

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

# IV. IMPROVISATION & PLAYER WRANGLING

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## “YOU LET HIM EAT THE PHOENIX EGG?”



She improvises forward, not back - turning the consumed egg into a **phoenix rebirth event** that erupts from the sorcerer's chest like divine wildfire.

It doesn't derail the story - it becomes the new story.

Behind the screen, she quietly retires the flame-priestess plot. She's now the party's rival, bitter and wing-singed, convinced they've stolen a sacred destiny.

By the end of the session:

- The rogue names the baby phoenix “Hot Todd.”
- The champion negotiates a truce with the monastery elders by swearing fealty to the flame.
- The sorcerer glows slightly in moonlight. Forever.



Hot Todd

- Embrace curveballs, weave in character backstories, stay agile.
- A tabletop RPG is never just what you plan. It's what happens between the dice rolls - what emerges when players say something wild, unexpected, or brilliant... and you, the GM, don't flinch.
- "Yes, and..." is the rule of improvisers, but it belongs at every game table.
- It doesn't mean saying yes to everything.
- It means saying yes to possibility.

# YES, AND...

## THE POWER OF IMPROV





## “YES, AND...” IN ACTION

A player says, “I used to train at the assassin’s monastery near here - maybe they still owe me a favour?”

✗ “No, you never mentioned that.”

✓ “Yes - and the abbot there still remembers the debt. But someone else remembers you, too...”



A character tries to intimidate a demon with a bluff about summoning a greater power.

✗ “That wouldn’t work. It’s immune to fear.”

✓ “Yes - and it laughs... not because it’s afraid, but because it recognises the name you used.”



The party decides to adopt the goblin they were sent to slay.

✗ “That’s not the mission.”

✓ “Yes - and now he won’t stop calling the cleric ‘Dad.’ Also, he knows something about the ruins no one else does.”

“Yes, and...” validates creativity, and transforms wild player ideas into narrative fuel.



## EMBRACE THE CURVEBALL



You will be surprised. That's not a flaw. It's the engine of emergent play.



Your job isn't to control the game.



It's to steer it through the storm of player decisions and unplanned consequences - with a grin.



A plan to sneak into the vault turns into a full-on masquerade ball.



The villain becomes a romantic interest.



The side quest chicken becomes a prophecy.



Say yes.



Then build on it.

Even a soft “yes, but...” or “yes, and then...” can maintain flow while adjusting tone, challenge, or balance.



# WEAVE IN BACKSTORIES LIKE THREAD INTO TAPESTRY



Backstories are full of hooks - don't let them sit in a drawer.



A forgotten sister appears in a rival faction.



The cursed blade once belonged to the fighter's ancestor.



The ruins beneath the city echo with the rogue's dreams.



The key is to listen actively. Let player choices create the story with you. That's real improvisation: not random invention, but responsive narrative.

“Yes, and...” is how you turn backstory into plot.



# STAY AGILE, NOT AIMLESS



Improvisation doesn't mean making it all up - it means being willing to adapt.



Keep your prep modular:



Write NPC motivations, not scripts.



Design story situations, not scenes.



Prep multiple possible outcomes, not single solutions.



When things go off-track (and they will), ask yourself:



What are the consequences of this choice?



How does the world respond?



What feels true to the story we're building?

Improv isn't throwing away the plot - it's letting the players help write it.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

“Yes, and...” is more than an improv technique.

It’s an invitation to co-create, to build trust, to say:

“Your ideas belong here. Let’s run with them. Let’s see what happens.”

And when you embrace that?

The game breathes. The players shine.

And the story becomes one you could never have written alone.

Questions?

# Dealing with Derailment

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- Recognise when it's gold vs when it's gremlins - and steer accordingly.
- You've got a plan.
- You've got your notes.
- You've lovingly crafted a mysterious tower full of traps and lore...
- ...and your players decide to adopt the tavern rat and spend the next hour trying to get it a wizard hat.
- Welcome to derailment.
- But before you sigh, know this: derailment isn't failure. It's the story reaching out with new hands.
- Your job isn't to stop it. Your job is to listen, judge, and guide.

# GOLD VS. GREMLINS: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

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 Gold is derailment that adds story, character, or joy.

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\* A player makes an unexpected choice that deepens the plot.

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\* The party latches onto a throwaway NPC who actually slaps.

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\* A joke turns into a running theme that bonds the group.

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 Gremlins are derailment that eats time, tone, or cohesion.

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\* Endless debates that stall the story.

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\* Distractions that break immersion or exclude quieter players.

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\* Slapstick that spirals until the tension dissolves.

Not every tangent is treasure. But not every curveball is chaos. Learn to tell the difference.



# HOW TO RECOGNIZE GOLD

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Ask yourself:

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\* Are players engaged? Laughter, leaning forward, IC chatter = good signs.

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\* Does this add stakes, theme, or investment? Even if it's weird - if it makes them care, it's worth exploring.

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\* Can this lead somewhere interesting? Don't kill it if it might bloom.

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If yes to any of the above, lean in.

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Turn that silly NPC into a lore hook.

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Let the side trip become a reveal.

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Say "yes, and..." and run with it - for a little while.

Sometimes the derailment is what they'll remember forever. Let it become the legend.



# HOW TO HANDLE GREMLINS

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When derailment starts dragging the game down:

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\* Recentre the table: “Okay, let’s take a breath. Where were we headed again?”

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\* Use in-world cues: “As you argue over the kobold’s hat, the wind shifts - and you hear the howl again... closer this time.”

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\* Change the stakes: Drop a complication. Introduce urgency. Put time pressure on choices.

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\* Check in softly: “Are we having fun with this, or ready to move on?”

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You’re not the fun police - but you are the one watching the big picture. If a scene is spiralling into nothing, help your players find the story again.



## STEER, DON'T SNAP

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The best GMs redirect with grace.

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\* “That’s a fun idea. Let’s bookmark it and jump back to what the ranger just noticed.”

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\* “The goblin does offer you a wizard hat. But he wants something in return...  
Something strange.”

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\* “You spend 10 minutes arguing. Then - without warning - the ground shakes.  
Something is coming. And it’s not wearing a hat.”

Guide don’t guilt. Steer don’t scold. Let the table laugh, linger, explore - but  
always bring it back home.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Derailment is the heartbeat of a living game.

It means your players are thinking, engaged, improvising. That's not a problem to solve - it's a gift to shape.

So, learn to spot the gold. Sweep away the gremlins.

And when the train goes off the rails?

Build new tracks. Light new torches.

And let the story find a path you never planned – but always hoped they'd discover.

- Rule of cool, fair consistency, and knowing when to check vs move on.
- The dice hit the table.
- A player grins.
- “I leap from the chandelier, fire two arrows mid-air, and land on the back of the wyvern!”
- Someone squints.
- “Wait... can they do that?”
- You pause.
- This is the crossroads: rules or rhythm?
- Here’s how you choose the right path - and keep the story alive while honouring the structure beneath it.

# HANDLING RULES DISPUTES GRACEFULLY





# RULE OF COOL: WHEN SPECTACLE WINS THE DAY

The Rule of Cool means this:

- \* If something is awesome, cinematic, and in-character - and doesn't break the game - let it happen.

- \* Give it a skill check.

- \* Add complications.

- \* Narrate it with flair.

- \* Make it matter.

Letting a bold, creative action succeed doesn't break the game.

It makes it unforgettable.

But be mindful: Rule of Cool isn't Rule of Favorites.

What you allow for one player, you should be ready to allow for others.

“Yes, and roll for it.” is often better than a flat “no.”



# FAIR CONSISTENCY: THE TRUE CURRENCY OF TRUST

More than any single ruling, your players care about this:

\* Are you consistent? Are you fair?

\* If you fudge one ruling today, be ready to justify a similar call later.

\* If you change a rule, announce it. Explain it. Own it.

\* If you're playing loose, let everyone know early - ideally in Session Zero.

You don't need to be perfect. But you **must** be even-handed.

That's what builds trust - and trust is what keeps players coming back.

A wrong ruling that's fair is better than a perfect ruling that feels biased.



# WHEN TO CHECK THE RULES, AND WHEN TO MOVE ON

You can't know every rule. And you don't need to.

So, when a dispute comes up, ask yourself:

Is this ruling going to...

\* Change the outcome of the scene?

\* Affect player agency?

\* Set a precedent for future encounters?

If yes - pause and check the rules (briefly). Let someone else look it up, if possible, while you keep the scene going.

If no - make a fast, fair ruling and move forward. You can always revisit it between scenes or after the session.

“I’ll rule this way for now, and we’ll check it after combat.” or “Let’s go with this interpretation and update it after break.”

That single sentence can save five minutes of dead air and preserve group harmony.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

A rules dispute doesn't have to break the session - it can strengthen it, if handled with clarity, calm, and fairness.

Remember:

- The rules are there to support the story.
- The players are there to co-create, not compete.
- And you, as the GM, are not a machine - you're the keeper of tone, arbiter of flow, and guardian of fun.

So, rule wisely. Rule consistently.

And when in doubt?

Rule with grace.