

PRESENTED BY A
BATTLE-HARDENED STORYTELLER

GM 101

RUNNING ENJOYABLE
TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING
GAMES



Written &
Presented
By
Shane
Ericksen

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

V. TOOLS OF THE TRADE



PREP LIKE A PRO



- Efficient prep templates, reusable NPCs, encounter scaffolding.
- You don't need to write a novel. You don't need to know the hit points of every rat in the sewer.
- You just need to know what matters.
- Professional prep is like stage lighting - you set it up in advance, so the players don't see the wires, only the magic.
- And when you prep smart, you prep to play - not just to present.



START WITH A STRONG FRAMEWORK: THE EFFICIENT PREP TEMPLATE

Build every session around a simple prep structure - one page per session is often enough. Include:

* What's happening right now that demands action?

* What do the villains, factions, or rival forces want - and how are they pushing forward?

* Quick notes on locations, NPCs, moods, secrets.

* What's the hook?

* What's in motion?

* What are 3 places they might go?

“Prep the tension, not the outcome.”



REUSABLE NPCs: YOUR UNSUNG CAST OF SHADOWS

You don't need fifty NPCs. You need five good ones that can wear many masks.

The Sceptical Guard. The Ambitious Merchant. The Doomed Seer.

Have modular stats ready:

Track relationships:

Prep a few archetypes with clear motives:

Give them names, quirks, and hooks you can drop in anywhere.

A "townsfolk" stat block, a "rival adventurer," a "spellcaster in hiding."

NPCs are the living wires of your world. Keep a few coiled and ready to spark.



ENCOUNTER SCAFFOLDING: BUILD THE BONES, NOT THE WHOLE BEAST

You don't have to script every combat or puzzle. You just need the structure that supports improvisation.

Sketch environmental details: Where's the high ground, the cover, the hazard?

Prep one twist: A moral complication, a betrayal, a secret weapon.

Define the objective: Is it to defeat, delay, escape, or protect?

Set escalation triggers: What makes the fight change - reinforcements? A ritual reaching its climax?

Then run it fluidly. Let players shape the moment. Let the dice tell the story.

Combat isn't about killing enemies. It's about turning danger into drama.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Prep isn't about control.

It's about readiness.

It's the sword you sharpen so you don't have to draw it too often.

So, prep your plot threads like they're rigged to explode.

Prep your NPCs like they have their own stories to tell.

Prep your encounters like they might burn down the town.

Then sit down, roll the dice, and let the players surprise you.

Because a pro doesn't prep to predict the story - they prep to let it live.

Questions?

- Sensory immersion and table theatre.
- The clatter of dice. The flicker of candlelight. A bloodstained letter slid across the table.
- Your players lean in - not just to play - but to feel.
- This is table theatre.
- Not about spectacle for spectacle's sake but about inviting your players into the scene with their eyes, ears, and hands - not just their minds.
- You don't need to build a set or have a Hollywood budget. But with a few well-placed tools, you can anchor the imagination and deepen emotional engagement.

USING PROPS, MUSIC, AND MAPS TO ELEVATE THE VIBE





PROPS: TOUCHSTONES OF THE FICTION



Physical objects create tangible connection between players and the world.



A sealed envelope marked with wax, trembling in the hand of a dying NPC.



A charred page of a ritual text, its runes partially erased.



A handwritten note, scrawled in a player's native language.



A rusted coin, a plague mask, a coded telegram.



Props give players something to touch, pass around, study. They prompt questions. They feel real.



You don't need props every session - just at key narrative beats. Think reveals, rituals, or emotional gut-punches.

When the handout lands on the table, silence follows. That's the moment it works.

MUSIC: THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF EMOTION



Sound is a mood spell. It bypasses logic and hits players right in the gut.



Use music to match the moment:



Low drones and whispers for tension.



Harp and wind chimes for the fey wilds.



Distant drums before a battle.



Silence - yes, silence - when it's needed most.



Tools like Syrinscape, Tabletop Audio, Spotify or even YouTube playlists can give you a suite of options.



Key techniques:



Fade in/fade out with scene transitions.



Use looping ambient for locations.



Let players create playlists for their characters - it builds connection and gives you tone cues.

The right track makes a slow reveal feel like a cinematic climax. The wrong track? Just turn it off. Graceful exits are fine.



MAPS: NOT JUST WHERE, BUT HOW IT FEELS



Maps do more than show geography. They establish tone, scale, and story logic.



A weathered parchment map of a ruined kingdom invites curiosity.



A clean, angular city grid implies order - and control.



A messy, scrawled battlefield screams chaos and desperation.



Use abstract maps for vibe, tactical maps for combat, and player-drawn maps for immersion.



Let players annotate them. Let maps become living documents that reflect the story's scars and decisions.



And don't fear theatre of the mind - when paired with evocative language, it is a map, drawn in imagination.

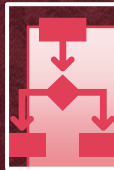
A great map doesn't just show where you are. It hints at what's waiting to find you.



TABLE THEATRE: WEAVING IT ALL TOGETHER



You don't need elaborate tech. Just intentional design.



Use:



Lighting (candles, dimmers, red bulbs during rituals) – be mindful that where you are running the game allows this.



Scented candles or incense (the sea, the jungle, blood and roses) – as above.



Props at arm's reach, ready for reveals.



Music transitions to signal when a scene gets real.



Let the table reflect the world:



A messy battlefield session? Scatter dice, tokens, old maps.



A political thriller? Black folders, sealed notes, whispered secrets passed under the table.



A ghost story? Quiet. Just you, their breathing, and the slow creak of your chair.

When the vibe matches the fiction, the line between player and character blurs.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Immersion isn't about impressing your players.

It's about inviting them deeper.

Props are keys. Music is mood. Maps are memory.

Use them not as decorations, but as doorways.

Because when the world feels real - when players can see, touch, and hear it?

They won't just play your story.

They'll live it.

Questions?

DIGITAL TOOLS FOR THE 21st CENTURY GM



- Campaign managers, AI helpers, and collaborative docs.
- You sit at a table, not a screen. Dice in hand. Player laughter in the air. The smell of coffee and character death lingers. You run your games live, face to face - just as the tabletop gods intended.
- But that doesn't mean you're stuck in the Stone Age.
- Digital tools aren't about replacing in-person play. They're about supporting it - quietly, efficiently, and powerfully - behind the screen like a silent second brain.
- Here's how to embrace modern tools while keeping your sessions tactile, personal, and alive.



CAMPAIGN MANAGERS: MEMORY WITHOUT THE MADNESS

For keeping notes, maps, lore, and tangled plot threads in order, nothing beats a campaign manager. In my opinion, the gold standard is clear:

✓ Obsidian.md

- Your digital vault of secrets. Markdown-based, local-first, and infinitely customisable.
- Link NPCs to locations, quests to outcomes, and player choices to consequences - with clickable, visual maps of your world's web.
- Use tags, graph views, and daily notes to track evolving timelines, session logs, and narrative arcs.
- With community plugins, you can expand into dice rollers, initiative trackers, and session planning templates - all from one clean, distraction-free place.
- Think of Obsidian not as a campaign builder, but as a memory palace where every door leads somewhere the players haven't dared yet.

🗺 World Anvil

- Massive worldbuilding and campaign platform.
- Create interactive maps, manage timelines, track characters and factions, and publish lore like a fantasy encyclopedia.

👤 LegendKeeper

- Sleek, modern worldbuilding tool with a strong focus on map integration and wiki-style entries.
- Designed for GMs building immersive settings with visual hierarchy.

📖 Campfire Writing / Campfire Blaze

- A feature-rich writing and worldbuilding suite.
- Track timelines, locations, relationships, plot threads, and more. Great for narrative-heavy campaigns or solo world design.

📄 Kank

- An open-source, modular campaign manager.
- Tracks characters, items, events, calendars, organizations, and maps.
- Good for structured campaign planning and detailed worlds.

🌸 RPG Manager – Obsidian Plugin

- A robust Obsidian plugin that turns your note vault into a campaign hub.
- Track sessions, characters, locations, and lore directly from your markdown notes.



AI HELPERS

Let me be clear, I'm not talking about AI here to write games but instead to take some of the menial labour out of game preparation.

No tool is more flexible - or occasionally poetic - than a well-trained AI assistant. Here's how an AI can serve your game prep without stealing your narrative soul:

* **Brainstorming:** Need three factions with conflicting goals in a desert city? Ask and ye shall receive.

* **Dialogue Drafting:** Stuck writing the villain's monologue? Let an AI offer a few sinister samples.

* **Stat Block Tweaking:** Quickly convert an enemy concept into mechanical terms.

* **Tone Matching:** "Write this scene, but make it feel like The Witcher meets Bloodborne."

Use AI as your creative co-pilot, NOT your replacement. It's here to spark ideas, organise chaos, and build bridges between the strange thoughts in your brain.



COLLABORATIVE DOCS: KEEP THE PARTY IN THE LOOP

Even at a live table, digital docs help your players stay informed, engaged, and invested.

Use shared folders (Google Docs, Notion, or synced Obsidian exports) to host:

- * World lore

- * Character journals

- * Recaps and rumours

Encourage players to contribute - notes from their character's POV, sketches, in-world letters, or even conspiracy boards. You're creating a living archive of the campaign's soul.

FINAL THOUGHTS

You don't need wires to weave a world.

You don't need an app to haunt a character.

But the right tools, used with intention, make the experience smoother, sharper, and more immersive.

I prep in Obsidian. Brainstorm with AI. Share through docs and other methods.

Then light the candles, pass the dice, and tell the story only your table can tell.

Questions?