

FARSIGHT GAMES

ODDS

The Tabletop Roleplaying E-Magazine

Issue 5 – February 2009



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ODDS
Issue 5
February 2009

Published through www.lulu.com

Front cover: *Weeping Evil* by Jonathan Hicks

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EDITORIAL

Happy New Year!

ODDS issue 5 come to you from an exhausted Farsight Games – I’ve overeaten, overdrank and overdone it. Christmas was a good one this year and the new year promises much for Farsight Games.

There is the looming possibility of Open D6 from West End Games, and if this comes about then there is a space opera-style setting I have been working on that uses the original first edition Star Wars D6 rules. There’s a lot of people waiting with baited breath wondering what’s happening with the D6 system and I’m one of them. Producing official D6 material will open avenues of opportunity I’ve only ever dreamed of.

On the SKETCH system page of the Farsight Games website (www.farsightgames.com) there are now four free and complete roleplaying games to download – a historical fantasy game, a Blade Runner game, a Star Wars game (both

unofficial fan games and not endorsed by the license holders) and a sci-fi exploration game. These small SKETCH system games will continue to be free to download.

Keeping on the SKETCH system track, there’s also a full science fiction roleplaying game being produced that gives you 10 pages of rules and 150 pages of background and support material – once ready, it’ll be available for download for £1.00.

That’s right. A full game with a campaign setting, adventures and support material all for £1.00. So keep your eyes peeled, because I’m hoping to have that ready in a couple of month’s time.

Hope you had a great holiday and New Year. Here’s wishing you the best for the next twelve months.

Keep on rollin’

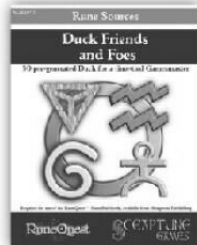
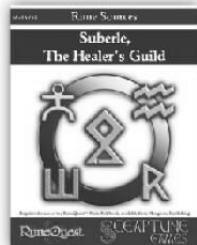
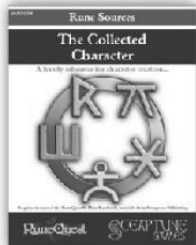
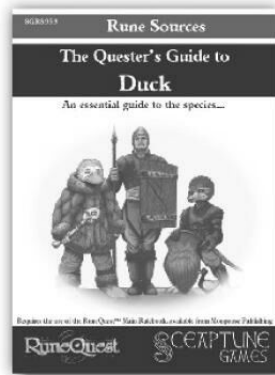
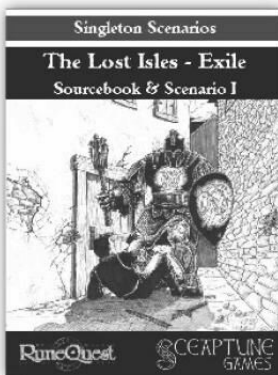
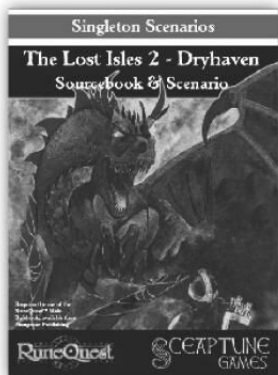
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Editor



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ONE TRACK MIND

Roleplaying from a selfish perspective

A single-minded article by Mark Newbold (AKA Jan Lomona...)

It's one thing that I'm almost certain of...no, it's one of thing I *know* that annoys GM's more than almost anything is when they have a team of players who just WON'T DO AS THEY'RE TOLD! And I admit, I have some sympathy with that. After all, if I was the omnipotent power in the universe and my minions didn't obey me then I'd throw the rattle out of the pram as well...

In my very limited experience (more about that later – or less as the case may be) most GM's would like an easy life. By that I mean they would like all the countless hours, sitting on the loo with a notepad in one hand and *whatever* in the other, to count for something more than just wasting time with their pants down. Characters, situations, locations, planets, plotlines, *anything* relevant to a scenario, it's usually pre-planned for the player to stroll through and experience. Because I think that most – say, seven out of ten – GM's want you to have a *Vinny Jones*-style emotional experience. Pleasure, mixed with pain and a dose of irony, regret and forehead slapping thrown in for good measure.

BUT...

There's always *one* player who won't follow the plot. One who has to make a stand and come out with annoying lines. Spoil the perfectly crafted scenario with lines like: -

"Well my character's a smuggler. Why would he go on a salvage mission?"

Or the equally annoying: -

"I really don't think my character would do that."

Or the soul crushing final rebuke: -
"Sod it, my character is leaving, buying a new coat and getting a hair cut."

Even a player like me, who's rarely GM'd, knows that when that particular line is rolled out then the game has hit a brick wall without a crash helmet. And I've heard it more than once. (*Ouch!*) So, what would a GM have to do to correct this?

Let's get one thing straight. I'm no expert on RPG. I've played *Star Wars* since 1988. I've done a bit of *D&D*, some *Shadowrun*, some *Prime Directive*, *Call of Cthulhu* and a few games of *MechWarrior*.

Not much really.

So for me to give my views you have to understand that I speak from a forced and narrow perspective. GMing a roleplaying game is the area of expertise of my friends – my area of expertise is of no relevance to this site whatsoever, but less about that.

I digress. To correct a session on a collision course with mediocrity the GM might decide to run the game to the strengths of the players. Now, this brings about problems. I remember clearly in about 1991 or 1992, when we were starting a whole new 'Star Wars - The Setnin Sector' campaign, we all decided that we would play our characters as close to their true selves as possible. Serious RPG – no slipping out of character, giggling in games, going up the road for a bag of sweets. Roleplaying to the max. And this must have sounded like nirvana to our GM.

But it proved to be a disaster.

Whenever the GM tried to get us to do something we would question it.

When he wanted us to salvage a space station we said, “*Why would I do that? I’m a smuggler/mercenary/bounty hunter, not a scrap metal merchant?*” And whenever he wanted us to stick together we would bring up all the old arguments that our characters indulged in and refuse to play as a group.

To cut a long story very short – it didn’t work.

I remember the GM being perplexed. I mean it seemed like a great idea. Play up to the characters instead of having the characters react to the storyline. But it didn’t work. Which proved one thing: -

IT’S HARD BEING A GM!

I have nothing but respect for those of you who lead us simple-minded players through the traps and pitfalls of the regular gaming session. Setting up the stories and such. Throwing off-the-cuff characters at us. Great stuff. But I can also give you another example of what annoys GM’s: -

SINGLE PLAYER CHARACTERS

What do I mean by this? I’ll tell ya. People like me, who only ever play one character. My particular Star Wars alias is *Jan Lomona* – he’s the A-desandian smuggler who’s peppered throughout the *Fiction* section of this site. So in almost all of those years of roleplaying I only played Jan Lomona.

Jan, Jan, Jan, Jan, Jan.

Which must have frazzled my GM’s brain.

It was cool initially. Jan was a character I knew very well, from my

books and the stories I was writing at the time. And for me it was a great workout – iron out the kinks in the character, build up more of a background for him. But as time went on it must have become increasingly difficult for my GM to come up with new situations for him. Jan was and is a fairly static character. He’s the same as a twenty year old as he is as a fifty year old. Apart from progressing through the ranks of an underworld organisation and finding out he has a daughter he never knew he had and governing the capital city of his homeworld and...

Well, quite a lot changed actually.

But the point is, much of it came through the Roleplaying games. Which was ace for me, but seeing the same stat sheet for ten years must have slayed the GM. But that’s not my problem, is it? Why should I care? I was playing a character that I wanted to, in a game that I love. And it’s up to the GM to lead the game (from a players point of view). So where could we correct things?

I DON’T KNOW...

If I knew the answer to what makes a perfect session then I’d publish it for free on the Internet.

.....?

No, actually, I’d sell it *through* the Internet and make millions. Which would sort of mess things up for every RPG publisher in the world.

And every GM.

Us players would have a laugh though.

The MARK NEWBOLD interview

Mark Newbold is not only a roleplayer, he's also the webmaster of www.lightsabre.co.uk, an incredibly successful Star Wars fan website where he has compiled guides to the Setnin Sector, the campaign setting for a huge Star Wars D6 roleplaying campaign, which includes hundreds of characters, worlds and stories. Add to that the fact that he's interviewed some of the greats of the Star Wars franchise, from artists and writers to actors and directors, and what you get is an awesome, Star Wars-crammed website.

Mark, welcome to ODDS. First of all, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

There's a loaded question. Well, first off I'd happily admit to being a sci-fi geek who'd trade the 9-5 rat race for a stock heavy freighter and a bottle of Old Janx Spirit. Masquerading as my alter ego Mark Newbold I work for a property development company in Birmingham, am married to fellow geek Bex, and try to cram far too much stuff into an average day.

Primarily my main passion is Star Wars, which I've been a fan of since everyone started talking about it in the playground back in late '77. I got issue 6 of Star Wars weekly, my uncle's copy of the novelisation, a Death Star Droid and the soundtrack and I was set. Thirty-plus years later I'm still collecting, reading, listening to soundtracks and being transfixed by the galaxy far, far away.

Weirdly for a Star Wars fan I also adore Star Trek, for different reasons. Star Wars is drama writ large and it's all about the story and plot. Trek is soap opera, all about the characters. I find myself very much drawn to the Trek characters, identify with their growth as people and their struggles and am always eager for more. The new Star Trek film can't come fast enough for me, and not just because

ILM are doing such amazing work on the show.

As I said I'm married – we got hitched on the bridge of the Enterprise-D at the late, lamented Star Trek Experience in Las Vegas in late '06 with a Klingon on the bridge – and am also heavily into my band, The Three Horsemen for whom I play bass. We're a Metallica covers band and we ROCK! I've played in rock bands for about 12 years, and in other bands for a number of years before that. It's a great feeling when a gig is going well, everyone is gelling and the crowd are up for it and I love the buzz. Not played my hometown for a while though, so looking forward to getting back and playing in front of some friends for a change!

[WWW.LIGHTSABRE.CO.UK](http://www.lightsabre.co.uk) is your bag - how cool is it that you can indulge your passion for Star Wars in such a way? How has the site grown over the years?

It's awesome the way the site has grown since June 1999 when we kicked off and it's changed almost beyond recognition. The basis of the site was the guides we'd all built up, based on stories written in the early 1980's and RPG sessions of the late 80's to the late 90's, but once we

launched with *The Phantom Menace* being so huge the site grew and grew.

We were initially a fan fiction site, which I still think of us as being, but in 2000 we interviewed Kevin J Anderson, then Dave Prowse, and that brought a significant number of people to the site.

Stupidly I didn't really follow up on the interviews as hard as I might have done because we – and by 'we' I mean you Jon, me, Paul Squire and Louis Turfrey – were all working so damn hard on the fiction, and I was focusing on working it all into a consistent chronology as well as updating the guides. If I'd known the role that the interviews would play in the future of the site I would have pushed much harder with that aspect of it.

For me the great thing is that *Star Wars* is a constant and daily part of my life. It always has been, ask any of my pals from when I was a kid. My involvement waned during my late teens, as did *Star Wars* itself, but as soon as *Heir to the Empire* and *Dark Empire* came out, following on from the WEG D-6 system in '87 *Star Wars* was back and so was I.

For the first year until June 2000 Louis was webmaster and, being the technical guy, he uploaded all the articles and stories but as I became more and more proficient in running things I took over and have run it ever since. I realise I'm a bit precious about the site and know I should have delegated a lot more than I did – and still should – but I'm as proud of the site as I am of anything I've ever done creatively, and as a project manager in training I find overseeing all aspects of the site content very fulfilling.

Kicking off we used to get between 300-500 hits per week, which we were all very proud of. Remember, this is back in the days when TPM had just come out and there were a ridiculous amount of *Star Wars* sites out there,

many of which have sadly fallen by the wayside. To get those kind of hits, be listed on link engines and occasionally mentioned on *The Force.Net* was a HUGE deal.

The site as it was ran until mid-2004. By that time Paul had stepped away due to work pressures, you had left to focus your creative efforts on your original writings and the site needed a break. We were updating maybe once a week, sometimes less and the spark had gone. From August 2004 right through to March 2005 the site was left alone, but it gave me and Louis the chance to redesign the site and give it a fresh look. We came back in March '05 with an Ian 'Wes Janson' Liston interview and soon got the weekly hits up to around 3000 a week. Ever since then we've added an interview every two weeks as well as speaking to prominent fans and these days we average between 12,000 – 14,000 hits a week. Our biggest week was the first of a three-part interview with Rick McCallum, the producer of the prequels when we hit 18,000 hits.

You've had some great interviews over the years – what has been your favourite?

That's tricky. Some have been amazing and some have been really disappointing. Alan Dean Foster would have to rank as a disappointment as he practically gave one word answers, as did a forthcoming interview with a leading stunt co-ordinator from the prequels.

On the other hand Rick McCallum was fantastic, and very generous with his time. The line broke down halfway through the interview – well, actually my phone ran out of juice mid-sentence, and on the recording all you can hear is me scream "Noooooo!", but amazingly they called me back! How cool was that, and then we chatted for

another 15 minutes, so I got 40 minutes out of a 20 minute slot.

Peter Mayhew was great, that started off a bit guarded but at the end of the 30 minutes he was calling me 'mate'. Which was cool. The most detailed was Mike Quinn, the puppeteer for Nien Numb who used to work for Jim Henson, that was a great one but the best for me so far has to have been Irvin Kershner. For a guy in his mid-eighties not only was he clear as a bell but he very kindly kept bringing the conversation back to Empire. In didn't wish to offend him by only talking Star Wars, so I mentioned his other films, but he always brought it back to Empire, which I thought was very sweet.

We've got a lot of other big interviews planned with some of the leading actors from the films as well as some more producers. The holy grail is of course George Lucas, and we're working on that so fingers crossed for 2009 and the 10th anniversary of The Phantom Menace.

As I mentioned we also chat with prominent fans and fan-film makers. We've been doing that since early 2006 and I get a big kick out of that, and I think it's that as much as anything that's helped get us better known in the fan community, that and being a part of Celebration Europe where we hosted the great Gerald Home (Tessek from Return of the Jedi) as our guest. He's a great guy and helped us raise a lot of money for our chosen charity Cancer Research UK.

Now – to roleplaying. We were both there at the beginning of the end, when we first delved into the tabletop roleplaying world. 1984, Netherstowe Comprehensive School, the D&D club, with Jason Brown as our Dungeon Master. You played a magic user named Taskmaster, if I remember correctly. What got you

involved, and what was the attraction?

God, Taskmaster, I'd totally forgotten about him! The reason I got into it was easy, it was because my best mate fancied having a go, so it was something else we did together as school kids. I was never very athletic, you remember I was quite chubby until I suddenly shot up, and it required our imagination, of which we had plenty. And the D&D cartoon was a big hit, Jason Brown was involved, who we both looked up to in those days and not only because he was six foot something when he was thirteen. We had a bunch of pals in there, Desmond Osbourne, Daryl Waler, Phil Smith, and Mr Blower was a gamer himself. It was a lot of fun and that really kick-started my RPG involvement.

Going forward a huge attraction was being a part of the story and helping shape it but not knowing what's coming next. Only the GM ever knows that, and even then only to a certain degree, and that level of control missed with the uncertainty of what's around the next rock – dragon, maiden, troll, elf – was alluring, and that continued into our Star Wars gaming days.

You've primarily been a player in the RPG scene – why did you stay on the wrong side of the GM's screen, and did you ever want to have a proper stab at GMing?

You remember I did one scenario, and all you guys loved it because I was very good at being descriptive and laying out the environment we were gaming in. Jason used to always have a pad at his side and would sketch it out on the spot and you'd do a lot of diligent preparation in advance so you'd pull out maps and plans as we

went along, but I'm no great artist so I'd describe it.

As I remember the game involved a test for the characters involved, with them having to do certain tasks to prove their worth to Glann Cipple, our major ganglord in the Setnin Sector. I think Paul and Andy Curtis enjoyed it but I remember you hated it because you felt I'd manipulated the characters by having them do a test, and Goah wouldn't need to be tested.

But that wasn't the reason I was put off GMing, the major reason was that I was, and still am, lousy with rules and stats. I did a night long session once and I think we rolled the dice about 3 times all night, but then again we did loads of Jan, Goah, Ryath games like that sitting in bards and just discussing business over a bottle of Duarga. Jason HATED those games as he was GMing and probably had loads of stuff to throw at us, but for me and the character they were among my very favourite games.

Of course, the Star Wars D6 RPG was the game of choice – what other games/settings would you have had a proper stab at given the chance?

Over the years I've played plenty of other systems. We did Prime Directive for a good while, which I enjoyed very much, and back when we used to hang out with Paul Gilbert, Dave Shields and that gang we played Paranoia, ShadowRun, stuff like that.

I never fancied the vampire stuff, not my bag, although Call of Cthulhu was fantastic whenever we played that. Basic D&D back in the day was always fun, and I played a bit of Warhammer. MechWarrior with Paul was a lot of fun, and I guess if anything that's the setting I'd have liked to play more in, although Marvel Super Heroes was a good laugh.

Ultimately though I think that Star Wars is always where I'll end up, because it's the setting that interests me more than the process of roleplaying. I get to learn more about the characters and settings, the source material is so interesting and the immersion into the characters and situations makes me feel like I'm a genuine part of it. To me, the Setnin Sector and the characters are just as 'real' as any of the official stuff, Hoojibs included.

The guides on your website are mostly influenced by the Star Wars D6 RPG games – what kind of work went into cataloguing all that information?

Blimey, the hours I put into those guides, I couldn't even begin to guess. Starting off back in the mid-90's we had an idea to produce a Setnin Sector sourcebook, and Luis being the only guy at the time with a decent computer reckoned that we could accomplish this. I began to compile the guides in '98 when I got my first PC and pretty soon we had a vast database of stuff.

I then began to cross-reference and add stuff into the guides, which became very tricky because as you remember there have been three runs through the classic era timeline. Firstly there was the NHP (Newbold Hicks Productions) stuff, which came off the back of the stories I'd written when I was a kid (Quest for Freedom, Lydon Legacy, Search Continues), then there was the RPG run through that era from '87 through to '92 when you had the Gang War and a huge amount of characters were killed off. Then the second run through the timeline until we ended our regular games.

But in that time a lot of characters changed hugely. Goah for instance, he began as Jan's co-pilot, then became a

load lifter before doing the first job for Jabba as a smuggler. Then as he evolved he became a hit man and assassin, was cloned, became a half human, half Coryarthanax creature and ultimately went mad from Clone Madness and died.

I had to logically work those different versions of Goah into a consistent whole that made some kind of sense and didn't contradict anything you wrote, or any others wrote. That was very hard and time consuming, and very, very satisfying to pull off.

My character Jan is a much more straightforward guy, he's not much different when he's 20 to when he's 60, but even he's had some continuity snafus to remedy. Louis character Tar Ranth is a nightmare because Louis changes it constantly, even when you ask him to stick to what's in the guides, and Paul's character is undergoing some retcon work to account for the fact that Ryath Centaur is a Clonetrooper.

I find it very pleasing to know that we have, by a long way, the largest original fan fiction character database in the Star Wars universe with almost 1100 characters in the guides, and over 220 in-continuity stories that are linked in a logical timeline. No other fan site can claim anything close to that, so that makes me as proud as anything else on the site.

And the work continues, I'm writing again as is Paul and Louis and I'm hoping to have semi-regular stories cropping up on the site going forward.

What does the future hold for Mark Newbold and www.lightsabre.co.uk?

For Lightsabre the future holds a lot of promise as we have comic strips in progress and in pre-production. We're hoping to have a half hour audio drama go into production in 2009, and should be able to boast some star names

among the cast. As I mentioned I'd like to get the fiction up and running again, the roleplay sections seem to be in good hands and the art gallery is going to have a special focus next year as we raid the archives and add in some lost artwork.

As for interviews I already have the first half of 2009 sketched in with plenty more big names to chase later in the year, were going to get Setnin Radio off the ground again after a two year hiatus and other than that I just want to maintain the quality of the site and get those hits up to near the 20,000 a week mark.

We're very fortunate in that we have a lot of good pals out there in the community, and some great friends at Lucasfilm so we get certain opportunities present themselves to us. In 2008 we've been to more conventions and events than ever, spreading the word about the site, so I'd like that to continue, and of course I'd like to work closely with Farsight Games, spreading the word about each others products. It's like the old NHP days all over again!

Pop quiz – all your interviewees are involved in a mass Star Wars roleplaying session and they want you to be the GM. What do you do, hotshot? What do you do?

Apart from poop? Well, if that's the case I'd be effectively directing Irvin Kershner, so he'd be handed the Obi-Wan role. Rachel Grant would be the damsel in distress – yeah, right! – Peter Mayhew would be the lovable giant sidekick, everyone else would play Clonetroopers apart from the ILM guys who would provide vocal sound effects through a knackered old tape recorder, 1985 style.

As GM I would be safely hidden behind toughened safety glass, rolling behind a screen so no one could see the

rolls and booming my commands through a loudspeaker.

No haircuts, no buying a new coat, no eating onion rings and no bloody Coca-Cola Man!

I think that would go down about as well as the Executor over the Death Star.

Many thanks Jonathan, love what you're doing with Farsight Games and ODDS and really appreciate the chance to chat!

Thanks for your time, Mark. All the best.

THE QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN GROUP

*There are quite a few roleplaying groups out there.
Which type are you most suited to?*

A myriad of different gaming groups has spawned a lot of different styles of gaming. You get your heroes, your wargame-types, your freeformers... each group has a different approach to how the game should be played. Roleplaying has come a long way since the days of *'don your armour and draw your sword to kill lots of nasties and get the gold from the dungeon'* type games.

Hundreds of groups all over the world have their own little quirks and house rules that make their game unique, but on the surface a lot of groups share the same traits. How do you play your games?

The **SOCIABLES** don't take their gaming too seriously. In fact, as soon as they are distracted by anything that they think is more entertaining, they'll drop their dice and take off. Oh, they'll get together on a pre-set evening to do a game, but there's a chance that the game will fall apart half-way through the session, or maybe it won't even take off. This is because that roleplaying is just another way of getting together. Groups like this don't usually last long. Sometimes they'll

have a good game where they'll get into a situation they can relate to, but those games are few and far between.

WARGAMERS are almost exactly what the term means- they play the game to conduct detailed combat situations, and roleplaying pretty much takes a back seat. Their characters are two dimensional, almost always being a part of a military outfit, or at least trained that way. The term 'hack n' slash' applies to these kind of groups, who don't think they've had a decent night's game unless someone has been killed or something has been blown up. Considering a lot of games are especially created for conflict and war, these kinds of groups are quite common.

The **FLAMBOYANT** groups are the ones that belong on the stage. Their games are more or less freeform, with the rules used only to govern confrontational situations. They'll jump from their chairs and wave their arms about to physically express their character's actions. The place they play their games will be decorated to suit the mood of the game, like having candles lying around or drapes over the

windows. Each player is an actor in their own right, and would rather decide a situation using their skill as a thespian rather than what they have written on the character sheet.

Another common kind of group is the **RULESMONGERS**. The rulebook is law, and deviating from that law is wrong. These gamers will quote rules for every situation, be it combat or climbing a rope or NPC interaction. Half the evening's session will be taken up by flipping through the rulebook or companion volumes, checking charts and tables and passing books across the table. Some of it is also taken up by disagreements on a rule interpretation. The players question each GM decision and the GM checks every player action carefully.

MOTIVATED roleplayers are the ones who only really want what's best for their character. They want decent equipment, better skills and a higher status. They'll play their characters to the hilt to get the most out of it, and try to reap in rewards and prestige. They'll place their character sheet and applicable notes in clear binders, and flesh out the character with complicated backgrounds and a predetermined goal. Likewise, the GM will have detailed notes on all the NPC's the PC's will meet detailed locations and maybe even draw up a sequence of events that happen around the players.

These sorts of groups' spawn the **STORYTELLERS**, who play the game to unfold a plot that has the traditional beginning, middle and end. These groups can be quite linear with their play, with the GM guiding the players along a story already conceived. They can also be quite unpredictable, what with the players wanting their characters to do what's

best for them, and the GM trying to cater for all the different PC's by introducing alternate plots.

INTENSE groups are the ones who get right under the skin of their characters, giving PC's and NPC's alike psychological traits which go beyond what they have written down on their character sheet. They play characters with dark pasts or horrible phobias, and react to situations with intricately fleshed out actions. They have personal reasons (at least, personal to their character) why they are acting in a certain way. Their campaigns revolve around personal tragedy and psychological trauma, with moments of high drama and tense atmosphere thrown in.

Finally, there are the **CASUALS**, who are willing to play the game but are indifferent to the outcome. They'll crack jokes throughout the game, make light of grave situations and generally be laid back about aspects of the session that would mean a lot to any other roleplayer. These groups tend to change GM's frequently, and PC's are quite expendable. The players will play their characters, sure, but if they died it would be no big deal. The scenarios are pretty much open, allowing the players free rein of their environment with the GM winging the games to give the players something to do.

Different types of groups produce different kinds of players and GM's. Some players don't mix well, however. Could you imagine taking a rulesmonger and slapping him in the middle of a flamboyant game? It doesn't take much to realise that it would not work. A rulesmonger would probably fit in better with a group of wargamers. A motivated player would probably mix well with a group of

flamboyants. A sociable type would probably get bored very quickly with any other group.

So which of these groups would you fit in well with? Perhaps you would fit in with more than one. You may be a rulesmonger who likes to be intense

about the games, or you may be flamboyant gamer who has a lot of motivation for the character being portrayed.

Better still, which of these groups is like your group?

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WELL, WE'VE ALL GOT OUR PROBLEMS

Campaign going down the pan? Players not interested anymore? Running out of ideas? Games lost their sparkle? Here are some hints.

It happens. At some point or another, gaming groups, especially the more laid back ones, go through a phase when the game doesn't interest them anymore because of something or another. This can be anything to being bored with the setting you're in or a problem player messing up the sessions or a rather incompetent GM... There are a myriad of things that can stunt the progress of a group. Sometimes you may think it is easier to lay down your dice and forget the whole thing.

Tempting. But it's a shame when there is a small element of the group who are really eager to play, a hyped up player or a creative GM. But then it's hardly fair on the people who have lost interest to have to slog through *another* two hours. Well, no-ones forcing them to play. So how do you get life back in the game when the eager players want to burn their character sheets?

Difficult question, especially when the group has been together a *very* long time, and they've virtually tried everything. There are no definitive answers, each group have their own reasons for playing the games. But here are few ideas that may get you back on track, for a while at least.

GIVE US BREAK, GUV

The overseer of all games is, of course, the Gamesmaster. The God of the gaming world. It's a bit of a pain, then, when the GM is a downright git who is playing the game for the following reasons...

1. He wants to ego trip on powerful NPCs he's created.
2. He feels that he is contending with the players.
3. He wants everyone to think he is intelligent and has an imagination (there are people like that!).
4. He wants to NPC his own character and gives him the biggest rewards and best equipment.
5. He wants to show off his narrative skills, whereas he's just a boring fart.

... And so on. Quick answer? Get rid of them. Don't let them GM the game. Or at least explain what the problem is. Get them to change their attitude. If they don't then just change the GM.

It may pay off to change GMs even if the current one isn't a pain in the backside. It can make a refreshing change when the perspective of a gaming world is changed to the view of another GM. Such things can revitalise a dying campaign with fresh ideas and opinions.

KILL THE HERETIC!

Players who ruin gaming sessions can really put other gamers off, especially newcomers to the group. They bicker, they're loud, they always want to be heard, they cheat... *ooh*, and they make you so *mad!* What destroys a gaming group faster than a terrible GM? A terrible player. Or worst of all, a couple of terrible players. Even one can ruin a decent night's gaming, even in large groups. They just cannot be tolerated unless they take the game a

bit more seriously, depending on just *how* seriously you take your games.

Players who generally are annoying usually won't change their ways, and should be jettisoned as soon as possible. It can be a shame if they are there to be genuinely sociable, but they should respect the serious gamers wishes and stay away.

DÉJÀ VU

"Wait a second," says the third player to your right, "We killed a similar creature to that in a similar way when we were walking through a similar city... which was very similar to this one."

Oh, dear. Sounds like the gaming world is becoming a little bit boring. Players saved the world just once too often? Even pulling back the home planet from the brink of certain destruction can be boring after you've done it a few times. The players need new and more exciting challenges, not just ones where you find out where the bad guy is hiding and you go round and give him a damn good thrashing. It can be difficult for a GM, especially those who play frequently, to come up with new and interesting dangers or puzzles for the players to face. If the GM is resilient enough, she can get a good few months play out of a game, even years. But you've got to notice the signs when the group starts to get bored with the setting. It's then that you change everything.

First, start with the location. Go from one part of the planet to a fresh climate, or even go to another planet, which is an absolute must in some roleplaying games. After kicking backside at that locale, change the characters. Get the players to create new characters at beginner's stats,

because there is nothing more challenging than playing a weak character after playing a more experienced one. If that starts to wane, chuck out the setting. Get a new campaign in, a new setting, a new part of the galaxy. Change the genre; go from playing a bunch of specforce operatives to bounty hunters. Play differently, do more investigation than fighting, get more story out of the game. Then go back to your original setting, and start again. Or even get *another* setting in.

Of course, continually changing settings can disorientate and confuse players, and put quite a hole in the old bank balance. Actually, I went for whole new settings I created myself, which cost me a hell of a lot of time... but its nice having a large selection of places to go. It just depends on how serious you are about the whole thing.

HAPPINESS IS MANDATORY

Make a note in your diary about when and where the game is taking place. It can be a really big pain in the nether regions when the group is set up and raring to play and one or two people are late. Waiting around twiddling thumbs and other manipulative limbs can really put a downer on the willingness to play, so make sure that everyone is punctual.

It is also a good idea to have a little privacy. Trying to scare the players with deep meaningful narrative about the stealth-suited killer cyborg in the engine room can all be for nought when someone else who lives in the house waltzes through the room blaring "alright, mates?" Make sure the night you play there will be no interruptions.

There will also be a rather nasty problem that players may have to deal with... scorn from non-players. Being called childish and having such remarks as "don't you think you're a bit old for that kind of thing?" can destroy player confidence. What is worse is when your accused of depraved and occultist practising. I'm not sure what that is supposed to mean, but it sounds as though it would make a great game. Players, mainly the newcomers to the hobby, will pack their bags pretty quickly when persons who don't play the games start on them, and I guess we've seen and heard it all. But what the hell, its only a game, right?

Saying that, it is a good idea to avoid those people whose entire existence revolves about the hobby. I don't label these people as *sad*; I label them as *dead boring*. What kept my group going for years was the fact that we were all good mates anyway, and we had plenty of interests outside the hobby. People who chatter on and on about games and characters and stats and gaming worlds and settings and charts and tables and conversion systems and character generation ideas and equipment... they need a good kick up the arse and directions to that great city called Life. They can bring the group down because, well, you can only take so much roleplaying.

EUREKA!

Ideas are a bummer. Where do you get them? Well, there are plenty of places.

I've got quite a few games where the author has tried to explain to budding GM's where they can get their ideas from. They usually say the media (such as television and radio) and do you know something? They're absolutely *right*. I've got loads of inspiration and

ideas from television, by watching the news and other information gathering programmes, taking the item of discussion and converting it to the game I was running. The political intrigue of other governments, the military actions of countries at war, the scandal of a public figure... all of these things can make good stories for your campaign, as long as you change some bits so that the players who saw the program don't second guess you!

Of course, published adventures are great, but you'll soon run out of them, no matter what setting you play. It'll be up to the great pink mushy thing in your head when the printed games run out, and it'll do overtime. You'll run out of ideas after a while, but that's the signal to change things, as detailed above.

I'm not going to say 'in conclusion' because there is no conclusion. The ideas and information above may be a total waste of time to your group if you've already tried everything, and the games have still taken a dive. Situations like that are regretful, but maybe its time to ask yourself whether it is time that you gave it a rest. Maybe you should let the group go, round up the ones who are still eager and go and find new players. Who knows? All groups are destined to fade away as peoples attentions are pulled elsewhere, and today's young, innovative, eager players are tomorrow's adults who remember gaming as one of their old pastimes.

Don't cling desperately to the game and the players if the group is crumbling beyond redemption. Let it go, and then decide if you want to carry on with new players. You may find that roleplaying is just another pastime that you and your friends used to enjoy.

PLAYED TO DEATH

Let's take a look at the sobering subject of character death in roleplaying games

One of the worst things about being the all-powerful GM in a roleplaying game is looking across the gaming table and staring into the eyes of someone who just died. Not you're friend actually keeling over at the table, of course, but the player's character in question. After many games, actually biting the big one after being shot/ stabbed/ blown up/ dissolved/ vaporised/ minced/ spaced/ gassed/ strangled/ beaten/ sliced/ diced/ pushed/ made very depressed and left with only one drastic, stupid option.

The character is, to be blunt, dead.

Oh, dear. There is never a worse time in a game as when a carefully designed player character actually makes one too many mistakes, or one too many low dice rolls, to be allowed to survive. There are many things that you have to consider before, during and after a character being killed.

BE SURE THAT THE GAME YOU HAVE CREATED ISN'T A SIMPLE DEATH TRAP.

Oh, please. We've all sat down and designed the 'mother of all deadly locations' with pitfalls and lasernets and security systems to die for. Literally. What you've got to realise is that the players won't take the risk if they think that it's simply too difficult and then all your evil work has gone to waste.

You don't want to get to the point where you're saying '*that's Bill, Bob and Brenda out of the way. That just leaves you, Belinda!*'. So Belinda turns round, looks at her dead friends and says something along the lines of '*screw that!*'. Oh, spending that two hours drawing the floor plans was worth it, eh? It's not only that, what are your players going to think? '*This evil b*****d is out to get us!*'

There is nothing worse than losing a well-cultivated character to a simple throw of a dice, especially when you're told '*no, that's not good enough, you're dead!*'. You have to make sure that the players either have a) a logical way out or b) several sets of rolls they can make to limit the damage. Make sure that whatever you've designed has a weak spot or an escape route that is tangible. There's no use the players battling a killer 'droid for an hour only to get pasted, and then for you to say '*People, you had to use a high-frequency signal to disrupt it's carrier wave so that the defence screen drops!*'. If you hadn't alluded to that earlier or given that option then it makes the deaths pointless. You want the player's to go '*Oh, of course, why didn't we remember that?*' instead of '*How the hell were we supposed to know that?*'

MAKE SURE THE PLAYER REALISES THAT ANY MISTAKES THEY ARE ABOUT TO MAKE COULD BE FATAL ONES

But what do you care, right? You can't hold the player's hand through a scenario, all you're doing is presenting the material and it's up to the player to get through it. Hey, if they get vaped that's their own fault, right?

Wrong.

It's very true that you can't direct the player on the path to success. It's also true that part of the game is the fact that they are taking risks and giving them the obvious way out of every situation is a no-no because it destroys the illusion of risk.

You don't want the players to walk away from a situation where they were blatantly doing things that were so dangerous, so reckless, that the chances of getting killed were high. You don't want to tell them *'Are you sure you want to do that?'* continuously because that makes them far too wary and not only makes them a lot more cautious, which slows the game down, but it also virtually guarantees them survival. What you want to do is allude to the fact that it is a dangerous situation. If the player is still on a road to destruction then quickly throw in a reminder of their predicament. If they continue then it's the final jump for them if they fail. At least you can't be held responsible for the death of the character. Don't remind them all the time, just when the encounter begins and maybe a quick mention at variable points.

Also, the biggest no-no, is when the player states their actions and you have to make the response. Don't look at them with a smile and an evil twinkle in your eye and say *'Are you sure that's what you want to do?'* What an evil, egotistical thing to do! If the character does die then the player is going to think it was pre-ordained by the GM. Oh, that'll bring them back for more.

IF THEY ARE GOING TO BITE THE BIG ONE, MAKE SURE THEY GO OUT WITH A BANG

No, I don't mean blow them up (unless it's called for), I mean make sure that their deaths mean something. Make sure, after twenty games battling the evil enemy, after saving worlds and thwarting plots and being generally pleasant, that they don't simply die in a corridor after getting blasted by a lucky shot.

'Luke Skywalker. You destroyed the Death Star, fought a rearguard action to defend Hoth and defeated Vader and the Emperor - oh dear, you've slipped in the shower and died a stupid pointless death. Ah, well, that's life, eh?'

Yes, it may be life but it's not very high adventure, is it? Don't listen to those people who say, *'Well, anyone can trip over a root and break their neck, just like in real life'*. It's not real life! It's a game of exploding starships and laser fights, of bright shining swords and dashing heroes. Compare these two facts:

(a) *Real Life.*

(b) *Faster than light travel, lasers and magic.*

Oh, please. If you wanted real life you'd go to the shops or something and then get skill points. *'Oh, that's a high skill in grass cutting, now...'* Get the point?

When a roleplaying character makes a last gasp you've got to make sure it means something. Maybe they get to pilot a starship into a marauding warship to save a planet - fair enough, the character may not have survived a hit but you can just say - *'look, you've got a few rounds to live, what do you want to do?'* Then that'll give them time to throw defiance at their enemy, gasp their last, poignant words or save a life. Of course, knowing that they're going to die, some players might take the mickey and say *'I'll shoot the other player characters'* or *'I'll tapdance and shout "don't fight, dance"'*! At this point you should just say *'too late, you're dead.'* If they're going to mess about with what should be a dramatic moment then they probably won't have minded simply dying, anyway.

Character death can be annoying - it can be a little upsetting to the player if the character is a well-cultivated one - but it should never be trivial. After the game there should be a few moments to reflect on the character and whatever they attained in their career. Remind the player what they played and why so that they will try to emulate or rekindle what they lost. Players should be able to create their next character with the knowledge that they will get a fair deal at a game and that they can create a personality that will have a beginning and an end. It all makes good roleplaying.

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