

From the Desk of The Angry GM



ANGRY GAMES

To: The Game Master

Re: Portraying Characters

Do you want your players to experience the unbridled joy of True Role-Playing? Of revealing a character through gameplay? And building a deep, emotional bond with that character? Of course you do!

But True Role-Playing requires time, patience, and trust. Not on your part. On your players' parts. They've got to put in the effort and they've got to trust that it's all going to pay off. You can't put in the effort for them. And there's no shortcuts you can offer. But you can help.

Encourage: Attitude

True Role-Playing is all about attitude. It's about patience. It's about investment. It's about trusting the process and trusting your gut. Unfortunately, you can't change the players' attitudes. But fortunately, they tend to reflect whatever attitude you bring to the process. If you're excited to see their character emerge over time and through gameplay, the players will be excited. Bring the right attitude to the table. Starting with character generation.

When you sit with the players to make their characters, focus on the mechanical choices. Nothing else. Push the players to trust their guts. To make choices that seem like fun. And not to sweat the in-character, backstory justifications. If they struggle with that, let them know you're excited to discover the reasons for their choices as the game goes on. "I can't wait to find out why your character is so good with animals." Let them see you're sure that a great character will emerge as the game goes on. Let them share your excitement.

Discourage: Make-and-Portray

A good attitude is a good start. But you have to steer your players away from the traps that lead away from True Role-Playing and into the shallow Make-and-Portray approach. Some players will resist the steering. You can't force them to accept it. But you can refuse to ride along with them.

During character generation, discourage complex backstories and pre-existing relationships between player-characters. You can't stop the players from inventing backstories and inventing relationships, but you don't have to play along. If a player shares their backstory ideas or discusses their existing relationships, stop them. Say, "let's focus on the character sheet right now, and let me learn about your character while we play." Emphasize that you, at least, are playing the game to see what happens. Not to watch a script play out.

If someone tries to hand you a written backstory, refuse it. Tell them you want to be surprised when this stuff comes out during gameplay.

And during gameplay, stop any players from pontificating. Don't let them bog the game down with a monologue describing their character's thoughts, motivations, and personal history. Interrupt them and ask them to describe their action, please. Or ask them if their character is really standing there in the middle of the pitched battle giving this speech.

Require: Prompts

I told your players to come up with a role-playing prompt. A single sentence that describes their character. You can't force True Role-Playing on your players, but you can demand a prompt. If they hand you something that's more than one short sentence, hand it back and tell them to try again. And no, long, run-on sentences with lots of clauses don't count.

Most prompts will naturally include a motivation, as described in the sidebar. As a rule, people are inclined to understand characters in terms of their motivations. But if you've got a prompt that doesn't suggest a motivation, ask your player to pick one.

Nurture: True Role-Playing

True Role-Players don't know their characters inside-out. In the first session, they barely know their characters at all. So, take it easy on your players when the game starts. No complex moral dilemmas. No NPCs interrogating them about their backgrounds. Keep the interactions and choices simple and focus on stuff that reinforces each character's prompt and motivation.

Over time, the players will find their characters. That is, distinct personality traits and behavior patterns will start to emerge. Use in-game events and NPC interactions to foster that growth after it starts to happen. And if the players shy away from it, back off.

That might sound complicated. But it's actually easy if you have the right attitude. If you're genuinely interested in the characters at the table — if you want to get to know them — you'll do what you need to do without thinking too hard. Imagine they're your favorite characters in a Netflix series. You want to get to know them. But also imagine they're really shy. If you push too hard, you'll scare them off.

Motivation Required to Proceed

Every fictional character needs a motivation. You can't play a character without one. Fortunately, most humans understand that on such a basic level that, if you ask the players to come up with a prompt, it'll include — or imply — a motivation. But if you've got a prompt with a missing motivation, get the player to fill in the blank.

Motivations drive character actions. They're not goals. Goals come and go. Motivations underlie every goal. Motivations tell you what a character values. What they're seeking. What gives their life meaning.

Here's a bunch of sample motivations:

- Amass Wealth
- Earn Glory
- Gain Respect
- Accrue Power
- Achieve Status
- Earn Recognition
- Perform a Duty
- Discover the Truth
- Do Good
- Help Others
- Attain Perfection
- Acquire Knowledge
- Indulge Pleasure
- Fulfill a Destiny
- Stave Off Boredom
- Satisfy Wanderlust
- Instill Chaos
- Slake Anger
- Mete-Out Justice
- Spread an Idea
- Take Revenge
- Climb the Ranks
- Build a Following
- Test Your Mettle
- Become a Master

Stop Worrying and Love Tropes

Learn to love tropes and cliches and stereotypes. Encourage your players to love them too. Tropes are just storytelling seeds. But they're familiar seeds. Seeds that resonate deeply with people. That's why they're the ideas that last. True Role-Playing is about planting simple seeds and watching them grow. Tropes are seeds that grow well in human brains. So use them. Play with them. Enjoy them. And always do so with a sense of loving respect.

You're not clever when you subvert tropes and cliches and stereotypes. You're not smarter than anyone else. You're just telling stories no one cares about. That no one will remember.

Nothing grows from a deconstructed seed.

THE ANGRY GM