UNFRAMED

The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters

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Credits

Dedication

This one's for Jonathan Jacobs and Fred Hicks, without whose inspiration there probably wouldn't be an Engine Publishing. Sláinte! —Martin Ralya

Coherence and Contradictions

D. Vincent Baker

D. Vincent Baker is the creator and publisher of several critically acclaimed, award-winning, and controversial RPGs, including *kill puppies for satan*, *Dogs in the Vineyard*, and *Apocalypse World*. He lives in a little town in New England with his wife and co-designer Meguey Baker and their three sons.

"*Prepare a list of images that are purely fantastic, deliberate paradoxes say, that fit within the sort of thing you're writing. The City of Screaming Statues, things like that. You just write a list of them so you've got them there when you need them. Again, they have to cohere, have the right resonances, one with the other.*" —Michael Moorcock, "How to Write a Book in Three Days" (*http://www.ghostwoods.com/2010/05/how-to-write-a-book-in-three-days-1210*)

Improvisational GMing is, in its way, like trying to write a novel in three days. Instead of the blank page, you have the eager and expectant players, hoping that you'll say something delightful, startling, provocative, and fun, with no editing and no do-overs. Go!

Effective preparation is crucial. Moorcock gives us an easy and powerful way to go about it, a minimum of prep for a maximum of fun.

The GM's Raw Materials

For our purposes, the raw materials an improvisational GM has to work with are the game's setting and scenery—that is, its places and things—and its cast of NPCs. The players' characters are their own to play, of course, and their belongings are theirs too. The game's eventual storyline is strictly hands-off: The storyline emerges, develops in play, live at the table, as a result of the players' characters interacting with the GM's setting, scenery, and NPCs.

Because the future storyline is unknown, it's impossible to give the NPCs their narrative roles in advance. The GM can't know which NPCs will turn out to be antagonists, sidekicks, trusted friends, hidden influences, love interests, or even just forgotten, until the moment that it comes true in play. Before then, it's just guessing, and the best policy is to give every NPC, even the most casually-invented, the potential to step into a major role.

The right resonances and deliberate contradictions can do it.

"The Right Resonances"

By coherence and "the right resonances," we'll take Moorcock to mean the principles that underlie the game world you're creating.

Take a few minutes to think about *how the world is*, *how things work*, and *what people are like*, in principle, in the abstract. You've probably been doing this already, by gut, as you've been imagining the game and getting excited to play. It won't hurt to make it explicit. Three or four principles should be plenty for a start, and you can always add more as they occur to you. Principles like:

- Nobody really likes their job.
- Every computer has a human face.
- The city is full of people of every culture.
- Religious devotion is usually hypocrisy.
- A person with a sword is dangerous to everyone.
- The sun is scorching, blinding, and unforgiving.
- Spaceships are noisy, close, and smell weird.

When you create a setting element, a piece of scenery, or an NPC, you make it cohere with the rest simply by remembering and following the principles you've established. Your principles help you improvise things that fit into the imaginary world as though they have always been there.

"Deliberate Paradoxes"

It's the cracks, the seams, the tensions between things that make them interesting. When the players rely on you to improvise things for them to be curious about, to explore and seize upon, you can use inbuilt contradictions, Moorcock's "deliberate paradoxes," to provide the appealing texture.

Moorcock's example, the City of Screaming Statues, is fun and over the top ("Screaming statues? How would a statue *scream*?"), but more modest paradoxes will do just as well. Even utterly down-to-earth features of a place, a thing, or a character can contradict one another.

I like to say it, simply, as "give everything a *but*." The spaceship is hard-worn *but* lovingly maintained. The island sky is blindingly blue *but* today the clouds race in. The hocus of the desert cult loves his family with all his heart, *but* he knows that in the desert you have to choose who will have water and who will not.