



The Art of Great Roleplaying

A MANIFESTO FOR PLAYERS AND STORYTELLERS

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Foreword

This manifesto exists because roleplaying games deserve more than casual participation - they deserve craft, intention, and heart. I have spent over forty-six years around gaming tables, and still, I strive to be a better player. That pursuit is endless because roleplaying is not a skill one masters and sets aside. It is a living art - one we practice together, over and over, each session a rehearsal for the next story we will tell.

I wrote this for new players stepping into the circle for the first time, and for veterans who still hunger to refine their craft. It is a guide to the qualities and responsibilities that elevate play from mere pastime to shared creation - not just for one person, but for everyone gathered at the table. Because the truth is simple but profound: ***the players bear as much responsibility for the story as the Game Master.*** Without their energy, curiosity, and courage, even the most brilliant GM notes are nothing but ink on paper.

What follows is not a list of rules. It is a philosophy, a set of tools, and an invitation -to become more than participants, to become ***co-authors of myth.***

A Shared Responsibility

At the heart of tabletop roleplaying lies a fundamental truth: this is a ***collective*** art form. A campaign is not a book written by a single author or a film directed by one hand. It is an orchestra of imaginations, each instrument distinct, each player essential. The Game Master (GM) is not a puppeteer pulling strings but a conductor, guiding tempo and tone - and the players are not passive recipients but performers who shape the music itself.

Too often, new players arrive thinking the GM carries the story on their shoulders while the rest simply react. The best tables know otherwise. A GM can set the scene, but it is the players who breathe life into the world. Their characters' choices build the plot; their questions open new doors; their failures and triumphs weave the emotional core. A campaign thrives when players understand this shared weight - and falters when they do not.

This principle echoes through decades of design and theory. Ron Edwards' seminal work *Narrativism: Story Now* argues that story is born not from the GM's preparation alone but from "the meaningful decisions made by players in play" (Edwards, 2001). Sarah Lynne Bowman, in *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (2010), expands on this: "The most successful groups are those where participants actively co-create the dramatic arc, supporting not only their own goals but the unfolding stories of others."

A player's responsibility extends beyond their character sheet. It is a duty to the **story**, to the **group**, and to the **game itself**. It means showing up prepared - not with encyclopaedic lore or tactical builds, but with curiosity, empathy, and a willingness to engage. It means taking initiative, not waiting for the GM to spoon-feed plot. And it means understanding that the game is richer, deeper, and more memorable when every person at the table invests in it fully.

The Core Qualities of Great Roleplayers

There is no single path to greatness at the table, but the finest roleplayers share common traits - qualities that transform good play into extraordinary play. These traits are neither innate nor exclusive; they are muscles to be strengthened, crafts to be honed.

Empathy and Perspective

At its core, roleplaying is the act of inhabiting another being. It demands we step outside ourselves and see the world through unfamiliar eyes. Great roleplayers practise empathy not just as a storytelling tool but as a discipline. They ask: **What would my character truly feel here? How would their history shape their choices?** This commitment breathes authenticity into the game and invites others to respond in kind.

Empathy extends beyond one's own character. It is also about reading the room - noticing when another player wants the spotlight, sensing when the GM is offering a narrative thread, understanding when a joke has gone too far. This sensitivity to others' experiences is the bedrock of collaborative play.

Consistency and Internal Logic

A great character's choices make sense - even when they surprise us. They act from goals, flaws, and beliefs, not from the whims of the player. Consistency does not mean predictability; it means integrity. When a proud samurai kneels or a ruthless mercenary shows mercy, those moments land with power precisely because they emerge from the character's inner logic.

Inconsistency, by contrast, shatters immersion. Sudden reversals with no explanation or out-of-character decisions ("That's what I want, not what *they* would do") pull everyone out of the shared story. The best roleplayers guard against this, crafting arcs that feel true and earned.

Collaboration and Spotlight Sharing

Tabletop RPGs are not solo performances. They are ensemble pieces. Great players know when to step forward and when to step back. They amplify others' moments, set up scenes where companions can shine, and resist the urge to dominate.

Sarah Lynne Bowman calls this *social facilitation*: the practice of "**co-creating dramatic arcs for others by deliberately setting up beats their companions can resolve**" (Bowman, 2010). The joy of roleplaying deepens when every player feels seen and valued - and that requires generosity.

Adaptability and Improvisation

No plan survives first contact with the dice. Roleplaying thrives on unpredictability - a failed roll, an unexpected NPC choice, a twist none saw coming. Great players lean into this chaos. They adapt, improvise, and pivot gracefully when the story veers left instead of right. They do not cling to rigid plans; they treat surprises as opportunities.

Adaptability also means responding to others' ideas with openness. The improv principle of "Yes, and..." - accepting what's offered and building upon it - is invaluable here. It keeps scenes flowing and stories evolving organically.

Vulnerability and Risk-Taking

The most memorable moments at the table are often born of failure, sacrifice, or pain. Great players understand this. They allow their characters to falter, to suffer, to make mistakes. They embrace flaws as fuel for story rather than obstacles to "winning."

This willingness to be vulnerable transforms a game from a sequence of victories into a journey with stakes and meaning. A character who never risks anything remains flat; one who stumbles, bleeds, and grows becomes unforgettable.

Raising the Table - Empowering Fellow Players

"The most powerful players are not protagonists in isolation, but catalysts of a shared dream." - Emily Care Boss, *Push* (2005)

Great roleplayers elevate not only their own characters but the entire table. They know the story is not theirs alone - it is a tapestry woven by many hands. Their craft lies as much in enabling others' stories as in telling their own.

Setting Others Up to Shine

One of the most generous acts in roleplaying is handing someone else the spotlight. A deft player recognises when another character has a stake in the scene and steps aside to let them resolve it. They ask questions that invite backstory, prompt emotional responses, or draw quieter players into the conversation.

For example, a courtier might turn to the stoic warrior and ask, "You've faced their armies before. What scars do you still carry from that?" - suddenly, the scene pivots, and another player has centre stage.

Building Ensemble Narrative

A campaign is at its strongest when characters' stories intertwine. Masterful players seek opportunities to connect arcs - forging alliances, rivalries, romances, and shared histories that enrich the story. They listen actively, remember details, and weave them into their own narrative threads.

Hamish Cameron (2019) notes that collaborative storytelling thrives when players “seed narrative affordances” - hooks and details that others can build upon. A passing remark about a childhood friend might become another character’s lost sibling. A rash decision in one scene might give someone else a moral dilemma to wrestle with in the next.

Being a Partner, Not a Passenger

A campaign’s emotional weight grows when players carry part of the load. That means not waiting for the GM to pull them along but actively pushing the story forward. When players ask questions, pursue goals, and engage deeply with the world, they become co-authors - and the game becomes something none of them could have written alone.

Partnering with the Game Master

The relationship between GM and player is often misunderstood. The GM is not a storyteller performing for an audience; they are one part of a collaborative machine. And players are not there to simply **receive** the story - they are there to **build it**.

Offering Hooks and Story Fuel

Great players give the GM narrative raw material. They write backstories with open threads - debts owed, rivals left behind, promises unfulfilled - that can blossom into future plots. They make bold choices that create consequences, giving the GM something to react to. They articulate their characters’ ambitions aloud, providing direction for future arcs.

Even a single line - “*One day I will reclaim the Blade of Askura*” - is a gift to a GM, a flag planted in the sand that says, “Here is a story waiting to happen.”

Supporting the Flow of Play

Players also help the GM by pacing their actions to match the tone and rhythm of the story. They sense when a scene needs escalation and when it needs quiet. They contribute to worldbuilding by asking questions, filling in small details, or suggesting plausible reasons for events. These small acts lighten the GM’s load and enrich the shared fiction.

Sharing the Narrative Burden

Cameron (2019) observes that emergent narrative - the kind that arises organically from play rather than prewritten scripts - depends on player initiative. When players act as co-narrators, the GM can focus less on pulling them forward and more on deepening the world around them.

At NAGA (Northside Adventure Gamers Association Inc.), the group I play with now, we hold that responsibility for a safe, respectful, and enjoyable game is shared equally between players and GMs.

This means communicating openly, checking in about themes or content, and using tools like the X-card to signal when something crosses a line. When everyone at the table shares this responsibility, the GM is free to focus on weaving story rather than policing boundaries.

Driving the Story Forward

A good player reacts to the story as it unfolds. A great one helps propel it. Their characters don't simply stand still, waiting for plot to wash over them - they make decisions that **generate** story. Every action is a seed from which new branches grow.

This is where the art of roleplaying becomes collaborative storytelling in its purest form. The GM may lay the foundations of the world, but the players are its heartbeat. Their choices determine what matters, where the narrative goes, and how it changes along the way.

Proactive Choice-Making

The most compelling characters are defined not by what happens **to** them, but by what they **do**. They take initiative. They pursue goals, follow grudges, chase desires, and make hard calls. Even a decision that seems small - choosing to spare a defeated enemy, writing a letter to a distant mentor, picking a fight that could have been avoided - creates ripples that shape the future.

As Ron Edwards notes in *Narrativism: Story Now*, story emerges from “meaningful player decisions” (2001). It is not merely the GM's prepared material that gives a game life; it is the collisions between player action and world response.

Choices With Consequences

A proactive player does not just act; they act with awareness of consequence. They know that their choices will have weight - and they welcome that. In fact, they crave it. It's in the aftermath of choice that drama blooms: victories feel earned, mistakes have teeth, and the narrative gains texture.

This, too, is part of the player's responsibility to the table. A GM cannot generate meaningful consequences if the players refuse to make meaningful decisions. It is a shared dance: players step forward, GMs respond, the world shifts, and the cycle begins anew.

Connecting Narrative Threads

Masterful players think beyond the immediate moment. They seek ways to connect storylines - linking their character's arc to that of another, tying their goals to the central plot, or even creating bridges between seemingly unrelated events. They are always looking for the “why” that transforms isolated scenes into a cohesive story.

For example, a bounty hunter might learn that the mark they're chasing is tied to the scholar's lost sister. A shugenja might realise the spirit they're bound to is the same one haunting the ronin's dreams. These threads weave the party's individual journeys into something grander than any could achieve alone.

Creating a Safe and Inclusive Table

Great roleplaying does not happen in a vacuum. It requires trust - the trust to take risks, to reveal vulnerabilities, to push boundaries. And trust can only exist when the table is *safe*.

Safety is not about sanitising content or restricting creativity. It is about building an environment where everyone can participate fully, knowing they are respected and heard. It is about consent, communication, and care - principles at the heart of the NAGA approach to play.

Respect as a Foundation

Every game begins and ends with respect: respect for one another, for differing comfort levels, for lived experiences, for the story being told. This extends beyond the table itself - to conversations before the game, during play, and in post-session debriefs. It means listening as much as speaking and recognising that your fun should never come at the cost of someone else's comfort.

Respect also applies to the worlds we create. Many games explore challenging themes - violence, loss, oppression, betrayal. These can be powerful storytelling tools, but they demand care. Talk about them before the game begins. Set boundaries. If you're unsure whether something might cross a line, ask.

Safety Tools and Communication

The best tables build safety into the very fabric of play. Tools like the **X-card** - a simple way for anyone to pause the game if something feels uncomfortable - allow for real-time consent. If the card is used, the table pivots without question or judgement. Likewise, session zero conversations about themes, triggers, and tone help ensure everyone knows what kind of story they're signing up for.

The NAGA Player Guide encourages this proactive approach: discuss potential concerns, clarify expectations, and remember that anyone can step away from a game at any time. The goal is not to restrict, but to create a shared understanding that makes deeper, more daring stories possible.

Ratings and Expectations

Just as films carry content ratings, at NAGA we also recommend rating games for tone and intensity - not as strict limits, but as guides. A game labelled "PG" might feature light adventure and humour, while an "M" game might explore darker, more mature themes. These labels help players make informed choices and foster open conversation about the experiences they want to have.

Feedback and Growth

Finally, safety extends beyond the game session itself. Reflection and feedback are vital parts of the process. Thank your GM for their work. Offer constructive thoughts on what worked and what could improve. And be open to hearing the same about your own play. The goal is not criticism, but collective growth - a table that learns together becomes stronger together.

Shaping the Culture of Play

Culture is the invisible current beneath every game. It is shaped by how we speak, how we listen, how we treat each other, and how we approach the shared story. Great players are mindful of the culture they create and contribute to it deliberately.

Modelling Generosity and Curiosity

The tone of a table often reflects its most experienced members. When veteran players model generosity - sharing spotlight, celebrating others' ideas, approaching differences with curiosity - that tone ripples outward. It becomes the unspoken norm.

Curiosity, in particular, is a powerful cultural force. When players ask questions about one another's characters, about the world, about the story's deeper layers, they signal that everyone's contributions matter. That simple act of interest invites richer storytelling.

Trust and Vulnerability

No great story emerges without risk. Characters must make hard choices, reveal secrets, and face consequences. Players must do the same - taking emotional risks, trying new approaches, and trusting the table to hold them.

This trust is not automatic. It is built session by session, through reliability, honesty, and respect. It's built when players show up on time, listen actively, apologise when they misstep, and prioritise the group's experience over their own spotlight. Over time, that trust becomes the soil from which unforgettable stories grow.

Responsibility Beyond the Game

The responsibility players bear does not end when the session does. It extends to the spaces around the table - how we speak about others, how we handle disagreements, how we welcome newcomers. Every action contributes to the culture we're building. The question is not whether we are shaping that culture - we always are - but whether we are doing so *intentionally*.

Pitfalls and Opportunities for Growth

Even the most seasoned roleplayers stumble. The difference between a good player and a great one is not the absence of mistakes, but the willingness to learn from them. Here are some common pitfalls and how to turn them into opportunities.

Character Inconsistency

The Pitfall: Sudden shifts in motivation or behaviour with no explanation.

The Opportunity: Reflect on your character's inner logic. If change is needed, build towards it through story - let others see the reasons.

Spotlight Stealing

The Pitfall: Dominating scenes, speaking over others, or resolving challenges alone.

The Opportunity: Step back intentionally. Create space for others to act. Ask yourself: ***How can I make this scene better for someone else?***

Mechanical Tunnel Vision

The Pitfall: Focusing solely on dice rolls and optimal choices, ignoring narrative context.

The Opportunity: Treat mechanics as storytelling tools. What does this roll *mean* for your character? What story can emerge from failure?

Avoiding Failure

The Pitfall: Refusing to let your character lose, suffer, or make mistakes.

The Opportunity: Remember that tension and drama live in the gap between intention and outcome. Failure is fertile ground for story.

Ignoring Safety and Consent

The Pitfall: Pushing content that makes others uncomfortable or dismissing their boundaries.

The Opportunity: Listen. Adjust. Use safety tools. Recognise that respecting others' limits deepens, rather than diminishes, the story.

Conclusion - Becoming a Catalyst

To be a great roleplayer is not to master a list of techniques or memorise a set of rules. It is to embrace a philosophy: that we are all co-authors of the story, that our responsibilities extend beyond our character sheets, and that the heart of this art lies in collaboration.

It means understanding that the GM is not the sole storyteller - and that the players are not merely audience. We are partners. We are architects of shared worlds. We are custodians of trust and imagination.

It means showing up - not just physically, but emotionally and creatively. It means listening deeply, speaking with care, and celebrating the stories of others as much as our own. It means holding ourselves accountable for the tone, culture, and safety of the space we help create.

It means, above all, playing with intention - because intention transforms a game into a story, a session into a memory, and a group of individuals into a troupe.

This art is never finished. Even after four decades, I am still learning, still refining, still striving to be the best player I can be. That, perhaps, is the greatest lesson of all: ***roleplaying is not something you do. It is something you become.***

So let us become more. Let us be storytellers, collaborators, stewards, and catalysts. Let us sit down at the table not just to play - but to ***create.***

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