

From the Desk of The Angry GM



ANGRY GAMES

To: The Players

Re: Protraying Characters

Here you are. You're playing a table-top role-playing game. The fight's gone bad. Arwydd shouts, "I'll cover your escape. You all run." Cassia and Dameer are already heading for the door. But your character, Bathar, swore never again to leave an ally behind. It's your turn. Do you flee? Fight? Drag Arwydd away?

That's role-playing right there. Playing an RPG isn't just about making the best game choices. It's also about portraying a character.

Or is it?

Action, Not Acting

No. Role-playing isn't portraying a character. It's not speaking in character. It's not pretending to be someone else. It's not sharing an awesome character with the world. It's not psychoanalyzing a character. Role-playing is entirely about making choices and taking action.

It's not who your character is; it's what they do that defines them.

Between You and Your Character

Role-playing has nothing to do with anyone else. You're not putting on a show. It's entirely about building a relationship with your character. Your character in a role-playing game is like your favorite character in a Netflix series. The longer you spend with the character and the more you learn about them, the more you care.

Role-playing is about experiencing a story through your favorite character's eyes. Experiencing a story about your favorite character from the inside. But the relationship still needs time to develop and room to grow. And it has to catch you by surprise sometimes. Just like your favorite characters do. Surprises test and strengthen relationships.

How can you pull that off?

Start Small and Build

The more you know about your character at the start of the game, the less room it has to grow. And the less chance it has to surprise you. But that's okay. Your character's a low-level nobody when you start playing. And that's great. Because everything that happens to your character before the game starts is something you won't get to experience at the table.

In other words, skip the extensive backstory and character analysis. Instead, try this:

Step One: Come Up with a Prompt

Think about your favorite character from that Netflix series again. Think about what they were like when the show first started. In a single, short phrase, how would you describe that character? That's how you describe a newly-minted RPG character too. One short phrase with room enough for one or two ideas. A motivation, a simple trait, a defining moment. That's all.

"Bathar is a dishonored ex-soldier trying to redeem himself."

Step Two: Keep that Prompt Handy

That prompt? Write it down. Type it out. Don't just keep it in your head. Put it somewhere on your character sheet. Somewhere you can see it.

Step Three: Refer Back to Your Prompt

At the start of every game session, read your prompt to yourself. Read it again whenever something happens in the game that feels big or important. Read it whenever you have to make a choice and you don't know what to do.

Step Four: Trust Your Character

Did you come up with a prompt? Did you write it down? Do you refer back to it? Great! Don't do anything else. Don't analyze your character. Don't explain your character. Don't change your prompt. Don't write stories about your character. Just refer to the prompt whenever you have to. And then do whatever feels right. Make whatever choices seem best. Gradually, the character will grow in your head. They'll start making choices. They'll start talking out of your mouth. It will happen. You just have to give the character space to grow and time to grow in.

Some Harsh Truths

Here are a few harsh truths for would-be thespians who think RPGs are a chance to put on a show.

1. No Plan Survives Contact with an RP
Role-playing games aren't novels. And they don't have scripts. You can't control the game's events. You can't control how the other players act. You can't even control how other people perceive your character. The only control you have is over how your character responds to what happens in the game. And people — even fictional non-human cat people — evolve as things happen. Your thirty-page character analysis is useless after two hours of gameplay.

2. No One Cares But You

Everyone at the table has their own favorite character. It's the one they're playing. No one's there to watch you play yours. And the GM has five different performers to watch and a world to manage. There's no point playing your character for anyone other than you. Consider this: do you really pay attention to what the other players and their characters are doing? Or do you spend most of your time figuring out what your character is going to do next? It's the same for everybody else at the table. Sorry.

3. Understanding Comes After Action

You don't need an extensive character write-up to know how your character should act. You don't even need to know why they do what they do. Because that's not how people work. Not even fictional non-human cat people. People act first. The reasons come later. You might not believe that. You might think you're different. But people with extensive graduate degrees and complex medical equipment have proven it. If you give your character space, they will tell you how to act. And eventually, you'll be able to figure out why they acted the way they did.

Awesome Character-Building Scenes

But what about those scenes in TV shows and movies where the characters aren't making choices and taking action? When they're talking about the choices they made. Aren't you giving them up with this "simple prompt and action" stuff?

Nope.

As you play, your brain will constantly invent stories about them. They'll seem to come out of nowhere. Your brain is a story-writing machine. And it loves stories about people. Especially about why people are the way they are.

When something forces you to explain your character's backstory something will come out of your mouth. If you let it. Even if it's just:

"I don't know. I just realized at that moment that I didn't want to be the kind of soldier who'd leave someone behind."

THE ANGRY GM