Improvisation for GMs

Role-players won't do what you expect them to do. As a consequence, one of the gamesmaster's most important skills is improvisation.

The Anglo-Saxons didn't know role-playing. They didn't need to; they still did their swordplay and adventuring for real. But they had something similar: the Scop. This was the Old English ancestor of the Minstrel, an oral poet who would sing or tell heroic tales after dinner in the hall of the local lord. If you know Beowulf, you may remember the Scop in Hrothgar's hall.

Why am I telling you this? Because we as GMs, the very modest modern versions of oral poets, can learn from the Scop. His most important lesson is this: Don't memorize your poem. The early medieval oral poets (and their descendents in Kyrgyzstan, for instance) can reproduce an epic of several thousand lines, the singing of which will last a whole night. Yet they don't learn it by heart. Instead, they are trained by their masters to memorize the story, its sequence and its characters. The actual lines of the poem are improvised, using formulaic metric sequences. Hence the oral poets recreate an epic instead of merely reproducing it.

The GM as Minstrel

The task of the GM is similar to the Scop's. He knows what is going to happen in the story and who its main characters are, but he will have to make up the details while telling it. Improvisation is even more important to role-playing than to oral poetry, because the GM is not the only one creating the story. You know the situation: Even if you have prepared your game for hours and hours, even if you are using a pre-published adventure - your players will always find a way around it, upsetting your plans and forcing you to improvise.

Try to see this as a good thing. Improvisation is, in fact, a powerful tool that can improve your game and make things easier for you. The best GMs are known to be the ones who can jot a couple of ideas on a sheet of paper and then run an eight-hour session without even looking at it. This is not a gift bestowed by Sigmar on some lucky guys; it is a craft you can learn.

Improvisation means Preparation

The first lesson to learn is that you have to be prepared to be able to improvise. Though this may sound paradoxical, it is a fundamental truth. Take the Scops. They had to learn their formulae and practise their metrics and sing their songs for years until they were ready to perform at a royal court. Similarly, there are a few things you should be familiar with before you start improvising large parts of your campaign.

First of all, you must know the rules to be able to forget them during the game. You will need your head free of numbers and charts, so you can focus on the story and the characters. If a critical rule question comes up, all you must know is where to look it up. In other words: don't worry about the rules as long as you are familiar with the basics.

Secondly, you should feel at home in the Warhammer world. Again, this does not mean that you should learn the names of all electors, town rulers and lovers of Countess Emmanuelle by heart. However, make sure that you understand how this world works and how it looks, especially the part of the Old World where your campaign is set. In other words, you should be aware of the fact that there are things like the aristocracy, the guilds, or feudal rights, and

how these things affect the people living in that world. Moreover, get some impression of how people of different social backgrounds dress, how their houses look like, and how villages and cities are structured. This sounds like a lot of dry reading, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, being a player in someone else's campaign or reading a Warhammer novel can teach you almost as much about the game world as history books. This is a game, after all, and it is often more important to get into the atmosphere of this fictional world than to collect a plethora of facts.

Thirdly, get to know the player characters. Have a copy of their character sheets at hand, or note their stats, their skills and trappings on a separate sheet of paper. This way, you won't be forced to ask revealing questions such as: "Does any one of you have Sixth Sense?" Add a few notes about each character's background, important enemies or friends, unresolved conflicts, mysteries and plot hooks. If you ever run out of ideas during your game, you might look at these notes and bring up a shadow from the past.

The Plot-Outline
Fourthly, know your plot. To be able to improvise, you'll need to know where you are heading, at least more or less. Take a sheet of paper and jot down the essentials of your adventure. Start with the central task your player characters will be performing: "rescue the princess", "uncover the cult", "find the magic item", "fight the evil mage", or whatever blurb you can think of. There is no need for originality here. Most adventures, even the published ones, work along similar plot outlines. The same is true for mystery novels, action movies or computer games. The important thing is not what we do, but how we do it. If your inspiration ever falters, take a look at your past notes. There is bound to be some unfinished business in your campaign that you can pick up again. If not, use something in your PCs' background to start a new plot line, for instance a father dying, a brother disappearing or reappearing, an old friend calling in favours.

Once you have defined your general course, you should start with the ending. What is the goal of your players, and what kind of showdown do you imagine? A typical climax would be the fight against the villain. Who is, by the way, the next important thing you need to note down. Forget about the stats, you can make those up during the game. All you need is a name, his function in the plot and a few words of characterization. The easiest way to define a character is by analogy. Let's say your bad guy looks like Christopher Lee and acts like Goldfinger - that should give you an impression of how to role-play this particular NPC.

Now you need to do the same for a couple of other important NPCs. These could be allies of the player characters, their employer or people with essential clues. Then throw some obstacles in the PCs' course, i.e. complications and opposition. Who is in league with the villain? What conflicts, beasts or enemies could be encountered on the players' way to the showdown? You might want to add a subplot or two, story-lines which are only peripherally connected to the main task. A love story, a political crisis or some mysterious astral phenomenon might add colour to your plot. Finally, you will have to find a beginning. This should be an event which quickly draws your player characters into the action, and which sets them on course. Reviewing your notes, you will see that this single page filled with a few names and events is enough for you to be able to visualize the adventure. The outline is ready; all the details will be fleshed out on the fly during the game.

Finally, you may prepare templates. Many GMs like to have a binder full of standard NPC stats, random encounters, a bestiary and floor plans of typical buildings of the Old World handy. Publications such as "The Enemy Within" or "City of Chaos", and of course the rulebook itself, provide most of the material necessary. More experienced GMs will be able to improvise stats and floor plans as well as plot elements, based on their knowledge of the rules and the game world.

Winging It
With your notes ready and the pillars of your plot firmly installed in the back of your head, you should be able run most of the game on the fly. Not having prepared the details of the adventure will actually make you freer to react to what your players do. This is what improvisation in games-mastering is all about: Let your players take their course and quickly adapt your storyline to it. If you had written dozens of pages, you would hate to miss out half of it simply because the PCs won't do what you want them to do. So you would force them on your course, in a more or less subtle way.

Improvised games-mastering works the other way around. While you do convey goals to the players, you let them decide which way they take to achieve them. Hence the first and the last rule of improvisation are: listen to your players! The players will talk to each other all the time about who is behind what conspiracy, about where could be which trap, about who is the bad guy and why. Let them talk, and don't give away too much information yourself. More often than not, the players will come up with ideas that you didn't think of. Sometimes these ideas are better than yours, or they work better the way the game now develops. Use these ideas to change your game for the better! The players will think that they have cleverly worked out what you had planned for them. Let them.

Listening to your players also means that you have to be sensitive towards the development of tension. If the players start to lose interest in the game, maybe because they don't know what they are looking for, or because things develop too slowly, it is time for you to throw in a new plot element. You may deliver a new clue (or red herring) through an NPC, add a plot twist by switching friend with foe, or simply entertain the players with a random fight. Thus listening to your players doesn't mean you let them take over the game. The plot must still be under your control and guidance, since chaotic games aren't funny more than once. If things are running out of control, take a look at your notes and try to advance the plot more quickly. In other words: bring up events which force the players to react.

Being in control of the game entails being consistent. Consistency, in turn, is only possible if you take notes. Be sure to systematically write down the parts of the adventure you are improvising. Note names of NPCs, inns or towns, clues and items, friends and foes, ideas. Don't write down everything, just the important facts you'll need for your next game. It makes sense to use a separate sheet of paper for your game log. Some GMs use tables or index cards; some rely on techniques such as mind-mapping. Use your notes right after the gaming session to write up a more detailed log of the adventure, and, if necessary, add notes to your player characters' background. It sometimes makes sense to e-mail the log to your players, along with a list of NPCs encountered. This may help them to pick up the plot line in the next session.

However, don't let the book-keeping hinder your creativity. If you are concentrating too much on doing everything right, you won't be able to improvise. Try to enter the game as deeply as

possible. Visualize the world and the characters of the game like a movie. Maybe keep a particular movie or novel in the back of your mind. That will help you keep up the atmosphere, and it will help you come up with ideas for scenes, places and characters. Never mind being original, focus on having fun.

A Final Word
The Anglo-Saxon Scop is rarely portrayed as a young man in Old English literature. The reason for this fact is obvious: he needed years and years of experience to refine his skill of improvisation. The same is true for most gamesmasters. Probably, there are those narrators of natural genius who don't need much experience to be able to host a game on the fly. Most of us, however, will have to role-play and GM for a long time before improvisation comes easily. And even if you are an experience gamesmaster, your first try at running an adventure that isn't fully planned may be a little chaotic. Don't let that hinder you to try it again. It will make you a better GM, it will eventually save you a lot of time, and it will make your games more fun for you and your players.
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