

PRESENTED BY A  
BATTLE-HARDENED STORYTELLER

# GM 101

RUNNING ENJOYABLE  
TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING  
GAMES



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Presented  
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# TALES FROM A BATTLE-HARDENED STORYTELLER

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

### **I. Foundations of Fun**

- The Role of the Game Master
- What Makes a Game “Fun” for Everyone?
- Know Thy Table

### **II. Building a Game that Wants to be Played**

- Worldbuilding That Breathes
- Plot Hooks & Story Seeds
- Balancing Structure and Sandbox

### **III. The Art of Session Flow**

- Session Pacing: The Pulse of Play
- Spotlight Management
- Combat that doesn't Drag

### **IV. Improvisation & Player Wrangling**

- Yes, And... The Power of Improv
- Dealing with Derailment
- Handling Rules Disputes Gracefully

# TALES FROM A BATTLE-HARDENED STORYTELLER

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

### V. Tools of the Trade

- Prep like a Pro
- Using Props, Music & Maps
- Digital Tools for the 21st Century GM

### VII. Long-Term Success

- Campaign Sustainability
- Levelling Up as a GM

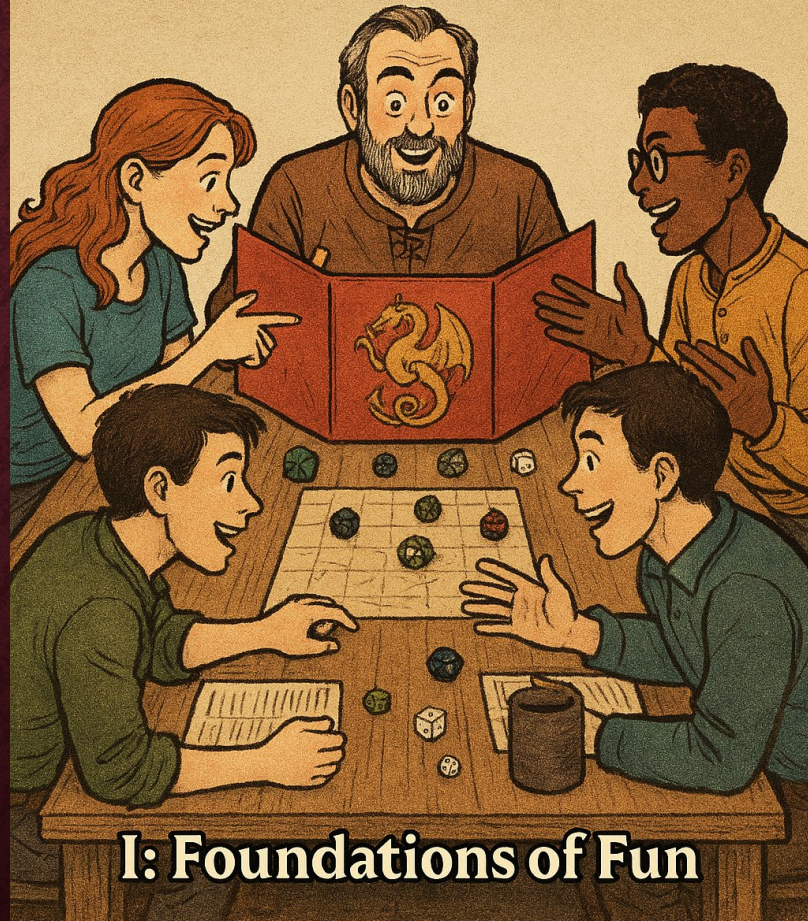
### VI. Beyond the Dice

- Cultivating Player Investment
- Reading the Room
- Being a GM, Not a God

### THE ART OF THE GAME:

- Final Words on Running Enjoyable TTRPGs

# FOUNDATIONS OF FUN



**I: Foundations of Fun**

# THE ROLE OF THE GAME MASTER



- Facilitator, storyteller, referee, and fan of the players.



## **FACILITATOR: GUIDING THE FLOW OF PLAY**

As a facilitator, your job isn't to command the spotlight - it's to ensure everyone else gets to shine in it.

You set the stage, explain the rules, introduce the setting, and help the group navigate the experience smoothly.

You watch for moments when someone is unsure, hesitant, or needs a little encouragement - and you help them step in confidently.

A facilitator also knows when to step back, letting players run with a scene, solve a puzzle, or interrogate that random fishmonger for 30 minutes.

You manage pacing: speeding up when things drag, slowing down for emotional beats, and keeping the group engaged through transitions.

**Analogy:** You're the conductor of the orchestra - not playing all the instruments, but making sure the symphony works in harmony.



# STORYTELLER: BREATHING LIFE INTO THE WORLD

As a storyteller, you're the voice of the setting, the fate-spinner, and the unexpected twist around the corner.

You describe environments, give NPCs their quirks and motives, and create drama through conflict, choice, and consequences.

Great storytelling is about evocation, not exposition - paint with details that matter, and let the players imagine the rest.

You craft narrative arcs, yes - but also respond dynamically to player choices. The story isn't just yours - it's shared, discovered at the table together.

You use foreshadowing, callbacks, and themes to make the game feel cohesive and emotionally satisfying.

**Analogy:** You're not writing a novel - you're building a living story that breathes in the space between dice rolls and player decisions.



## **REFEREE: KEEPER OF RULES AND FAIRNESS**

As a referee, you uphold the game's rules - not to restrict players, but to empower them through consistent structure.

You resolve conflicts, interpret rules, and make rulings on edge cases that the system doesn't cover. The key rule here is the rule of fun, if a ruling doesn't make it fun for the players than it shouldn't happen.

Fairness and consistency are key - not just to keep the game balanced, but to maintain trust.

Sometimes the rules take a back seat to the drama. Other times, the rules create drama on their own. Know when to honour both.

When in doubt, adjudicate with transparency. Explain your reasoning and, when possible, invite collaborative problem-solving.

**Analogy:** You're the invisible hand of justice - firm, impartial, and always working to keep the game fun and fair.



## FAN OF THE PLAYERS: CHAMPION OF COOL MOMENTS

This is the most important role - and the one new GMs often forget.

You are the players' biggest cheerleader. You want them to be awesome, clever, heroic, tragic, terrifying - whatever flavour they're bringing to the table.

You set up moments for them to succeed, fall, and grow. You celebrate their triumphs and give weight to their failures.

Even if your NPCs are against them, you as the GM are always on their side.

You build tension not to punish - but to let them break through it, with style.

**Analogy:** You're the director who claps the loudest when the actors nail their scene. Their story is your standing ovation.

A good GM wears many hats - but the magic happens when you weave all four roles together.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

You guide the table (Facilitator), shape the world (Storyteller), uphold fairness (Referee), and make the players feel like legends (Fan).

And when you do it right?

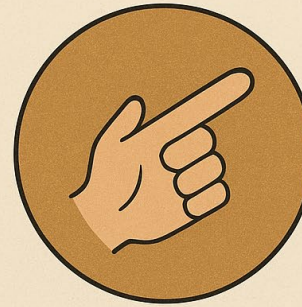
The table leans in.

The dice fall silent.

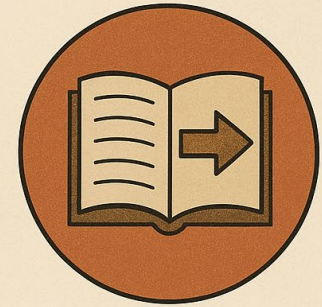
And everyone - just for a moment - *believes*.

Questions?

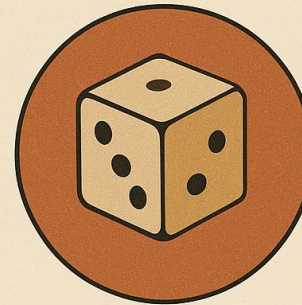
# WHAT MAKES A GAME “FUN” FOR EVERYONE?



PLAYER AGENCY



STORY MOMENTUM



CHALLENGE



SHARED SPOTLIGHT

- The Four Pillars of a Great Tabletop Experience.



# PLAYER AGENCY: THE POWER TO CHOOSE, ACT, AND AFFECT THE WORLD

When players feel like their decisions matter, the game comes alive.

Let them change the world, disrupt your plans, and take unexpected paths.

Allow them to say, "We want to talk to the villain," and don't shut the door. Let them surprise you.

Agency isn't just about big plot decisions - it's in how they solve problems, define their characters, and interact with NPCs.

Why it's fun: People don't want to watch a story unfold - they want to be part of it, driving the narrative forward with their choices.

# ⚡ STORY MOMENTUM: KEEP THE WHEELS TURNING

Even in a sandbox, things should happen. The world should breathe and move - whether the players act or not.

Keep scenes tight and purposeful. Avoid getting bogged down in long logistics or overplanning.

Introduce tension early. Create mystery, danger, or drama to propel the group forward.

Every session should feel like it went somewhere: a discovery made, a conflict escalated, a relationship changed.

Why it's fun: Momentum creates a sense of adventure, urgency, and purpose. It pulls players forward and makes every choice feel like it matters now



# CHALLENGE: EARNED VICTORIES ARE THE SWEETEST

Players want to struggle, even if they don't always say so.

Make them work for their victories - through combat, diplomacy, problem-solving, or emotional stakes.

Tailor challenges to the group's strengths and flaws. Test their teamwork, their morals, their creativity.

Don't be afraid to let them fail... but make failure interesting. Setbacks should spark new storylines or create hard choices.

Why it's fun: Overcoming obstacles gives players a sense of triumph and growth. It's what makes the cool moments truly earned, and the story memorable.



# SHARED SPOTLIGHT: EVERYONE GETS THEIR MOMENT

The best sessions are ones where everyone walks away with a story to tell.

Track who's getting attention and who's fading into the background. Call on the quiet ones. Create moments for introverts.

Design encounters and plot threads that pull on each character's personal backstory or goals.

If someone's having an off day, don't force the spotlight - but make sure it's waiting when they're ready.

Why it's fun: A game where everyone feels seen and valued creates emotional investment, camaraderie, and deep personal buy-in.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Fun isn't a one-size-fits-all metric. It's a living, evolving alchemy of trust, engagement, and shared imagination.

As a GM, your job isn't to entertain your players like an audience - It's to empower them to build unforgettable stories with you.

Questions?

# Know Thy Table

- Session zero
- Lines & veils
- Safety tools
- Group expectations



- Session zero, lines & veils, safety tools, and group expectations.
- Before the first dice hit the table, before the first NPC monologues or sword is drawn, you must build the foundation of trust, clarity, and consent.
- This isn't just a checklist - it's how you forge the social contract that will carry your group through battles, betrayals, heartbreaks, and triumphs.



# SESSION ZERO: YOUR CAMPAIGN'S GROUND FLOOR



• Session Zero is the prelude to adventure - a dedicated time to align expectations and build your game together. Expectations from the players on how the game will run but just as importantly, the expectations from the Game Master on how the players will interact with the game.



• Set the Tone: Is your game gritty and tragic, or pulpy and swashbuckling? Do you want courtly intrigue or dungeon delving? Let players know what to expect before they invest emotionally.



• Establish Themes: What's this game about? Honour? Betrayal? Redemption? Revolution? This guides players as they build characters.



• Create Together: Let players shape parts of the world. A beloved mentor, a hometown, a rival clan - these become instant story seeds. Create a relationship table that ties the player's characters together in some way. Allow the players to tell you how they are connected. This creates a buy-in and group narrative before the game even begins.



• Set House Rules: Clarify rulings, homebrew mechanics, critical success / failure expectations, and how XP or advancement works.



• Discuss Game Logistics: When do you play? How often? What happens when someone misses a session? Set clear, fair expectations up front.

**Why it matters: Session zero builds buy-in. Everyone feels ownership over the game and its tone - so they're more engaged from the start.**

# LINES & VEILS: SETTING EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES



- Lines and veils are tools to help define what content is okay at your table - and what's not.



- Lines are hard boundaries. These themes or subjects do not appear in the game, ever. (e.g., no sexual violence, no child harm, etc.)



- Veils are fade-to-black areas. These things might happen, but they won't be described in detail. (e.g., consensual romance, graphic gore, etc.)



- Encourage players to set their own lines and veils - either in discussion or using anonymous tools (see safety tools below). Respect and honour them without question.

Why it matters: A safe table is a trusting table. When players feel emotionally secure, they engage more fully - and with more courage.



# SAFETY TOOLS: KEEPING THE GAME COMFORTABLE IN REAL TIME



• Even with lines and veils in place, things can surprise us. That's where in-game safety tools come in.



• X-Card: Any player can tap or hold up an X to immediately skip, fade out, or change content without explanation. No discussion needed.



• Open Door Policy: Any player can step away from the game at any time for any reason - no justification required.



• Pause / Check-In: If something feels off, any player or GM can say "pause" to briefly check in with the group.



• Stars and Wishes (for debriefs): After the session, players share something they loved (stars) and something they hope to see more of (wishes).



• Normalise using these tools by modelling them yourself as the GM

Why it matters: It keeps emotional safety active, not passive. Respect grows, and players can take bigger narrative risks when they know there's a net beneath them.



# GROUP EXPECTATIONS: ALIGNING THE EXPERIENCE



- Every group has different playstyles. Get yours aligned early:



- Roleplay Focus: Are we here for heavy RP? Tactical combat? Exploration? A little of each?



- Player Behaviour: What's the group's vibe? Goofy? Serious? Immersive? Do you want in-character only during scenes, or is table chatter okay? It's ok as the GM to tell the players your expectations around the game you are running.



- Rules Engagement: Does everyone need to know the rules, or are you okay with handwaving for newbies?



- Tone Consistency: Are horror and humour allowed in the same breath? Or are tone shifts disruptive?



- You can even write a Group Charter - a few bullet points that summarize your expectations so new players can jump in easily later. Don't be scared to have expectations of your players – you are giving up your time and effort to make their experience an enjoyable one and it's ok to have some minimum expectations on behaviour and engagement with the groups game.

Why it matters: Misaligned expectations are the #1 killer of campaigns. Get ahead of that, and you build something that lasts.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Knowing your table isn't a one-time task - it's an ongoing conversation.

Be curious, be flexible, and always prioritise the people at the table over the plot on the page.

Because when everyone feels seen, heard, and safe?

That's when the real magic begins.

Questions?