

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

VI.
BEYOND
THE DICE



- Tying backstories into the world and rewarding creative risk-taking.
- You can build a beautiful world, craft brilliant plots, and describe a dragon's lair with poetic precision - but if your players don't care, it all falls flat.
- Investment is what makes a player lean forward.
- What makes them gasp when the villain speaks their character's name.
- What turns dice rolls into destiny.
- This isn't about forcing emotion. It's about inviting the players to bring their own weight, wonder, and wounds into the story - and then reflecting that back to them through the world you build together.

CULTIVATING PLAYER INVESTMENT





BACKSTORIES ARE NOT BONUS CONTENT

They're not homework. They're raw narrative fuel.

A backstory is a map of what matters - family, regret, failure, ambition, love, fear.

When you engage with it, you tell the player:

“This world remembers who you were before the dice hit the table.”

Ways to Tie Backstories into the World:

Turn a named NPC into an unexpected ally... or enemy.

Let a distant place from a backstory suddenly become relevant: under siege, in ruins, whispered about.

Introduce consequences from the past: debts, secrets, oaths, children.

Echo themes from the character's history in your plot: betrayal, redemption, legacy.

If your player says, “Wait... that's from my backstory,” and everyone else at the table turns to look? You've nailed it.



REWARD CREATIVE RISK-TAKING

Encourage players to stretch beyond the safe choice - and reward them not just with success, but with narrative consequence.



Let bold decisions leave a mark:



A rogue lies to a duke and gains influence - but earns a spy's attention.



A paladin breaks an oath to save a child - and begins hearing a different god's voice.



A bard insults the fae queen with a poem - she smiles, amused, and marks them with a glowing sigil.



Success isn't the only reward. Story is.



Failing forward is how characters evolve. Players invest more when the world reacts to them - win or lose.

The more the story remembers their choices, the more they'll invest in making them.



CREATE SPACE FOR INVESTMENT TO GROW

Leave gaps in your world that players can fill.



Let them name towns, factions, legends from their past.



Ask questions like:



“Who taught you that spell?”



“Why did you stop wearing the family crest?”



“Who in this town remembers you - and why are they afraid?”

These moments cost nothing in prep time - but pay dividends in immersion.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Cultivating investment isn't about getting players to follow your story.

It's about making sure the story follows theirs.

When you:

- Weave backstories into the living world,
- Let consequences echo across choices,
- And say yes to risk with wonder rather than fear

You're not just telling a story.

You're growing it together.

And that's when the game stops being just a game - and starts becoming legend.

Questions?

READING THE ROOM



- Table dynamics, body language, and when to pivot tone or content.
- As a GM, you aren't just running a world - you're holding the pulse of the table in your hands.
- Reading the room means tuning in to the unspoken energy at your table. It's about watching the players, not just the characters. Listening to what isn't said. Feeling when the story hits - or misses.
- It's emotional sonar.
- It's social sleight of hand.
- It's what separates a good session from a truly legendary one.



TABLE DYNAMICS: WATCH THE VIBE, NOT JUST THE VOICES

Every group has its rhythm. Some are rowdy. Some are pensive. Some shift from jokes to drama instantly.

Pay attention to:

* Who's talking - and who isn't.

* Who's leaning in - and who's pulling back.

* Who's engaging - and who's checking their phone.

* Are the players riffing off each other's roleplay? Are they fidgeting in combat? Is one player dominating the spotlight while another disappears?

Adjustment is not failure
- it's finesse.

You're not "fixing" your game - you're tuning it, like an instrument.

If the table feels slow, maybe the scene needs stakes. If it's getting chaotic, maybe it's time to anchor the tension. If someone's checked out, maybe you bring them in with a personalized prompt.



BODY LANGUAGE & NON-VERBAL CUES

Words lie. Posture doesn't.

Reading faces and body language gives you real-time feedback on the emotional state of your players.

Crossed arms, disengaged posture → possible discomfort or disinterest.

Quiet nodding, eyes wide → they're invested.

Eyes darting, twitchy behaviour → nervous energy, maybe you've hit something big.

Laughter that doesn't quite reach the eyes? → time to shift tone.

When in doubt, take a pause. Ask, "How's everyone feeling about this scene?" You don't break immersion - you build trust.

Remember: you're not just narrating the story. You're watching the audience write it with you.



WHEN TO PIVOT TONE OR CONTENT

Even the best-laid plans must sometimes yield to reality.

Pivot when:

* The scene is dragging, and energy has dropped.

* A player seems genuinely uncomfortable with the subject matter.

* The tone no longer matches the table's energy.

* Something unexpected becomes more interesting than what you prepped.

Pivot doesn't mean abandoning your story. It means trusting your players to help shape it.

Let the horror fade into dark comedy. Let the political drama become a bar fight. Let the sad scene breathe - but cut away if the room needs relief.

You're the emotional barometer. Adjust the temperature when needed.

🗨️ QUESTIONS THAT KEEP YOU IN TUNE

“Are we good with this scene?”

“Want to stay here, or move things forward?”

“Anyone need a break?”

“Do you want to explore that thread more?”

These aren't signs of weakness. They're signs of awareness. Of respect. Of care.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Reading the room isn't about control.

It's about connection.

It's listening with more than your ears.

It's storytelling with empathy.

It's knowing that the most powerful move you can make as a GM is not in your notes, or behind your screen - It's in the quiet, sacred space between you and your players.

Master that space, and no matter what happens?

You'll always know how to keep the story alive.

Questions?

- Sharing narrative control, embracing failure, and letting players surprise you.
- You are the world.
- You are the wind, the weather, the whispering darkness.
- You are kings and dragons and the groan of ancient gates.
- But you are not a god.
- You are a guide. A weaver. A fellow storyteller standing behind the curtain, not above it.
- The best games don't happen when the GM dictates every beat - they happen when the players take the reins, when the dice surprise everyone, and when you step back just enough to let the story breathe.

BEING A GM, NOT A GOD



👉 SHARING NARRATIVE CONTROL: CO-AUTHORSHIP AT THE TABLE

You're the architect, but your players are the ones living in the house.

Sharing narrative control doesn't mean giving up your voice - it means inviting theirs.

Techniques for Shared Storytelling:

Ask open questions:

* "What does your character remember about this village?"

* "You recognise the symbol - why does it terrify you?"

Let players narrate the outcome of a successful roll:

* "Describe how you disable the trap."

* "What does the crowd do as your speech ends?"

Embrace player theories - even if they're better than your plan.

If someone says, "Wait, what if the ghost is actually her father?" - smile, and maybe make it true.

The story becomes more powerful when the players feel like they're building it with you - not watching it unfold without them.



EMBRACING FAILURE: LET THE FALLS MATTER

Failure is not the enemy of fun.

In fact, it's often where the story truly begins.

Let players fail - but make that failure mean something:

A missed persuasion roll earns a rival instead of an ally.

A failed stealth check triggers a chase through crowded alleys.

A critical failure in a duel ends in defeat - but earns the respect of the enemy knight.

When you treat failure as fuel, players stop fearing it.

They lean into risk. They make bold choices. They trust the story to catch them, even when they fall.

A great GM doesn't avoid failure - they make it sing.



LETTING PLAYERS SURPRISE YOU: SURRENDER TO THE MAGIC

Some of the most iconic moments at your table will come from things you never planned.

The bard insults the wrong noble and starts a revolution.

The cleric decides to heal the villain instead of strike them down.

The rogue befriends the cursed artifact, names it Steve, and gives it its own voice.

These moments are gifts. They show that the players are invested, that they're engaging with the world, and that they feel free to create.

Don't shut it down. Don't say "that's not how it works."

Instead, lean in. Make it matter!

When your players surprise you, they're telling you that they believe in the world you've built - and they want to leave their mark on it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Being a GM isn't about being in control.

It's about curating chaos.

It's about giving players the tools, the stakes, and the trust to create something together that no one could have written alone.

You are not a god. You're not even the hero.

You're the shadow behind the fire.

The whisper in the dark.

The space where stories grow.

Let them grow wild. Let them fall. Let them bloom in ways you never saw coming.

And when it's over, your players will say not just, "That was a good game," but "That was our game."

Questions?

VI. LONG-TERM SUCCESS



CAMPAIGN SUSTAINABILITY



- Managing burnout, scheduling, and session summaries.
- A good campaign burns bright.
- A great campaign burns steady.
- Sustainability isn't just about prep and play - it's about pacing yourself, protecting the table's momentum, and building a rhythm that doesn't collapse under its own weight.
- Whether you're running a six-session arc or a multi-year saga, these are the tools that keep your story alive - and keep you from burning out.



MANAGING BURNOUT: PROTECT THE FLAME, NOT JUST THE FIRE



Burnout is real. It sneaks in quietly - through over-prepping, missed sessions, emotional fatigue, or the pressure to "make every session epic."



How to Guard Against It:



Set expectations early. You don't need to prep like a novelist. You need to prep enough to feel confident and adaptable.



Take breaks. Schedule off-weeks, run one-shots, or let a player GM a side story.



Don't fear pauses. Life happens. A one-month hiatus is better than a permanent drop-off.



Check in with yourself after each session: Did I enjoy this? Do I feel energised or drained? What could make it easier next time?



GMinig is an art, but also a muscle. Rest is part of the training.



SCHEDULING: THE REAL BOSS BATTLE



Getting a group together regularly is harder than any boss fight. But with clarity and flexibility, you can tame the calendar monster.



Best Practices:



Set a recurring schedule (biweekly Sundays, first Friday of the month, etc.). Consistency builds rhythm.



Use shared calendars or scheduling apps (Doodle, Google Calendar, Discord bots) to coordinate. For NAGA we use the website to achieve this.



End each session by confirming the next one. Make scheduling part of the session's rhythm.



Be transparent. If someone's energy is low or life gets in the way, pivot without guilt. A sustainable campaign is one that forgives.



And when schedules slip? Don't panic. Just pick it back up. Use a summary. Refresh the stakes. Invite the players back into the dream.



SESSION SUMMARIES: MEMORY IS SACRED

Time breaks continuity. Summaries restore it.

Session recaps:

- * Reorient players after missed sessions or long breaks.

- * Help new players catch up quickly.

- * Keep long-term plots and character arcs clear.

- * Provide a shared record of triumphs, failures, and inside jokes.

Options:

- * A GM-written summary with highlights, NPC names, and consequences.

- * A rotating player recap told in-character or as a quick bullet list.

- * A shared campaign doc or Obsidian vault where everyone can contribute.

Even a three-line summary is enough. And those short notes often become treasured lore years later.

“Remember the time the bard seduced the necromancer? It’s right here in the scrolls.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

Campaigns don't collapse because the players lose interest.

They collapse when the rhythm dies - when scheduling gets messy, burnout takes root, and no one remembers what they were fighting for.

Sustainability is about trusting time, planning with grace, and letting your game breathe.

Protect your energy.

Respect your calendar.

Write it down.

And your story won't just survive.

It will thrive.

Questions?

- Feedback loops, post-game debriefs and learning from each campaign.
- Just like the characters at your table, you gain XP too.
- Every session is a roll. Every campaign is a level.
- But you don't need a milestone mechanic to track your growth.
- Becoming a better GM isn't about perfection - it's about reflection.
- It's about asking the right questions, embracing what went sideways, and listening - really listening - to the players you're building worlds with.
- Here's how you build your next level.



🗨️ FEEDBACK LOOPS: ASK, LISTEN, ADJUST

Good GMs prepare.
Great GMs adapt -
based on what their
players experience, not
just what they planned.



Build Feedback Into Your Table Culture:



End each session with a quick “Stars & Shadows”
(or “Roses & Thorns”):



* One thing they loved.



* One thing that could be better.



Ask targeted questions:



* “Did the pacing feel right tonight?”



* “Was that mystery satisfying to
uncover?”



* “Is there anything you'd like to see
more (or less) of?”



This doesn't need to be formal - just consistent.
Normalise it, and players will open up more over
time.

Feedback isn't criticism. It's a compass. It shows you where the fun is.



POST-GAME DEBRIEFS: YOUR PERSONAL SAVE FILE

Take 5 - 10 minutes after each session to log your thoughts. Not about what happened - but about how it felt.



Ask yourself:



* What moments landed?



* What scenes dragged?



* Were all players engaged?



* What surprised you?



This practice builds emotional and narrative awareness - so you don't just remember what happened, but why it worked (or didn't).

Write it in your GM journal, your Obsidian vault, or a doc titled "Lessons of the Flame War" - whatever helps you remember what you've learned.

LEARNING FROM EACH CAMPAIGN: CLOSING THE LOOP

When a campaign ends (or breaks), it's tempting to move on without looking back. Don't. That final XP is still on the table.



Run a Campaign Retrospective:

- * Let players share favourite moments and missed opportunities.
- * Ask what plotlines they were most/least interested in.



Reflect on your own experience:

- * What did you discover about your GMing style?
- * What did this campaign teach you?



Between Campaigns:

- * Try something new: a different genre, tone, or system.
- * Read other GMs' recaps, blogs, or advice posts.
- * Watch actual plays not for plot - but for pacing, tone, and facilitation.



The best GMs grow campaign by campaign, not just game by game.

If your last campaign taught you something, you didn't fail - you levelled up.

FINAL THOUGHTS

You don't need a chart to show how far you've come.

You need the courage to ask, the humility to hear, and the creativity to keep going.

Your growth as a GM is ongoing, iterative, and earned - not through flawless execution, but through willingness to evolve.

So, listen. Reflect. Adapt.

And when you level up, bring your players with you.

Because the best GMs aren't just running the game.

They're becoming part of the legend.

Questions?



THE ART OF THE GAME: A FINAL WORD ON RUNNING ENJOYABLE TTRPGs



- Being a Game Master is part storyteller, part referee, part facilitator, and part magician. But most of all, it's about creating space - space for wonder, challenge, laughter, drama, and connection.
- Running a truly enjoyable tabletop roleplaying game isn't about having all the answers.
- It's about asking the right questions, building trust, and letting the story come to life through the players.
- Here's the heart of it all:

SESSION FLOW & STORY STRUCTURE

Frame your scenes with intention. Control pacing like a heartbeat—ebb and flow, tension and release. Use cliffhangers, player spotlights, and shifting tempo to keep things engaging. Every moment should invite action, emotion, or curiosity.



GMING WITH EMPATHY & PRESENCE

Learn to read the room.

Watch for the quiet ones.

Pivot when needed.

Tone and timing matter more than plot twists.

You're not a god - you're a guide.

Share the narrative, embrace player input, and don't fear the unexpected.

❤️ CULTIVATE PLAYER INVESTMENT



WEAVE CHARACTER BACKSTORIES INTO THE WORLD. REWARD RISK-TAKING AND CREATIVITY. MAKE EVERY VICTORY PERSONAL, AND EVERY CONSEQUENCE MEANINGFUL. LET PLAYERS SHAPE THE WORLD, AND THEY'LL LOVE IT LIKE IT'S THEIRS.

📄 PREP WITH PURPOSE

Use lightweight templates, modular notes, reusable NPCs, and encounter scaffolding to save time and stay flexible.

Tools like Obsidian.md, collaborative docs, and AI helpers can turn prep from a chore into an engine of creativity.

ELEVATE THE VIBE

Bring in music, props, maps, and atmosphere.

Use all five senses. Make the table feel like a stage, where every scene is part of a living myth.

Keep it immersive, intentional, and alive.

SUSTAIN THE CAMPAIGN



Burnout kills fun. Manage scheduling with clarity and care. Use session summaries to preserve continuity and memory. Set expectations, respect time, and create rhythms your table can grow with.



LEVEL UP AS A GM

You grow just like your players. Build feedback loops. Debrief with honesty. Reflect after each session. Each game is a chance to try something new—and to evolve your voice as a storyteller, leader, and friend.





Final Truth:

Being a Game Master isn't about knowing every rule, crafting the perfect plot, or dazzling players with voices and lore (though those help). It's about inviting others into a shared dream - one shaped by dice, laughter, mystery, and meaning.

You'll stumble. You'll improvise. You'll watch players take your carefully planned story and set fire to it—then build something even better from the ashes.

That's the magic.

Every game is a conversation. Every session is a story only you and your players can tell. And every choice you make behind that screen - whether bold or quiet - is a gift to the table.

So prep what inspires you. Run what scares you. And always, always leave space for wonder.

Welcome to the game, GM. You've got this.