A Stick and a Carrot

Trying to GM is almost as easy as arm-wrestling with an octopus. It is a crude mixture of acting, organisation, logistics and talking, while at the same time avoiding the loss of friends. It often requires a lot of nerves and most GMs have experienced failure more than once. Not everyone is suited to GM, but everyone can try to improve his personal style.
This "How to" guide cannot teach you to become a good GM. And this is not my intention. All I wanted to do is to give you some hints and advice of how you can improve your personal style.

A. General topics

I. The System

Before you start to GM an adventure or campaign you have to think about the appropriate system. There is no rule of thumb of what system is better for which persons. One thing you have to bear in mind however is, that you should look for a system. It is another question whether you also want to use the world and setting connected with the system or not. Although some producers advertise their system as high or low fantasy, cyberpunk, space opera or whatever, this does really mean that the system can only be used in these environments. In fact I know of only very few systems, that are so deeply rooted in their setting, that it is almost impossible to use them in another.

Therefore when you choose a system try to concentrate on the system. There are really great system, that most people do not play because of the bad setting and there are also a number of awful system that are just played because of their setting. Thus choose a system you like, no matter if you think that the setting is good or not.

Instead of choosing a system after the setting, you should concentrate on the system itself, i.e. on the game mechanics. There are almost all flavours of mechanics from very simple to very complex, from realistic to unrealistic. The ideal system should be easy to use, it should give you enough freedom to come up with new ideas without fearing to contradict with half the rulebook. This however does not mean that the system has to be simple or rudimentary. It should be easy to use by YOU. Some people can run a Rolemaster campaign smoothly, while others find Warhammer FRP too complex. The only thing that any system should have is fairness. The rules should be able to reflect any game balance and the various tests should be reasonable. This does not mean that there should be no room for superheroes or powerful items, but that the procedure for a test should be understandable for anyone. If you have to read rules more than twice they are either not thought out or written in a language you cannot comprehend. In either case you should look for another system.

A good system is able to reflect any possible situation in game play. Unfortunately you cannot say in what way the game will develop. Therefore you cannot really say if it is able to reflect any possible situation. With a good deal of common sense you should nevertheless be able to give a good judgement. It is also important that a system leaves room for further development. It should not put you into a corset. A great deal of different skills is okay, but a general guideline for all those cases without an appropriate skill is more important.

Okay, no you have spend too much money on a system. Read the rules, read them again. You do not have to memorise every single page of the rulebook. I have heard of, but never seen, people who knew every single chart and table of Rolemaster (for those not familiar with Rolemaster: it mostly consists of tables and charts). This may be nice to impress other people, alas it does rarely impress people from the opposite gender, but you do not need it. The only situation I can think of where such a knowledge may be relevant is when you strand on an isolated island with your whole group and do have the rules at hand. But this is very unlikely and even if it happens, you have other things to worry about. Nevertheless you should be familiar with the rules, that means that you should have an idea of the basic game mechanics. If you do know them you are able to improvise rules when you cannot find them or if there are none.

A good way to familiarise with the rules and something which I always do right after buying a system is to create two characters. These two should reflect different aspects of the system, like a warrior and a wizard. Test them in combat and make a few non-combat test with them. Assume as if they have gained experience and raise their skill points, attributes or whatever. This should help you to familiarise with the rules, speed up the process to create PCs for your players and you will probably find things to pay attention to.

When you GM for the first time, most people will forgive you if you have to search through the rules for a few minutes. If you have done it more often it is better to able to find it fast or come up with a more or less reasonable alternative. Therefore you should refer to the rulebook often. This helps you a lot in getting a feel for the system and you will eventually memorise the most important rules. Copy the most important tables and keep them in a

special file. After some time of playing this file may be the only thing you need during ordinary gameplay. Do not worry too much about copyright infringement. I know of no copyright law that does not allow the buyer of a product to copy a text once or twice for his own personal use. (Selling it however is a different thing).

Before you begin playing make sure that you have all the relevant dices, paper and pencils at hand. Even if most of the players bring their own equipment along, there is often the danger that someone will forget some parts. I once GMed an adventure. Just before we could start it turned out that we did not have enough dices. We had to drive through the town and find a shop to buy D10. It was a small town and took us about an hour to get the dices. There is nothing as sobering as racing around to find items that are worth a few pennies.

II. Character creation

The character creation should be done together. This prevents that anyone cheats, makes the players familiar with the rules and they get to know each other if they don't already. Plan enough time for the creation. Even in simple system it can take hours to get finished. Players ask questions and want to learn something about the background. You should also begin playing right afterwards. By doing this the players are more tied into the game and it is less likely that they will not show up the next time. Always, and I mean always, keep the character sheets or a copy of it. Too many players forget and you have to drive through town again. It also prevents any kind of cheating. When a player ascends into the next level (or whatever it may be called in your system) keep a close eye. Most, even me, have the tendency to interpret some things more widely when they raise the skills or characteristics.

Prepare a sheet with the most relevant information on the environment you are playing in and hand it to all players. They should have a basic idea of the world. Just as much as anyone in the world will have. If the environment are the Middle Ages, this should only contain very rough ideas of the world, since few people ever left their village in this time. In a space opera, the peasants will have a far greater knowledge of the politics and economy of the world. Then prepare a second sheet witch takes into account the background of the individual character. A wizards will have knowledge of the most important colleges of magic, the most famous wizards and something about the history, while a warrior will have more detailed knowledge of any campaign currently going on and probably something about monsters. You do not have to give a detailed account. Some general information, that give the players something of the atmosphere is enough.

Even if your system of choice has rules to determine the class or career of the character I think it is often better to let the players choose - however within reasonable boundaries. Most players will not accept a PC that is a rat catcher. A very experienced and mature player may have great fun with such a character, but do not expect that anyone is so mature. Another danger of such a system is that your group will turn out to consists of bureaucrats, lay healers and beggars. Certainly not a band to save the world. When a player on the other hand wants to play a very special kind of character, like a Noldo in MERP (Noldor are high elves, pretty powerful and immune to almost anything), he should come up with a very good reason to do so. All in all your party should be balanced. It should not necessarily be homogenous. If however you do not find a someone to play a magic user or a psi adept, do not insist, the players have to deal with their characters and you should listen to what they want.

You should encourage that all players write down some sort of character history. I always award a great story or a story at all with experience points, special items or connections. Do not award it if someone tells you that his PC was the personal student of Elminster and had access to all his secrets. The background should flesh out the character, but not to give the players an advantage. When you play in a fantasy environment the players should be encourage to place the background in a small village, otherwise you run the risk that a player will insist on extra knowledge when the PC enters a mayor city. The same is true for environments in the present or the future, but since the cities are much bigger in these times and the social network much weaker, such a danger is less imminent.

III. Place & Food

Important for any gaming session is the place. Not the place in the game, but the place where you play. It should be convenient to reach for all players and you. It should have a lavatory and access to running water. A school or university is a good place to play, even if it may create some unpleasant memories. A school or university also has the advantage that they have a chalk board. This allows the GM to make big map and is a great visual aid. It is had an overhead projector, even better. One warning: ask before you begin playing in such a building. It may ruin your party (literally) if the evening ends with a chase by the local swat team and crossfire.

The costs and work for any food should be shared. This should be made clear beforehand. Humans beings can reach surprising speed when you want to ask them for any money and they are more likely to run when the session is at end. Clearly differentiate between in-time and out-time. You can discuss all non-game things during this time. Prevent that players start to discuss the movie they saw last Sunday during gaming, you will never get them back on track once this has started. Drinking and eating potato chips is okay during playing. Eating salmon with green pasta in cheese sauce is not. When you want to eat, interrupt the game. Take care that there is enough food and drinks for the session. I remember a long Saturday afternoon during which a group of four had

nothing to eat but a single pizza (for all four) and a single bottle of coke. After a few hours people were worrying more about their stomach than their PCs. A sure way to ruin any game.

Try to find a permanent place for gaming. You should not switch too often, since this interrupts the flow. If you are playing in a players or your own house, make sure that no one interrupts you while playing. Sisters and brothers can get annoying and parents, no matter how good their motives may be, can also interrupt gaming.

Try to play regularly. I was for years in a group that played probably not more than every two months. This separates the adventure too much and you need too much time to brief the players of what has happened last time. Playing regularly also has the advantage that everyone will get used to it and it is less likely that someone will not show up. However do not stick to a fixed date, when it is inappropriate. If one of your players is sick, do not continue without him. The risk is too big, that this fellow will loose the interest once he has lost touch and it is difficult for him to get back into an adventure later on.

B. How to Play

I. No winning

Every rulebook will state at one point, that role-playing is not about winning. In my opinion this is rubbish. The whole life is about being better than the rest. Competition helps a lot in the game. Your players are much more under pressure and will try to come up with a good idea, instead of joking around. Just image, that the party has to solve a riddle. Without competition they will sooner or later begin to insist that they don't know the answer. When there is a minimum of competition everyone wants to solve the riddle first, even if just for getting the experience points. However do not use one player against the other(s).

What is correct is, that the competition in a role-playing game is different from competition is other games. The players are not playing against each other in the sense, that one wins at the cost of defeating the rest. Instead the competition is to be better than the rest, while not defeating them.

When I say that role-playing is about winning, I did not mean the GM against the players. Alas there are GMs out there that take self-esteem out of their bodycount. This is wrong. Try to provoke competition among the players, but do not play against them.

II. Neutrality and fairness

Probably the most important thing in game mastering is to remain neutral and fair - on the outside. The players must have the feeling that you do not change anything in their favour or disfavour. This does not mean that you should not cheat or give hints. It only means that you should not get caught while doing so. When your players suspect that your bend the rules or even ignore them, they no longer will take you serious. If you modify anything to their advantage, they will eventually feel almost like superheroes and behave accordingly. On the contrary, when the feel that you change things to their disadvantage, they will get frustrated and think that playing has no real sense or start cheating themselves.

When you begin to manipulate the world you will eventually experience what is called the God-syndrome. A feeling of omniscience and omnipotence. Of course the whole game is about manipulating the world, you are the GM after all. What I mean by manipulation is not to make the world as you want it to be, but to change the outcome of rolls and the consequences just as you want them to have. I know that your words are the final word, but do not stick to your decisions even if a player raises a reasonable point that they are rubbish. If you enjoy the God-syndrome, leave role-playing and become a bureaucrat.

Anything that your players do should have consequences, but these consequences should be reasonable. The should make sense. Your players may not understand them, possibly because they have an inferior knowledge of what is going on, but nevertheless they should agree in case they do have that knowledge.

Fairness also requires that you do follow the rules. The rules, no matter how stupid, where made to make actions and their outcome predictable. To achieve a certain degree of predictability you have to follow the rules. However you do not have to follow the rules by the word. But you have to follow the basic mechanics of the rules. When you do not like a certain rule, use your own common sense, but within the basic mechanics. This allows the players to follow your judgement and will make it predictable for them. When they have no idea how you handle the result of a roll, they will probably shun the risk. To use an analogy. The game mechanics are like a fence around the garden and the rules in particular are everything within the fence. You can trim the bushes in the fence, but you should never break down the fence and start wandering around. This causes more confusion than relieve.

Once you have gained experience in game mastering you should be able to come with a reasonable solution for

any situation that is not included in the rulebook. To be able to do this, you need knowledge of the basic game mechanics.

Never hesitate to listen to your players. If you come across a situation not covered in a rulebook and you make up your own solution, one player may come up with a better idea or a modification of your own solution. At least listen to it. Both you and your players participate in the same game and you are the game master not the game tyrant. You do have to be sensible not to let your players run the game, but they should also not feeling as if they speak to a wall.

III. Strictness

Every system will state at one point or the other that the GM should not follow the rules when inappropriate. Well this is true. If you find a loophole or an inconsistency or even something you do not like, ignore the rule. This can only be done if it affects a single non-basic rule. Should this situation occur with a fundamental rule, better change the system.

In these situation replace the rule with common sense. However common sense has to do something with sense. Your solution should make sense. It must be plausible and reasonable, both to the players and to the system. If, for example, you play a fairly simple system with quick rules. You come across totally ridiculous rules for combat situation in which the victim is crushed beneath the hooves of a horse. You want to replace them. Fine! You should however not make up rules that require a hundred dices and table. This solution may be reasonable, but not reasonable in a system streamlined for quickness and simplicity. Think about it. The better your "feel" for the system, the more likely that you come up with a reasonable idea for the system.

What should never be manipultes are the basic game mechanics. If this becomes necessary think about switching the system. The basic game mechanics help to make a situation predictable.

IV. In-time and not

Clearly differentiate between in-time and out-time. In-time is what is happening within the game. Out-time is the time not in the game, but in the real world. If someone asks for the way to the toilet, this is out-time. Unless otherwise clearly noted, everything that a player says is in-time. This helps a lot to discipline the players. When they begin joking around about pulling someone's leg, they should be met with mistrusting eyes by the inhabitants of the world. The players should of course have the chance to discuss certain things without getting into trouble. This can be done by crying "time-out" or something similar. You also have to remember that a strict execution of the above mentioned rule is likely to hinder gameplay considerably. Give the players enough freedom to plan and plot, but try to make the players feel as if they are in the world. Keeping the balance between the two is challenging and difficult. But nevertheless it is a task necessary to accomplish. It is important that the players are aware that their discussions may be overheard by the people around. Do not trap them.
For example if the PCs are standing on a street and plan to break into a house, they should have given the possibility to do so. Only when the discuss it in great detail and for a unreasonable long time, should you interfere with sending a few interesting looking guards.
If you are lucky with your players they will try to behave as if they were actually present in the game world. They will try to avoid discussing things that would bring them into trouble in a tavern. However few are fortunate enough to be blessed with such players, most need a reminder now and then.

One thing not necessarily fitting here, but I know of no better place, are to avoid discussing statistics. It wastes an atmosphere if the PC attend a royal banquet where they want to extract some information from the prince or princess who has romantically fallen in love with one PC and the players begin discussion who has the highest chance, given his or her skill in seduction. This is not the way the world works. Any characteristic an skill should only be revealed to the GM, that is you, and of course the player, but not the rest of the group. Try to motivate your players to say that their character feels pretty bad, has a bleeding wound on the head, a strained ankle and is generally not in good shape, instead of saying: "I got seven hitpoints, if I loose two more I get unconscious". If someone is good at climbing, he can say so. But he should have only a vague idea if he really is better than someone else from the party. This helps to keep the players much more in their role. I remember a situation in MERP. I played a Black Numenorean and had an excellent skill in jumping and acrobatics. Far better than the rest of the group. Unfortunately every time I had to roll, I fumbled. In the end the rest of the party was pretty sure that my character was merely showing off. This lead to some interesting in-party discussion, especially since Black Numenoreans are extremely proud.

V. Speech

Another important point: free speech. You have to be able to talk without any "ahms" and "ohs", any "wells" or "you knows" for at least an quarter of an hour. Some people have problems with it, but it can be learned and the more often you play the better you get. It helps a great deal if you are aware of what is going on. The better your knowledge of the adventure, the better your performance. Don't get nervous, you are not giving a speech in from of a committee that decides on your future. You are standing in front of your friends and they will not make fun out

of you, just because you stuttered or went red. If they do, look for new friends.

Anything that a PC says should be delivered in active and not passive voice. In the best of worlds a player does not say: "I stand up.." or even worse "My character stands up, walk to the bar and ask if the bartender has heard of someone called Luigi". Better: "I stand up and walk to the bar. I address the bartender: 'Do you know someone called Luigi'". This has many advantages: First and foremost it creates atmosphere. Secondly the players get the feeling as if the actions lead to a more direct reaction from the environment. Thirdly they begin to think about what they are saying, because there is less room for reinterpretation.

Some GMs want that their players use two ways to speak. The first for anything that the players say and the second for anything that their character says. This can be done through a pitch in the voice an accent or something similar. This helps a lot to clearly differentiate between the two. However it always runs the risk of being just ridiculous. Some people are also pretty bad at doing this kind of thing and they provoke laughter where the wanted attention. Discuss it with your players and do not force it. Some, including me, feel very uneasy to do something like this.

VI. To speak or not to speak

Another delicate issue is whether you should help the players or not. All in all I say no. As with most "nos" there is a big but following. In this case, you should help them by pointing them a little bit in the right direction, but not by giving crisp-clear answers.

Players will only enjoy gaming in the long term, if they succeed. Success however includes work by yourself. Say for example that you replay the lord of the rings-novel. None of your players have read the novel, for whatever reason, probably they are all illiterate or you live in a very exotic nation with a very exotic language into which the book was never translated. Anyway, the reach the eastern gates of moria. The inscription was something like: Speak friend and enter. The solution to the riddle is that someone has to speak the word "friend" in some dwarven dialect. This is exactly what the inscription says. Most players, and I speak from my own experience, tend to think in very complex terms (just like the fellowship in the novel), rather than start with the basic meaning of the words. You could just say what the solution is. This is what we call bad game mastering. A good game master would, is necessary, only point the players in the right direction. Probably by saying that they should think more simple (something generally very familiar to most humans beings).

Whether you want to give hints or not, never ever give them right away. Only give them when you have the feeling that the party is really stuck. They should torment their grey cells before you help them. And give vague hints. When fighting an almost invincible enemy do not say that they need to hit him real hard under the knee-cap, rather say that they should observe the enemy more closely and then give a hint that he walks very sluggish or tries to keep his knee-caps out of the fight. Common sense is important here.

When players directly address you and ask for hints ignore them. Even when they offer sexual attention to you it is generally better not to consent. You have done it right, when the players have the feeling as if they have triumphed over the problem themselves and not only through your help.

VII. Ways to game

There are hundreds of possible ways to game and it is your decision on which you choose. What however is important is that the players are aware of your style. I remember a session when we introduced a new member. He had only gamed AD&D before. Unfortunately we were playing Harnmaster. The - pretty quick - result was that he hurled himself in a rather unnecessary battle and was killed by an ordinary city guard, something that had never happened to him in AD&D.

It is a common misunderstanding that the system predetermines the way of gaming. When someone wants to play high fantasy he will choose AD&D, if he wants realism the Rolemaster book is taken from the shelf. This is wrong. If you want to play in a high fantasy environment, you can choose whatever fantasy game system you like. You and your players are responsible for gaming and not the system.

I want to name a few possible ways of style. The list is far from being complete and there are many forms between those mentioned below. It is not meant to tell you what style is better or not, however I will try to work out some of the advantages and disadvantages of each style.

The first style I want to mention cinematic. This is a very imprecise term, but the best I could come up with. Cinematic styles always, in one way or the other, put the PCs in very singular positions. They are the heroes. Defender of man-kind, saviour of the world. They are the knights in shiny armour sitting atop their white steeds in the morning sun. The PCs are special and even in their first level able to defeat the ordinary people of the world. The peasants and farmers are no match for them and even the city watch is nothing but easy prey. Another characteristic of the cinematic style is that the heroes will eventually safe the world by the glimpse of the second. James Bond and Indiana Jones are examples of cinematic heroes. The plotline of adventures almost always evolve around big things: saving the world, defeating a god, finding a powerful artefact. No matter what it is, it has to be big. One advantage for the players is, that this style is actually entertaining. These are stories with great drama and lots of black and white. They are nice to remember, at least nicer than struggling three hours to crawl

out of a swamp hole in a forest at night (something that actually happens). The main disadvantage is that some of your players may feel bored over the time. How often can you safe the world without getting boring. Also the range of possible adventures often shows certain parallels and a lot can be anticipated after a while. Don't get me wrong I like this style of gaming, especially as a player, it is just that it tends to come in big packages and may begin to be boring.

The opposite of a cinematic play is a realistic. This is not necessary a world without heroes, they difference is more that the game does not put the emphasis on the big things, but more on the details. The PCs may or may not be heroes, in any way there is an elaborated sociological system behind it. Harnmaster and Pendragon can be said to be realistic. Realistic games often have great conspiracies and the style is often less battle-oriented. Big dramas are the exceptions, but they do occur. The downside of this style is obviously that the players do not want to replay their own life. Realistic style has the tendency to be tiring over the time. The advantage however is that the players are often, but not always, more tied into the game. There is no stopping of a bomb one second before explosion.

The other pair I want to mention is serious and comical style of play. To begin with serious style, this involves that the world presented is generally hostile. Warhammer FRP and Call of Cthulhu can be used as an example. Any combat is deadly and their are enough people to cross in every village. Serious-style games tend to be low on combat, although it does occur. The PCs are often not heroes and there are more shades of grey than you can think of. Such a style is good for detective kind of adventures. The disadvantage however is, that it is hard to keep a constant atmosphere of hostility. This feeling wears down much too easily and when you have reached this point the players are likely not to take the whole world serious anymore, something that ruins every adventure. Probably the best way to avoid it, is to differentiate between the world in general and the current actions in particular. The two often overlap and influence each other. However a single adventure or encounter can release much of the "pressure" and the players will be more involved in the world later.

The opposite of this is of course a comical-style. This does not have to be like Paranoia or Tales of the Travelling Vagabond. It is more that the play allows the players much freedom to joke around. Pressure is almost unknown. This style is, with the exception of the aforementioned games, very rare. The main reason is that it is extremely hard to keep up a comic atmosphere all the time. Just as a hazardous feeling wears of, so does a comical.

VIII. Tools of the trade

All you need to roleplay is a pen, a sheet of paper and a number of dices. How often have you heard this? I guess quite often. It is of course true, there is nothing else (well except for the rulebook). However most groups use a variety of other tools. The most obvious are miniatures and a cd-player, but believe me there are many many more. What you personally prefer is up to you, the only thing you may want to remember is that people fiddle around with things when they are present. Some like to throw a pen up in the air all the time (like I do), others try to build large miniature pyramids. So much as there tools can help you, so much can they distract the players from playing.

Miniatures are often used in role-playing. They help a lot of visualise combat. They also avoid any discussion when the players would like to reinterpret some of their statements rather freely. Miniature are however expensive and unless you already play a table-top game, most do not have miniatures. Okay you may use chessmen, coins or any figure from a boardgame, but they do not look half as good as a fully painted miniature and it is likely that either you or your players forget which represents whom. If you want to use miniatures seriously it is helpful, but not essential, for the GM to have an assortment of common monsters. When you want to use floorplans, put a transparent plastic sheet above. This allows you to write on the sheet and wash it off later. I consider it a bad idea if you require your players to buy a miniature for their PC. Some do not want to do that simply because they fear that they have to replace it every few weeks, when a PC dies, while others do not want to spend money on something that is not essential for playing.

Another handy tool is a cd-player. You won't believe the impact of music on the atmosphere of a situation. Although it is useful to spice you adventures with music, it is difficult. First you need to find tracks that fit the atmosphere. Secondly you either need to sort your cds or, probably better, copy the tracks on a new cd in the order you want to use. Since you cannot foresee every possible situation, it is useful to have a number of tracks around that can be used in various situations. Never, ever use tracks with vocals. Your players may begin to sing along and you have not gathered for singing, but for playing. A great idea is to use cds with special sounds. These can be bought at most music shops. They do not have songs, but sounds from the daily life, like bird singing, waves breaking, etc. This adds much to the atmosphere and it is much more easy to find the right sound for each situation. However do not overuse it, you are game mastering not impersonating a disk jockey.

Some GMs use computers. This can be useful to have all the relevant statistics at hand and probably even let the computer do all the rolling of dices. Besides that problem that you may need some programming skill, you are giving a presentation, but playing a game. A computer needs time to boot, you need time to start the relevant programmes, when it goes into screensaver mode everyone will stare at the moving pictures and last but not least there is the danger that someone spills coke on the keyboard, which of course ruins the evening. I avoid the presence of computers during gameplay.

There are a number of other possible tools. Use your imagination. I remember a Paranoia session. We (the players) had triggered an alarm. Instead of just saying, that you hear the alarm, the GM used a stroboscope and a horn powered by air pressure. It was, well, very visual, but took a few hours to get the ringing out of the ear. Anyway, tools can be nice to create atmosphere, but they always carry the risk of distracting the players. Therefore use them with care.

IX. Cheating

Very difficult issue. Honestly I cheat whenever possible. Either as a gamer or as a GM. You give me a dice I will do whatever is necessary to manipulate the result (if you pretend to have problems with arithmetic it helps a lot). I guess most, if not all, GMs have manipulated results in one way or the other. Your powerful necromancer awaits the PCs and his first attack is a really bad fumble to which the rulebook says that the NPC has dislocated his arm and went unconscious. This rarely happens. Your archvillian should appear as an archvillian and not as a member of the Marx Brothers.

If you decide to cheat, make it secret. This is clear when you are a player, but also true when you are a GM. If the players find out that you cheated in their favour they may feel as if whatever they do won't harm them and you get them back on track. If they find out that you cheated in their disfavour, they will feel cheated and this will lower the moral considerably.

I think cheating is one reason why game screens where invented (the other reason is that they are a great way to sell absolute crap). Only make your rolls behind the screens. Combat is the only exception, it gets much more thrilling when everyone sees the results. Make every test that involves perception or awareness behind the screen and not let it be done by the players. It is difficult to explain that they have not seen or heard something, when everyone knows that they rolled a critical success.

X. Starting a session

Starting a session should begin with repeating what happened last time. This is vital, if you do not play regularly. But I always thought that it is the best starter into the scenario. The repeat can be done by you or the players. In my view the best is that the GM starts with some basic information like "after you have left the village two days ago, your way took you higher into the mountains...". The players should be given time to discuss the current situation. If someone keeps a party journal it can be read out. The clues they have, the next steps of their journey etc. Some GMs do award any information the players can remember. What should always be awarded is when one player came up with a great idea between sessions. You cannot prevent that the players think about the adventure between sessions and you can also not prevent that they discuss the things between sessions. Then why not award it.

Before starting you should have a look if everyone has written down new items. It often happened to us that new items found shortly before the end of the last session were not written down, mostly due to confused situation.

XI. Ending a session

Ending a session may appear to be quite simple. In fact it is. There are just one things that should be done. Do not reveal the whole plot to the players. They should leave with the knowledge that they had gained during the game. Any loose end should be left where it is. This not only gives possible hooks for future adventures, but also may add to the overall atmosphere of the game. I remember an adventure long time ago. We thought to have killed the villain, although we were not sure. We also were not sure of his motivations. During the next couple of games a lot red herrings or people were interpreted by us to be plots by this villain. As it later turned out they were not. This however did not prevent us to be very suspicious against anyone mysterious person we met.

The only exception to this is, if you do not plan to play with the people again, like on a con.

XII. The Players

Game mastering could be so much fun, if it weren't for the players. In a worst case scenario they can ruin everything you have planned and plotted in many sleepless nights. They of course come in many flavours, so you may have good luck with your players.

Many people try to categorise the types of players (e.g. the rules lawyer, the munchkin, etc.). Although such categories have a certain entertaining value, they are of little use in my view. Reality is more complex than categorising theory. Most players will show one trait or the other, very much depending on the circumstances. Therefore I have only detailed certain characteristics and I have restricted to the negative ones, that may cause you problems.

1. Being overly involved

Sooner or later some of your players may become overly involved. They no longer differentiate between reality and game. Everything that happens to their PCs is taken personal and they expect that things working in reality also work in the game and, even worse, things that do not work in reality work in the game. This is probably the worst trait a player can develop. I had some experiments with these people. From that I dare to say that a great percentage of people developing (or born) with this trait come from esoteric and occultism. Maybe they look for a way to see their distorted idea work. To give you an example: We once played with someone who was very much into occultism. He has read all those weird books like Alistair Crowley's examples of stupidity. We desperately wanted to play a magician. Of course he knew everything better was unable to comprehend that (a) he was talking absolute bullshit and (b) it was a game. He just wanted to transfer his own idea of magic (or Magick as he always pointed out) into the game. My only advice is to avoid these people.

However there are a number of people that suffer under this trait temporary. In fact most people will get overly involved. The reason may be stress or something else. I can't say, since I have not studied psychology, but something useful. This syndrome appears when the atmosphere is very dense and the tension high. Do not worry too much about it then, under these circumstances a lot of people begin to say things that they do not mean and the discussion can develop into a real conflict. The difference between a temporary trait and a permanent one is that a temporary one is forgotten after the session. If people persist to take everything personal, point out that it is only a game. If they still persist find someone else.

2. Nit-picking on the rules

Probably the most common trait. Every player nit-picks on the rules sooner or later. In most cases this happens when the player does not like the GM's decision. Only few do this constantly. If they do, you should avoid them. The people that temporarily nit-pick on the rules are easy to handle. The best way to do this is to point out that you are the GM and not the player. When a player has a better idea or really points out that you understood a rule wrong or apply it wrongly you should however not hesitate to listen. When the players are halfway mature they won't take this too serious. When you insist on your decision players will sooner or later stop taking you serious. A nit-picker however tries to interpret the rules in his own kind of fashion. His interpretations are one-sided.

Another way to deal with a nit-picker is to agree with his interpretation. The next time such a situation occurs you use his tactic against him. This is more of revenge than actually solving the problem. After you have done that the fronts will harden. Only do that when you want to sack the player and want to ridicule him a little bit.

3. Being bored

Sooner or later one or more of your players may be bored. This has not necessarily something to do with your game mastering. Of course in some cases it does. In the remaining number of cases the player is too much occupied with other things, like personal problems. In the latter case you should simply ignore it. It will go away anyway. In the former case you should try to stimulate the player. This can be easily done by giving him some extra quest. Probably he is the only one who heard something during the night and the rest of the group cannot be woken up without losing the thing that made the sound. Probably he has a strange dream. Whatever it may be, do not hope that he will jump back onto the train some time, but help him to do so. Of course, when someone is bored over and over again and all these attempts do not help, you should have a word with him. Maybe he lost interesting in roleplaying or just in roleplaying with this group. In any way, it is better to make a clear cut rather than extend the problem.

4. Joke around

Also a frequent problem, at least in the groups I have gamed. The joking around problem usually evolves from the fact that the players are unsatisfied with something, generally either you or the game itself. Should this happen they begin to behave quite foolish. I remember a session in which we spend a night in a town during winter. The snow was a few feet high. The GM made the mistake to give us too much spare-time in this town. When he walked through the town one morning, one of us made a snowball and threw it (I can't remember on whom). During the next couple of hours of game play, he were having a real big fight with snowballs and rolled laughing on the floor. To cut a long story short, the session was wasted. In the next session we forgot everything that has happened and began anew. This is probably the only solution I can give you to deal with the problem, once it has occurred. Treat everything that has happened as if it did not happen in the game.

Of course it is much better to prevent these things, rather than picking up the pieces. Should you have the feeling that the situation goes out of control, give the players something to do. An ambush, an attack, a strange hint, whatever. Just keep them moving and do not let them think about something stupid. The players should have a decent amount of freedom, do not get me wrong, but when they begin to abuse this freedom do not hesitate to restrict this freedom with the help of tight time periods, enemies etc.
Note: Should you play Paranoia, ignore the above.

5. Cheat till you drop

Cheating is a common in roleplaying as it is in poker. Prepare that your players may interpret dice rolls rather widely. As said above, I have done more than once. Cheating can come in many forms: manipulating skills, dice rolls, raising hit points etc. I have never seen cheating as very much of a problem. It happens, everyone knows that it happens and you can do little against it. You could of course make all the rolls, keep all character sheets and lock them up between sessions. But this is boring. The players want to make some dice rolls and when you do this, they may feel helpless. Another interesting tactic I have witnessed on a con was that the GM awarded every player experience points when he denounces a cheater. Well this meant paranoia, although the people played AD&D.
You should only interfere when the cheating is dominating and no one really cares what the dices show. In this case have a word with the players and tell them that they should either stop cheating or find a new GM. This helps in most cases. Do not care for the rest.

6. Being too talkative

Very common and not so much of a negative trait, but more of a nuisance. Some players tend to tell everything to the other players. He has a dream with important clues and the first thing he does is to tell it everyone around. This can mean that Grog the Barbarian talks of white flowers and fluffy rabbits on the morning table. It is especially annoying of you wanted to give specific information just to this player. Well you can't do anything about it. No one prevents you in real-life to tell your strange dreams of discoveries to the person next to you on the bus. Therefore: Learn to life with it.

7. Discussion and no decision

A very common problem is that the players endlessly discuss things and never reach a decision. This is a group phenomenon. It usually occurs before difficult situations, like a big fight. The players want to include every possible situation in their plans and since this can generally not done, they discuss. They simply do to avoid facing the situation. There are two things to keep in mind when this happens.

First of all, do not push them! If they need time to plan, they should have the time to do so. Only a fool would charge into a difficult battle without spending a second on a plan and a substitute plan. Therefore give them time.

Secondly, do push them! When you see that all is said and done and the discussion is moving in circles, you should push them. This can be done in a number of ways. The most boring is by telling them that they have a minute of two left and should come up with a decision at that point. This only works in rather stupid groups, because you can do nothing when they have not finished at that point. Well, you can end gaming, but this is rather counterproductive. Another and in my view better strategy is to come up with a chance encounter. If, for example, the PCs want to attack the main chamber of an underground temple of an evil god, with 200 priests running around in the chamber and cannot come up with a decision, let them hear steps behind or people approaching from inside the chamber. The players then either have to move or loose the advantage of surprise. 95% will decide for the former very quickly.

XIII. Adventures: pregenerated vs. home brew

Whether you want to use pregenerated professional adventures or make your own is up to you. Generally it is better to start with pregenerated adventures. Even if you are an experienced game master, these adventure help you a lot to get a feel for the world. Pregenerated adventures however have some disadvantages: First of all, you must transport an idea that was thought out by someone else and probably you do not find it 100% convincing. Secondly some professional authors like to present long passages that need to be read out. This is one of the biggest mistakes some authors make. It is not fun to hear someone reading page after page of text. Go to church if you enjoy it. Unfortunately there is a big temptation to simply read it. It requires almost not preparation to do so and the GM can be almost sure that all vital clues are in the passage. I say: Avoid it. If you find such a passage, sit down for half an hour or so, read it carefully, extract all clues and then rewrite it or write down the most important clues. In game make the speech, but do not read it, add some details of what has actually happened. If the passage is a long speech from a NPC, try to thin how this person would have delivered it. Is he forgetful? Then repeat some passages or let him lose the thread. This makes the speech much more vivid and the players are more likely to remember it, at least it is more likely as if the speech is presented as a lecture in advanced calculus.

Some people prefer pregenerated adventures simply because it seems to be easier. It is not. When you have bought an adventure you have read and reread it several times. Prepare charts with the most important things. Change some parts and image as much as possible from what is going to happen. When you cook your own stew however, it is far easier to improvise.

No matter if you use pregenerated adventures or your own, before playing try to imagine the possible reactions of the players. This helps you to anticipate problems. And knowing that there is a problem, is the first step for solving

it. However in allusion of Clausewitz it can be said, that no adventure survives first contact. You have to be flexible. No matter how good the adventure is, if you are not flexible it is not worth the paper printed on. Important: Check if one of your players has played the adventure before when it is a pregenerated one. It sometimes happened that one player has played it before - one a con or in another group. It also happens that this person does not reveal his knowledge, maybe just to grab more experience points.

XIV. Riddles

The classic riddle is almost extinct in modern games. There are few niches where it could survive, but most adventures that built on intellect rather than sheer muscle power do not have them. Sure they have a lot of investigations and things like this. But the classical three line riddle as seen in J.R.R.Tolkien's hobbit, rarely does exist.

Personally I like a few decent riddles in an adventure. They make roleplaying so easy. Generally they take time to solve and you have enough time to sit back and think about the further development in a game. This already implies that riddles are perfect when you have to improvise.

However they do have some considerable drawbacks. First and foremost they can get boring when they are too difficult. The few people that enjoy thinking about such difficult problems can generally be found in the department of theoretical physics of the next university, but most players do not have enough patience. Another disadvantage is that most riddles very much base on the prior knowledge of the creator. When you create a riddle, especially those that play on words, you have to remember that your knowledge may differ from the knowledge of your players. So may find the riddle easy, while others may find it impossible to solve.
Although riddles can help you to get some time to plan your next steps, they have considerable disadvantages.

XV. Traps

Traps are a difficult issue. First of all, do not overuse them. How many times have you seen a trap in real life? I have never. The reason is pretty simple: If you would be built a fortress and probably inhabit it with mentally challenged guards, you would never include complex and possibly deadly traps.

It is possible to differentiate between two kinds of traps: offensive and defensive. Offensive traps are made to harm people. This is the standard poison dart through the keyhole or the ten ton block through the ceiling. Defensive traps primarily either trap someone or try to keep them away. This can include a cage falling from above to sleeping gas. Defensive traps may harm a person, but generally they do not kill, while offensive traps either kill or at least harm a person considerable. I never use offensive traps. It is a lame death, when a PC has fought many fights only to be smashed beneath a stone block.

When you want to include traps make sure that they can always be found. I do not mean that a simple test can find them, but that subtle hints should help the players in finding a trap. Even if the players trigger a trap, they should be given the chance to escape it (like dodging).
Never use traps as a substitute for a final fight or as a decisive situation. Only use them in the foreplay of the climax. The climax itself should then decided by the skills of the PCs or the players, but not by the pure chance of triggering a trap or not.

XVI. Combat

Sooner or later the adventure will lead to a combat. Combat rules should be fully understood, it is the place where flipping through the rulebook destroys most atmosphere. You should make notes of the combat procedures, copy the relevant tables and charts. When combat involves more than one opponent keep a journal. This should include the relevant skills for all opponents, room for notes (like modifiers) and room for projectiles. The last is especially important, since during combat people tend to forget to write down how many arrows or shots have been fired. The PCs may, after combat, search for fired arrows that are intact, but first of all keep note of this.

Some people like to use miniature during combat. This is personal taste. In general chess figures are enough. The only thing necessary are that everyone knows what figure represents what person. When you choose to use miniature, prepare to spend lots of money. You need a wide selection of possible opponents, ranging from ordinary citizens, watchmen to monsters. They can get very expensive and it takes time to paint them. If you already play tabletop games, you should use miniatures. They make combat much more vivid. Also tell every player that you use miniature and if they have to bring their own along.

You could build all situations like in a tabletop game, complete with walls, doors, hills and rivers. This is expensive. A cheap way is to take a large piece of cloth of paper printed with hex. They take a piece of transparent fabric and put it over. You can then paint the walls, corners or whatever on the transparent fabric and later wash it away with thinner.

The biggest advantage of using miniature or other figures is that there is no uncertainty about the position of the

opponents and the players do not run into the wrong places, just because they got the wrong idea of what is going on. Another advantage is that there is less discussion about line of fire etc. I have more than once that a player begins to interpret the laws of physics a little wide, when he finds out that someone is firing on him.

C. The World

Coming to the most important aspect of your game mastering: The world itself. The world with all its inhabitants, being it monsters or civilised people, is your medium to the players. They will judge you very much according to the setting and the reactions of the players.

I. Atmosphere

Atmosphere is important. Important with a capital "I". It is the blood that keeps your campaigns alive (and the players awake). A great adventure is nothing without atmosphere. Unfortunately creating atmosphere is pretty difficult. You can only tell of mist-covered streets, high-towering mountains and haunted halls so many times before they get boring. This is the big conflict. Most types of situations are overly exploited by movies and bad novels and the atmosphere is always created by clichés. The roleplaying industry has also played this chord. There are a great number of situations in pregenerated adventures in which fog moves the street and a scream can be heard. This may work once or twice, but afterwards your players will show clear signs of boredom.

This should not mean that you should not use clichés. In a way the players expect it and in fact clichés help a lot in visualising the situation. You should however not use the same patterns over and over again - leave that to computer RPGs. Change them a little bit or, even better, concentrate on details. That means that you can basically keep the cliché situation, but instead of presenting the overall situation, explain the details. Tell them how the sidewalk looks like, of the horse cadaver almost invisible through the fog, the cheers from the tavern on their right and the shouts of boatmen that steer into the harbour. The whole situation may be cliché, but the details let your players forget this.

Another way to do every now and then is to present contra-cliché situation. They both resemble each other on the first look. But the background is radically different. This can create amusement, at least it should be surprising. Probably the scream the PCs heard did not came from a young and beautiful blonde-haired woman in need, but from an ugly and fat hag or from rehearsals at the theatre.

Besides the problems with using clichés, you should be dramatic. Things generally need to be big, real big. The king's castle is magnificent and the dragon is terrifying. Be especially overly dramatic when the players have to do tests. Instead of saying "you climb the wall", detail every drop of sweat that runs down the back of the PC, how the muscles tighten and almost tear the shirt, the small stones that break under the feet, etc. Do this as often as possible. It makes a scene more vivid and easier to visualise.

II. Respect

Respect is also important. Treat your world with respect. Do not hesitate to kill a NPC, but try to play them as human beings. I have seen more than once that a NPC that followed the party was used as cannon-fodder. No one does this. Except for absolute fanatics and dumbheads no one is willing to sacrifice his live for someone else. Play the NPCs this way.
Should the players see that you do not take the world serious, they will exploit and no longer care for the world themselves. This then creates situations in which the PCs turn into a band of marauders moving raping and pillaging through the world.

Respect also means that the world should be coherent. It should not be realistic, which is difficult anyway when you think of magic, dragons, extradimensional demons, etc. I mean that the world in itself should make sense. The world should not contradict itself and should be believable. The worst thing that can happen to a role-playing environment is when the world begins to contradict itself. Even worse: the players are the first to find out. Everything that is possible for a NPC, should be (theoretically) possible for a PC and vice versa.

III. Consequences

Consequences are useful and interesting and too seldom used in games. Everything that the players do should have a reaction in the world. The players may or may not be aware of it, but you should put down the reaction for later use. Too often the players seem like little babies that only live for the moment and do not care for the consequences of their doing.
I remember an adventure in which the players cheated on a stock exchange until the bubble created burst. They players moved away from the city in which this happened and did no longer care. They returned about a year later. This time they met a great number of people living in poverty who basically told them the same story. You do not have to turn this anger into a lynch mob who is after the PCs, in this case I have not exploited it any further, but simply showed the players the consequences of their doings a year ago. They were impressed to say the last and one or two were even ashamed.

I have only used this "tactic" in a small scale. It should not hinder players to do what is necessary to do. When they have to attack the evil overlord, they should have a chance to get away with it and not chased back and forth through the realm by his loyal troops numbering 2000 men. I also use it more to illustrate what consequences their actions have and possibly to create new adventures, than to directly affect them. By doing this the players will think before they do, but they will do and sit shivering in the corner of the room for the fear of the consequences.

D. Death of a PC

This is a complex issue. It happens that a PC dies during gameplay. In the end most games are more or less combat oriented. Combat rules occupy major parts of the rulebook and there are few adventures totally free of combat. So you should be prepared to let them die. However do not kill them. There is no bodycount you have to achieve to be granted entrance to the Hall of Fame of GMs.

There is no rule of thumb about what the average lethality of a session is. When you ask yourself such a question it is too late. Better start playing scrabble. The death of a PC should under all circumstances be something extraordinary. Well, almost extraordinary. If Grog the Barbarian playing cards with demons of the void and cheats he should be turned into goo quite fast. If one of the PC is doing something really stupid and it is obvious let him die. I remember a situation were our group came across a big red button in Traveller. It read "self-destruct". Someone had the rather absurd idea that this was not triggering self-destruction but starting the engines of the vessel. Well he was wrong and we all died. This is okay, there is little you should do about it. In situation where death is less clear, you should give the players some more time (and tell them to think about it) before they do something really stupid. When the PC behave halfway reasonable however death should be extraordinary. With extraordinary I do not mean that the death of a PC should be dramatic. This is a question of the way you game, I only mean that death should happen but only rarely. I remember a Merp-campaign. My character died of small pox in a prison. Surely not a very glorious death, but it was okay, since it fitted into the atmosphere.

Personally I do not like it when it is just a question of chance whether a PC dies or not. I have seen a lot of situations where the players were asked to make a single test and the outcome decided upon death and life. I have either avoided the situation or when they occurred allowed further tests. To give you an example. A PC is climbing a cliff. He is a few hundred metres above ground and has to make a climbing test. He fails spectacular and would normally die. If the PC climbed the cliff just to on top faster or out of fun, let him die. The PC has decided to take an unnecessary risk. If it was necessary for the PC to do, let him make further test, getting more difficult each time. If he really fails all these test, okay then that was it. Or let him make a test to grab a branch or a luck test to fall on a small platform, which would leave him injured but not dead.

When you do this, you have to be careful not to exaggerate it. Otherwise your players have be desensitised to risk. They may get the feeling that whatever they do, you will get them out of this mess.

What you demand from a PC has to be true to all NPCs. I repeat "All NPCs". Every NPC, no matter how many time you invested in its creation can die. Do not let them reappear even after they have fallen into a volcano, crashed beneath tons of rubble or impaled on a stick. Unless of course this is the course of the adventure, but then you need a more than good explanation.

Some players, especially those overly involved (s.above), may have problems when they loose a character that they lead through many battles. There is only one thing to do about this. Make it clear that PC can die. Let them escape by the glimpse of a second the first time. When I have played the game master had a book. Every time a PC died its character sheet was put in this book. I found this a good idea, surely better than throw the sheet away.

E. Experience Points

Honestly I do not like the concept of experience points very much. When you kill ten people you may be more experienced, but you can hardly say that this can lead to better skills in reading and writing. I have always preferred to take down notes who did what. The experience points gained can then be distributed among the skills the PC have used during the game. In this way the advancement reflects the way the PC is played. Someone who fights and only fights is a fighter and unlikely to develop any notable skill in diplomacy.

Generally experience points are awarded for combat and roleplaying and solving certain situation. Killing a monster however can only bring experience points when the monster or foe uses a tactic unknown. The PC should get experience points the first time he fights the foe, probably also the second time. In the third fight the amount of experience points should be reduced and this should continue with any new fight until the PC gets no experience points for the fight, unless the foe used some new tactic or ability.

Roleplaying should be awarded with experience points. This helps to stimulate good roleplaying. Make clear that roleplaying is awarded. You may even want to as far as telling every player why he got the experience points (how much for fights, how much for roleplaying, et c.).