggers a pit trap however he will float down with wings and not take damage. He doesn't take as much experience from this because it's no threat to him.

Here in the tape the kobold is discovering the rev-grav trap. The GM treats it just like falling down a pit. The kobold is unhappy with this because the trap uses magic, which is "cheating" where it comes to making traps. (The player however is having fun.) The GM almost forgot that there would be a reflex save for not falling up into the trap, but he allowed the player to have one.

Small Metagame Rules argument here

There was a fake door in the back, where, touching it, would have collapsed the ceiling as well. This was a mechanical trap and was created by the kobold's master (as a way of tying his past in to the story and making him curious about the traps).

GM Technique: Character Hooks

The GM wants the players to see the game as a story and discourages what he calls "Gamism." He knows which players have that tendancy and tries to steer them clear of this way of thinking.

At one point in character the players refer to the "squares" on the floor in-character. It's made in to sort of a joking thing. The barbarian gets a little "bit gamey" and says something about "finishing off the level" (ie, clearing the level of monsters before moving down). This may not be an in-character motivation.

OOC System Knowledge Use to Advance

On the floor directly above the reverse-pit trap, GM makes kobold roll randomly a reflex save. The kobold doesn't make it, so the GM says that he just trips over a loose stone. It's meant to be a random outcome to show nothing bad was happening in that corridor, but the kobold (and player) took the loose stone seriously unintentionally. He marked it with chalk and instructed other players to walk around it carefully in case it was a more dangerous trap. This was a red herring and not part of the story but it did cause some suspense in an otherwise boring hallway.

GM Technique: Focus (on otherwise unimportant detail)

This tower is an 'upside down' dungeon. The group is now trying to reach the bottom floor, which is collapsed.

The hippogiff he introduces is treasure, not a foe. If they can figure out how to train it they can keep it as a pet.

In the previous session when they arrived, the first floor of the tower had collapsed in. There was a giant wasp nest on the outside, and the wasp arrived carrying the hippogriff paralyzed. The PCs fought the giant wasp and freed the baby. It was in bad shape but not dead. In this session it has now woken up and has wandered down to this floor. It doesn't

go any further. It is "loot," if they manage to train it and find a way to get it out of the dungeon safely, as it might serve as a flying mount or companion.

GM Rewards players for completing objective (killing wasp)

The player of the barbarian (Arkiro) will take action if the story seems bogged down. He doesn't like long planning sessions and arguments that go on and slow down the game. He is not really pleased with his character either.

The GM says he won't push a player to stick with a character they don't like. The barbarian wants to pull in a new party member, a samurai character. The GM wouldn't answer if that was Ok or not, because he wants to be able to review the class for balance. Keeping in mind that Arkiro is dissatisfied lately however affects the game later.

He has this "amazing capacity" to roll well when he needs to.

He very rarely fudges rolls, for his benefit or the players. The players would get suspicious if all the rolls were hidden and they didn't think the rolls made a difference.

The GM is known as a "bad roller" if the rolls are in the party's favor and seems to roll better if he is working with villains.

He uses the screen to hide his notes and his maps, but he rolls combat out in the open. Sometimes, he says, the players mind, because then he cannot fudge the rolls in their favor at all. But he doesn't typically fudge rolls in combat, he says, "rarely." "Once combat is initiated, I like to keep it kinda open. If it's behind the screen and the NPCs are doing well," the players (especially kobold) get suspicious.

He thinks that PCs using problem solving and teamwork can handle bigger challenges than the "challenge rating" actually says. "They have five minds to my one," he says, so they have problem solving skills that help them through that kind of problem.

Use of Group Dynamics important

The party hesitates at a door on the next lower floor, after getting past the red herring room. They are now very cautious because the previous door was heavily trapped. No one is certain who should open the door. It takes a while and they argue. The barbarian (player) loses patience at that point and opens the door just so someone will take an action. (The GM says he can usually count on him to do that, see above) However, he also dislikes getting hit, and would rather play a character that dodges attacks than one who "tanks/soaks". Kobold player on the other hand is a bit of "a showboat" and doesn't mind taking damage.

Knowing players

The party doesn't have many magic weapons because it's not as interesting. They do have master-craft weapons and can get nice ones later.

Sometimes the GM will give an item different abilities in the hands of the villains than in the hands of the PCs. That way, if they defeat the villain and take the item, it's not as unbalancing.

He says he doesn't give out "nearly enough treasure," (laughing at this). Not too many magic weapons so that any that are found are more interesting. He uses the master craft rules and lets players craft really nice weapons, they have no magical spells on them but are still powerful. He sometimes uses a system where a single magic item can gain in power.

He doesn't like the standard D&D system that makes even magical items seem a little mundane. He uses this example, "If you get Sting: you keep Sting!" So instead of introducing a "Plus one magic sword" that will be discarded for an equally mundane "plus three" later just because that is a better bonus, if he intros a magical weapon it is special and named, and grows in power with the wieldier as it "bonds" to him. Makes magic more cinematic and dramatic. If they get a powerful item from a villain, "it's not keyed to them," and not as powerful in their hands yet.

The fish-men the player fight now are a warm-up battle to build suspense. It went mostly according to plan and was a quick fight to get dice rolling. This fight goes very fast and isn't hard.

GM Action: Forced Conflict

(This discussion takes place during combat)

The GM tries not to take things away from the players, unless it's really bad and not working out at all the way he intended. He'll try to make this kind of thing natural and go along with the story.

Even in D20 however story should come first, GM says. The core mechanic is very based on many rules. (Fortunately the players know most of the important rules, since looking up rules slows down sessions.)

Not knowing the rules can actually open up the players' imagination. If they know all available mechanics they may not be as brave or creative with their ideas.

Disarming an enemy (and getting them to surrender) is very hard to do with D20 rules.

"It's very punitive to attempt that." A player that knows the rules won't do it because it's too hard. But a player that doesn't realize how hard it actually is will probably want to do it if it's cinematic enough.

Detractor: Hassle

(It's probably better not to have your players thinking about the rules, and instead thinking about the scene and story.)

Third edition is very "rules heavy" on the player side, and forces players to know a lot about their PCs and how rolling works, etc. Second ed is more rules-light on the player side and puts most of the rules knowledge in the hands of the GM. It was easier for second ed GMs to cover a mistake, as well, because only they really had to know all the rules. Second ed had different rolls for everything, Third ed has a "core mechanic," but each feat and special skill adds one more mechanic. New supplements add new mechanics, etc…

The GM doesn't want a 'me versus them' mentality.

Barbarian "Is particularly vicious against NPCs." Sometimes he feels that it is an us vs them situation, and since he also GMs it might be a reflection not of this GMs' style but of the player's style when he GMs. He sometimes tries to play with how he thinks the GM thinks (which may not be accurate).

Metagame behavior: System use

Occasionally the story slows down, outside of a dungeon, for a "shopping mission" or other downtime. The GM says this is necessary sometimes but can be boring.

After the fight, the players encounter a small lab, an alchemy lab, in the dungeon. The wizard (Halfling sorcerer) wants spell components so he asks about a few items he hopes that he will find. The GM decides that the wizard should be able to find what he needs, but only small amounts of his rarest needed item. GM says on the tape that the shopping missions are the "most boring" kinds of sessions for him. Not much story happens. He'd rather give the players the chance to get what they need by a method more interesting than having to go and buy it in towns. It's not totally likely that the wizard will clean out the room and try to get everything in it. He's betting on him not trying to scour it and only looking for specific things, so he hasn't actually officially decided everything that is on the shelves in the lab (and doesn't think he will need to).

Attractor: Fate: (this is the lab mentioned above)

The wizard's player doesn't like for loot to be distributed unevenly and thinks all treasure should be discussed by all party members and fairly shared. He proposed the idea of a "contract" for sharing loot, and this works well with this group for types of treasure; if one person finds something someone else can better use, they share it or pass it on.

There are "targeted items" from time to time that are designed for a specific class or player, but it doesn't happen a lot. The villainess they fight had a magical sword for the barbarian to use.

GM Technique: character hooks

Arkiro plays a character for "about ten sessions" and then tends to want to shuffle in someone new.

A treasure discovered in a small offshoot room is an ever-flowing pitcher of water. This is there because the room was used as a washroom. A handy but not imbalancing treasure.

The couch (a couch in one of the sitting rooms) was a pre-placed trap the barbarian happened to stumble across. It was Yellow Mold right out of the DMG. Even though the player was still discouraged he let that roll stand as it was.

"Releases spores if disturbed." The barbarian made the spot-check to see it and it looked disgusting, but he decided to move the couch anyway. He took a penalty to his con from inhaling spores though the cleric was able to help. This probably happened because the player or PC didn't realize that even though he saw the mold on the couch, it was necessarily bad enough to harm him.

Detractor: Damage

There was an invisible Halfling, an enemy, who was opening doors. That was the 'strange noises' that provided the players with some misdirection.

When the PCs hear the strange noises of opening doors in a nearby room, they all run to the small closet where they found the water jar (the "bathroom") to hide. But the closet is very small and only a few of them fit. This caused a rather comedic situation for a moment.

They don't know where the strange noises are coming from but when the barbarian checks it out the Halfling was invisible. So it is still a mystery. The GM added this at that point just to add another mystery for them to figure out and keep them from standing still debating which door to take or where to go.

GM Technique: "new beat" or drama injection (type of focus?)

The hall of mirrors was a special circumstance.

When the kobold opens this room the GM describes it in a very interesting way, by first saying that he sees another kobold, and then mentioning that there are many kobolds. He says they are all holding a sword in their right hand. (PC holds it in his left hand.) Then,

after the player has this impression, he can guess that he is actually looking in to a room filled with mirrors, when more light is let in to the chamber for him to see clearly.

There were 10 mirrors in this room; they looked ornate and seemed just from a glance that they might be special or magical. The fishmen that the players had battled earlier seemed to have come out of this room as there were wet tracks on the floor. These clues were there to indicate that the mirrors were special.

GM Technique: Focus

This was a plot hook the players were avoiding and didn't seem to want any part of at all. The mirrors actually open gates to a 'mirror world' where the characters would have fought mirror versions of themselves. One of their enemies is actually from the mirror world, a mirror evil version of someone who was an ally at some point before in time. If the PCs had entered the mirrors this "could have taken the rest of the night."

In the mirror plane, there is a mirror duplicate that appears of anyone who enters. It is that person's opposite alignment, and tries to kill them and take their place. So they would have discovered evil versions of themselves if they'd gone inside. The GM was a little surprised they didn't enter, he expected they might at least try or gaze in to it for a long time, as a long gaze might have caused one of them to "fall in" to the mirror world.

The abolith, the main monster in this dungeon, has a corresponding mirror down in the underwater portion of the dungeon. He sends his minions through it and in that way they can travel to this floor.

But the PCs didn't want to enter the mirrors despite the GM's plans. They did everything in their power to avoid them, and eventually turned them against the wall, without really looking at them too carefully either.

Suspiciousness becomes unintentional detractor and breaks story

The GM tried to introduce another fish-person, a "good" fish person who had come out of the mirror world. He defeated an evil fish-person, and escaped. This was the GM's attempt to get them interested in the mirror world again, but it still didn't work. He gave up on the thread for a while; maybe it will be re-introed later. He doesn't think the PCs noticed they were missing something or ignoring a hook.

The fish-person encounters them on the stairs as they are heading up to see what else may be in the floor above. The fish-person appeared and walked up to them, but instead of attacking, he bowed and scraped and said he was happy to surrender. He looked a little hurt and tired. The PCs let him go on past… then returned to the mirror room again and made good and sure the mirrors were face down and nothing else would escape.

GM Technique: NPC Creation/engineering

The players now encounter a pudding (type of monster) in the dungeon. Barbarian was discouraged by this monster because it was very hard to kill with weapons. The GM decided some helpful items would be located in the room to help them defeat it. This adventure was a module but has been modified a lot, especially the traps and monster placement. The GM likes for the traps and monster placement to be logical to the setting so that everything fits and has a reason to be where it is.

The 2 flasks of alchemical fire were put there on the fly. The GM figured if the kobold got a lucky roll, he'd just pull something "good' from the pile of flasks. He was doing this in part to reward his bravery for just trying something new.

He ruled beforehand there WERE two flasks of alchemist fire as part of the overall dungeon treasure. But they were not on that particular table in specific, in the pudding room, until the players really needed them to be there to defeat the pudding. (The pudding will divide if exposed to metal weapons like swords, and is weak to things like fireballs and fire.)

GM Technique: Fate

The barbarian initially cut the pudding in half with his sword even though OOCly he knew that it would divide one monster in to two monsters. (Good RP initiative.) The

GM says he probably figured this out in-character a bit too quickly after that happened once, but was willing to let it slide.

Attractor: Metagame knowledge of monster (Fortunetelling)

Players in this game can use an "action point" to emulate a feat they do not have, if it is dramatically appropriate to do that.

Attractor: Metagame reward

Room: "old laboratory."

The actual treasure vault, the GM says, is another level down from here.

In the original module the treasure room was in a different place, but the GM changed the treasure room to distribute things more evenly and put the vault somewhere else. He put a few bits of copper in the vault from the original module, as a small reward if they broke down the super-intricate door that guarded it, but decided it made more sense for the wizard who used to own the tower to put his treasure in a hidden place instead of an obviously marked vault.

He says he strives to make the ecology of the dungeon as logical as possible, so there is a reason for monsters to be where they are. He said that originally there were two

manticores in the pudding room, and he knew his players would question the logic of this. Why would a flying creature be in an enclosed room; what were they eating, why were they trapped there at all? On the other hand, a black pudding is a useful garbage disposal because it digests almost anything, and would be a handy creature to have in a lab setting. Originally it was contained in a small area but after the tower fell apart it escaped.

Encounter was CR7

This was a very challenging encounter for the players; difficulty-wise, the GM says it was "just right." CR7 is about standard for this level party, but because the cleric was the first PC trapped by the pudding, she was unlucky. Her strength wasn't very high and she would have had to roll very high to get out of the pudding. The players didn't use the optimal strategy; it might have been wiser to split the pudding in to smaller pieces and fireball it. The PCs lost some equipment and items due to this attack and the cleric was badly damaged.

Detractor: Damage

(Later, Shoney goes one on one with the female Barbarian. That was probably a bad choice; he was 6th lvl and could probably beat her but it would have been better to use teamwork. The GM says that the barbarian should have power attacked during the encounter, but admits he 'went a little bit easy on him' (Shoney).)

He's had situations where players have gotten frustrated with difficult encounters and walked away from the game. Tries to keep personality conflicts only on the IC level.

The cleric has a staff from a previous adventure. She finally figured out how to work it in this adventure. The PCs fought a young (baby) dragon for this treasure. They were officially discouraged from tracking it back to its lair, since they wouldn't have been able to handle the adult dragons. They elected not to pursue chasing down the parents after some debate, much to the GM's relief. In this case it seems he had just suggested above-game that this was an unwise course of action.

GM uses Focus here in describing the unusual reaction of the staff.

Occasionally, mechanic-wise, the GM uses both Damage Reduction and Armor Class rules for how armor works. Sometimes he tweaks the treasure stats slightly. Either to surprise players or to make an item better.

At this point I asked all the questions on my sheet, so it was time to watch the last battle of the session. It took about an hour, hour and half to complete the last set of encounters.

The kobold encountered a save-or-die trap just before the final fight, and didn't succeed in the save. The trap was a magical illusion designed to literally scare him to death. He

had a chance to disable the trap, a roll he failed, and then he had a chance to save to survive it, and failed that as well.

System-enabled, 'dice as they may' situation. Very little GM interference with the rolls, other than designing the trap and obstacle.

The bad guys, who the PCs will later fight, at first come in the spirit of negotiation. They did hire the PCs to get to the treasure in this tower, even if they later intended to kill them later and steal it from them. As a result, it wasn't good if the only character capable of disabling the traps here died, due to one. They used a revival scroll which they bargained with the PCs about.

Hiring/Bargaining: NPC Technique

A dead character is brought back to life (the kobold). The GM explains that the villains always had the revival scroll, so this was one way of using it. He doesn't like for a raise from dead to be a freebee so he constructed a scenario where the kobold had a choice, he could come back, or not. He did decide to come back. He's now lvl 4. There might be possible consequences later like a curse.

He digresses to discussing a mystery-type adventure that the PCs had done previously, where they were investigating an assassination. The GM says that it's hard for assassinations to happen in D&D because if someone is noble there is always some way

to bring them back. In this case, the king had given the queen (his target) a cursed necklace that would strangle her, and was exceedingly difficult to remove even after she had died.

The PCs were really unsure what to do when the kobold had died. It was very sudden. The GM says he doesn't like to have a lot of raise-dead happening in the game. But he also felt bad that the kobold had rolled so badly, because it really interrupted the flow of the storyline to have him die due to a bad roll.

Here he felt the system had interfered with his story and he had to turn it in to a dramatic situation. The NPC actions served this even if it was different from their motivations.

"There is always a consequence" the GM says, to reviving a dead character, so making that choice versus rolling up a new character is not a light one. He always has some kind of drawback for this, and gives the PC an in-character choice not to be revived. In this case, it is a dream-sequence-like situation where the kobold is given an option; he can stay dead if he wants, or move toward the magical light he sees blooming above him. He could have chosen to stay dead regardless if the player had wanted. The choice was actually a bit tricky for the player because he was trying to consider how it would actually have happened in-character. He decided he wanted to live.

Player OOC Knowledge at use

The GM describes the kobold waking up just to see the large barbarian woman over him. The GM also rolled to see if the spell to revive him succeeded in the first place. It did, but he admits later that probably was a small error. Mechanically, a roll is required for any such situation (it was a Use Magical Device roll on a scroll of revival), but if the spell had failed, after he had already gone through the process of giving the player the choice and roleplaying out his revival, it would not have served the story. Fortunately the spell succeeded.

Detractor: Hassle

The barbarian still hated the kobold even after he came back, and wasn't affectionate. (I thought this was sort of funny, and commented, if this were a movie, he'd have secretly cared for him and thought of him as a little buddy, but that didn't seem to be the case in-game.)

The barbarian makes a choice, after the kobold is revived, to go ahead and pick a fight with the villains based on their former actions. This seemed a little bit weird and forced but oddly was within the GM's plans for a finale encounter.

(It's unclear to me exactly why this happened in-character after review on the original tape. It seems mostly like it was a story-timing issue; it was near the end of the session and the GM says he wanted to have a strong climax and have the players quit that night on a high note. Also, in-character, the barbarian was very restless.)

When the kobold wakes up, he is very confused as to who is on whose side. He initially sides with the people that revived him, because obviously they did this for a reason. The player initiated this idea (roleplaying being confused) and the GM liked it, so, he went with it. On that note the Halfling villain uses this to his advantage and casts a Charm spell on the kobold, using him as an ally. They probably intend to recruit him. The party cleric tries to explain to the kobold what has happened. They run into an adjacent library room and have a separate fight.

Running NPC actions for dramatic purposes

Stays away from railroading as much as possible. "You can ATTEMPT anything," he says. But if it's a very bad idea "I can pretty much tell you what's gonna happen" to avoid problems. In a modern game, for example, there are enough laws against killing people, that there are bad consequences for such things. D&D is a little more open in that regard. He's been railroaded in the past, and he doesn't like it. He says NPCs with a competing agenda to the players' is a great way to keep the party together and focused on a goal.

GM Technique: OOC warning

GM Technique: NPC Design

"Sometimes you can do it with them thinking there's a choice, but there's not really a choice."

"Can you give me an example of that?"

"If I set up something, I could easily make it seem like there were three choices, but, ultimately, any choice would lead to the same encounter." Since a DMed game isn't designed to be replayed multiple times, this kind of trickery isn't evident. For example, if he wants them to encounter an NPC, he can basically make sure that they do so. He doesn't know for sure what form the encounter would take, when, for example, he added the invisible Halfling.

GM Technique: Fate

Halfway through the fight the Halfling did get a break to drink a potion. The potion was NOT initially in his inventory (it was a healing potion) but he wanted to make him slightly more of a challenge so he added the slight heal. He made sure the players saw him drink the potion so they would know that was the only extent of the 'cheat.'

GM Technique: Rebalancing Challenge

The GM doesn't think that Speak With Dead or other scrying abilities are imbalancing if used properly.

Allies can come with the group to explore but shouldn't be focus.

The enemy the PCs face is a barbarian woman. She has an AC15. He calls her "the Goliath."

A player used a blinding spell on one of the villains, and it worked, making the villain much easier. The GM said he really wished that would not have happened, but, since the player did that cleverly he had to give it to him. The wizard used the blind spell during the last encounter as well, with these same villains, which the first time resulted in a retreat.

GM Technique: Reward Creativity (even if it counters your plans?)

The barbarian almost forgot about his rage ability but the GM reminded him. This is what kept him in the fight. However, he took so much damage while enraged that the character died. This wasn't unexpected because the player was tired of that particular character and the death in battle was appropriate.

GM Technique: Metagame help

The Goliath's other assistant had an evil dark-magic sword. When she pulled it, it got most of the PC's attention because it was very strange.

GM Technique: Suspiciousness/Focus

The PCs killed these villains. The GM would have liked for them to have lasted one more battle, but, he thought that the fight was good and hard and the victory was deserved. Sometimes villains are not as fleshed-out as player characters because they may be killed, but they usually have at least a few motivations and a well-designed set of skills to help them survive.

They have probably one more session in this dungeon. There is still a final "boss," the abolith.

In D&D, the melee-focus means that villains can't run away as easily. In a modern game, if guns are used, the villains can usually escape.

9.2.GM2 Notes

This is a level 3/4 D&D 3.5 Campaign.

The NPCs are named Corbin the Sorcerer and Stern the Dwarf.

PCs:

Cleric – Victor

Paladin – Ramus

Monk – Sistrunk

Rogue/Mage (Halfling) – Milo (absent)

The dungeon was somewhere they were sent on behalf of the sorcerer who is accompanying them.

The players were suspicious that suits of standing armor "statues" were an old trick.

The zombie encounter on the second under level seemed very easy.

The GM says she has years of experience in doing this but this is her first time doing a long campaign.

This GM limits which books players should get their material from. Many extra supplements include material she hasn't had time to review or would find unbalancing. (This isn't an uncommon practice. Very few GMs let players get away with just anything in terms of their character setup, etc.)

Metagame system detractors (so the game is not "Broken")

This group has been together over a year. This is the first time for this GM doing a long campaign (so she has 1 year experience with this particular group).

She prefers low-power campaigns to high-power ones because powerful characters are very tough to regulate by comparison. She would rather work with low-power, low-magic to make players use their brains.

"I believe people prefer or are more inclined to be careful with their characters." This is because the characters can't take too much damage at this level, and it makes them more inclined to watch themselves carefully or run away if they need to do so.

GM Detractor: Damage/Danger

Also encourages them to negotiate if they can.

Prefers for them to think about it, and use different types of solutions. At 3rd or 5th level, they've already got "quite a bit of power," and the approach is different.

However, this particular group she doesn't want to remove magic and powers entirely.

GM has also played in horror type games, such as Chill, with lower-powered characters.

The PCs were hired by Corbin, an NPC, to check out this keep. His amulet was originally in the keep and was needed to unlock many of the doors.

GM Action: NPC Hiring

Hired as protection. Corbin found the note and amulet in his uncle's library. His uncle was a wizard who Corbin had studied under.

This is a 3.5 module, slightly down-powered for the level of these characters.

"Beginner" level module. Sort of a simple intro module in this case.

All chars were lvl 4. They've been playing for 6 weeks now with this particular set.

One of the players is the original DM for the game and handled the previous campaign.

The GM was missing a player this time around; he wasn't there that night. Usually a player will announce if he cannot make a session, so she can plan for them "going out" and doing something else with the downtime when he isn't present. In this case, however, they stopped in the middle of a dangerous keep, so she decided that Milo (the missing character) went off exploring on his own. She keeps a copy of sheets around for this purpose. Later, she used Milo as a hook to get the PCs to enter a tower.

NPC Action: Focus (happens later)

The party does not have major internal conflicts and generally work together whenever possible. They sometimes conflict with NPCs that are introduced. The party started out

adventuring together; there was no need to bring them together in-play. They met in a town prior to the game beginning properly.

If NPCs join the party sometimes they are a cause of conflict. Stern, the NPC dwarf that is a friend to the party, came in with one of the merchants that hired the party. Stern helped them fight off some orcs and human bandits attacking the merchants and village. There were several different encounters in this one village, which is why they were there for 6 weeks. At that time the players were 3rd level. Stern is considered a good friend to the party whereas Corbin, who hired them, is not totally trusted.

GM Technique: NPC Design

Corbin is a pre-gen that came with the module that the story is using. He's only slightly modified. Stern the GM made up herself a while ago. Corbin hasn't been totally honest with the party and only seems to want to be with them for a short time. He seems to have been established as a little suspicious.

GM Detractor: Suspiciousness

Stories don't necessarily happen in a linear pattern.

Sometimes things have to happen on the spur of the moment, because a module can't cover every possibility.

The players chose to continue on with a different mission than following the one suggested later, which the GM feels may distract them. There are multiple possible adventures that may happen in the new area.

The GM doesn't like "line" stories, but handles stories by events and area. Previous adventure hooks involved groups coming to the party because they had been attacked, and hired them for help.

The players form their backgrounds together to figure out how they all met. This party all "met in a tavern," talking to see if people were asking around for fighters or guards. This basically happened before the campaign began and it was more or less assumed that the group had some sort of solidarity by this point.

(Aside: this one is so standard that it borders on cliché, but, it's quick and effective.)

Social engineering at work here

The keep: belonged to an uncle of Corbin's. He had the amulet that unlocked the doors and hired the PCs to investigate the area. The PCs didn't trust him at first because he was secretive about the keep. Eventually they confronted him for the backstory, which he gave when pressed. He had an agreement to take any book out of the library.

In the case of this particular adventure, all of the adventurers saw a sign advertising a need for a small party looking to travel north, and that provisions would be provided, with later payment discussed. It turned out that "any treasure found" in the keep was the payment, though Corbin had the right to take any book out of the library if the library was found.

Attractor: In-game reward

When they did get to the library (later), there was a bit of conflict over this issue, because the party felt that Milo would want to keep one of the books that they found. It was full of magical spells. However when the group looked in the book, they saw that many of the spells were evil, and determined they would not want Milo to have them. Putting evil spells in the book was one way the GM encouraged the players not to go back on their word to Corbin, though it may have consequences.

GM Detractor: Suspiciousness

Corbin is not a "good" but "neutral" character.

Full story starts. Players exploring keep. In the keep, the group finds a box under a bed. In the original module, the box was trapped, so that the rogue would have to get by the trap before proceeding. However, the rogue was absent and since the GM determined that

challenge was unfair to the current group, there was no trap in the box. Otherwise they would have faced a poison-needle trap.

GM Attractor: Fate

The NPCs are primarily used to drive the adventure though they do not circumnavigate most of the challenges. The PCs are the ones that face the difficulty which may be caused by the NPCs.

Corbin is a sorcerer, so there was a spellcaster in the group even without Milo. The GM doesn't like to have more than two NPCs in a group. Any more than that and it's hard for her to run. She will only add two if she thinks the party will be shorthanded.

An NPC might jerk the adventure: if the players need to find a clue, he can point them in the right direction.

GM Attractor: NPC Instruction

The keep was a large area that took a long time to explore.

The party has a "kitty" for treasures but also can separate their individual loot.

It's important to balance EXP and treasure appropriately.

The GM writes the stats for a specific item on a card, so they can hold on to the information in a convenient way. This is if the items are special or have special abilities.

She can't think of a time when she's introduced a treasure that has unbalanced the game. She balances EXP by encounter; if the battle seemed too easy, the reward is not as high for them. In high-level campaigns with powerful monsters, you can't use a lot of them or they aren't special, but if you don't use hard monsters there's no challenge.

She can't think of a situation she's GMed where a single roll meant life or death, such as might happen in older "save or die" editions of D&D.

This GM doesn't use any mods to the original rules. She talks about the Living Death edition of D&D, where there is a "hero point" system to accommodate for bad rolls, allowing one re-roll per point spent. This seems common in newer systems.

This is mostly used in "cinematic" systems. Living Death is that way and magic is restricted heavily.

This GM doesn't use "action points" in her game (No meta reward system)

This party has a lot of "holy" type characters which make undead encounters easier. The GM is strict with Paladins and believes they should follow their deities. Sometimes Paladin power can be a bit unbalancing and make things too easy.

The GM agrees that the zombies were way too easy. They probably weren't the right kind of foe to throw up against this group. But sometimes an easy encounter is OK.

When the group first went down in to the next level of the keep, they saw suits of armor standing around. They were immediately suspicious about the suits of armor and thought they may be undead or a trap: they were right. As a fourth level cleric, Victor can turn undead. In this case, his roll was very high and he killed the bad guys very easily. The GM says their paranoia about the armor was "pretty much expected."

Metagame play occurs here (suspiciousness)

The keep's level was opened with an amulet which Corbin had kept hidden. The GM says the PCs didn't know about the magical amulet until almost halfway through the story because Corbin kept it hidden. The PCs confronted him at last because they had heard rumors in town about the keep and there being magic involved. For a long time the amulet was hidden. In addition to being used to open magically sealed doors it also had a map of the keep within it.

Technique: Focus (rumors)

In the rumors, other adventurers went to the keep but couldn't find the amulet so they had no way of getting in and finding the mysterious wizard's library. The GM also seeded a few false rumors in town such as that the keep was run by a witch.

A Paladin has an active "always on" Detect Evil ability. The GM finds it difficult to balance around at times because it means that evil creatures do not cause suspense. Later in the game, an encounter with a neutral-aligned but hungry animal does not set off his senses, as a method that works around this ability and allows for surprise.

She's rarely played in campaigns with Paladins ("Goodie Two Shoes").

Earlier, the cleric was not able to turn the undead, but now that he can, the GM has increased the numbers of foes. The party has fought a lot of undead.

To use random encounters, she has a table of "recommended" encounters based on the local terrain and level of the PCs.

The book suggests what kind of encounters, such as animals, might be common in certain types of terrain.

The group did once (in previous session) run in to a creature that was too powerful for them to defeat. They damaged it, but then ran away and spent some time healing. They then tracked down the monster and finished it off.

If Corbin had died in a random encounter or in the dungeon, it's all right: that would be OK. If the PCs had killed him or if he had died because they were negligent, the "gods" of the world might have been angry at them, and hurt their holy powers, etc.

Detractor: Damage/death

In this particular dungeon, static elements, such as a rope ladder that was precarious, were more dangerous to the PCs than the monsters in the dungeon. The falling damage was particularly nasty to the NPC Corbin because as a sorcerer he had very little Hit Points to survive falls. The PCs seemed to tire quickly of healing him from his trip-ups.

Detractor: Damage (forced PCs to rethink their strategy)

The GM says that playing a deity is one of the fun things about her job. She hasn't had to be an angry god yet however with this group.

The Paladin must follow the recommendation of his deity, keep justice, etc.

The Monk's player is one of the more quiet players, so sometimes he doesn't open up as much as the others.

The GM has been in situations where angry gods caused changes in characters, such as once when a druid, who is supposed to stay neutral, became "good."

This GM is fairly loose on the alignments, but she played a druid in a campaign where a Deck of Many Things, which changes your alignment, was used. It caused her to have to play the character with a slightly different personality.

She generally doesn't play clerics. Victor however almost always plays cleric.

The GM rolls the /reactions/ of monsters behind a screen to keep up suspense. She rolls attacks, etc, in the open.

In fighting the zombies the cleric rolled a 20 on his turning. That single roll pretty much won the encounter, except "cleanup".

She generally rolls in the open for anything combat related. She has a screen which she uses for reaction rolls: in this case, by reaction, she means social things like sensing motive, doing spot or listen checks, checking how much do NPCs like the PCs, and other things along those lines. She thinks it's better for players not to see the outcome of rolls like that, directly.

She'll hide figures behind a screen so that the players can't tell right away what they are encountering.

Skeletons can't be damaged by edged weapons; but this wasn't a huge problem for this group.

The GM urges the party not to loot the bodies of the armored monsters, by saying that the armor is in very poor condition and probably not valuable. They seemed to already be leaning toward leaving the armor behind so they found this acceptable. She thinks, however, if Milo was with the party it would have been harder to discourage him from "stealing everything in sight." She discourages him from too much looting by reinforcing his weight restrictions. As a Halfling, he can't carry as much treasure around with him.

GM Detractor: Hassle/System Punishment/Suspiciousness

CR = Challenge Rating = how EXP reward is determined. Varies based on the risk of the encounter. The zombies were so easy that they may not net much of a reward.

She has the EXP written down for each planned encounter ahead of time. She hands out the reward immediately after things have been killed. The paperwork, she says, is easier that way.

NPCs develop EXP along with PCs. This is so PCs don't pass them up in their advancement. A villainous NPC might not develop as quickly as the PCs, as a way of showing the PCs are training and getting stronger.

She tracks Corbin and Stern at the same time as tracking the PC's EXP after the encounter.

NPC Design Techniques

The players have never turned down aid just to get a better reward for an encounter.

In one situation, the Paladin missed a session and some EXP. She made up for this by running a secondary session for the Paladin to catch up, where he helped an NPC with a small encounter. She fears slightly that Milo will now be behind the group.

The key to the keep was retrieved off of a group of orcs the PCs fought earlier. This was how the keep, and the orcs later found there, were tied back in to the story.

(Previous session: a group of orcs that the party had killed was going to ambush a merchant. The key happened to open a secret door in to the back of the keep. This tied one seemingly random encounter in to the main adventure. The orcs were well organized, so defeating them was a bit more challenging than a standard orc encounter.)

Foreshadowing?

The PCs now find the library of the keep. The GM would have not wanted the players to keep the magical book that they found. She would have tried to get them to give it up by other methods. It was fortunate that the very good-aligned characters did not want the evil book, but if this had not been enough to deter them, there was a treasure later that she would have had Corbin offer to trade him for the book.

GM Detractor: Suspiciousness

Some of the spells in the book were not evil: they were just standard useful spells like "Featherfall." The module didn't specify which spells were in the book, just what level they were. She chose spells based on the fact that she knew the wizard was originally good and developed in to evil. So the simpler and easier spells were basically utilitarian with the evil spells being the stronger ones, written when the wizard became more powerful.

The GM was happy that the party had ropes to help them through the dungeon. She has been in a situation where the party hadn't had a rope and needed it.

Another common dungeoneering item is the standard 10-foot pole. The GM mentions that this group doesn't carry one, but in one adventure she is planning they may regret this.

Unexpectedly, in-game, Corbin took a difficult fall leaving the library level and knocked himself unconscious. The party Paladin healed him with lay-on-hands. To prevent this from happening again, Stern, the GM's dwarf, suggests a different approach to helping Corbin with steep climbs, than the one that the party was initially trying.

GM Technique: NPC instruction

She was very prepared for the final encounter of the adventure. She did however say that a lot of the encounter depended on how well the social discussion went in-character.

This group is not big on RP and cross-talk. This GM says she likes to keep the action going.

She would ideally have some sort of encounter within the first hour or so (by encounter, she means a combat). She gets bored if there isn't an encounter near the start. Her group has had purely social sessions, but she considers that "tiring."

GM Technique: Forced conflict

The major treasure for this particular module was a staff. The staff had a Daylight ability if the party had discovered it, which would have killed the last monster in it the keep very

easily. However, the players didn't figure this out. That was OK: there were multiple solutions to this puzzle.

The GM did a lot of advance prep for this module and tends to do a lot of prep in general. She has pre-made inn layouts, etc.

Unexpected action: when encountering the last room, the PCs at first decided to leave the room and regroup, climbing out of the room. Their plan was to throw a vial of burning oil into the room from the ledge above (since one climbs down a rope ladder to get in to the room). The GM didn't like this plan and wanted them to fight the monster directly instead of throwing down oil. She had them make a saving roll against a spell effect, and said they felt too "tired and weak" ("from a long fight with the zombies above") to climb back up the rope ladder to the top. The players seemed content to pass this off as a potential area-effect power that was caused by the monster in the room. If the players had lit a fire in the room, they would not have gotten the staff because the staff also would have caught fire.

GM Technique: Dectrator: Punishment (damage)

Note: On the original tape, this seems very metagame/socially engineered. It's a lot like she's putting an artificial barrier in their way and telling them what to do here. She did it because she didn't want them to destroy the treasure.

The final monster in the dungeon was a wizard that made a deal with a devil. The wizard wanted to become a lich, but the devil tricked him; the bottle that he drank was not a potion to become a lich, but was poison, and the wizard came back as a Shadow instead. The shadow was a 5th level wizard. He was resistant to turning, which is a decision that the GM made and was not actually written out in the module. She thought that being able to turn the shadow as the zombies were turned would make him too easy, so his turn resistance was 10th level.

GM Technique: Rebalancing challenge

Running a bad guy with magical abilities can be hard because it depends a lot on what the players will do. The GM just looks at the monster's list of spells to see what is appropriate.

The monster was written in the module as hating light. So since the Paladin had a light spell on his torch, he was the first character that was attacked.

The players had an option to not destroy the Shadow. They could have, instead, re-consecrated an altar above, which was higher up in the main keep, and had the Shadow repent to his god in order to be set free from his burden. This might have been a more positive, and non combat-related solution. However consecrating the altar would have taken an extra day to do. The GM said the choice between these two actions would not have made a difference to her, but since re-consecrating the altar would have taken an

extra day, there was "no way they could" do the non-violent solution at this point because of this extra day. (It seems from the actual game that she was discouraging this solution by mentioning the extra investment of time for the players, though she doesn't confirm in interview that she actively discouraged it.)

GM Detractor: Hassle

When Corbin initially encounters the Shadow, the GM makes a roll to see if he can convince the Shadow he is his own uncle. She expected Corbin to fail but his roll for Bluff was very good. This put the PCs in line to get the back-story of the situation, as well as the potential for the non-violent solution.

Not wanting to drag the sequence out in to an extended conversation between NPCs, the GM had Stern turn to the party and mention that the Shadow could be attacked as long as he was corporeal to talk to Corbin. (This was a bit of a nudge to encourage them to break the conversation by jumping in to immediate combat. Though they got ready for a fight, they still didn't immediately jump in to the fight.)

GM Action: NPC Instruction/Hint

The GM will occasionally hide rolls but doesn't typically lie about the results of rolls.

The wizard would have been struck dead by his deity once he asked for forgiveness if the players had chosen this option.

The group does group initiative for combat. Just one person rolls the D20, all modifiers are added. The GM uses that rule because it keeps the party together as a group.

The Players kill the shadow and leave the dungeon.

Social Pressure (to work together)

The second adventure module she ran, it was actually her third time running it (just not with this group). Usually runs 3 or 3.5. 3.5 is an easy conversion. Converting 2nd ed to 3rd ed is hard. She enjoys teaching new people how to play, because new people haven't developed powergaming senses, etc.

She tells a story about a bad player that was a sorcerer but kept wanting to be in the front in combats. He got "incinerated" and learned his lesson about being brave at the wrong time. Her sorceress was smart and standing in the back.

Detractor: Death

Milo would have went after the staff immediately. Milo can use the staff, so this is a fair deal with Corbin, who gets the spellbook.

In an earlier adventure, the Paladin in this group wanted a lance, but they were expensive. The GM designed an encounter where the group saved another paladin from a monster, and the NPC offered the PC paladin his lance as a reward. That way the PC had the weapon that he wanted which otherwise he'd not be able to have.

GM Attractor: Character hook

After the combat with the shadow, the PCs probably wouldn't have explored the last tower of the keep without the GM placing Milo in that tower (as an NPC) to rescue. (See above.) The PCs heard him scream and ran in to save him, and in that way they found the last room of the keep.

GM Attractor: Focus

The characters returned to town. They have a random encounter on the way which is a short fight.

This party really likes random encounters, because the random encounters provide them with more experience points and rewards that allow them to level up. The encounters in this game have been properly balanced so far, but the GM thinks she will make them harder in the future.

Attractor: System reward

The GM says she's going to design more stealth encounters and more encounters where the bad guys used ranged weapons. If they stay out of the 60ft radius of Detect Evil their attack might be a surprise. In this encounter, the monsters were neutral so they were able to ambush the heroes.

GM Technique: Rebalancing Challenge

(I've been with groups that didn't like random encounters because they detracted from the story. This group seems to LIKE random encounters because they only get "standard" EXP rewards which are primarily given out for successful combat.)

The GM allowed the PCs to choose two different routes when they left town again. There was a short but dangerous route, and a long but easy route. A simple binary option. The GM says they never would have chosen the long, boring route. They didn't, of course: they chose the short but dangerous route. However, even if they HAD taken the "easy" route, they still would have encountered the adventure, it would just have been on that road instead. She was confident, however, that they would pick the dangerous route.

GM Attractor: Fate

The GM hasn't had any experience with a belligerent player who liked to break her modules, in this group. She says in an older group she had an orc assassin who loved to destroy her stories. However, he also broke a rule of the game, by trying to cast a clerical spell from a book, so a god appeared and smote him because he did not actually follow him. This player actually quit for good. He was only a 16-yr-old "munchkin" so she hadn't been warned about his tendencies not to play along with a gaming group. The player always played an assassin, so he was "roleplaying" by engaging in basically classic grief behavior.

GM Detractor: Death/Game expulsion

Moving on to the next adventure… the party is hired by a caravan of merchants to take that short dangerous path through the woods. Seeing this is the prepared adventure they accept it openly. The GM knows they want to go to a bigger city, so the merchants happen to be heading in that direction.

GM Technique: NPC Hiring/Metagame Fortunetelling

As they get on the road the GM tells another old story about a player who picked up any treasure he could find, so, he encountered a cursed item. When he put it on it caused him to randomly change sex and size. As a female his armor didn't fit because he was tiny and small, and not strong enough to lift up his usual sword. He had to buy additional gear and the change would also happen randomly. That was a definite way to cure the player

of grabbing and stealing everything in sight, since after the curse he was much more cautious about what treasure he would actually use. The GM kept track of how long since he had changed, since it was roughly every seven days. Once he even changed in the middle of a battle.

GM Detractor: Damage

The group sets off on the path to the next city. On the road they find a dying elf.

Back-story: the village that they will pass on the dangerous road was once kept safe by a druid. Something bad happened to him and the trees and grass are becoming tainted. It used to be a beautiful meadow, now it is brown and dead with withered greenery. They sent parties out to talk to the druid but none have come back. They become walking dead instead, tainted with some kind of disease. The dying elf was a member of one such emergency party.

When they first see the body they are suspicious. There is a small moment where they may have killed him altogether, but since the GM describes that the body seems weak but is still breathing, they go up to it and poke it with a stick. (Lightly. At first the GM thought they were hitting him rather hard, but, miscommunication.) The elf does not detect as evil.

There are no rangers or druids in the party so the group cannot figure out anything in specific about the nearby plants (they ask).

The players discuss the situation with the elf. The elf is supposed to die, but the Paladin has a lay on hands ability that can save a dying person. There is a kind of metagame argument here where the players would like to save his life. The GM solved this by railroading fairly heavily; the elf begged to die because he said his curse could not be healed and the taint/disease would make him turn in to a tainted creature. The players are fairly insistent on healing the elf. The GM says that healing isn't working well, but the PCs are persistent about healing. Finally the elf begs to be killed because of the taint. The players acquiesce and let the elf die, but don't seem happy about having to do this as it's obvious they would have rather healed him.

Metagame system use/GM just asking as a detractor

Attractor: Character instruction (pleading)

I found this the most interesting scenario point in the game. The GM says the module is "broken" because it insists that the elf die no matter how well the players heal him. The players seemed to feel a little cheated by the fact that there was no way, seemingly, to heal the elf. The railroading was quite visible here. The players were laughing about the death, and didn't feel "in the game" at all because of the metagame construct preventing them from making their own choice in this matter.

The cleric also tries to dispel the curse, but the level of the curse is too high for him to dispel, and not centered in this location.

This disease is called the "Redwood Scar." The GM says if the elf had not been totally dead he would have gone back and attacked his family and children. Things created by the scar disease are different from standard undead. They are a special creature type the PCs haven't yet encountered. Knowing the context, the way the GM handled the "please kill me" encounter makes sense. But not knowing that, as the PCs didn't, they seemed to feel dissatisfied. (It might have been better for the bad consequence of the elf returning home to actually happen.)

The PCs now have to choose: do they investigate the taint, or go on to the city with the merchant who hired them? Despite the lure of the adventure, the players choose to keep their deal with the merchant and travel on to the city. The GM says this was because they were generally good characters.

GM Attractor: NPC instruction (promise)/character hooks

The cleric at first is not sure as to how going one direction or the other will effect the situation. He casts a spell called 'augury,' that will tell him if this is a good decision or not. The GM rolls a secret roll to see if the spell works or not. The spell does not work (legitimately), so he gets no information. The GM was glad for this roll because she was happy not to have to give the player advance information as to the outcome of his

decision. She says if the spell had worked, he would have probably been suggested to go to the village instead of following the merchant. But she would rather they made this decision on their own instead of using fortunetelling.

GM Detractor: Lack of reward

The players almost decided to split the party. (This is almost always a terrible decision in RP, says GM.) They came to the conclusion on their own not to do so, so the GM was relieved.

There is a potential adventure and encounters at the city that might distract them from this village. They may have to deal with the taint at a later time. GM says that is OK.

In the city there is a temple that is getting poor people, who come to the temple for help, and kidnapping them to sell them for slaves. The GM says she may have to boost the power of the temple acolytes because her PCs have leveled up and she wants for this to be challenging. The PCs will encounter rumors about people disappearing in the temple at the inn they choose to stay at. There are also temples that are rivals, and there are people vanishing in the slums.

That decision to move on to the city marked the end of this session.

This GM was notable for doing more advance prep than other GMs I had encountered. She had a lot of very thick notes and adventure detail planned out in advance. In some way this also made her less flexible when an unexpected game encounter cropped up: an interesting dynamic between GM and players.

9.3.GM3 Notes

A lot of the talk at the beginning is pre-game conversation. While the tape was running there was not necessarily story going on in the gameworld – I make a note when the "prep" starts and the game story itself picks up around hour one.

The spider on the table is for situations where the game digresses or moves OOC. It is squeaked or reminded in those cases, to get the game back on track. This was originally done with a penguin, apparently, the phrase this applied to was, "We've gone south, so far south we're seeing penguins," and a small tradition was born.

"Gaming is a very social activity," GM says with regard to off-topic conversations.

The character who died in this session, Kat, was a former PC. This happened because the GM was convinced Kat was not returning. (The situation was done entirely off the cuff. As she states it, the GM just started the phone call scenario, and that was what came out.)

This GM says she is very big on player freedom. Because of this she does very little advance preparation. It is the players, not she, who are really making the story; she is just directing it.

"There are two styles of gaming." Tournament style, someone provides a module and you are to run the story that they have provided. Home campaign style, you can write your own path.

"If they want to go to Albequerque, I'll lay track," she says. She has no problem with players choosing their own paths as long as there is a story there somewhere. But with too much freedom there IS the possibility of losing the story's coherence.

Even in regular writing, characters will do things that you don't anticipate.

This GM does not like the Dungeons and Dragons "D20" system as much as other systems because of its task resolution. She wants a system where players are a bit more likely to succeed in attempted tasks. She thinks that D20 "slams down" creativity. Notably she had a small contribution in playtesting on the second edition of the game she is running, which is Chill.

She want the mechanics of the system and the interface of the game to "interfere as little as possible" with the story, when it comes to task resolution. With regard to D20, she discusses the "whiff factor," ie, the fact that it can be challenging to hit enemies with a

weapon makes combat slow. This is why she doesn't generally run D&D, not finding it conducive to a "cinematic" experience. She does not use a map and did not roll many dice during the session.

Hassle

"If you don't play a game by the rules the designer intended, you're playing a different game." But that's OK.

Normally when playing this game her players sit around on couches in her living room, and this was the first time they'd all been around a single table. However, it worked better than she'd thought it would have.

She has developed a system which other GMs in her peer group also sometimes use, which is the "action point" system. Action Points are rewarded to players who do something interesting, amazing, very in-character, or creative. They can also be called "Drama Points." An AP is spent if a player wants a bonus roll on a difficult task, or wants to reroll a new task for a better or more dramatically appropriate result.

GM Attractor: Metagame system reward

This is borrowed apparently from the "Buffy" role playing game in this case.

Many task resolutions in this game are done with Willpower or Resolve. Resolve increases slightly with small successes. This means that at the end of a story, players are more equipped to face the big bad villain without potential disaster, while still feeling accomplished for defeating him.

Resolve is actually a second-edition game mechanic that this GM scrapped in favor of the AP system. She thinks the AP system is more elegant because it doesn't interrupt play. Under Chill 2nd ed mechanics, players roll a die to check for how afraid their characters are, the "fear check" resolution. It reduces a stat pool they have, Willpower. As the game goes on, more fear checks are made and Willpower gets smaller, making each check against fear successively more difficult. This means the characters get more afraid over time, which can be good. However, it's "not satisfying or cinematic" to be so afraid of the final monster that you can't fight back at all. If you collapse in a heap at the end of the story or have to run away from the last boss because you failed your fear check, it's a bad climax. However, under Chill 1st mechanics, this happens regularly.

Resolve, in Chill 2nd, had players make a second fear check any time they failed an initial check. The score on that added to a "Resolve" pool they could use later. GM doesn't like this mechanic, though, because she feels making a second roll takes them out of the story, and the Resolve system gave too many points.

Detractor: Hassle

Action points are also used to reward behavior.

At this point on the tape the GM was handing out tokens to players to represent their current AP pools. The players have a pool of AP because this campaign has been going on for a while. "When they do something that makes me go wow, I give them an action point." They can save them up to use later or spend them as soon as they've been handed out. They are given for: roleplaying well, being heroic, or being self-sacrificing.

An AP can increase a skill check by one level. If it is a fear check, the player can spend as many AP as he/she wants, even making a failure in to a critical success. She feels they should have some control over whether or not they are afraid.

In situations where cross-player talk is occurring, sometimes it can be difficult to focus on what players are saying. However, listening is important because it gives the GM an idea of what their plans are and what is going through their heads.

"I don't usually have that much cross-player talk." "You may have noticed I was getting a little bit irritated."

Not a lot of prep was done for this session.

"When I sat down," other than the zombie fight, "I had no idea what was going to happen." "For the wedding, not a lot of prep."

The players defeated a cult one session prior to this.

"They had defeated the zombie cult, not the prior session, but the session before."

This GM does not consider money or resource management a big deal. She feels it gets in the way of story and doesn't want it to be an issue.

At this point in the tape players are discussing reward money and how to distribute and spend some of their current money. They're talking about buying vehicles, etc. The GM says "we do not worry about money" in this campaign much. One of the PCs, Reg, has an advantage purchased which means he has access to a lot of money already. The other PCs have a good amount of fund from a previous adventure. The GM discusses that adventure briefly and where the money came from:

She points out, with regard to the cult story, that she always tries to make sure a story wraps before players lose interest in it. If the story is not interesting anymore, the finale won't be satisfying.

Bring the story to the players.

She discusses briefly another mission these same players ran, where they took down a terrorist cell in Deerborne MI. After this mission, the players received a good deal of

monetary reward for the destruction of the cell, which helped her story because they had to worry less about resources. (However, she still feels that in a modern setting, having the player-characters have a life outside of adventuring (a day job, family, etc), is important for plot hooks.)

An NPC that also appears in this session, Ayden, was discovered to be a werewolf. He had been turned in to a werewolf in Afganistan, which is rather far from the game's actual setting in Detroit. However, a friend pointed out to the GM that there was a large Arab population in Deerborne MI, and perhaps the "lead" werewolf could be there. The GM came up with the idea of terrorist werewolves. She led the story to Deerborne and had the players fight an Al Queda cell and a creature from Arabic legend to save their NPC friend from the werewolf curse. To make this more fun she also got the real names of several terrorists from public FBI files.

GM Technique: Player hooks/character hooks

It turns out that many of the real people she had the players capture or defeat had large rewards on them by the FBI, 4 or 5 million dollars each. She thought it would be fair to give those rewards to the players. She rounded it out to simplify math, to a million dollars each, and 4 million in a non-profit fund for "fighting the good fight." The players kept trying to come up with tax shelters so they could get more of the money, but she just told them no to that, 1 million each was enough. It seemed like a fair number. It isn't important to her that players be poor.

The GM has an idea or story to tell but it's up to the players to make it happen.

Yes, there is an element of fantasy fulfillment to this sort of adventure.

Characters:

Leigh – anthropologist and professor of the occult

Karen – Archeologist/anthropologist

Reg – Fantastically rich "massive tech geek"

Frank – FBI Agent

Justin – Auto Mechanic

Tony – Paranoid type

These are somewhat relating to the player's interests.

The player of Frank was playing "out of type" this time around. He's usually a showstopper and a "challenging player" because he's very smart and a good actor. The GM says he's constantly "outthinking" her. His current character is a bit quieter, something different from the usual, which is partially at her request.

"It's not a competition," the GM says, it's a collaborative story and she is not the only author. She doesn't have a hard and firm idea of where exactly the story will go.

The zombie fight itself took a few days of prep before tonight, because she wanted to make sure that the creature was a proper challenge. It is not important that the players do fail. What is important is the "credible threat of failure." This adds suspense.

Note: this is cited in the GM guide as well

She says: she did do prep for the last fight in this session. The reason she prepared was she wanted to be certain of all the abilities that the creature would have and how to use them correctly.

GM Technique: NPC design

"Failure is boring – the credible threat of failure is very exciting."

"Dead characters are not interesting," she says. It's more fun to "torture" them, hence the reason the character's IC dependants are called "snack food."

"Emotional pace" is a very important issue.

A cooldown portion after a big victory is also important.

To keep emotional pace going well, you cannot just continually ratchet up the tension, or else everything will seem the same with no highs or lows in the story arc. Humor can also be used to diffuse tension.

Horror is about violence and the threat of violence.

"I have a limited number of tools to inspire fear in them."

Sometimes the game has time management issues with prep work and getting started up in the story. Gaining momentum is hard at first.

She feels she's really "perfectly honest with them" (the players) even if using misdirection. "I don't hide my motivations but I hide my methods."

To start the game properly, there is a phone call. The phone call and actions surrounding it were completely off the cuff. Part of the reason for this is that the GM would rather kill other people's old characters than play them herself.

She felt that Kat's player had lost interest in the game. However, since another character was getting married, and Kat was in the wedding, how to get her out of the wedding? She decided that killing her was a fine solution. Originally she thought perhaps she could be undercover or on a top secret assignment, but death was more interesting and dramatic.

Technique: Forced Conflict (mystery)

Only after coming up with the idea that there was a car accident, did the GM see that the players suspected murder. Then, she came up with a reason for the possible murder. This is a case of an action preceding the reason for that action. The GM decided that it was the fiancé of the character, and not the character, who was the target for the murderers.

Adding the death came first. As she was working out the conversation, she came up with "the why."

The situation with the bodies found was a lead-up to the fight with the zombie. However, this was also generally off the cuff.

Sometimes, this GM will drop a detail in to the story just because it is intriguing, and figure out why it happened later.

Since not everyone was involved in the initial phone-call, she added an additional mystery. Some mysterious bodies were found, chewed up and damaged. She created a sort of arbitrary pattern that would get a "visceral" reaction. Again, she decided why later.

The fiancé who was killed was named Jared; he was a "smooth talker" who moved quickly up the ranks in his job. A supernatural incident got him involved in the story.

She came up with the idea of killing Kat because it made the players realize the situation was serious. "All bets were off" and one of them could be next. She liked the idea of the contrast between what the players thought of Jared (many of them thought he was a little slimy) and having to hear him on the phone distraught about Kat's death.

GM Technique: Character hooks

Frank (character, the FBI agent) has a "paranoia" flaw. He thinks some of the PCs may be involved in organized crime.
Tony (other character) is calling Frank every 5 minutes asking for details about the death: has he figured anything out yet?

GM thinks the players probably believe that she's been planning this murder, but it was really totally spontaneous.

All of the characters in play have personality traits the GM calls "buttons." She can call upon those particular character specialties or weaknesses to produce a reaction, and in doing this can predict the behavior of the characters somewhat. For example, one character hates to see harm done to couples in love.

Each character has a supernatural incident in their background that got them involved with the group. Leigh's character's husband was seduced by a creature called a Lorelei. If you are killed by one, you come back as one, and when he came back as one he tried to kill Leigh also. She prevailed, but now has a "hotbutton" with couples in love; she wants to see things work out.

Frank's button she's been "counterpushing." Frank is an "outsider" type with paranoia, so she works hard to instead of play to his outsiderness, play against it, and make him part of the group.

"It's all about playing the characters." The story is written by the characters. That's a change to her GMing style recently.

GM Technique: Character hooks

NPC behavior: player characters can't function in a vacuum; they are not the only determinates of the story even if it is "their" story in the end. The world accounts for the characters and their actions, so NPCs move in accordance with their moves.

How do you get players to feel a certain way about an NPC?

"Behavior."

She discusses an NPC named Father Andrew, an NPC with a troubled past who goes "way back" in her campaign. Very unsympathetic, except for toward Karen. He has a soft spot for her. It sets up a conflict in the group.

GM Technique: NPC Design

The game has kind of a Catholic bend because there are several Catholic PCs.

The Polish PC -- Justin -- bought an attribute that makes him likely to run into family or friends where ever he goes. He also has a negative attribute that says he's bad at lying. Everything he does gets back to his family eventually. Characters are in their hometown for most adventures.

Time doesn't always line up. It might take 2 or 3 months to do a few weeks of game time. She wants players to think about the "petty details" of their lives, and their ordinary civilian work. If you're away from that for too long things might fall apart; people always have obligations. There's tension and story to be found in the clashing obligations.

This GM uses a laptop with an internet connection to grab quick maps and settings. Since she's using a "real world" setting, these things are available and she doesn't have to make them up on the spot.

The players needed a big hall for the wedding, so she let them rent the hall without a lot of advance notice. This isn't necessarily realistic even if the setting is realistic, but that kind of thing it's OK to overlook realism for story. Even if using Google Earth for the setting information. They added the large hall because the players and GM realized that the families involved were very large. The large hall was suggested by the "wedding coordinator" NPC she had invented.

GM attractor: Focus/NPC design

Karen is also friends with a Native American tribe. She sent an invitation, but the GM decided that meant that the whole tribe would want to come. Since she's already determined that money is not an issue, she decided to set the wedding at Kobal Hall, on the river in Detroit. Printing stuff out from the internet "hooks" it in to reality. It makes it so that these situations feel less like a comic book.

This "superzombie" is part of a voodoo supplement for the game. The original scenario was actually from an early playtest of the game. The PCs have, in some cases, been held over from that previous game. In that scenario, there were zombie-humans, who were not undead, but brainwashed in to behaving like zombies.

In the current scenario, the PCs were informed by a zombie "expert" as to the rather arcane method of disposing of the "superzombie." It involved putting the zombie in a suit, for some reason related to his culture. (This is really weird.)

GM Attractor: NPC instruction

"Voodoo" supplement story called "Drums in the Night" changed to "Zombie Jamboree."

When she was playtesting, she had two monsters, a ghost and a zombie. The players were fighting zombies. This was during a test, and the zombies were way too fast and almost invincible. She decided they were too hard to use again later. She had picked up a book called the Zombie Survivor Guide. The PCs were texted an address and time.

Even playtesting an enemy type she wanted a story. Sitting on the table of the address was a copy of the Survivor Guide, and a Post-It. The Post-It instructed them to find out if anything in the book was true. Tucked in the book was an address for them to go. That was how she got them in to the hook to fight their first zombies. (Simple but effective.)

The zombie cult had 3 different types of zombie. Zombified humans were not really dead, just brainwashed. Justin's cousin, a reporter, was looking in to the cult and got zombified in this manner. She wasn't dead, and could still be rescued.

There are "spirit zombies," she hasn't used those. And lastly there are actual dead, cadaver zombies. "Toenail zombies." One has to restrain it, cut off the fingernails of the left hand and foot, and put the clippings in a bag around its neck. Then the zombie would die. But there's no way for the characters to find that out without help. An NPC,

however, put them in touch with another NPC zombie expert. She gave them information and allowed them to do research.

GM Attractor: NPC instruction

What they were facing in this fight was a "Greater zombie." Any bad-guy can make a zombie cadaver, but only a "creature of the Unknown" can make a greater zombie. The researcher told them that, in order to destroy the super zombie, they had to put him a suit, put him in a coffin with 27 seeds, and bury the coffin.

(At the end of the session the GM decided to hand-waive the part where they put the zombie in the suit. She figured that after the good fight, this would be dull to play out.)

There is a new bad guy being introduced which is a type of creature called a Loa. If you want a regular bad guy to survive, this GM says, don't let the PCs get anywhere near that bad guy. Once they know someone is really bad they'll probably be out to get them unless you take measures to protect the villain. This will seem unfair unless the villain is just not available most of the time.

The Loa is the one that raised the super zombie. He's the next, and scarier villain. Continuing bad guys are a "Very good thing," and good in horror. There is nothing the PCs can do about the Loa; he's too powerful for their level. For now she's not giving

them any contact with him directly, they only see his effects. The events involving the cult were caused by a human, being manipulated by the Loa.

NPC Challenge/Design

"If I let them get close, they deserve – they're entitled to a shot at it."

The wedding reception is the bulk of the session's action. There is some socialization with various NPCs the PCs know. During the wedding reception, Karen (character) meets "Edward," who is her mother's new boyfriend. She makes a roll to see if she gets any kind of supernatural impression off of him. The GM simply says "You don't like him." This is misdirecting, after a fashion; there's nothing supernatural about Edward, but he is actually a con artist and not as polite or nice as he appears. The other characters don't make this roll, so they all think that Edward is just fine. This builds a sort of isolation around the character that feels "something" is wrong with him; isolation is a big part of a horror atmosphere.

This idea, she got from a show, "Medium." Edward is a motivational speaker. She developed the character to be not supernatural, but just an evil man. By having him just be a bad guy, she's misdirected the players in to thinking he's supernatural.

GM Technique: Focus/Suspiciousness

"Horror is about isolation, powerlessness."

Sometimes she consults with people not in the game, but who know her players, for hints on how to surprise them.

Knowing players/Social engineering

Moving the wedding to the riverside gave her a chance to tie the story in to place. Since the zombie could crawl out of the river easily, he's been collecting body parts, which are the strange corpses the police have found. The GM wanted the players to think there was a pattern, but honestly the zombie was "just hungry," which became apparent later.

GM Attractor: Fate (in encountering the zombie)

The GM digresses slightly at this point and discusses other RPGs that didn't go as well, back in the early days, when players figured things out too quickly.

This was a Star Wars campaign; the player characters all talked to each other and compared notes, and that was a moment when she realized that the players were going to make the story theirs.

"Make the people that they meet real."

Ayden and Angie are important NPCs. Their involvement in the story was very fluid. The GM mentions that NPCs need to be vivid and have more than one dimension so players care about them. These NPCS have their own agendas and get their own EXP, leveling up a bit with the players.

NPC Design/action

Sometimes she has trouble making sure the NPC voices are different from one another. But when she's doing well, the players can always tell which NPC is speaking.

In one case Father Andrew was involved with a group of PCs who were mostly women. He has a bit of a misogynistic streak, because things don't always go well when female characters are involved in these situations. That's how the character has developed. It colors his interactions but he will still work with the PCs.

The state police sent Angie to work with the group because there was a bomb threat and they needed an explosives expert. The GM uses movies, etc, as a way to quickly describe and develop character personalities the players will recognize. (In this case, she's very much like Vasquez from Alien.) She said initially both those NPCs got involved with one another because adding a romance at that time made for a more interesting story. It was another case of figuring out "why" later, but it seemed to work.

NPC design/action

Sometimes she does have to alter an NPC action to make an interesting interaction for the players. The more "real" the NPCs are, the truer the reaction will be from the players, so it's important to give them multiple traits. Angie made a pass at Ayden and Ayden accepted it because it made a more interesting story. Ayden was also the same NPC who was turning in to a werewolf, so adding this amount of tension made the players more interested in curing his condition. It was interesting for the characters.

Ayden was expecting he might die. He wanted to have one last romance. Angie followed him to Michigan from New York.

If this hadn't turned out to be interesting, she'd have dropped it, but tried to make dropping it interesting as well.

In this setting, once people know about the supernatural, the supernatural knows about them. She calls it "The talk."

One NPC is a cop who doesn't know much about the supernatural, and likes it that way. She helps the players out, and Frank kind of likes her. The GM wants to let the relationship proceed, until she can "use it to hurt him."

GM Technique: Character hooks

One PC has a Clairvoyant Prescient Dream "superpower." The dream sequence is part of a story "arsenal" in a way. This particular dream sequence was something she'd used variations of before. She reworked it to fit this particular story. She is very familiar with the background music that she used, so she knew how to time her narration to fit the song.

This particular dream was a reused story element in her "arsenal," but it had been used with different players in a totally different campaign. So it was Ok to reuse this story element to come up with a dream off the top of her head.

In this dream, Frank and his cop friend were dancing. At first it seemed as if they were dancing in a hall, but then the hall turned in to a graveyard, and it was discovered that the other dancers around them were zombies. Then the cop woman turned into a zombie as well and bit Frank, waking him up.

That was how the GM dropped a clue that the zombie was going to attack at the reception – the dancing. However, it also makes Frank paranoid that his friend may turn on him.

GM Technique: Suspiciousness/Focus

"Sphere of Protection" is a tricky ability that projects a 10/20 foot safety sphere around a character. Supernatural creatures cannot stay in that sphere and their special powers will drop. This is very inconvenient if a supernatural creature is in disguise. Powerful

creatures do get to roll a "check" against this power. Anyone "tainted" by the supernatural can "feel" this sphere even if they are not penalized. That makes its one useful plot purpose a way of building suspense that helpful people might be tainted.

Karen has this ability. The GM thinks it gives the character (not the player but the character) too much control. In order for there to be horror the players can be in control but characters shouldn't be.

A creature of the unknown has to leave this area even if he must dig through the wall. The power costs a lot of Willpower to use, but since it destroys illusions it's a "giveaway." It only lasts 5 seconds. Cost = 2D10 Willpower, can't do a lot of those but it can be sustained. Willpower total would be about 80, or less. Extremely powerful creatures of the Unknown get a "fear check" to stay in it, a rule the GM added.

GM Technique: Rebalancing Challenge

"Haywire" is the supernatural ability to break down and control machines. This zombie villain did not originally have this power. However, since it wasn't scary if video cameras and other technological devices revealed the zombie before it was interesting, she added this ability on the fly, knowing the rules accounted for it. She will change a monster slightly if this benefits the story. The important thing is that the players do not realize a change has been made; the creature has to at least appear consistent.

Greater zombies do not have Haywire. She added it at the last minute because she needed it for the story. She figures, if player characters grow and change, so should characters.

"We make the Unknown." The more the bad guys are fought, the more they can adapt and become stronger and learn how to fight back.

GM Technique: Rebalancing Challenge

Ayden was in a situation where he nearly died, in a previous adventure. The GM decided since it had already been revealed that he MIGHT be a werewolf, that this would activate his transformation. Normally there might be a roll for this (25 percent), but in this case, it was a good story, so, it definitely happened. It gave the PCs the goal to kill the head of the bloodline. (The terrorist adventure.)

GM Technique: Fate

She reads a lot of books on screenwriting to help her set up ideas.

"Never say no." Take what the other person gave you and build on it, "no matter how insane it is." She'd make this a rule of RPing if she could.

The GM does not turn down player suggestions if possible. She wants players to be creative.

Major digression from the discussion occurs here. GM is talking about a campaign where the villain was Elizabeth Bathory, the "blood countess." She had the players beaten up very badly by the end of the campaign but she knew that the bad guy was hurting. She wanted to encourage them to move forward and finish the story. But they were all, in character, tired, and decided to go back to town.

She decided that this decision was more important, in this case, than the adventure she had pre-written. So she let them make the choice not to follow the villain even if that was where her original notes had planned for them to go.

GM Action: None

"Most GMs" would have forced the players in to the last stronghold to finish the fight. She thinks that it takes a good GM to not force this kind of interaction.

The players of this old game almost lost and failed, because the bad guy also built up her resources while they were resting.

Doesn't like having conflict between different players.

The party planner for the wedding was off the cuff. Reg had made an offer to hire someone to "direct traffic." This is the NPC that suggested the large hall.

Keep the reality of the game separate from actual reality. Keep the reality of the game consistent.

In-game, a birthday party is planned for a character (Justin) at this point. The GM didn't realize it was the character's birthday, but when someone mentioned it, she said she couldn't imagine Justin's sister not planning a party. So she decided that the sister had planned a surprise party, after all, and then she invited the characters to it.

GM Attractor: NPC action/Rewind

A "perfect session" is when they are so lost in the story that there is no digression or sidebar discussion.

The big house these characters hang out in was a bit unplanned. Initially the GM thought that they would like a base of operations, and a helpful NPC helped them construct a site to use. However, they eventually decided not to use it as much, and use one another's homes instead, most often using the home of the wealthiest character.

"The Batcave." This safehouse was set up in a run-down but slowly revitalizing area in downtown Detroit. The building is a burned-out store, a place to meet for the characters. Andrew told Ayden to find a place and fix up the inside, but not the outside. Ayden is a paramedic; his friends helped build the interior. However, the players "got difficult," and

didn't really like the safehouse. Karen has a condo; Justin has a garage where he works and a fairly nice house. Reg is rich and has his own home. Since everyone has their own home they don't all want to live together in this "Batcave," so it's almost never used after the work.

Tony works for a demolition company. Frank's job sometimes causes him to be called away. (This is also a convenient reason if the player cannot make a session.) Leigh is looking for a condo in the area.

A bad guy came to Karen's place and killed her cat. Suddenly the players are thinking maybe the hideout is not a bad idea. But they may not use the Batcave and may choose a different place (that would be OK).

At this point the players are checking up information to see who killed Kat. The FBI agent knows what to look for, but the GM wasn't ready with enough information; she hadn't developed the story that far. At this point, therefore, she wasn't giving him a lot of clues. Knowing what she knows about how murderers might hide evidence, these murderers, who struck Kat and Jared with a car, spray-painted a security camera so there was no footage of the accident for Frank to find.

GM Detractor: Lack of Reward (for following unprepared story)

Lt. Worth, the cop, calls Frank after he gets back from this, telling him another body was found. The GM did this to remind him of the current story and to "tweak" him; she knew that he'd find it upsetting to miss a clue.

GM Attractor: Focus (back to the main prepped story)

At the beginning you don't know players well enough, and their characters well enough, but you learn this over time.

Tell them what you're doing and why you're doing it.

GM likes to discuss the "social contract" of the game; what are people's ideas and expectations and what do they want to get out of the game?

"Robin's Laws" (book) talks about this a lot. Give the PCs what they want to do. Try to make sure the characters all get spotlight time. Sometimes this requires self-assessment because it's easy to accidentally miss people when things are moving quickly.

If players don't pick up on a clue right away, for a while keep forcing it, or leave other little clues in the background. If players still aren't picking up, move the story forward by introducing a consequence. For example, it took 3 or 4 iterations of using a nosy reporter character (a cousin of a PC, Marlene, Justin's cousin), before the players were interested

in a particular voodoo story. At that point, she called one PC and got his machine, but then disappeared as she was captured by the cult.

Have you ever had players not pick up on a clue?

"All the time."

Keep feeding it in, seeding it, or change it. May be dropped, dropped to background, or just altered.

The zombie story above is her example. It was percolating in the background of other story items. She made periodic notes about its progression.

Marlene was calling Justin because she knew Justin had some information. This was a core story the GM didn't want to abandon, so she used the voice mail. It basically said, "I think I'm on to something! Call me back." When he called back she didn't answer, but the GM didn't make it seem all that important that she wasn't home. So the PC left for the weekend, and didn't follow up again.

There were two groups, a "gray" middle group and the really bad group. Both, however, were pretty bad.

When Justin returned from leaving for the weekend he stopped by his cousin's place, and only then found signs of a struggle. Now he felt guilty about ignoring her. She had been

captured by the "red sect," the mid-level bad guys. They found Marlene as a hypnotized zombie, and managed to save her.

Character Hooks/Focus

Sometimes storylines can be totally dropped, if they didn't affect anything and not much prep was done. But actions do have consequences.

Having "nothing" happen at the wedding was intentional. It gave the players downtime for later drama and made them relaxed, so that further drama was a surprise.

Edward is a new NPC at the wedding who may be a villain later. This is the first time the players have met him, so he doesn't have a sheet yet.

A lack of followup will lead to consequence but remember players trust you to give them a fair chance.

When you build trust, the players will allow you to do more with them.

Whenever possible it's best to have players answer questions in-character.

The zombie encounter: after the dancing and the drinking.

Players are happily discussing the wedding and fun they are having. The GM decides to challenge Justin. Justin said, "If anyone gropes my new wife during the dancing I'll punch them." The GM says, yes, one of your relatives does get a little fresh; do you start a fight? The player backs down, however, saying he'll get his character's sister to intervene. The GM made the gamble figuring the player would back down. If he did want to start a brawl at the wedding, he could have, but it would have had different consequences. She however isn't surprised Justin chose a more diplomatic solution.

GM Technique: Character hooks

Detractor: Damage

The last fight was partially unplanned. The GM decided it was over fairly quickly, because game time was running long and also because after the initial blows were made, the actual slaying of the creature was academic and not a matter of story interest. She had the NPCs behave as they did so that the players had a hand in their rescue. However, they retreated because it was up to PCs, not NPCs, to kill the monster. If an NPC died in that situation, that would have been OK.

Mechanics for fighting: percentile dice. Very simple and doesn't stop the game from happening.

Social trick: GM lowers her voice and speaks more quietly when the game is getting more intense.

Technique: Metagame

Phrasing

At this point, when things were basically normal, there were signs of danger happening outside and an NPC (Angie) had disappeared, gone off somewhere. The players know they are close to the river and they are suspecting the zombie attack.

Technique: NPC Action provides focus

A good part of the action is spent looking for the zombie, trying to see it, as it moves in and out of cars and makes sounds. They can't find it, but they can see lights flashing whenever it walks by.

Players will try to outsmart you, keep them on their toes.

It's not a "me versus them thing so much as trying to keep the story twists ahead of them so they have surprises." Frank's player is the most notorious for this with his ideas.

She wants to narrate things as if they are on film. The PCs are wearing radio earplugs to communicate with one another. The women in the group aren't wearing high heels because that would be a "stupid movie cliché," but cinematic is otherwise a good thing.

Reg's character was tapping in to video cameras to try and follow the zombie around. This is when the GM added the Haywire power to the zombie's abilities. The zombie used this power to shut off the lights, in the parking garage where it was hiding, and jam a few of the cameras. That way the players were forced to check things out in person. When she mentioned that cameras weren't working, the PC said, "Oh, I know what this is," and described what he thought about the zombie, even though the GM hadn't explained it otherwise. The character has a "manual" that tells him some information about what he's fighting, but he's prepared for it to be occasionally incorrect, and to adapt to changes.

Attempted PC fortunetelling beaten by GM rebalancing challenge

Lack of Reward

CJ: an NPC who was at the wedding. She was in a car accident when "something" stepped out in front of her car, so she arrives at the reception in a wheelchair after surviving that accident. She's still in recovery.

The PCs decide to try and get everyone out of the reception, safely. In-game it's about 8 PM. It might have gone all night, but closing the bar was the PCs' solution to start shutting down the party so that people would leave and be safe.

The Native American tribe wanted to have a ceremony at the wedding reception also, to wish the new couple luck. One of them approached a PC about it, but then with the zombie fight the GM almost forgot to have it. One of the players however asked about that situation and if she was going to re-include it. Then she remembered, and had the ceremony go on even though the bar was closed. This didn't end up being a forgotten or disruptive thread.

Early in the zombie fight a guard dies. The GM called him Bob, off the top of her head, and all the players thought that he was a "throwaway" or red shirt. She made them feel bad by mentioning that he was also married and had children, although this was out of character knowledge.

Angie: small woman who uses a big gun. The players described it as a "hand cannon" so she used this as a descriptor and said they heard a "hand cannon" go off somewhere in the garage.

Phrasing

One of them tried to call her phone. It wasn't turned on. It would have been in-character for it to be on, in vibrate, "in retrospect." However, it did make a better story for it to not be turned on at all, so they couldn't reach her, despite what she might have ICly done.

Technique: NPC action/Character hook

The GM has to ask PCs what they are doing, not tell them what they are doing (or feeling).

She describes the scene vaguely and mysteriously at first to build suspense, before they actually see the monster clearly. At that point it has captured Angie.

"I have to be consistent with what I have imagined is the laws of physics in my universe." If the GM makes an error in judgment, she's OK with backtracking.

The PCs have an ability, Perception, which can be rolled for all types of sensory mechanics. Spot, listen, smell, everything all in one single stat.

The last fight is "pure magic," everything goes according to plan with the last scene. The PCs had created "mancatchers" earlier to trap the limbs of the stronger zombie. Ayden is a pacifist now so he won't fight; it's up to the PCs. Sometimes he's used as a conscience or voice of the GM.

GM Technique: NPC Instruction/Inverse Instruction (he won't do anything and must be saved)

Have players killed anyone you thought they would not kill? Sure, 10 out of the 18 zombie cultists from the cult adventure, were shot, and blown away. Father Andrew was not pleased; because of this they're less likely to kill in more recent adventures.

GM Detractor: Authority figure

She just took people in order of proximity to the target instead of an initiative roll. Nobody was left out. She moved people's orders if they shifted positions. Ayden was last because he was an NPC. If the character would act she will let him act, but she will delay him if needed.

Has a problem with estimating distances so she frequently doublechecks. As they confirm it, they "buy in to it."

A player does a driving roll and does a good job, so she makes it a successful task.

She will lead them a little. For example, she asks a player, "are you going the general direction of the zombie?" instead of "Where are you going?" She wanted to make sure she took the suggestion and saw the action, so she could be involved. She also reminds the player that her character has Akido, but adds, "not that you have to" fight, she's only

reminding her with a nudge. This is the climax of the story so she must push them a little harder so they can end on a good and dramatic note.

GM Social Manipulation techniques (metagame)

GM telling/reminding

Rolling the dice increases the tension whether or not the outcome actually matters. If he had failed his second driving roll, he still would have gotten there in time but might have destroyed other cars in the process.

If she doesn't like the result, she will lie, but if she's prepared for any outcome for a roll, she rolls in the open. She'll also roll in front if she thinks they think she's "padding the blows."

During the climax people start spending their APs. She isn't totally sure she's satisfied with the AP mechanic, and would love it if players gave one another APs. However she'd have to be careful it doesn't get out of control.

Justin doesn't earn APs often. He's "too careful."

The zombie has a scream power that is familiar to the players. When they heard the scream they knew that it was dangerous.

Ayden used a feat of strength to rescue Angie. This did leave him vulnerable however to the monster. He did this as an independent action because it was in line with his behavior and motivations. Now the PCs see he is brave and need to rescue him as well as making sure Angie is safe.

Technique: NPC Design

The PCs fight the zombie by catching its arms and legs in the trap. Leigh rescues Ayden and they all hide in the van so that Angie can get medical aid. The limb traps took the zombie down and the other PCs dogpiled on it. The wrap-up of this, after the big fight is over, will be saved for next session.

9.4.GM4 Notes

Star Wars:

This is a "Slot Zero," a session run by a lead GM to teach modules to other GMs. The modules played were both convention-style modules designed to run in approximately 3 hours each. (We got through two of them in around 4 hours for a basic total of 2 hours per module; they were run efficiently) The modules were new to everyone in play. The GM had read the modules in preparation but had never ran them before.

During this kind of game there is an object called a cert, short for certificate. The certs are used in national shared world campaigns and are certificates that say a person has a certain advantage, disadvantage, power, etc. One of the players going into this game was carrying a cert that said the GM had to roll to see if he was attacked off-screen prior to the game. (He wasn't.)

The Living Force campaign is considered to be part of the Star Wars extended Universe canon. Sometimes LF has to deal with issues from Lucasfilm. For example, Lucasfilm told the campaign writers to jump the campaign forward for ten years so it would sync up with the events of Episode Three during the release of the movie.

The cert handed out at the end of the session mentions that the PCs have the attention of the emperor, which may cause trouble for them later.

The emperor was appearing in the hologram, but Len Marcus is what the name of the campaign bad guy is. He is the right-hand man to one of the villains in the campaign, and stole the long rod called the Dark Staff. The players will jump to the conclusion that bad things are Marcus' fault even if the GM is really using the emperor.

The Man in Black that the group encounters is a Darth Vader "wannabe" who is a student to the emperor, but not as powerful as other Sith.

"Normally during a game, I would try not to reveal ..." when a story is broken by a player action. This time the GM went ahead and told the game players that there was a story break. That way if they run the module in future, which they may have to, they may be more fully prepared.

The GM skips a space battle in the module, because he feels it's not in a good place.

RPGA rules in module design used to say that "Encounter Three" always had to involve some NPCs being sent out to fight the player characters. This was an "Obligatory Thug Attack" according to the GM, since even if it was considered a rule of good design to have a combat at that point; it didn't always fit the story.

"Encounter" in module terms is any major scene. Normally the format is that the encounter starts with an explanation for the GM, and a box text to explain the story. This particular module almost always ends the same way, but there are five different ways to get the clue that will lead them to the end. This module was otherwise very linear, and did not use much of a branching system. GM calls the branching system a "Matrix Structure." You can get clues in any order that you want, but you have to get all the clues before moving on.

This module story starts with the PCs going through the jungle on a planet, on speeder bikes. A tree branch almost hits them. Then snakes fall out of the tree which the players must fight. The GM says that this module provided two different possible fights for the

players to encounter, just designed to show them something was strange in the jungle, since normally they could travel here without difficulty. The other possible encounter provided by the module was a dinosaur, but the GM didn't use this for fear it would take too long to fight. The snakes were very easy for the players to kill; this was intentional. The snakes didn't have any statistics.

GM Technique: rebalance challenge (easy)

If he had used the dinosaur, the goal of the encounter is to scare it away. However, he thought that these players might chase the dinosaur if they used it instead of chasing it away, and the players going to chase the dinosaur would take them off the track of their story. The dinosaur is one of the "legends of the campaign," but is a major red herring that might detract from the current story.

GM Technique: Focus

On this planet, the trees are a major source of life. The PCs have been to this planet before, and at least two of them knew that, and the fact that anything dangerous in the trees was a bad sign.

One of the characters has been previously dead, but had a lucky "cert" that allowed him to be revived.

When the snakes leap down to the speeders to attack PCs, they begin fighting immediately. Not unexpected, but the fact that they didn't investigate anything at all still made the GM wince a bit, since there were bad consequences for accidentally hurting one of the lifegiving trees.

Snakes were roll 15 to hit in the first round, 13 in the second. The GM says he will lower the difficulty of an encounter after a round or two if the group is not able to handle it. In a convention style "Living" campaign you must balance on the go, because you have no control over what type of balance you will get at your table.

GM Technique: Reblanacing Challenge

There are several classes in this system. This table had two Jedi (There are Jedi who are warriors, Guardians, and Jedi who are Councilors.) There are also Scoundrels, Force Adepts (non Jedi with Force powers), Spacers (pilot), Nobles, Fringers, and Soldiers. The PC who was dead previously was a Soldier. There are almost 100 prestige classes (special classes) as well because new books have come out.

The "time ghost" was how the player who was dead was revived. At the end of another story, a roll was initiated because of a time travel incident. The good roll that the player got meant he had a "time ghost" who was an echo of himself. It would allow him to play again after the first time that he actually died. The cert "I've Got a Pulse" allows you to

get up if you are nearly dead (more on that later), and one called "Future Vision" allows you to avoid one death by being forewarned about it by Master Linneas.

Linneas has the power to see the future but is an NPC. Everything he knows is spelled out for the GM in the book, so he rarely has to ad lib a future vision. If he does, he should "vague it up a bit," according to his instructions, most of the time, so Linneas is more vague than wrong. He's been one of the masters of the Jedi Academy in this system and has appeared in about fifty modules.

Linneas will die in this module. He's the second of the Jedi masters to die in a module.

GM only read the module twice before playing this. He says it was enough just to get the story but not a lot of prep otherwise.

The player characters discover that the trees that keep the planet alive are not really many trees, but all shoots and roots of the same, master tree. This is an enormous secret that almost no outsiders know. The tree can't be seen as the master tree from high above, because it is very wide but its leaves make it appear as many multiple trees rather than one single tree. The players' quest is to go to the deepest part of the jungle and try to find if something is hurting the master tree.

GM Attractor: Instruction

The Heart Tree was a planned campaign secret, but the idea that all the trees in the forest were shoots of it was an original idea that hadn't been previously discussed in the campaign.

As a campaign staffer, one has to be careful with what one hands out to players, which may have consequences that are unforeseen. Powers that allow player characters to revive characters are particularly powerful, and one has to consider the consequences of rewards given to other players.

Unknown abilities problem point

The module the group may play tomorrow involves them running in to a character right as they are murdered. One of the characters is accused of committing the murder. What happens if the player characters revive the murdered person? That would definitely ruin the intended story.

View of death problem point

At the tree, the players encounter some evil thugs/aliens who attack them. The GM says he accidentally made this encounter too hard. The players found it a challenge and had a very difficult fight. Halfway through the fight, the helpful NPC that is with the players uses a power to group-heal them all and restore a lot of their hit points. The character did not have that power. "That power doesn't exist in Living Force." However, the GM had

it happen anyway because he thought the "thug attack" had been too hard. He's been specifically told by campaign coordinators that he is "not to kill characters in stupid ways." "If these characters are going to die, they're going to die heroes." It's more like a movie that way. Heroes can't die in silly anti-climactic or random ways. What if "Obi-Wan died falling down a staircase?"

Rebalancing challenge

NPC action

A character in a previous D&D campaign (run by a different GM) died "slipping in the shower," literally. The character was bathing, a dragon landed in town, and the player had to make a roll. When he failed, "the shower made an attack" and this killed the character. He considered this a very bad DM moment and would never do this. "I'm considered a softball GM." Known for not killing characters.

If a character is well-developed, it's unfair to kill them with something that may turn out to be a rules screwup on his part. "We're coming towards the end of the campaign," so he wants the characters to survive to the climax.

Dark Side Points: If DSP get to half your Wisdom score, you make a Will save. If you fail, you become tainted. Your character becomes an NPC. If you ever get all the way to your Wisdom score in DSP you are evil, full-on Dark Side.

Detractor: Metagame punishment

Players must be good guys, and must fight bad guys. In the end, good must triumph over evil. By those rules, they can't write modules where the bad guy wins. Even if the bad guy gets away, they have to do it with the promise that the bad guy will eventually "get it."

A PC is killing a bad guy in this fight, who he has fought before. The first time he encountered her, she was on a giant Dark Side artifact that looked like a hand. The evil bad guys are called Weirds. The Weirds are like witches who use dark side powers. The PCs have been trying to chase them down to kill them all.

The next module involves the players chasing down the one bad guy who gets away at the end of these adventures.

Weirds are a cult that exists on this planet, Kularin. They believe that all offworlders are evil and should be sent off of the planet. "From the Trees" is the module where they first appeared. A village of wookies was trying to move on to the planet and the Weird attacked them.

In the movies, you almost never see anyone get actually hit. "Vitality" hit points are the near misses where someone ducks out of the way. "Wounds" are hit points where the player is actually hit. In Star Wars, a critical hit goes to the smaller wound pool instead

of the vitality pool. You die if you lose all wounds, but vitality is usually chipped off first.

Comparison to movie

There are a lot more evil force users in the game than there would be in the movies. The weaponry works well "until you get about 8th level," then the damage is not balanced correctly. Force powers scale better for high level bad guys.

It's common to have multiple Jedi at a table. Either 1/3, or 2/3 of the campaign are Jedi. Most players, their first character is; the second character isn't. GM says that one day he ran an entire day where the players were all Jedi except one. Now, players can't make them anymore because of events in the story canon. He expects to see a lot less.

There was a small rules debate over an attack. The GM let the player dictate what he wanted to do so he could move on. The PCs defeat the bad guys. Combat takes a while.

Metagame Fortunetelling

Thugs had around 90 HP: 72 Vit, 16 Wnd. Heroes also had a lot of hit points.

Soldier class is the SW equiv of the Fighter class.

Jedi can deflect blasts with their sabers just like in the movies. Sabers scale up. Right now they are doing 5D8 damage. If the fighting Jedi gains another level it becomes 6D8.

After the group heal, the battle is nearly over.

In a living campaign, there are little surveys at the end of a module, and if the players don't like a character or story much they can let the DMs know. The designers may decide to abandon a plot if players don't find it all that interesting.

At the end of the fight, Master Linneas shows up "Just in the nick of late." The module actually says this, because he would originally show up "just in the nick of time" in other modules. He can show up earlier, if the PCs are having trouble with the bad guys, as another way of preventing them from dying in the attack.

NPC Action

There is a Noble in the group today. He isn't as useful in a jungle adventure. In the city, he has access to contacts and a lot of equipment. He isn't as high level as the Jedi Councilor is. He seems less involved in what is going on in the campaign today. The GM says he's six levels under the other characters, so he isn't as useful, but he can't lower the whole module because it will be too easy for the Jedi. He uses a "floating" difficulty. If the Jedi try to do something, he'll make it harder for them, but if the Noble attempts it immediately it will be easier so that he can get something done.

Rebalancing Challenge

The Jedi try to leave a bad guy alive to question them but it doesn't go well.

(The PCs later find a woman chained to a wall. She has a bad attitude and is rude. However, the GM says that she was answering questions honestly. As a Weird herself (or an ex-Weird) her powers made her immune to things like the Jedi Mind Trick, and she "automatically" made any save for a power thrown at her. However, she did answer honestly if questions were asked, just rudely. There were some "key words" that if the players used, they'd get information, but they didn't use a lot of them. The captive would not volunteer information so she wouldn't say things if the PCs didn't think to ask. This happens later, but comes up now in interview because of the first interrogation also going rather poorly.)

Lack of Reward (forcing better questions)

The PCs find a map on a fallen body that will lead them to where they need to go, after the interrogation fails. The map was there because the module writer figured that this would be what the PCs would need after potentially killing all the villains. It was easier than asking questions.

The PCs go to the hideout of the villains. There are guards outside. The GM decided that any kind of attempt to sneak past the guards would work, because he didn't want another fight. The guards rolled '1' on their rolls to figure out they were being duped and see the people sneaking by, so it was legitimate that they were really that dumb. This GM rarely shows his rolls in the open. He will fudge for, or against players, if the story needs one or the other. He'll move challenge around.

Rebalancing Challenge

The guards are snuck by and this is quick and rewarding. Some roleplay occurs where the PCs make noises in the bushes to try to fool them. The GM plays the guards as very gullible and dumb. He wanted them to get inside successfully so they could examine artifacts and question prisoners, instead. He believes that this encounter could've taken a long time if a GM was more interested in making the guards smart or simulating them accurately, but he didn't find it an interesting part of the story.

NPC Action (guard failure moves story along faster)

There is not a lot of out of game conversation or digression in this particular session.

"Cinematizing things," is the GM's phrase for making things move more quickly, by running them essentially in movie mode and just explaining what happens to get story

back on track. He doesn't think that players should be forced to roll if that would hurt the story.

Everyone who sits down at a table where the GM has a Living module: "We all know what we're getting, when we get in to it." Some railroading is acceptable because it's understood by the players with a module that they have less freedom than normal. Modules still "go south" sometimes which is a phrase meaning going off-track.

At the end of the module are two XP lines. One is roleplay XP for remaining in-character and providing good dialogue. The other is adventure XP for following the adventure correctly. If the players were on the right track of the adventure but ran out of time, they get half the XP. If there was a special circumstance were they got where they needed to be, but failed part of a mission, the normal reward is ¾ of the XP. If the player turns down the mission very early, as in, during the initial briefing, the player gets 50 XP plus any RP reward and is sent off. (This small reward means the player cannot do the module a second time.)

Metagame Reward system

Normally these modules start with a mission briefing of some sorts: an NPC, government, etc. Then there is an introduction, a Q&A, and they can accept or not. If they do not accept, they are done with the game, so they just don't play, and are sent away from the table.

After getting around the guards, just inside the enemy camp the players find a datapad that has some information on it. The datapad is too hard for the PCs to hack in time. If they did nothing but hack the datapad they would "lose" the module because it takes too long. Or, at least, they would not get to do anything. The module can't actually be "lost" per se, and will always end the same way when run. However, the GM told the players they had "won" at the end, even though there was no loss condition!

Lack of Reward

GM Technique: Phrasing

"No matter what, the First Witch will die; Linneas will die; the Tree will survive."

Also inside the camp is where they find the chained-up woman mentioned above. They initially debate letting her go. The GM says in interview this would be a terrible idea. She is too powerful in her magic and would kill them. It's a good thing they didn't let her go. He says if they had really wanted to do it, he would have said "You're getting a bad feeling about this." This would be a subtle urging to tell them to stop doing it. If they still unchained her, they would probably get what they deserved. She is "untiered" which means she'd always be powerful no matter who she was fighting.

The other encounters in the story were tiered so they could vary in difficulty depending on how the players were doing. This includes the last fight in the module.

Originally, the First Witch (the main bad guy) was supposed to kill one of her own assistants to end the module instead of what actually happens (later).

The chained woman will always succeed in Will saves. He rolled a die as a "fake" however.

This interrogation scene counted as the "real briefing" if they could get the right information out of the chained woman. If they didn't get much information then they were going in unprepared.

A player tries to use another mind-effecting power on the woman, but the GM pretty much ignores his effect. He wants to get him to talk to the character instead of just trying to read her telepathically, which isn't as interesting to him. The woman treats the Jedi like morons. Affect Mind is a power that one of the players (Patrick) tries to use incorrectly a lot. This GM doesn't reward him when he uses the power instead of thinking to solve problems in other ways.

Lack of Reward (for overusing powers)
Hassle Detractor (for trying a die roll – just use roleplay)

The chained woman was also very hard to intimidate, though the Jedi also tried this rather than talking with her. The woman becomes ruder, and tells the Jedi that they can't do

anything to stop the ritual that the Witch has already begun. She's confident enough that they can't do anything that she tells them what the ritual, to destroy the tree, is. "The ritual has already begun … you can do nothing about it."

NPC Inverse Instruction

The ritual itself is being cast by the head Weird named the First Witch. She is casting the ritual right now. The chained woman tells the PCs they can't do anything. The GM however says that no matter what they do, the ritual will not finish or succeed, as long as they bother to show up at the end fight at all, and even if they lose. "The ritual will not finish … period, end of story." "This entire trilogy is a severe railroad."

At the end of the last module in this trilogy, even if they don't beat the big bad, the emperor will kill him for failing instead.

There is a holoprojector included in the room where the woman is chained. The GM says he likes holoprojectors a lot and says they are a great device, because players will always sit and listen to the entire message. The messages have a tendency to self-destruct after being listened to once, enforcing the idea that they are very important and have to be listened to the first time they are turned on.

The man in the holoprojection is Len Marcus. He's the one that told the Weird how to perform the tree-killing ritual. He's "one of the greatest over the top villains" and "Star

Wars hokey." This makes it easy for players to hate him. The last time he appears, he has a long monologue that he can rant through. The GM has no idea if players will let him finish or shoot him (either, is possible).

NPC Design/Character hook

A player (the soldier) hands the GM a note. It says "I secretly switch my gun to stun." Then he shoots the chained woman, so she falls unconscious. The player would not have gotten a Dark Side point for killing her, so he decided to stun her.

Metagame Detractor works here

The PCs move to the site of the ritual now. A map on the table in this room shows them the way to the ritual. The table also has a hole in it indicating the Dark Staff has been there. The players avoided touching the table, but used the map.

Around the site of the ritual is a large barrier shield (a forcefield). The GM says he was inventing and making up the rules for that shield. His notes said "any projectile thrown at it will not go through." The GM decided that a person flying was much like a projectile, and this wouldn't go through. The moment that anyone on the inside is seriously injured, the ritual is broken. One player that rolled a critical success did break through the shield, because "they wanted it so badly."

Reading the table/Knowing the players

The GM draws a picture of the shield on the whiteboard so players have a visual aid. Around the force shield was the elite guards. There was also a shield generator, on the inside of the shield, and around the generator were Weird who were more powerful than the guards.

The PCs didn't have to kill everyone on site. They just had to hurt one of the people performing the ritual. The ritual would go for as long as they needed it to. Since it was always going to be interrupted somehow, there was no set moment at which it would really be complete.

Fate: Ritual doesn't finish no matter what

"The feeling of victory, at the end of the day, is what keeps the player coming back." "We want players to keep coming back, so I want the player to leave with a good experience." "Having them lose the first battle is never a bad idea." That way they go from a low point, to the high point where they finally win. This module even has a small caveat in it that no characters will really die. They'll black out, and they may lose an arm or leg instead. They don't want to kill characters in this module, since it's the "next to last trilogy" of a set.

Here, a player stuns one of the people doing the ritual, with a stun shot. Technically, that should have broken the ring automatically. The GM felt this was too easy and he wasn't ready, so, he let the combat go on for a few more rounds. This worked Ok since the players weren't pre-informed as to the victory condition.

"The kind of unwritten house rule is if you stun an unnamed person, they're done until the end of the scene." "Mook battles in D20 will last forever, because of sheer volume."

Rebalancing Challenge/NPC Design

A player tries to throw a stun grenade in to the force shield, but rolls a '1'. He drops the grenade instead, and it explodes on to all the player characters, stunning several. The GM, on tape, laughs at this and seems cheerful that the roll failed. In interview, he says playing "evil GM" is a "persona" that makes it seem as if he's not as with them and isn't being easy on them after all. He's not happy to see actual failure, just happy to see silly consequences or small complications that make things interesting.

Social Engineering/social presence trick/Metagame behavior

The guards outside the force shield are very hard to kill.

The people inside, "once you cause at least four wound points," – injury to one of the interior people, that ends the ritual and the story comes to a conclusion.

The GM keeps track openly of how much damage has been done to the guard. That's an intimidation tactic because it shows that the guard has a lot of HP and is designed to be challenging.

Metagame fortunetelling

The shield generator itself wasn't actually drawn on the GMs original map. He put it on his drawing because he thought it made more sense.

The First Witch has an evil rod for this particular ritual.

The GM had forgotten to draw a tree root on the map, but it was part of the ritual. This was an oversight, so he had it appear in the middle of the ritual instead, as if he were working making the root appear in to part of the ritual. The player didn't ask questions about that; if it seemed they were going to he moved the topic of discussion to something else.

The GM had decided that, every round, that something evil would happen. The rod would grow bigger, or the skies dark, or something else. The first of these special effects happened when the first guard died. The players (wrongly) concluded that killing the guards was feeding the ritual and they should stop doing it. The GM didn't contradict this

assumption. It ended up working out in his favor because it made the PCs more urgent to stop the ritual instead of killing the remaining guards.

Evocative descriptions provide intensity of climax and Focus to important events

"The mind games are more interesting to me than the combat games." The GM feels that the social aspect, and fooling people, is more interesting than the statistics of rolling dice to beat opponents.

Because in a module in a totally different game, killing the bad guys actually made the ritual stronger, a player jumped to the conclusion that was the case this time, even though the modules and games weren't related.

A PC used a stun shot on the First Witch. She should have fallen down totally stunned, but that would have not worked with the box text in the module. So, it was enough to break the ritual, but not to knock her out.

Linneas shows up at this moment, and then does some Jedi counter-ritual and "talks to the trees." Then one of the trees attacks him, and he dies. GM calls this a "death by box text." The players can't prevent Linneas's death. The GM says this is a lot like the full motion cut scene in a video game. "Most big-name characters" will die like this, in a way that the players can't get involved with, so they "can't screw it up" if the character is required to die.

Lack of reward

Metagame Detractor

In another campaign there was a cert that allowed the players to have "any item," but they didn't release it with that text because it may break something later.

"This is where the module goes wrong," the GM now says. "You are supposed to sit there and wait while this box text happens." The players aren't supposed to take any action at all. However, seeing Linneas in trouble, one of the players declared he was charging forward to attack the First Witch. The GM says, as long as there is a hard return in the box text, it's Ok if the players do something, when he's running the game.

What originally was supposed to happen: First Witch sacrifices her assistant by stabbing her through with her staff

What did happen: the PC charged her, and became the sacrifice instead.

There was no way in the rules the PC should have survived being killed for this ritual. If it was one of the weird, they would have died. The GM could have said, "You're dead" at that point in time. But he thought that it was a very heroic thing for the PC to do, and wanted to reward him. So, when the ritual was a failure, the PC also was brought back to life. The Heart Tree used its magic to save the hero while the First Witch died from a backlash of energy.

GM Rewards heroic actions; throws out intended story for a path players like better

Linneas' spirit joined with the tree when he died. (It was a voluntary sacrifice like Obi-Wan.)

The players seem very happy with this result, where a player was replacing one of the NPCs.

"If I had this to do over again, the First Witch would have said something to him." To add extra drama.

The PCs are rewarded by giving them access to a cave under the planet. Protected by the life energy of the tree, they can hide there from people who would try to find them with the Force. The GM explains that this is so, if they decide to pick up the characters years later, they can survive the Jedi purge. The players get a cert saying they know the location of the cave. "The cave to me is a cop-out," he says, because Jedi are supposed to die. Also, it's weird because of the way their knowledge is explained. They forget about the cave after they leave, but magically become aware of it if they "need it", which seems a bit cheap.

In-game reward/instruction/Character hooks for Jedi

Potential future plothook

Linneas supposedly didn't know the cave existed, but the GM says that is kind of a plot hole for someone who can see the future.

The next module is called "Destruction," which the GM doesn't like. It gives too much away right off the bat. The PCs also can't stop the bad guys from blowing up the Jedi academy. The emperor is directly behind this storyline, and he's the hologram that appears in this base.

Module title may cause unwanted metagame play

The GM starts this by drawing up the Jedi academy at the beginning and having the PCs get their briefing. The PCs are sent to a planet to check out an abandoned base. They get their ships and equipment.

The GM decides to skip over the starship combat in this module. It would have taken a long time, he says, and not been rewarding, so this was a time when "cinematizing" was a better idea than having a real fight. The base they were checking out belonged to separatist droids, but not very smart ones. They would have attacked the PCs with their ships, while the droids were leaving the base.

GM Rebalances challenge for story

Before leaving the briefing, the PCs encounter a monkey-lizard. They all make charisma checks, and whoever has the highest check, keeps the monkey-lizard for a while. The GM says the monkey is the "world's greatest plothammer." The monkey can provide clues, or prevent the players from going places they shouldn't go.

NPC Action (monkey)

The players don't want the monkey around, however. They're all hoping they can make a low check and not be stuck with it. It isn't used much in this module after it is encountered. Even when benefiting the party, the monkey can be annoying. Once, the GM used the monkey to take a dart that would have killed a PC.

The GM doesn't like this module. He's letting players digress and talk about the module, while he considers it.

Metagame social engineering

The starship combat can "eat" an hour and a half or two hours. The last time he ran one, he sent everyone but the pilot to lunch. The GM thinks the starship combats take just too long and aren't as interesting. They look better on screen than on a game map.

"I'm not the world's strongest on mechanics," says the GM. He thinks that it's actually easier to be more story-focused so you can ad-lib and rely less on the systems and dice.

After landing on the planet, they go in to the abandoned droid base.

This base had "DCs of doom," the GM says, and the roll-related difficulties were arbitrarily hard. It was difficulty 32 just to open the door to enter, but there were no specialized repair people in the group, which this challenge was catered to.

Rebalancing Challenge

Destruction of the academy happens no matter what. The difference that's made is, whether or not the players witness it, or if they are trapped in this base the entire time instead.

Fate

Detracting players from one location by attracting them to another (via Instruction)

The GM thinks the design of the base that the PCs encounter was dull and frustrating. Most of the rooms ended up being empty. By the time the PCs got to the base, they weren't clear on the mission objective anymore. Their objective was just to go to the base and get information about it. They didn't find it an incredibly engaging objective.

The GM decided that, when one of the Jedi used a force-sense power, he would pick up a signal from a room in the base. That got him interested again, and lead him in to that particular room, which had the most interesting design out of the other rooms in the base.

Character hook

Before getting to that room the PCs encountered some droids still in the hallway. They killed them without too much trouble.

Within the room are a computer that needs to be repaired, and a holoprojector. The hologram device has some footage of the emperor, taunting the players. The room locks down and a countdown begins while the emperor is taunting. The doors of the base would be locked for an hour. The emperor said three hours, but after one hour, according to the write-up, someone came to rescue them. If for some reason they had done something "incredibly off the wall" it would've taken them all three hours. Then the PCs would have returned too late to do anything.

The GM feels he screwed up the last combat in the module.

The battle droids, he feels, were badly placed. They were another obligatory fight, and were easy to mow through. "More players wanted" the hack and slash style, he says. The GM doesn't like that this is a combat which feels like it doesn't involve the story.

Jedi force sense was a useful lure in this situation. In other games, it has been bad and ruined surprises, because it could "detect any life form." Now it only detects other Force users instead. The GM likes to use more creative bad guys than Dark Jedi/Sith, because it gets around this problem and is also more unexpected.

Character hooks/NPC Design

The GM digresses and discusses the villains in a previous module: a group of villagers struck with an insanity disease. Believing they were all Jedi, they attack the player characters with brooms that they think are light sabers, and call them evil force users, including referring to their leader as "Darth Banana." This is a silly module, not serious like the current one, but sometimes silly stuff can be fun. You can have fun with either "pure humor" or "pure drama" because those moments will be remembered.

The droid combat now ends. The GM says he would have skipped that combat if they hadn't already skipped the other.

The force energy turns out to be coming from the data crystal that needs to be fed in to the holoprojector. The GM made it a force sensitive object as a lure.

The players thought about taking the crystal out of the room and putting it in their projector back on their ship. The GM wanted them to stay there, so said it only would fit in the projector in this particular room. The projector however, was broken, so they also

had to spend some time repairing it. The GM says he would have done it differently because having the projector be broken served no purpose. The DC was high (36). If he had it to do again, stepping in to the room, or just touching the console, would have automatically triggered the hologram.

After the hologram teases them and begins to taunt them, the doors to the room lock. The PCs try to unlock the doors. The GM says that he "misran" this; the doors should have been jammed without any possibility of release after the second failed attempt. However, he didn't mind that they kept trying, so he let them succeed anyway. One player rolled a natural 20 (highest possible roll) and so he allowed it even though technically it wasn't enough. The GM believes the challenge level was that high to accommodate players who were playing high-level repair characters, which this party didn't have.

Rebalancing challenge (for absentee abilities)

Force Points are expendable points that can be used to help out the players. They don't automatically replenish but the GM gave some out at the end of the adventures as a token of a job well done. They can be used for rerolls, etc.

The emperor counts down, as if something bad is going to happen, but… well, nothing does. (Even the word "boom" appearing on the hologram projector would have been good, but, wasn't in module.)

Red Herring

The characters escape, and go back to where they got the briefing. There is Kai Adi Mundi, who tells them where to go next. The GM mentions that the Living modules are only allowed to use canon characters in certain ways, so the players will be reverent to those characters.

Authority Figure

He tells a story about a home campaign where this rule wasn't in effect, and the players strapped a thermal detonator to Anakin's pod-racer and blew him up. That was an unexpected action! But since the PCs were working for the Hutts, and it was a one-time scenario, the GM thought it was good and the players didn't have to worry about the consequences.

If the PCs had tried to kill Kai Adi Mundi, guards would have rushed and killed them immediately dead. Kai told them to go to the Jedi academy at "all speed."

Instruction

The PCs get in their ships and head back to the academy. If he'd wanted to, he said, he'd have had the starship combat occur here.

The module had a smallish branching structure here. Either the players arrived too late to witness the destruction, or they arrived just in time to witness it. Putting a starship combat here may have negated the need for a branch, since they would have always been held back and slightly too late. It may have also solved the problem where Zelice, the Jedi trainer, lived even though she should have died, later on.

Branching story design/Fate design (academy always destroyed)

Some problems with this module could've been caught if it were playtested more.

When the PCs arrive at the academy, it's mostly destroyed already and some bad guys are here. They recognize the bad guys' ship. If they'd have blown it up, they would've gotten another one. The bad guy has a double-bladed light saber, the only one in the campaign.

When giving out player rewards in Living campaigns you have to be careful that they won't break later modules. That includes the players getting the double-bladed saber if they manage to get it. Sometimes players will also play modules out of order, so they will play part three before part one or two, or something like that. They may even play the revenge module before seeing the events that cause them to want revenge.

The PCs arrive at the destroyed academy and are attacked by some hired goons and bounty hunters. The GM says he was just "tired" at this point and didn't want to run

another fight. He felt a fight with goons didn't allow the players to bond with the NPCs that were important. Final words from the heroes would've been good. However, this was a fight with random mercs, without names. So, he decided that the random mercs had their weapons set to stun, and just stunned the players instead of defeating them, then left. If he could do this again, he'd have developed a bad guy who "got away" from the base, so that attacking them would have been more interesting. He thought maybe the Weird chained to the wall could have been the bad guy in this scenario instead.

NPC Design

Use of character hooks

Rebalancing challenge (mercs could have been too hard)

Sometimes in the past player characters would kill a bad guy too soon, but sometimes the GM can use an "out" if he wants a bad guy to recur. For example, if a PC declared they had the villain's hand, he could have them examine the hand of his adversary and realize it was now cybernetic.

The mercenaries stun all the player characters and move on. Otherwise, the GM says, the fight would have not been interesting. It seemed a bit like a fudge. Some of the players remark that they thought this was accidental and the mercs hadn't intended to stun them/thought they were dead. However, the GM says that the players may have been ordered to be left alive, so that would be a reason the mercs didn't kill them.

The name of the "Vader wannabe" is Garth. He's a hanger-on that hasn't quite reached the rank of Sith because he's not strong enough with the force.

A story break occurs here. The GM has "a page and a half of box text" that he doesn't get to read.

What was supposed to happen was that the trainer Zelice dies because of fatal wounds. However, the cert mentioned earlier called "I've got a pulse" allows a player to declare anyone not dead. The cert designer figured a player would always use it on himself but the cert didn't specify and said it could be used on anyone. It even gave a Force Point for selflessly using this on another person.

Story break – NPC revival with unexpected ability

Metagame reward (slightly backfires)

Garth, who has injured Zelice, runs away. He deflects blaster shots that are fired at him. If the players come up with a plan that forces him not to escape, a ship arrives to pick up Garth and shoots at the players with ship-board guns to cover his escape. If they manage to kill him anyway (it's still possible) they can't play any further modules that include him.

Fate in use (if at all possible)

"I was afraid of this," the GM says aloud, when he sees the players use this cert to save Zelice. The players had previously worked hard to bring Zelice back from the Dark Side in a previous adventure. It would be worth it to use your own cert to save her life.

Slight metagame break (admonishment) but the GM allows the unwanted action

The whole next module in theory is about getting revenge for her death which doesn't even happen in this case. The GM will rephrase the next module to make it about revenge for the academy at Almas rather than Zelice in specific. Zelice will accompany the PCs on the next adventure instead of being dead.