

PLAY UNSAFE

It's a summer's day and I'm running a game in my back garden. My only preparation for the game is scribbled words: "Decoy team", "Hotel", "Something blows up".

As the game progresses, it's clear that half the players want an investigative game and half want to shoot things. I have no preplanned ideas, so I follow their lead, giving the first group a mystery to solve, the second a monster to hunt.

The game goes well. The players say they enjoyed the story, which I invented on the fly.

Five years ago, I couldn't have run a game this way. I'd have prepared for hours before a game, arriving with sheaves of notes, railroading players through my adventure.

Then I took an improv course. The skills I learnt – inventing stories on the fly, being spontaneous, playing with others – fed into my roleplaying and made it better.

Contents

Introduction **v**

<i>The Zen of gaming</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Where do these ideas come from?</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Explanations</i>	<i>vii</i>

Play **1**

<i>Play</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Stop working</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Don't plan ahead</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Hold ideas lightly</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Be average</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>A boring experiment</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Be obvious</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>An obvious experiment</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Let your guard down</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Don't pretend</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Moving forward</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>GMinng an adventure without planning</i>	<i>13</i>

Build **15**

<i>Build</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Shooting ideas down</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Building on ideas</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Yes, And</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Imagine if everyone built on every idea</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Shooting ideas down deliberately</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Moving forward</i>	<i>24</i>

Status 25

<i>Status</i>	26
<i>Stories and status</i>	26
<i>Status behaviours</i>	28
<i>Reasons to play low status</i>	29
<i>Reasons to play high status</i>	29
<i>Status is emotional</i>	30
<i>Comic and serious status</i>	31
<i>How to roleplay realistic relationships</i>	31
<i>Status in roleplaying games</i>	32
<i>Types of status</i>	33
<i>Moving forward</i>	34

Tell stories 35

<i>Tell stories</i>	36
<i>Create routines and break them</i>	37
<i>Create platforms and add a tilt</i>	39
<i>Create a status relationship and alter it</i>	41
<i>Create a mystery and solve it</i>	42
<i>Deliver on your promises</i>	43
<i>Reincorporate</i>	44
<i>A number guideline</i>	45
<i>The trouble with trouble</i>	46
<i>An ordering guideline</i>	47
<i>Two good ways to start stories with trouble</i>	49
<i>Moral dilemmas</i>	50
<i>Get to the action</i>	51
<i>Keep the action onstage</i>	52
<i>Justify</i>	53
<i>Moving forward</i>	54

Work together **55**

Work together.....56
Give the other guy a good time.....57
Lose gracefully.....58
Trust.....58
Screw with each other.....59
Take risks.....61
Do things you don't want to do.....62
Do it again.....63
Put on a show.....63
Energy.....64
Fit into the group.....66

Afterword **68**

Glossary of games **69**

Thanks **73**

Introduction

In this book, I'll take the ideas I learnt in improvisation, and describe how they can make games more fun. The goal of this book is fun: when I talk about stories, ideas and theories, remember that everything aims at making games fun.

To start, in **Play**, I'll discuss how roleplaying games often seem like work. If we work less, and plan less, the game gets better.

Then, in **Build**, I'll describe how we often kill other players' ideas. If, instead, we take ideas and run with them, games take flight.

After that, in **Status**, I'll give ideas for playing your character. Using status techniques, I'll describe how to play kings, servants and everyone in between.

But the heart of this book is **Telling Stories**. Every game, from a dungeon crawl to a Greek epic, has a story at its heart. I'll take stories apart, analyse their structure, and describe how to make them better.

Finally, in **Work Together**, I'll talk about playing with others. When you work well with others, when you put on a show, when you screw with other players, your game comes to life.

Before I start, though, let's take a step back and look at the theory I'll be using.

The Zen of gaming

What do you want from this book? Many roleplayers will want *things they can do* to improve their game.

Now, of course, I'll describe techniques like this: reincorporating items in stories; changing status; building on other players' ideas. These techniques will, I hope, improve your game.

However, techniques are only half the story. Many of the ideas in this book are Zen-like: they involve doing less.

For example:

- "Be more boring!"
- "Do nothing!"
- "Stop trying to be clever!"

Perhaps you can see sense in these ideas now: for example, if you do nothing in a game, you'll listen more to other players.

Throughout this book, I'll explain both the technique and the Zen. Perhaps one will seem more natural to you: perhaps you relate better to things you can do than mystical Zen language, or vice versa. However, the two work best when used together.

Where do these ideas come from?

The ideas in this book originate from Keith Johnstone, an improvisation teacher and director.

Many concepts come from his book, *Impro*. If you enjoy this book, I highly recommend reading that book afterwards. Other ideas come from his follow-up book, *Impro for Storytellers*.

Keith Johnstone's ideas have been developed and expanded by improvisation teachers worldwide. This book includes many of these expanded ideas.

Explanations

In the examples, I refer to different types of games: from behemoths like *Dungeons and Dragons* to small-press games such as *Dogs In The Vineyard*. If a game is unfamiliar, look in the back of the book, where all games are listed and explained.

Often, in these examples, I assume that games have a GM (Game Master), who runs the game. Some modern games do not have a GM: however, the examples make sense if you read "GM" as "Another Player".

Play

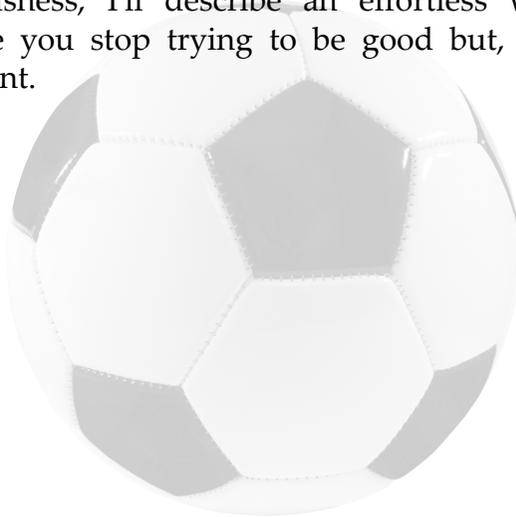


*Roleplaying games sometimes seem like work:
we plan ahead, we think too much.
Stop working and start playing.
The less you are working,
the better you play.*

Play

Roleplaying games can get too serious. We buy shelves of thick books. We plan detailed adventures. We memorise rules.

In this section, we'll explore what happens when you throw the serious stuff away: when you stop trying, stop planning and let your guard down. In place of the seriousness, I'll describe an effortless way to play, where you stop trying to be good but, often, you're brilliant.



Stop working

Often, we treat gaming like a job. We study rulebooks, we try to gain an advantage, we care more about experience points than enjoying ourselves.

I remember, as a teenager, playing Dungeons and Dragons. At first it was fun, but it became work: in one session, I remember negotiating for a business permit. It was dull.

Later, I carried my work ethic to Vampire LARPs. I studied rulebooks, working out tactics. I memorised lists of powers and combat rules.

But it's a game. So work less. Stop thinking. Don't be clever.

There are two reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, working hard is no fun.

Secondly, if you're working hard, you're no fun to play with. The other players see your seriousness and respond to it: your game will soon feel like a business meeting. Lighten up, play around, and you'll be more fun to have around.

Don't plan ahead

Many roleplayers plan ahead. They have an agenda for their character, which they push forward, little by little.

When I played Vampire LARPs, I'd arrive at each game with an agenda, which always fell apart. Like other players, I had long, convoluted plots, which took months to build. Looking back, it was boring, but fun always seemed around the corner.

Even now, I plan in my head, almost unconsciously: when *this* happens, I'll do *this*. Then I sit, waiting for the thing to happen. It doesn't.

Don't plan ahead. There are many reasons not to.

Firstly, *it doesn't work*. Someone might say something that throws your plan out the window. And then, to be blunt, you're screwed.

Secondly, *it's boring*. Sitting at the table, pushing your pre-crafted plot is predictable: you know exactly what will happen. If you don't plan, you'll discover things you didn't expect.

Thirdly, *the stuff you make up on the fly is better*. When you invent on the spot, we see the excitement on your face, hear the urgency of your voice. When you plan, that excitement isn't there.

Now, not planning ahead is scary. Without a plan, you lose control. Anything could happen.

Hold ideas lightly

I enjoy researching for games. I read H P Lovecraft stories to inspire Cthulhu games; I research Zeppelins for pulp games; I pore over Victorian maps of London for detective games.

This research provokes ideas. I want a chase, like the one in *The Mountains Of Madness!* I want to fly a Zeppelin! I want to sail up the Thames!

But isn't this planning ahead? Should I stop?

Let's take a step back. Of course, it's fun to research for games. Of course, it's interesting to imagine things to happen in games.

But keep these ideas at the back of your mind. Don't plan for them to happen. Drop an idea if it wouldn't work. But, if you see the chance to make it happen, seize it.

For example, let's say I'd like my detective to sail

along the Thames. It would be a mistake to plan for this: insisting our characters search the Thames, insisting we go to London.

However, if we're searching London, we might go to a tavern near the Thames. We might search, in the Thames, for a body, using a boat.

Keep your ideas vague. "Sailing along the Thames" is unspecific, adaptable to many stories. "Seeing the murderer through a telescope" is more difficult to bring into a game. "A motorcycle chase through the Highlands of Scotland" is unlikely to happen without railroading.

Do think of things you'd like to happen in games. Hold the idea lightly: don't force it, don't push for it and, if it's not happening, drop it. But, if it makes sense, take it.

But that's the fun. If you react instantly, if you have no preconceived ideas, if you don't think into the future, you'll have a better game. You'll be more fun to play with, too.

Be average

Don't try to be *good* at games. Don't try to play *well*.

Whenever I try to be good, I'm bad. I've given speeches in Vampire LARPs, straining to be entertaining: I never was. I opened a HeroQuest game with an in-character monologue, trying to be funny: I wasn't.

Now, I've been entertaining and brilliant at the table: but never when I'm trying to be entertaining and brilliant. It doesn't happen because I try: it happens when I just play.

We've all played with people who try to be funny or try to shock. It doesn't work. When you're trying to be good, you're bad. The harder you try, the more you fail.

Instead, be average. Be boring. Be dull.

Paradoxically, when you try to be boring, you're interesting to watch. When you try to be average, that's when you're good.

In their book *Maximum Performance*, Laurence

Moorhouse and Leonard Gross interviewed athletes who had broken world records.

None of these athletes had tried to be good. When interviewed, they'd say things like:

"I didn't feel well that day...I don't remember any particular moment during the event. It all seemed so easy. At the finish, the way the crowd was cheering told me I'd done well, but I had the feeling that if I had only tried a little harder I could have done much better."

If you're striving to scale the heights of Awesome, we don't see Awesome: we see you trying. Stop trying, aim to be average, and you'll enjoy yourself more.

A boring experiment

On an Internet forum, I asked people to tell a boring story. Many responses, far from boring, were fascinatingly detailed. Here is an excerpt from a story by Jarod Scott:

I yawn, look outside and see that it's still dark. There's not much to see, but I gaze casually at the ground that fully surrounds the tavern. I count to a thousand, and it is still dark. Maybe hours from now, the sun will rise and that will mean only five more days before the soup of the day is mutton stew. Yesterday was chicken broth, which is alright. Oh, but that means it will be five days till mutton stew. I try counting to two thousand this time, and roll several dice to see how far I get. Thirty-seven. So I start counting from there before checking outside again. Still dark. I look back inside. There's a couple whores dozing at a corner table. I don't care to spend my money.

Be obvious

If, while gaming, you can't be clever or try hard, what can you do? The answer is: be obvious.

Do the obvious thing: the thing that obviously happens next in the story; the thing that you think everyone expects to happen. Paradoxically, that obvious thing may, to everyone else, seem original and brilliant.

For example: in a game of *Lacuna*, a team of agents was investigating a hospital, where people had been disappearing. One player suggested there should be a ward where former agents paid to have their faces resculpted. The idea was obvious to him: to me, and to everyone else, it was brilliant.

Another example. I remember running a scene, in a Vampire LARP, in which someone had received letters, written in blood. A player asked to examine the paper.

An obvious idea occurred to me. If the ink was blood, the paper should be skin: parchment, made of human skin.

When I said this, people were shocked, as if I'd said something brilliant. I hadn't. I'd just said what, to me, was obvious.

Naturally, not every "obvious" thing you say will be brilliant. Often, what you think is an obvious next step in the story will, indeed, be an obvious step in the story.

An obvious experiment

I posted the following story on an Internet forum.

A thief moves across the rooftops, keeping to the shadows. He creeps to a window, reaches through and opens it. He sees a woman and, behind her, something shining on a desk.

Then I asked:

1. What do you naturally expect will happen next in the story?
2. What would you like to happen next?
3. What is the coolest, cleverest thing you can think up to happen next?

All answers to 1 and 2 were, in different ways, natural extensions of the story. Some seemed brilliant.

- I want the woman to be beautiful and to embrace the man.

- She turns, holding the shining object. It's a knife. "That was the noisiest B&E I've ever heard."
- The thief dashes into hiding watching the woman continue to get ready for a magnificent ball or some such.

Constrastingly, most answers to 3 were overblown, clever ideas.

- From the waist down, her body consists of a dozen writhing tentacles tipped with ten-inch serrated spikes, which tear him limb from limb. He laughs hysterically the whole time.
- Behind the desk, a grandiose chair swivels to face the women. Bill Clinton draws on his cigar. Klaxons blare and orange lights flash. A countdown commences. His bathrobe falls to the floor.

That's fine. When you respond obviously, 90% of the time, you'll carry the story forward naturally. If you'd tried to be clever, 90% of the time, you'd have thrown the story off course. And, when you're obvious, one time in ten, you'll be brilliant.

Try to be brilliant and you'll fail. Be obvious and, often, you'll be brilliant.

Let your guard down

We were playing Primetime Adventures, portraying an 18th Century version of the A-Team. I played "The Mask", a version of the A-Team's charmer, "The Face".

Now, do you remember how cheesy the romances were in Eighties shows? And how explicit? There was always a love interest, always a romance and usually sexual innuendo. I remember watching an Automan episode, in which Automan was chatting up two beautiful women, in a club. The women asked which of them he preferred. He appeared to negotiate a threesome ("It doesn't seem fair to deprive either of you"), before being called away to solve crimes.

I wanted The Mask to be a homage to these romances. So I described him flirting his way into castles, past beautiful female guards; chatting up gang members; flirting with his torturers, who were twins.

Then I became uncomfortable. Was I, without knowing it, revealing a sexual fantasy? Would the other players think I was a pervert? Was I, accidentally, giving away something about myself? So I stopped.

I censor myself similarly in *Dogs In The Vineyard*. Sometimes, it'd be in character to, say, shoot a woman carrying a demon baby. But what would people think? That I was playing out a fantasy of violence against women?

When roleplaying, we often play safe. We don't want to give anything away about ourselves.

You see this at conventions. Players want the GM to lead them through an adventure. They sit quietly, not wanting to do anything, in case they do something wrong.

And, yet, play is more interesting when we let our guard down.

In a recent Cthulhu game, my character flirted with a girl of higher class. For me, that's close to the bone and, hence, made the game more poignant.

Similarly, in *Lacuna* games, I've started using management-speak: "We've had some comments about your performance". This language sets my teeth on edge: so, when I say it, there's an electricity in the air.

When you let your guard down, even if just a little, you bring the game closer to home. Try it. It adds an edge to your game.

Don't pretend

Sometimes we pretend to let our guard down, but don't.

In horror games, we comfortably describe demons bursting out of chests, women ripped apart, screaming deaths. There's a sense of taboo-breaking, but, really, we're treading a well-worn path. The game doesn't scare anyone, because everyone's playing safe.

Similarly, many small-press games handle "serious" issues that affect no-one.

Players describe suicides, slave-beatings and war: they shoot pregnant women in *Dogs In The Vineyard* or torture minions in *My Life With Master*. But everyone stays in their comfort zone. Players break social taboos: but not their own taboos.

Personally, I narrate shooting pregnant women and feel nothing. But I never narrate my character's father into roleplaying games: because I don't want to play a character whose father suffers. It's too close to the bone.

So I keep my guard up, even as I fool myself I'm being challenged. Many players do the same: kid themselves they're digging deep, whereas, actually, they're skimming the surface.

If you let your guard down, do it for real. Don't "tackle issues", don't wallow in gore. Choose something that pushes your buttons and put it in your game.

Moving forward

In this section, we've experimented with not planning ahead. But if we don't plan ahead, what do we do, moment to moment, in the game? The answer is: we build on other players' ideas.

GMing an adventure without planning

Can the GM, too, avoid planning ahead: even running an adventure with no planning?

The answer is yes: it's possible and very rewarding. Particular sections of this book will help with this.

Firstly, reread the sidebar "Hold ideas lightly". Have vague ideas of things for the game: a chase through sewers, warehouses of filing cabinets, a confrontation atop a water tower. Hold these ideas lightly, abandoning them if the story goes elsewhere: if

players chase the murderer to a train station, hold the final confrontation on the roof of a moving train instead. However, if you see the chance, use your idea.

Then, read the later section "Imagine everyone built on every idea". With no planning, you'll build on your players' ideas to construct a story.

Finally, read the entire chapter "Tell Stories". The narrative tricks in this section will help you invent the plot as you go along.

Build



*We often shoot other players' ideas down.
Instead, build on them.*

Build

Often, games go nowhere, because we work against each other. You want to talk your way past the guard, but I attack him. By killing each other's ideas, we spoil games, without meaning to do so.

In this chapter, I'll describe reasons why we shoot down ideas unintentionally, even unconsciously. Then I'll discuss how to play cooperatively instead, by building on each other's ideas.

Finally, we'll see where everything I've discussed so far has been leading: a utopian way to play, where no-one plans, no-one works and everyone's ideas reach fruition.

Shooting ideas down

In games, whether we mean to or not, we often shoot others' ideas down:

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Player: | "I search for another entrance!" |
| GM: | "No, there's only the main door." |
| Player 1: | "I force you to kneel in front of me!" |
| Player 2: | "I break free and stand up." |
| GM: | "She moves towards you seductively." |
| Player: | "I push her away." |

It's hard to define "shooting ideas down" exactly, but you'll know it when you see it. It's about:

- Saying an implicit "No".
- Negating what was just said.
- Stopping the action from advancing.

Generally, it makes things dull, yet we still do it. Why? Here are some possible reasons.

1. We shoot ideas down in life

If someone insults us, in real life, we don't challenge them to a duel. This avoids trouble, stopping the action before it starts:

Stranger: "You're a pathetic worm!"
Me: "Look, calm down."

Stranger: "I'm going to kill you!"
Me: [Walks away quickly]

That is, we shoot the idea down, to keep us safe. But safe is boring. In games, we want trouble.

Stranger: "You're a pathetic worm!"
Character: "A laughable insult. I challenge you to a duel of honour!"

Stranger: "I'm going to kill you!"
Character: "You'll be dead before you reach that gun."

Fight the urge to be safe. When an idea comes along that will make trouble, build on it.

2. *I have a plan*

If we've planned ahead, we often kill ideas that interfere with our plan.

Game Masters are notorious for this. They plan an adventure, then shoot down any idea that doesn't correspond with theirs:

GM: "In front of you is a door, with a riddle painted above it."
Player: "I look for other entrances."
GM: "No, just the door."
Player: "OK. I'm going to try and charm a guard to let us in."
GM: "They don't speak your language."
Player: "We go back to town."
GM: "But town is two days away and you must enter the castle tonight!"

However, players shoot each other's ideas down, too. Let's imagine I want to steal a jewel stealthily:

Me: "I creep into the tavern, sticking to the shadows."
Other player: "I knock on the tavern door, loudly."
Me: "I stop you! I grab your hand and pull you into the shadows."

Here, the other player shot my idea down, then I shot down his: hence, nothing ends up happening.

3. *Our guard is up*

We often shoot down ideas that take us into uncomfortable areas:

GM: "She moves seductively towards you."
Player: "I back away."

If I kissed the girl, I might reveal something about myself: people might think I sleep around or I might have to describe sex. It's safer to step away.

Of course, it can be good to kill ideas we're not comfortable with. If I don't like sexual content in games, I should kill ideas that involve sex.

The problem comes when we kill ideas, instinctively, but wonder why our game is dull.

4. *I don't want to look bad*

In life, we often avoid things that would make us look bad. This leads us to instinctively shoot down these ideas in games:

Player 1: "I fling manure at you!"
Player 2: "It misses!"
Player 1: "I force you to your knees!"
Player 2: "I get up."

Whatever our reason for shooting ideas down, it kills the action. It keeps us safe: and safe is dull. If we build on ideas, things become more exciting.

Building on ideas

When you build on an idea, you accept it and take the action forward.

Player: "I search for another entrance"
GM: "OK! There's a small trapdoor beneath the ramparts."

Player 1: "I force you to kneel in front of me."
Player 2: "I beg for forgiveness."

GM: "She moves towards you seductively."
Player: "I run my fingers through her hair."

You can build on an idea by conflicting with it, providing you carry the action forward:

Player 1: "I force you to kneel in front of me."
Player 2: "I get up and force you against the wall!"

You can also build on an idea by taking it in an unexpected direction:

Player 1: "She moves towards you seductively."
Player 2: "I run her through with my sword."

Does this seem easy? Well, it is, and it isn't, and then it is again. To explain...

1. It's easy to understand the technique.
2. But using the technique consistently changes the way you play, which is hard.

3. And getting your mental blocks out of the way, so you can use the technique, is hard.
4. But, when you get used to it, building on ideas is so little effort, so pleasurable and so good for the story, that it makes play easier.

And this is where everything - not being clever, not planning ahead, building on ideas, being obvious - comes together. It produces an exciting, unpredictable, spur-of-the-moment way to play.

Yes, And...

When you build on an idea, you say an implicit "Yes, And..." to the idea. If we make it explicit:

Player 1: "She moves towards you seductively."

Player 2: "Yes! And I run her through with my sword."

Try saying "Yes, And...", in response to other people's ideas, before you've decided how to respond to them. You may find that, as you say it, you'll realise how to respond.

Try playing with everyone saying "Yes, And...".

Player 1: "She moves towards you seductively."

Player 2: "Yes! And I run her through with my sword."

Player 1: "Yes! And she dies on the floor."

Player 2: "Yes! And her father fights me."

You'll build a story without effort.

Yes, And...

Imagine if everyone built on every idea

Imagine that, for a whole game, you did nothing but build on other people's ideas.

In fact, imagine everyone at the table played like this: accepting ideas and moving them forward. What would happen?

Firstly, you *couldn't plan ahead*. Everything you did would be based on someone else's ideas: there'd be no chance to plan.

So, as the GM, you couldn't plan an adventure. You'd react to the players, building the adventure on what they gave you.

But if we're building on each other's ideas, where do the ideas start? Is there, in fact, anything to build on?

The answer lies in *being obvious*. If I react to something in an obvious way, my obvious will, often, seem like a brilliant idea. Then, other players can build on that idea.

For example, if I say:

- "I kneel in front of you."

And you say something that, to you, seems obvious:

- "I kick you in the chest! You sprawl at my feet!"

Then, to me, that's an idea I can react to:

- "I beg for mercy!"

And you can react to that:

- "Really? What will you give me for my mercy?"

To play like this, *your guard must be down*: if you're self-censoring, you can't react immediately. Also, you will find that your guard *comes* down: because you're being obvious, you're revealing something about yourself.

So, with this, everything comes together: building on ideas, being obvious, not planning, letting your guard down. You can play an entire game like this. You only react, never initiate: and yet your reaction seems like a brilliant initiation.

Shooting ideas down deliberately

Sometimes, shooting ideas down can add to a story, by adding tension:

GM: You're trapped in a prison cell.
Player: I call the guard.
GM: No-one comes.
Player: I look at the walls.
GM: They're sheer stone.
Player: I use the magic I swore I'd never use.
GM: Right...

Here, when earlier ideas are shot down, we understand a later idea will succeed.

Killing ideas can also simulate delusion or surreality:

Player: I open the door.
GM: Your hand passes through the handle.
Player: I ask the barman what's happening.
GM: There isn't a barman. Perhaps there never was.

Again, this builds tension, later to be resolved.

Moving forward

In the last two chapters, we've developed a utopian, moment-to-moment way to play.

Will you play all your games like this, all the time? Not completely. You'll probably still plan, a little; use your clever ideas, a little; study rules, a little.

So keep the parts of your play you like; abandon the ones you don't; and use the parts of this new play style that appeal to you.

In the next section, we focus on playing characters, using the powerful techniques of status.

Status



At their heart, stories are about status.

*Play with status and let it
drive your game.*

Status

In this chapter, I'll describe how status techniques can bring your characters to life.

I'll explain how to play high status - kings, heroes, gods - and low status - servants, beggars, fools. I'll list tricks you can use, at the gaming table, to raise and lower your status. I'll consider the different sorts of status in roleplaying games.

Alongside all that, I'll list reasons to play high and low status; I'll describe how to use status to produce natural, realistic relationships; and I'll outline how status drives different sorts of stories.

Stories and Status

All stories, in some way, are about status.

Take King Lear: a powerful King slides, slowly, towards impotence. Or Cinderella: a rags-to-riches story. Or Great Expectations: a boy is elevated to high society and, gradually, watches everything crumble around him.

Status changes are storytelling gold. Take any low-status character:

- Stephanie is a milkmaid from a poor family

Then elevate her to high status:

... One day, a mysterious stranger tells her she is a princess.

Instantly, you have a story: one similar to Cinderella or Harry Potter.

Similarly, take a high-status character:

- Lord Stefan rules the province of Goldfields

And bring him low:

... until he loses it in a card game.

Again, you have a story.

The best roleplaying games use status for you. Dungeons and Dragons is about heroes, rising in power and wealth. Vampire has Princes and Seneschals jockeying for position. The small-press game The Shab Al-Hiri Roach is based on status, which it calls Reputation: every scene ends in a fight over status.

But you can use status in any game. You can invent kings or underdogs and deliberately change their status. Players can boost other characters' status or destroy it. GMs can play high-status NPCs and let the PCs bring them crashing to earth.

Status behaviours

To be high status - to play a king or a god - try doing these things at the gaming table:

- Hold eye contact
- Keep still, especially your head
- Take up lots of space
- Relax
- Imagine you are tall
- Speak directly, as though you do not expect to be interrupted
- Say things to imply that you are better (in some way) than the person you are talking to

Similarly, to play low status - a servant or a fool - try the following:

- Break eye contact downwards, then look back immediately
- Twitch and make unnecessary movements, especially your head
- Touch your head and hair
- Take up as little space as possible

Reasons to play low status

1. Low status characters are, generally, more likeable than high-status ones: think of R2-D2 compared to C3PO; Passepartout compared to Phileas Fogg; Cinderella compared to the Ugly Sisters. We admire kings, but like their servants more.
2. The story needs you. If everyone's high status, it's boring. Besides, if you rise to high-status later, that'll make a superb story.
3. Remember you needn't be miserable: you can be happy in your low status. Be a retainer who loves to serve or a servant who can't live without his master.
4. You're not your character. Snivelling, grovelling and dying ignominiously are fun when it's not really you doing it.

Reasons to play high status

1. High status characters are better admired than low status ones. We won't like you, but we'll respect you.
2. The story needs you. When you are brought low, everyone will enjoy it. Realise you're setting yourself up for a fall and enjoy it. Play a bully; play a king; play a hate-figure. You'll get your due.
3. Remember you needn't be nasty: you can be happy in your high status. Think of Bill Clinton, Tom Cruise or Tony Blair: you can be charming but high status. We'll still be glad, though, when you're brought down.
4. You're not your character. When you give orders to your friend across the table, it's not really you doing it.

- Be nervous
- Speak hesitantly, as though you expect to be interrupted
- Say things to imply that you are inferior, in some way, to the person you are talking to

There is a synergy between these. If you hold your head still while speaking, you may find you stand straighter and speak more directly.

Experiment with status behaviour in real life, but be careful. I once went to a bar and played high status. When ordering my drink, I spoke directly and clearly, as though giving the barman an order. He jumped to get the glass: but looked angry for the rest of the night.

Status is emotional

Status behaviour is emotional. Some people hate playing high status; some hate low status.

If you try changing your status behaviour, you may find that you:

1. Hate it.
2. Can't.
3. Think you've changed your status, but you haven't.

Comic and serious status

We can describe the same status shifts comically or seriously. When a King is brought low, that can be comic or tragic.

Comedy often uses quick status shifts: the King falls in mud; the tramp dresses as a king.

Tragedy often uses slow status shifts: King Lear slowly loses his mind.

Serious stories, that aren't tragedies, also use slow status shifts: Cinderella is elevated slowly to greatness; Pip, in Great Expectations, is slowly raised to high status and slowly brought back down.

How to roleplay realistic relationships

Try keeping your status slightly above or below someone else: be slightly superior or inferior. Change, frequently, so that you go from slightly superior to slightly inferior and back again.

This produces natural, lifelike relationships.

Personally, I can't be high status for long, without becoming embarrassed and apologetic.

Equally, you might hate someone using status behaviour on you. I detest people acting high-status to me: I worry about it, for days, and fantasise about putting them in their place.

Status in roleplaying games

In games, we often want to be powerful, heroic, to conquer everything in our path: that is, to be high status.

That was my experience of Dungeons and Dragons. Everyone wanted to be a hero: a fighting machine or powerful wizard. Personally, I played thieves, but that was high status, too: I wanted to be sneaky and perform feats no-one else could.

Later, I played Vampire LARPs, and high status became a problem. Again, everyone wanted to be powerful but, this time, they competed for power: only one could be Prince. Status changes caused upset: when a Prince was overthrown, the player was mortified. There were tears when characters died.

This made games dull. Players clung to their status jealously, afraid to do anything extraordinary, for fear of retribution.

Types of status

There is **Given Status**: status that other people give you. If you're king, you are high status because everyone else treats you with respect.

There is **Behaviour Status**: the status with which you act. You can behave like a king, even though you're not.

Disconnects between these types of status can be deeply affecting or comic. A mad king, who soils himself, has high Given Status (he's still king) but low Behaviour Status. A beggar (low Given Status) with affected airs (high Behaviour Status) is a comic figure.

Note the synergy between the two. A king, behaving low status, will be deposed. A beggar, behaving above his station, risks being pushed into the gutter.

Then, in roleplaying games, there is **Player Status** and **Character Status**. A player whom everyone admires (high status) might play a beggar (low status). Another player might nervously (low status) describe his paladin smiting non-believers (high status).

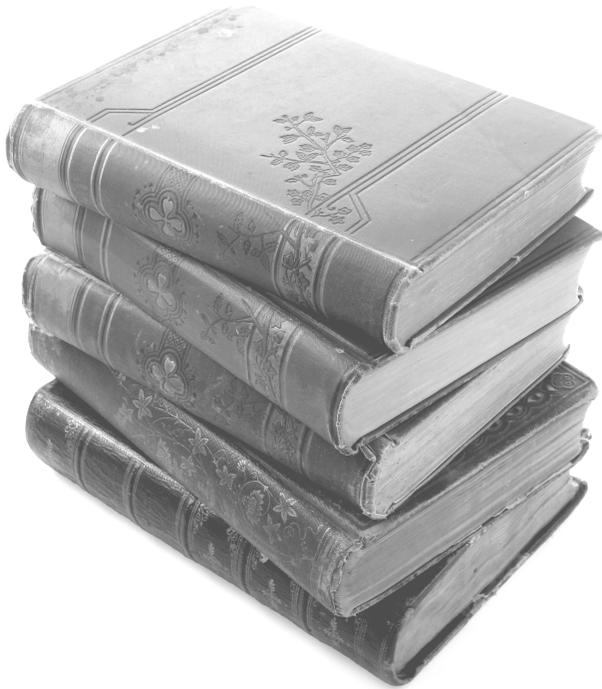
Again, note the connection. A player of high status will, often, play the leader of the party. A low-status player, who finds it hard to interrupt, will have difficulty playing a high-status character.

Finally, there is **Game Status**: status granted by the game rules. A fighter with high Strength has a form of high status. A character whose Hit Points fall below zero has the ultimate form of low status: she is dead.

Moving forward

We've begun to talk about stories. Let's dive in, now, and explore how stories can power your game.

Tell stories



Roleplaying games are about stories.

This is how to tell them.

Tell Stories

Never underestimate how important stories are in roleplaying. When you're playing a game, you're telling a story.

Even in the most basic dungeon crawl, there's a story: you start in an inn, where a mysterious stranger invites you to explore a dungeon. You slash your way through the dungeon. Finally, you meet a huge creature, which you kill, and take its treasure.

That structure is a story and is important. If the adventure had no structure - if you found treasure at the dungeon entrance, killed an orc, then suddenly found a tunnel that led to safety - it would make no sense.

Here, "story" needn't mean a fairytale. It needn't mean drama and tears. It just means that, from the start of the game to the end, everything fits together.

In this chapter, I'll describe tricks to tell stories: to start them, end them and make them sparkle. Many of these tricks overlap, but they're best considered separately.

Create routines and break them

Here's a simple, effective trick to start a story.

Create a routine.

- We are drinking in a tavern.
- We are hunting in the wilderness.
- I am mending my armour.

Then do something to break that routine.

- We are drinking in a tavern...
... when a mysterious stranger approaches us.
- We are hunting in the wilderness...
... when we hear a roar louder than we have ever heard before.
- I am mending my armour...
... when I notice it does not bend when I hit it with the hammer.

There are several ways to break any given routine.

- We are drinking in a tavern:
... when a mysterious stranger approaches us.
... when an arrow thuds into the wall near us.

... when we smell smoke.

You'll intuitively sense when the routine needs to be broken. When you feel something needs to happen, break the routine.

When you break the routine, you can create a new routine. You can then break that. By continuing, you can tell a story:

- We are hunting in the wilderness...
... when we hear a roar louder than we have ever heard before.
- We go towards the roar...
... but a mysterious force is holding us back.
- We are trying to find a way round the mysterious force...
... when a witch doctor approaches us.
- We are talking to the witch doctor...
... when she begins to transform into something else.

And, with that simple trick, we've begun a story.

Create platforms and add a tilt

When you create a platform, you start a scene in a way that isn't instantly dramatic.

For example:

Player 1: "I sit down. 'Evening, Dave."
GM: "The barman looks at you. He flicks his eyes to a tankard of ale he'd poured as you came in. 'You'll be wanting that."
Player 1: "'Yeah,' I say, drinking it. 'Quiet in here, isn't it?'"

and so on.

When you add a tilt, you introduce the drama.

Player 1: "I draw my sword and aim the point at his throat. 'It's too quiet, Dave. What have you done with everybody?'"

Here, the platform is as important as the tilt: that is, the calm preceding the drama is as important as the drama itself. During the platform, we add colour, we get to know the characters. When the tilt comes, the dramatic force is greater.

Most people instinctively realise the importance of a calm before the storm. For example, few games of *Dogs In The Vineyard* start with instant drama:

GM: "As you ride into Ash Bridge, a woman yells 'They're trying to kill my baby!'"

Instead, we begin with platform-building:

- GM: It's an cold autumn day and you ride into Ash Bridge. The town seems deserted.
- Player: I tether my horse at...can we say there's a well in the centre of town?
- GM: Sure.
- Player: I tether my horse at the well. I head towards the inn.
- GM: OK, there's a tiny hostelry across the way. As you walk in, the barkeep straightens up.

...and so on. All the non-dramatic details add to the story.

As with breaking routines, you will instinctively know when the tilt should come. After building a platform for a while, you'll realise that something needs to happen. That's the time for a tilt.

Create a status relationship and alter it

Here's another way of thinking about platforms and tilts.

When you build a platform, you establish a status relationship between two characters. When you tilt, you change the status relationship.

For example: at the beginning of the scene, you bully the bartender for information, establishing yourself as higher status than him. Halfway through, the bartender produces a shotgun, raising his status and lowering yours.

Everything else about platforms still applies. You must give the status relationship time to build. You'll instinctively know when to alter the status relationship.

For full effect, keep both ideas of platforms and tilts in mind.

Create a mystery and solve it

In your stories, create mysteries, then solve them.

Tilts are good for creating mysteries. Here are some mystery-creating tilts:

- "You realise the beer is poisoned!" (Who poisoned it?)
- "The bartender says 'I know who killed your brother, but it'll cost you.'" (Who killed him?)
- "Behind the bar is a trapdoor!" (Where does it lead?)

For comparison, try taking the mystery out.

- "You realise the bartender has poisoned your beer, to bring you to justice!"
- "The bartender says 'I killed your brother, because he was sleeping with my wife.'"
- "Behind the bar is a trapdoor marked 'To the sewers'"

They're still tilts, but they're weaker: the mystery has gone and, with it, tension and anticipation.

Deliver on your promises

Anton Chekhov was quoted as saying:

"If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there."

In games, we promise things, whether we mean to or not. For example:

- "The treasure is guarded by a mighty ogre."
... promises a fight with the ogre.
- "No-one has ever escaped from that prison."
... promises the players will be imprisoned and attempt to escape.
- "There is mysterious magic brewing."
... promises we'll see it in action.

When promises are fulfilled, it's satisfying; when they're left unfulfilled, it's dissatisfying.

The difficulty, here, is that you can accidentally promise something. As a GM, if you describe a prison from which no-one has ever escaped, you've promised an escape attempt. Once promised, you must deliver.

Make promises in your games and keep them. Be aware of what you promise accidentally, and keep those promises too.

Reincorporate

When you reincorporate, you bring back something from earlier in the story. Although the trick is simple, it's magical: it creates the illusion of structure, giving the effect that you'd planned this all along. Reincorporation brings stories, or part of a story, to an end.

For example:

- Your father gives you a small silver key as you leave home
... Later, it opens the chest after you kill the dragon.
- A mysterious old man gives you a scroll.
... Later, the magical door opens when you read it.
- Your aunt waves to you in the fields, waving her knitting.
... Later, she's taken hostage.
... Later still, she uses her knitting needle to unpick her ropes.

Note that there's no forward planning here. When you decided your father gave you a silver key, you hadn't imagined it might open a chest. That decision came later. If there hadn't been a chest, perhaps the key would have opened a door.

A number guideline

You should usually reincorporate once, twice or many times.

Reincorporating once is simple: you introduce something early in the story; it reappears towards the end.

- The old man gives you a mysterious scroll, which you cannot read.
- But, as the dragon bears down on you, you suddenly understand it.

Reincorporating twice uses the Rule of Three. Something happens; it happens again; but the third time, it changes.

- The old man gives you a mysterious scroll, which you cannot read.
- Before you enter the cave, you look again, but still cannot read it.
- But, as the dragon bears down on you, you suddenly understand it.

Beyond three, you must incorporate many times, to develop a theme. The final time, it changes.

- The old man gives you a mysterious scroll, which you cannot read.
- That night, you look at the scroll, but cannot read it.
- You show it to the shopkeeper, who cannot read it.
- You show it to the knight, who cannot read it.
- Even the sage, in the hills, cannot read it.
- But, as the dragon bears down on you, you suddenly understand it.

Importantly, the item you reincorporate will often be part of the platform. This is an important reason to build platforms: the more details in the platform, the more opportunities there are to reincorporate.

Try reincorporating different things: objects, people, locations.

Sometimes, reincorporation may seem nonsense. Here's an example:

... As the dragon bears down on you, you produce a little silver key, and insert it into a keyhole in its leg. As you turn, it falls, dead.

However, you'll be surprised how far you can push it. Things that, at first sight, seem unexpected, often make surprising sense when you say them:

... As the dragon bears down on you, you produce a little silver key, and insert it into a dusty keyhole in the floor. A trapdoor opens, sending the dragon plummeting into the depths of the mountain.

The trouble with trouble

Many people mistake "trouble" for plot. If you're the GM, "trouble" means throwing nasty stuff at the players:

An ordering guideline

As a guideline: reincorporate things in the reverse order they were introduced.

For example, this story...

1. When you leave home, your father gives you a silver key.
2. The man in the tavern warns you not to look at the dragon.
3. There are mysterious words written on the city wall.
4. The silver key opens the dragon's lair.
5. You don't look at the dragon as you kill it.
6. The mysterious words open the chest the dragon guarded.

...is OK.

But this is better:

1. When you leave home, your father gives you a silver key.
2. The man in the tavern warns you not to look at the dragon.
3. There are mysterious words written on the city wall.
4. The mysterious words open the dragon's lair.
5. You don't look at the dragon as you kill it.
6. The silver key opens the chest the dragon guarded.

- A bomb goes off!
- Swordsmen burst in!
- She pulls a gun!

Two particular mistakes that GMs make are:

- Opening a story with trouble: for example, starting with a fight.
- Adding too much trouble: after the swordfight, there's an explosion, then a dragon attacks!

Remember platforms and tilts: here, the trouble corresponds to a tilt. But you need a platform before the tilt: that is, you need calm, non-dramatic storytelling before the drama.

Without that platform, the story feels lightweight: you won't care about the characters or what's happening. Also, there will be nothing to reincorporate, to end the story.

Note that mental attitude plays a part. Relaxed GMs happily let the calmness play out, introducing trouble when it seems natural.

Anxious GMs, nervous that the game isn't working, want action. They create trouble. Then, when the story fails, because they added too much trouble, they add more trouble. Another swordfight! Fireballs! And things go from bad to worse.

Two good ways of starting stories with trouble

Here are two exceptions to the rule: don't start a story with trouble.

1. The James Bond way

Many James Bond movies start with action before the credits: ski-ing, explosions, gunfire, stunts.

The audience knows that the story hasn't started yet. They know that, after the credits, the story starts, with a period of calm storytelling (Bond enters M's office and the mission is explained).

We can use this in roleplaying games. Start a game with a fight but, afterwards, realise that the story must start.

2. The Body On Page One

British murder mysteries, such as Agatha Christie's, contained three "acts".

1. In the first third of the book, the characters and setting were introduced (the platform).

2. Only afterwards would there be a murder: a tilt. The investigation would occupy the next part of the book.

3. Finally, in the "third act", the murderer would be revealed.

Modern stories, however, begin with a murder.

This "Body on Page One" is not trouble. It is a trick: despite the illusion of action, this first murder is used to introduce the setting and characters.

This is a platform. Later, there will be another murder, and that is the tilt.

Again, we can use this in roleplaying games. Begin the game with "action": a pub brawl, a great battle. Be aware that this action is an illusion and that, during it, you must introduce the characters and build your platform.

Moral dilemmas

Moral dilemmas add spice. Here's a simple problem, interesting in itself:

- The dragon attacks you.

If we change it to:

- Ignoring you, the dragon attacks the other party members. Behind it, you see gold, enough for you to retire.

We add the dilemma: will you help your colleagues or take the treasure?

Of course, not everything need be a moral dilemma. We needn't change simple problems:

- The chasm is four foot wide, but you might jump it.

By forcing in a moral dilemma:

- The chasm is four foot wide, but you might jump it, if you could forget the memory of your mother saying "You'll never succeed in anything, son."

Moral dilemmas add spice: as with any spice, use in moderation.

Get to the action

Sometimes it's obvious where a game is going.

- We're going to kill the usurper!
- We're about to discover the treasure!
- We're going to uncover the murderer!

But it seems too soon. Perhaps the game session lasts two more hours, so we don't want to end the story. Or perhaps we've just started the task and feel it should be harder.

So we stall. We put obstacles in the way.

- ... The usurper isn't in the room we thought, but miles away!
- ... The treasure is worthless, but there's a map to the real treasure!
- ... The photo shows the murderer, but the face is blurred!

GMs, of course, are particularly notorious for stalling like this.

But stalling is dull. It delays the story, inventing obstacles for their own sake. We try to clear the obstacle, with little enthusiasm.

Instead, do the thing that you think is happening too early:

... We kill the usurper!

... We discover the treasure!

... We uncover the murderer!

Then, decide what happens next:

... We become the new rulers of the kingdom.

... The treasure was stolen and the owner wants it back.

... We must capture the murderer.

And continue the story.

Keep the action onstage

Never describe action from a distance:

- You're in the court, when a messenger brings news of a great battle!

When you can bring the action closer:

- You're in the midst of a great battle!

Justify

Try bringing something unexplained into the story, trusting you'll justify it later.

While playing *Lacuna*, a player decided a Mr Phylactery was involved in a mystery. We didn't know who Mr Phylactery was, but trusted he would be introduced, later. In the following game, we explored a hospital, and decided the manager was Mr Phylactery.

Similarly, while playing *Polaris*, I referred to my character's Starlight Hammer. We'd never mentioned this before, but trusted it would be explained later, perhaps in a flashback. It was.

Try using an emotion at another character - be angry, be scared - and trust you'll justify it later. As you play the emotion, you'll realise how to justify it: for example, as you play angry, you'll realise why you're angry.

Note the overlap with creating mysteries. By creating something to be justified, you implicitly create the mystery "What's this thing?". When you justify, you solve that mystery.

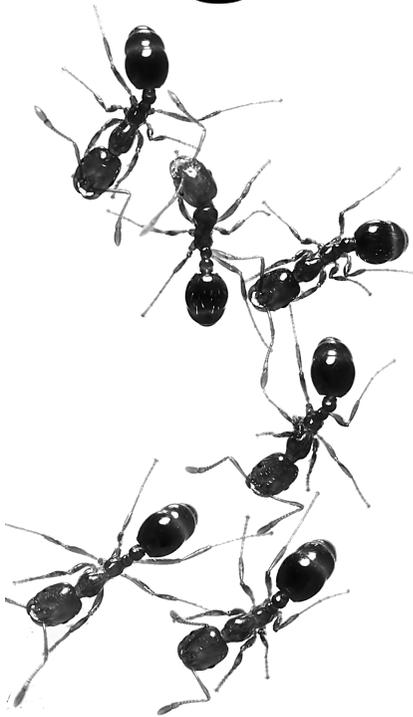
Also, note the sense of mischief. Effectively, you are throwing something on the table and saying: "Deal with this!". You're screwing with the other players, just a little. We'll come back to this sense of mischief in the final chapter.

Moving forward

In this section, I've described many tricks to tell stories. During a game, you won't remember them all. Indeed, you wouldn't want to: it's better to use one trick effectively than all at once.

Keep all these tricks at the back of your mind. Use each when it seems right.

Work together



*The way you play with others
will make or break
your game.*

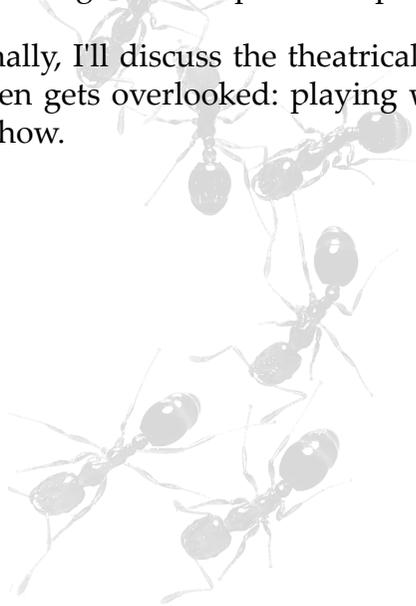
Work Together

In this final section, I'll talk about working with other players. What makes you fun to play with? How can you work together to make the game better?

Firstly, I'll describe the positive side: giving other players a good time, trusting, losing gracefully.

But then I'll explore the darker side: messing with other players, taking risks, doing things you find difficult. Providing you've got the positive side, too, these edgier techniques will spice up your game.

Finally, I'll discuss the theatrical side of gaming, which often gets overlooked: playing with energy, putting on a show.



Give the other guy a good time

Often, we try to make games fun for ourselves. Instead, concentrate on making games fun for someone else. Work out what the guy opposite enjoys, then give it to him.

Try this as a GM. If a player takes every gun he can carry, give him things to shoot. If someone questions suspects, give her mysteries to solve.

Try it as a player. If the person opposite is looking for a murderer, assist him. If someone is hunting out conspiracies, conspire against her.

And look for social cues. If someone's eyes light up before combat, throw monsters at him. But look for negatives: if a player looks uninterested when you start a fight, drop it.

Don't be afraid to ask. At the start of games, ask "What do you want in this game?". In the middle, try "How's it going for you?". And afterwards, "How did you find that?".

All this, of course, is related to our earlier concept of Building On Ideas. However, building on ideas is about the story: this is about the people.

Lose gracefully

When you lose, lose enthusiastically: relish losing fights, being caught, being berated.

Then, when you die, enjoy it. Die gloriously. Narrate your death scene.

Losing gracefully is, perhaps, the most important trick you can learn. If you can smile as you die ignominiously, you'll enjoy everything else.

Trust

Trust the other players. Trust they're good; trust they like you; trust they're looking out for you.

Force yourself to trust them *even if you can't*. Force yourself to like them, *even if you don't*. Trust they're good, *even if they're bad*.

Trusting other players isn't about whether you genuinely trust them: it's about making play better. If you're mistrustful, you'll play carefully and conservatively. Instead, force yourself to trust, and you'll take risks.

You'll always find something you like/trust/appreciate about another player. Find those things, remind yourself of them, and you'll play better together.

During a recent game, the gamer opposite irritated me. He was loud, forthright and insisted on playing a particular character.

I forced myself to trust him, reminding myself of things I appreciated: his ideas were good; he listened; he wasn't a wallflower.

During the game, I wanted to eavesdrop on him, but wasn't sure whether he'd like it. I asked, nicely. He said yes. The scene was superb.

After the game, I still didn't like him. But, because I'd forced myself to trust, the game had gone better.

Screw with each other

So far, I've described playing with others as cooperative. Here's the darker side.

Don't play nicely. Misbehave. Screw with the GM and other players. Do this nicely, but do it. When you're well-behaved, you're conventional: when you break the rules, you improve the game.

Recently, I played Runequest, and wasn't enjoying it. An hour in, a dragon flew towards us, ready for a fight. Several times, I rolled to attack and missed. Bored, I decided to misbehave.

"I wave my arms and shout," I tell the GM. "I want it to

fly at me." He looks surprised, so I check: "Is that OK? I don't want to mess up the game."

"Sure." he says, and the dragon flies at me, which pleases those players who were avoiding the fight. We roll and, miraculously but wonderfully, I knock the dragon unconscious. It ploughs into the sand.

Screw with other players, too, and let them screw with you.

In a dull Vampire LARP, two other players approached me. They were playing Mormons and attempted to convert me.

For half an hour, they screwed with my character's head, sending him mad. Playing that mad character was much more fun.

Try misbehaving in games. It's fun to misbehave and fun to be messed with. If you're saying "Screw it, let's...", at least once per game, you're doing it right.

Take risks

Often, we play carefully, afraid to fail. We sit quietly, afraid to take risks in case we "play wrong".

When I began playing Vampire LARPs, I was intimidated by experienced players in their flowing costumes. I was warned that older players exploited new ones. I was encouraged to play another player's servant, to "learn the game", but when I did, nobody talked to me.

When I stopped being cautious, the game became exciting. I played riskily. I charged into battle. I insulted others. It was fun and, to my surprise, the experienced players didn't kill me.

Try this in your games. Don't hold back: charge forward and correct mistakes later. Trust others to correct you if you go wrong. Play games until they break. Do things, deliberately, that might be mistakes, but might be fun.

As the GM, encourage players to make mistakes. Be a safety net: when they take risks and fail, let them put it right. By saving them when they fail, you'll encourage them to take risks.

Do things you don't want to do

If you find something difficult, do it until it's not. If something scares you, do it until it doesn't. If a game bores you, play it, and make it work for you.

There is a game called Bacchanal, about sex and debauchery, which I am afraid to play. I'm too nervous to suggest playing it, too apprehensive to run it. When I mention it to others, they look nervous too. Because it scares me, I should play it.

Playing games that scare you pushes your boundaries. Playing games that bore you makes you discover new ways to play.

Try doing this at games conventions. Play games you'd usually avoid and make them fun.

I recently played Traveller at a convention. I'd never played Traveller and imagined it boring. Instead, it was gloriously old-fashioned: I felt like a teenager, playing a spaceman with a laser pistol. For three hours, I conspired against other players, enjoying every moment.

Realise the things you avoid, and do them. If you dislike sexual descriptions, describe sexual acts. If you find combat characters boring, play one, and make it work for you.

Do it again

If a musician stopped, mid-song, and started again, she'd be thought incompetent. In roleplaying games, however, we can change things we don't like: "Having my leg broken is dull. Can my arm be broken instead?". If a scene isn't working, we can stop it.

Use this. If a scene is boring, kill it. If a scene works badly, restart it or change it.

I played Diana: Warrior Princess with Marcus Rowland, the author. He narrated a dream sequence: then realised it wasn't working. "I think I've made a mistake here," he said, "Can we go back?". We did.

Put on a show

When Iain McAllister runs *Stitch*, it's a performance. The table's centrepiece is the clock, which never stops running. He points at it, using his dramatic voice: "Once that clock starts, it doesn't stop, for any reason".

When I run *Lacuna*, I keep a glass on the table. When players earn *Static* (which means danger), I drop in a glass bead, which rings as it hits the glass. Sometimes, I'll hold a bead over the glass, threateningly, while talking to a player. Sometimes, I'll count the beads, and say "Nearly".

Keary Birch, who runs Call of Cthulhu games, sits players at a table, while he stalks around them. In one game, he described a sub-human creature, staring and whining. He continued whining, staring at us, until we were thoroughly disturbed.

We miss much by not putting on a show. Often, gaming is a sedentary activity, players and GM hunched over the table.

Instead, make games a performance: use your voice, use your body, use props. Do this especially as the GM: use the power relationship with the players to mess with them. They're in your hands. Entertain them.

Energy

At a convention game, the players arrived quietly. They sat down, said hello, looked suspicious. I asked what they wanted from the game and got no answer: one just said "I want to play!". The game never took off.

Earlier in the day, I'd made the same error. I'd unwillingly joined a Runequest game, after the game I'd registered for was oversubscribed. I sat down, annoyed, and hoped others would entertain me. They didn't.

Let's be blunt: your job, as a player, is to play with

energy. If you're uninspired, if you sit down tired, if you expect others to entertain you: you're not doing your job.

If a singer sang unenthusiastically, she'd be out of the band; if an actor was unconvincing because "he was tired", he'd be sacked. Similarly, roleplaying is a creative endeavour: if you do it half-heartedly, it doesn't work.

Energy is about alertness, listening, reacting, focussing, being on the ball. Sportsmen describe it as being "in the zone". You can play quietly, and intensely, with energy. You can say nothing and do it with energy: you'll be listening and reacting.

Don't mistake being loud for energy. If you're trying to be centre of attention, you're doing it wrong.

How do you play with energy? Steal a trick from actors and sportsmen: to prepare yourself, warm up. Work out what gets you in the mood to play. For example, here's what gets me focussed:

- Not drinking alcohol (until after the game).
- Not having too much coffee (unless it's a hyperactive game).
- Sitting quietly for a few minutes, preferably in the sun.
- Walking around.
- Flicking through the game text.

- Ensuring I have everything I need.
- Getting enough sleep or, if I can't, getting up early enough to be awake for the game.
- Having breakfast before a morning game.
- Avoiding stodgy lunches, especially chips.

When I GM convention games, I take this seriously. An hour before the game, I wander off alone and read my game text. I avoid drinking and eat well.

When playing casually, of course, I'm less punctilious: there's little time after work to prepare. However, I walk to the game, to relax, and do a crossword to forget about work.

Everyone is different. You know what to do to get yourself in the mood to play. Do it.

Fit into the group

Each of the following ideas have followers, who think it is the "right" way to play:

- The GM should run the adventure.
- When the GM runs players through "his" adventure, that's railroading.

- Player-versus-player games are fun.
- Players who act against other players are annoying.
- If the GM reads pre-prepared text, it's boring.
- When the GM reads pre-prepared text, it sets the tone.
- Games should tackle serious issues
- Games are for fun! Keep serious issues outside!
- Being loud is good! It means you're enthusiastic!
- Being loud is inconsiderate to people around you.

When playing with an unknown group, never assume they agree with your "correct" way to play.

When introducing ideas that may be controversial, tread carefully. When narrating sexual acts into the game, for example, watch for social cues: if people look unsympathetic, drop it.

Most importantly, talk to other players. Ask whether something is acceptable: "Can I kill your character's wife?"; "I want to stop you, is that OK?".

Never assume your ideas about gaming are correct. This, of course, applies to all the ideas in this book. Enjoy them, but introduce them carefully, and talk with your group about them.

Afterword

And that's the end.

Will you use all the ideas from this book in your gaming? Perhaps not all. You'll use those you like frequently, others occasionally and, perhaps, some not at all.

But, of course, you shouldn't try to use all these ideas at once. If you're concentrating on using every technique, you'll be working too hard to have fun.

Instead, keep the contents of this book in the back of your mind. Hold the ideas lightly. When you see an opportunity to use a technique, use it, but don't force it. Use each idea when it seems natural in your game.

You'll like some techniques in this book more than others. Use your favourite techniques: but, also, use the ones you find difficult or uninteresting. If you liked the Tell Stories section, but not the Status section, then try the techniques from the Status section. Make them work for you.

Get in touch and tell me how these ideas work in your games. My email is graham@thievesoftime.com. You can also visit me, on the web, at www.thievesoftime.com. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for reading. Enjoy your games.

Glossary of Games

Here are descriptions of the games I've used in the examples. They're listed in the order I discovered the games.

Dungeons and Dragons

Now published by Wizards Of The Coast
<http://www.wizards.com/dnd>

The game I played through my teenage years, when it was called Advanced Dungeons and Dragons. A classic fantasy adventure game.

Call of Cthulhu

Chaosium, Inc
<http://www.chaosium.com/>

An investigative horror game, based on the works of H P Lovecraft. I owned it as a teenager but hardly played it. Now, I find it the most reliably fun game to play at conventions.

Vampire: The Masquerade, Mind's Eye Theatre

White Wolf
<http://www.white-wolf.com/>

In my late twenties, I played the live-action version of Vampire, called Mind's Eye Theatre. Throughout the

book, I've referred to it as the "Vampire LARP".

Vampire has now been rewritten as Vampire: The Requiem. There is also a new Mind's Eye Theatre version.

My Life With Master

by Paul Czege, Half Meme Press
<http://www.halfmeme.com/>

In my thirties, I discovered small-press games. This was the first I discovered and one of the best. You play the minions of an evil Master. Fun and disturbing.

Dogs In The Vineyard

by D. Vincent Baker, lumpley games
<http://www.lumpley.com/>

The other great small-press game. You're a gunman, roaming an alternative Wild West, delivering God's judgement.

HeroQuest

Published by Issaries, Inc
<http://www.glorantha.com/>

A small-press fantasy game by Robin D. Laws.

Bacchanal

by Paul Czege, Half Meme Press
<http://www.halfmeme.com/>

A game about drunkenness, sex and debauchery, which scares me.

The Shab Al-Hiri Roach

by Jason Morningstar, Bully Pulpit Games
<http://www.bullypulpitgames.com/>

An odd, and wonderful, game, about academia, horror and an ancient telepathic insect god. At its heart, it's a game about power, which I highly recommend.

Lacuna Part I: The Creation of the Mystery and the Girl from Blue City

By Jared Sorenson, Memento Mori Theatricks
<http://www.memento-mori.com/>

A recent discovery and a wonderful sci-fi game. Mystery Agents descend into a mysterious mind-world to hunt subversives.

Primetime Adventures

by Matt Wilson, Dog-Eared Designs
<http://www.dog-eared-designs.com/>

A small-press game about television drama: your group creates their own TV show.

Traveller

Originally published by Games Designer's Workshop,
now different versions published by different publishers

A classic science-fiction game, which I didn't discover until my thirties, when I played it at a convention.

Diana: Warrior Princess

by Marcus Rowland
<http://www.heliograph.com/diana/>

Marcus Rowland's bizarre and wonderful game, which imagines the Twentieth Century seen through the eyes of historically inaccurate drama.

Stitch

by Iain McAllister (in development)
<http://www.giantbrain.co.uk/>

A time-travel game, played against the clock. Currently in development and looking good.

Runequest

Originally published by Chaosium

Another fantasy roleplaying game. which I've played once.

Thanks

Too many people assisted with this book to remember accurately, as I will now demonstrate.

The greatest thanks go to Keith Johnstone, who invented this style of improvisation, and Ron Edwards, who started the indie game thing. Without the former, this book couldn't have been written; without the latter, it wouldn't have been published.

Thank you to Bay Area Theatresports and The Spontaneity Shop (Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances White) who taught me improvisation.

Thank you to everyone who read through the text and suggested improvements: Gregor Hutton, Andrew Kenrick, Steve "Immersed" Dempsey, Simon "Tedious" Rogers, Meguey Baker, Alex Fradera, David Walmsley and Jason Morningstar. Although I used only half your corrections, I appreciated them all.

Thank you to Jeff Zahari, Simon Carryer and Ian (Isbo) for correcting the glossary of games.

Thank you, also, to everyone who commented on my journal with suggestions: Emily Care, Johnn Four, wizofice, Marc Majcher, Matt Machell, Seth Ben-Ezra, Fleisch, Claire Bickell, jmac, Ben Johnson, Per Fischer, wml, Sami, Georgios, Paul Tevis, jzn, Paul Czege, Fang Langford, Brand Robins and everyone who posted to advertise casino sites, including, apparently, Bill Nighy.

Thank you to the websites Story Games (www.story-

games.com), Knife Fight (www.i-would-knife-fight-a-man.com) and Collective Endeavour (www.collective-endeavour.com), where I hashed out ideas.

Particular thanks to those who commented on the thread "Bore me", especially Jarod Scott for allowing me to use his quote.

Thank you to the posters on the thread "What happens next?", especially those who gave me permission to use their quotes: Paul Czege, Rafael, Warren, Matthijs. Particular thanks to Paul, for qualifying his permission with "unless my response makes me look stupid, somehow". It didn't.

Thanks and apologies to Steven and KT ("Call Me Curly"), whom I tried to contact for permission, but couldn't find. I've used the quotes anyway, because they were great. Do get in touch if that's annoying.

Thank you to everyone who helped me with the introduction, when I was stuck: Justin D. Jacobson, Paul Czege, David Donachie, Thor Hansen and Jamey Crook.

Thanks to Lulu, through whom this book is published, and the makers of Scribus and GIMP.

Thank you also to Basil and Tilly, our cats, for helping by walking over my notes as I was trying to read them.

Particular thanks to Liz for her patience and, when that ran out, for not hitting me over the head with the skillet.