

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

## II. Building a Game That Wants to Be Played



- A great game world isn't one that's fully written - it's one that feels alive.
- The air tastes different in a real world.
- The shadows move.
- The tavern owner has a secret.
- The map has smudged corners and unknown edges.
- And the world doesn't sit there frozen, waiting for the players - it moves whether they act or not.
- But here's the secret: you don't have to build it all at once. You just need to build it right.

## WORLDBUILDING THAT BREATHES



- Start small, leave space for player input, and let the world evolve.



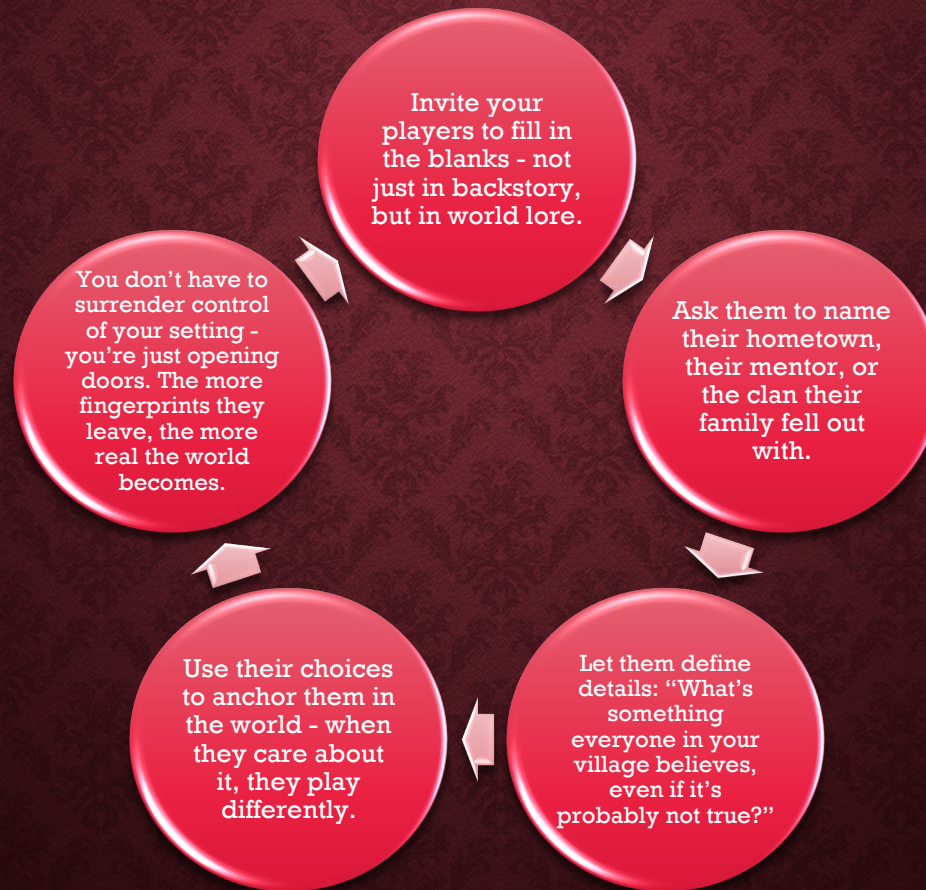
# START SMALL: BUILD A VIVID CORNER, NOT A WHOLE CONTINENT



Why it works: A narrow focus gives players clarity and investment. It makes the world feel rich, not overwhelming.



# LEAVE SPACE FOR PLAYER INPUT: MAKE THEM CO-CREATORS



Why it works: Collaborative worldbuilding builds trust, investment, and personal stakes. The players stop just playing in your world - they start living in it.



# LET THE WORLD EVOLVE: IT SHOULD REACT AND GROW



Why it works: Change gives weight to actions. When players realize the world is watching, they act with meaning and care.



# BONUS TIPS: BREATHING LIFE INTO THE WORLD

Use the senses: Let your world be smelled, tasted, heard. Is the air heavy with spice or the stink of gunpowder? Is the tavern floor sticky with spilled plum wine?

Let NPCs want things: The stablemaster is saving to buy back her family's ancestral sword. The noble hates music but can't admit why. Small motivations = big depth.

Three-Detail Rule: When describing a place, give three evocative details - something visual, something odd, and something that hints at deeper story.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

A world that breathes isn't defined by its size, but by its soul.

Start small.

Invite your players to help plant the seeds.

And then? Let it grow wild.

Questions?

## PLOT HOOKS & STORY SEEDS



- Give players reasons to care
- Bait the hook with personal stakes

- Give players reasons to care and bait the hook with personal stakes.
- Every story begins somewhere - but the best ones don't start with the world.
- They start inside the characters who live in it.
- A plot hook is a spark.
- A story seed is fertile soil.
- Together, they grow into a campaign players won't just follow - they'll fight for.



# WHAT IS A PLOT HOOK?

A plot hook is the narrative bait - an event, mystery, offer, or danger - that grabs the characters' attention and demands action. The best plot hooks revolve around a person connection to a character - their past, their relationships, or their passions.

\* A stolen artifact.

\* A vanishing noble.

\* A mysterious letter with no sender.

\* A prophecy that names a character's ancestor.

These aren't just cool things happening. They're questions that itch, and opportunities that tempt.

\* "If we don't act, what happens?"

\* "What's really going on here?"

\* "Do I trust this contact... or kill them?"

Hooks provoke curiosity, urgency, or moral dilemma. But they're even better when they feel personal.



## WHAT IS A STORY SEED?

A story seed is a narrative element that might not sprout immediately - but can blossom later into major arcs, side quests, or character drama.

\* An NPC remembers a PC from their past.

\* A town festival includes a dangerous, unexplained tradition.

\* A villain shows mercy - for reasons unknown.

\* A PC's sibling is rumoured to be working with the enemy.

Seeds are subtle. They're the loose threads, odd coincidences, or emotional entanglements that you, as the GM, plant and let grow over time.

The trick? Don't explain them right away. Let players pull on the threads. Let them wonder. Even let them have some conjecture on the topic – some of the best plots have been derived from a player's idea on a topic. Take them and make them your own – unless we are omnipotent, we can never think of all possible narratives around a story seed.



# MAKE IT PERSONAL: EMOTIONAL BUY-IN IS KING

It's one thing to say "A village is under attack."

It's another to say "Your *mentor's* village is under attack."

Connect your hooks and seeds directly to:

\* **Backstories:** Tie current events to a player's past.

\* **Motivations:** What does the character want, fear, or need?

\* **Relationships:** Who do they care about? Who do they hate?

\* **Choices:** Make their earlier decisions echo through the plot.

When players feel that their character is at the centre of events, they go from spectators to co-authors of the story.



# PRACTICAL HOOK & SEED TECHNIQUES

**Three Hooks Per Arc:** Always have a few hooks ready - one emotional, one urgent, one mysterious.

**Seed Without Pressure:** Don't force players to follow every seed. Let them grow naturally. If ignored, maybe they wither - or become a thorn later.

**NPC Magnets:** Create NPCs with desires, flaws, and secrets. These characters are living hooks that move the story forward on their own. It's important that player characters have a view on an NPC - love, hate, friend or foe. If the PC's feel an emotion towards an NPC then they become memorable.

**Consequences as Hooks:** Players break a law, leave a villain alive, or make a deal. Later, that moment comes back - but bigger.



## EXAMPLES OF HOOKS & SEEDS BY GENRE

### Fantasy

- A dragon is sighted - but its scales are falling off. (Hook)
- The bard's songs start predicting tomorrow's events. (Seed)

### Sci-Fi

- A distress call from a ship carrying a PC's old squad. (Hook)
- A new AI in the party starts dreaming. (Seed)

### Horror

- A murdered girl calls one of the agents by name in their dreams. (Hook)
- Every mirror in town shows a different sky. (Seed)

### Mystery/Noir

- A corpse has the same tattoo as a party member. (Hook)
- A PC's old flame turns up... with no memory of them. (Seed)

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Plot hooks ignite action.

Story seeds keep the world alive.

But the best campaigns grow when those elements touch the hearts and wounds of the characters at the table.

So cast your hooks with care.

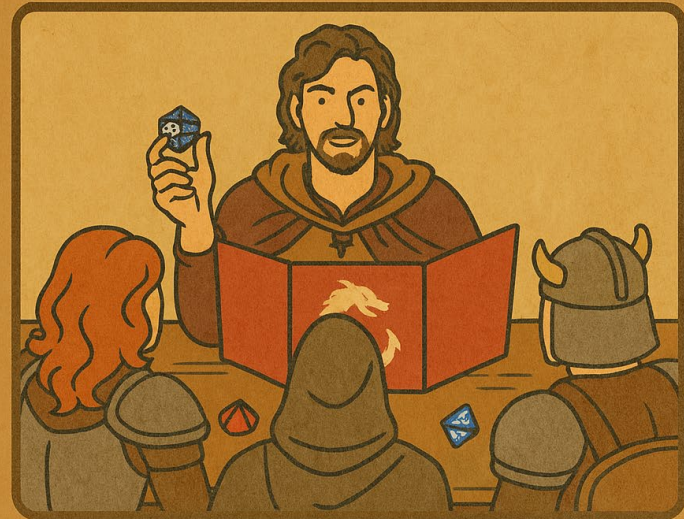
Plant your seeds with wonder.

And watch the story bloom - wild, tangled, and unforgettable.

Questions?

- Structure is the skeleton.
- Sandbox is the soul.
- A campaign needs both to feel alive.
- Too much structure, and players feel railroaded - like actors in a script they didn't write.
- Too much sandbox, and they drift, unmoored, lost in the wide ocean of "you can do anything."
- Your goal is to guide the story like a river - not a train track. Let it meander, but let it flow.

# BALANCING STRUCTURE AND SANDBOX



When to prep and when to  
improvise;  
Giving choices  
without chaos.

# WHEN TO PREP: GIVE THE WORLD WEIGHT



Preparation gives your world depth, cohesion, and momentum. It's the infrastructure of your story.



Prep the things that:



\* Will definitely happen (the villain's plan, the festival tomorrow, the strange lights on the horizon).



\* Anchor the tone (a recurring NPC, a signature location, a ritual that always plays out the same way).



\* Support choice (several NPCs or locations that react differently depending on what the players do).

Prep what matters - not what might not happen. Don't map the whole continent if they're just visiting a fishing village. But do know what the village elder wants, what the villagers fear, and what secret lies beneath the chapel floorboards.

## **PRO TIP: PREP SITUATIONS, NOT SCRIPTS.**

- Instead of writing dialogue, define motives. Instead of paths, define tensions. That way, no matter what players do, you're ready to react.

# WHEN TO IMPROVISE: LET THE WORLD BREATHE



Improvisation is where the magic happens - those unscripted, unforgettable moments that become player legend.



Improvise when:



\* Players make unexpected choices (which they will).



\* They talk to an NPC you never named (hello, "Gary the Goblin").



They want to try something clever, chaotic, or genre-breaking.



Their actions push the story in new directions - and you don't want to say "no."

Improvising doesn't mean winging everything. It means trusting your instincts, using player ideas as fuel, and making confident choices in the moment. It also means taking breaks when needed - a five-minute pause to collect yourself can be a game-saver.



## **PRO TIP: LEARN THE IMPROV MANTRA— “YES, AND...” OR “YES, BUT...”**

- Either agree and build or agree with a cost. Both keep the story moving forward.



# GIVING CHOICES WITHOUT CHAOS: THE ILLUSION OF INFINITY



Open worlds feel bigger than they are because you frame choices clearly.



Let players choose their direction - but define the stakes and outcomes:




\* “You can investigate the warehouse tonight, meet the contact at dawn, or follow that black car right now. Each leads somewhere. Which is more important to you?”



\* “You can join the court intrigue or take the back door to the undercity. The first earns power. The second earns freedom.”

This creates meaningful choices, not overwhelming options.

 **REMEMBER: TOO MANY CHOICES CAN PARALYSE. TOO FEW CAN FRUSTRATE. THE SWEET SPOT IS 2-4 CLEAR, CONTRASTING PATHS.**

- You're not saying, "you can't do that." You're saying, "you can, but here's what that choice means." Make every choice have a consequence.

## **STRUCTURE = SETUP. SANDBOX = PAYOFF.**



Use *structure* to set up:

- Conflicts
- Timers
- Factions
- Mysteries
- Promises



Then, let the *sandbox* deliver:

- Player-driven consequences
- Surprising solutions
- Emergent drama
- Unexpected alliances or betrayals

Your job isn't to control the story. It's to load the world with dramatic tension and let the players be the spark that sets it ablaze.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

A railroad tells the story you want.

A sandbox tells the story they want.

But the sweet spot?

That's a ***structured sandbox*** - a living world with friction, fate, and freedom.

Prep like an architect.

Improvise like a jazz musician.

And let the players make the song unforgettable.

Questions?