

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

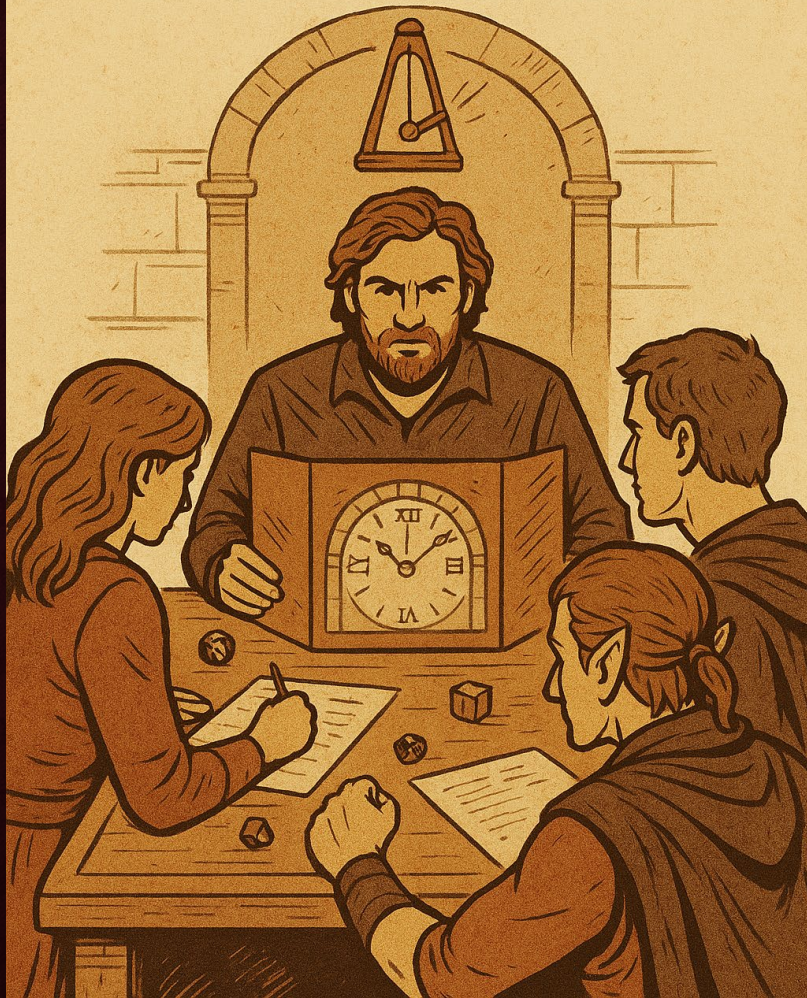
### THE ART OF THE GAME:

- Final Words on Running Enjoyable TTRPGs



# SESSION PACING

## *The Pulse of Play*



- Pacing is the difference between a session that lingers in memory and one that drifts into boredom.
- It's the music beneath the narrative - the flow of tension, release, and curiosity that keeps players leaning forward in their chairs.
- Think of pacing as your ability to control time and focus at the table. You choose when to zoom in, when to skip ahead, when to build dread slowly, and when to let it all explode.
- Done well, pacing makes the story feel effortless. Like a dream the players don't want to wake up from.



# SCENE FRAMING: START WHERE IT GETS INTERESTING



Too many GMs start scenes with characters waking up, ordering food, or walking across town.



Cut that. Start in the heat.



Skip to the moment something is at stake - a knock at the door, a scream from the alley, a letter in the dead of night.



Use the "Late In, Early Out" method: enter scenes after the boring bits, and leave before the players exhaust them.



Frame scenes with a clear question or tension: What's really in the box? Why is the ambassador smiling like that? Who's missing from the town square?





# TEMPO CHANGES: CONTROL THE SPEED OF EMOTION



Pacing isn't just speed - it's rhythm.



A good session needs ebb and flow.



Use fast scenes (combat, arguments, explosions) to create adrenaline and urgency.



Keep description tight. Push players to act quickly.



Use slow scenes (investigations, campfire talks, discoveries) to let emotions breathe.



Ask reflective questions. Let silence linger. Use the senses.



# CLIFFHANGERS: THE POWER OF THE UNFINISHED MOMENT



Cliffhangers are pacing tools, not just story tricks.



They keep momentum burning between sessions and across scene breaks.



Use cliffhangers to:



End sessions with a bang (“The vault door opens, and you see what’s inside - but it’s moving.”)



Cut away mid-scene (“As you lift the mask off the body, we jump to the other group.”)



Delay resolution (“You fire the gun - and we’ll come back to that in a moment.”)





# MOMENTUM CONTROL: KEEP THE STORY MOVING



Even in a sandbox, the story must move.



If nothing changes, the world feels dead. If everything changes too fast, it feels chaotic.



Manage momentum by:



Tracking unresolved threads and nudging them forward.



Giving players meaningful options - but limiting them to 2 - 4 clear paths.



Asking leading questions: "Where are you headed next?" "Who do you think is behind it?"



# FINAL THOUGHTS

Pacing is invisible when it's done well.

But it's felt - in the tension before a dice roll, in the silence after a question, in the gasp at the end of a session.

Master pacing, and your game will sing.

Stumble, and even the most brilliant story might fall flat.

So, frame tight. Change tempo with care. End strong.

And let the pulse of play guide you.

Questions?

- Ensuring everyone gets moments to shine - even the quiet ones.
- An RPG session isn't a monologue. It's an ensemble cast drama, part improv theatre, part dream logic, part chaos ballet.
- And every player - every character - deserves their time under the stage lights.
- Spotlight management is your artful ability to shift focus around the table, ensuring every player feels seen, valued, and narratively impactful.
- Because when only one or two players dominate the story, the others begin to fade - and when that happens, so does the magic.

# SPOTLIGHT MANAGEMENT

Ensuring everyone gets moments to shine— even the quiet ones.





# BALANCE THE LIGHT: GUIDING YOUR NARRATIVE FOCUS

Every scene, encounter, or even quiet moment is an opportunity to steer the light.

Don't let the loudest voice always lead.  
Listen for the silences.

If one character is talking to the king, what is everyone else doing?

In combat, don't just call out damage - describe what each action looks like. Let them be cool.

Use initiative, roleplay, or puzzles to invite participation, not gatekeep it.

Think of your game like a spotlight sweeping across a stage. Your job isn't to keep it on one actor - but to light the entire cast in turn.



# KNOW YOUR PLAYERS: RECOGNIZE ENGAGEMENT STYLES


Not everyone wants the spotlight the same way.

Some will initiate roleplay.  
Others wait to be invited.

Some players love grand speeches. Others love quiet character moments.

Some shine in mechanics, others in emotion.

The key is to understand how each player engages - then give them tailored opportunities to thrive.

 **Pro Tip:** Ask between sessions - “What kind of moments do you enjoy most?” Then build scenes to reflect that.

# 🔨 Tools & Techniques to Share the Spotlight



## 💡 1. REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Direct specific questions to quieter players to draw them in:
- “How does your character feel watching this unfold?”
- “You notice something the others miss - what is it?”
- “What memory does this place stir in you?”

# 🔨 Tools & Techniques to Share the Spotlight



## 🎯 2. DESIGN PERSONAL MOMENTS

- Drop NPCs from a character's past into scenes.
- Create side quests based on their goals, fears, or history.
- Let them be the key to solving a problem - an ancient dialect only they speak.

# 🔨 Tools & Techniques to Share the Spotlight



## 🧩 3. MECHANICS WITH MEANING

- Let niche abilities shine. The rogue's "ear for lies" uncovers a traitor. The cleric's obscure lore saves a town.
- Offer decisions that require a character's moral compass or unique skills.

# 🔨 Tools & Techniques to Share the Spotlight



## ⌚ 4. PASS THE MIC

- In group scenes, go around the table intentionally - especially during planning or emotional moments.
- If someone's dominated the last two scenes, look elsewhere next.
- Spotlight management isn't about taking attention - it's about giving it away with intention.

# 🗨️ “WHAT ABOUT THE QUIET PLAYER?”

Some players don't want a spotlight - they want a lantern: a warm glow, space to speak when ready, and the chance to matter without pressure.

To support them:

Let them prepare their moment - don't rush.

Send their character a secret letter, a dream, or a vision - something just for them.

Create one-on-one scenes when others are resting, shopping, or researching.

Affirm their contributions. After they speak, build on their idea. Show it has impact.

The quiet player's moment doesn't need to be loud. It just needs to be meaningful.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Spotlight isn't a reward for performance.

It's a gift of presence, a chance to be part of the story's heart.

Manage it with care. Share it generously.

And you'll see something beautiful:

Players lifting each other up.

Characters growing in ways they didn't expect.

A table full of people who feel like heroes - even if they're broken, scared, or hunted by ancient things that should not be.

Questions?

# COMBAT THAT DOESN'T DRAG



- Dynamic environments
- Goals beyond “kill everything”
- Keeping it cinematic

- Dynamic environments, goals beyond “kill everything,” and keeping it cinematic.
- Combat should be a highlight reel, not a spreadsheet.
- It’s not about how long it lasts - it’s about how alive it feels.
- When combat flows well, it’s exhilarating.
- When it bogs down, it feels like the story stopped and everyone’s just waiting for their turn to do 12 points of damage again.
- Here’s how to make it pulse with drama, decision-making, and cinematic flair.



# USE DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENTS: LET THE WORLD FIGHT TOO

Static 30x30 stone rooms are the silent killers of excitement.

Make your battleground a character in its own right.

Ideas to Elevate the Environment:

A crumbling bridge during a thunderstorm.

Shifting fog that conceals or reveals enemies.

A burning tavern with collapsing beams every round.

Gravity going sideways in a ruined alien ship.

Cultists chanting a ritual - the walls pulse with light.

Make players think about where they fight, not just what they fight.

When the environment moves, players move too. And suddenly, every turn feels like a puzzle - or a gamble.



## SET GOALS BEYOND “KILL EVERYTHING”

Not every fight needs to end in corpses.

Give combat objectives that change the equation:

Protect the scholar while they complete the ritual.

Escape before the self-destruct timer hits zero.

Steal the artifact while dodging guards.

Stop the summoning by disrupting all four rune pillars.

Buy time until reinforcements arrive.

When the goal shifts from “eliminate everything” to “solve this problem under pressure,” combat becomes story.

Players stop asking “How many hit points does it have?” and start asking “How do we win this?”



# KEEP IT CINEMATIC: DESCRIBE ACTION WITH STYLE AND PURPOSE

Combat doesn't need long monologues - but it does need energy.

Tips for Cinematic Combat:

Use sensory language: the hiss of steam, the crack of ribs, the way blood hits marble.

Describe outcomes, not just numbers: "Your blade sinks into the creature's side - it staggers back, bile hissing from the wound."

Name attacks or describe powers with flair: "The monk's fists blur like falling rain," is better than "You roll to hit."

Show impact: Enemies bleed, panic, roar. Environments react. Something changes every round.

If a player does something cool, reward it - even if the mechanics say otherwise.

Narrative momentum is more important than statistical perfection.

You're not a referee for dice. You're the director of an action movie your players star in.



# COMBAT PACING: KEEP IT SNAPPY, KEEP IT SHARP

Combat drags when:

Turns are too slow.

Everyone waits too long to act.

Stakes aren't clear.

To Fix It:

Use timers: 6 seconds to decide your move. If players stall, narrate pressure ("The cultist raises the blade - what do you do?")

Clarify initiative: Use visual cues or apps to track turns. Keep them moving.

Describe reactions during other turns - keep the table engaged while they wait.

If the fight is going nowhere? End it narratively.

If it's gone long enough to feel climactic, it was climactic. You don't need to play out every last HP.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Combat isn't just a numbers game. It's narrative under pressure.

A test of character, creativity, and courage in the moment.

Make the world move.

Make the goals matter.

Make the players feel like legends - or like they barely escaped with their lives.

Either way, it'll be unforgettable.

Questions?