

# Odyssey

The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management



By Phil Vecchione & Walt Ciechanowski • Foreword By Kenneth Hite

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**Authors:** Walt Ciechanowski, Phil Vecchione

**Publisher:** Martin Ralya

**Editor:** Martin Ralya

**Art Director:** John Arcadian

**Graphic Designer:** Darren Hardy

**Layout:** Darren Hardy

**Cover Artist:** Avery Liell-Kok

**Cover Designer:** Darren Hardy

**Interior Artists:** Matt Morrow,  
Christopher Reach, Daniel Wood

**Indexer:** Martin Ralya

**Proofreaders:** Robert M. Everson, Ian Keller

**Capitalist Tool:** Kurt Schneider

In memory of Lynn Willis

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# Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to all the players in all the campaigns I have managed over the years.

With special thanks to the original Amber group, the Eagle Eye cell, the Heist crew, and the Heroes of Elhal. You are the great ones. – Phil Vecchione

To my beloved Zoeanna, whose odyssey is only just beginning. – Walt Ciechanowski

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# Phil's Introduction

I don't run campaigns. I manage them.

I used to think that I ran campaigns. If you asked me what I was running, I would say something like, "I am currently running a *Corporation* campaign." What I have come to learn is that you don't *run* your campaign, you *manage* your campaign.

What you run are *sessions* of your campaign. When you're running a session, you're at the table with your players and together you tell a story, with each of you contributing parts of that story. As the game master (GM) you're representing the setting, the story, and all the non-player characters (NPCs). The players, acting through their characters (player characters, or PCs), interact with and guide the direction of the story.

Managing a campaign, though, is done away from the table. "Managing your campaign" is the collection of activities and efforts that you, as the GM, work on to advance the campaign and to keep it viable. It is as much about creating things such as plot lines and NPCs as it is about reacting to changes and new elements that are introduced with every session you run—changes like rising and falling player interest, the growth of the characters, and the effects of the passage of time in your game world.

The goal of managing your campaign is the production of good gaming sessions. What you run during your sessions is a product of the management you have done away from the table, in between sessions. Sessions are where the GM interacts with the players and where drama is created, where good battles evil (or evil battles good), where heroes and villains are made, and where characters die. It is during sessions where changes occur as the players react to, and drive, events in the game and the unfolding story.

In the aftermath of a session there are all manner of loose ends that need to be managed: unresolved plot threads, escaped villains, NPC reactions to what happened during the session, etc. All of these are seeds to be gathered and carried into future sessions. Thus, *running* and *managing* are locked in a continuous cycle, one feeding the other and in turn being fed by it.

*We manage in order to have something to run, and  
we run in order to have something to manage.*

I'm a project manager by profession, and I spend a great deal of time working with teams and managing projects. It turns out there are a tremendous number of similarities between a project team and a gaming group.

What I want to do in this book is take the techniques that I've learned for managing teams and apply them to the gaming group. There's nothing magical about what I've learned—everything I've learned is a skill that can be taught, learned, and improved. It's my hope that these skills and techniques will help you and your players create stronger and more enjoyable campaigns.

Phil Vecchione • Buffalo, NY • February 2013

# Walt's Introduction

I'd like to introduce myself by stating that I'm not Phil.

Phil is a highly organized and dedicated GM who carefully plans out his games and keeps a tight rein on managing them. He's even written an excellent book about session preparation, *Never Unprepared*.

If I'd written that book, it would've been called *Barely Prepared – Maybe*.

I've never been the type of GM that spends a lot of time preparing for my sessions. I rely heavily on improvisation and my players' interest in the campaign to keep my sessions moving. For me, a page or two of notes is enough; I improvise the rest as necessary.

When Phil first proposed this project I was tempted to pass; compared to Phil I'm a slacker. As I thought about it, however, I realized that there are a lot of GMs like me who enjoy running campaigns but don't do heavy preparation. After all, regardless of whether you wing it or prep extensively, you still encounter the same challenges when managing a campaign. GMs who wing it simply have to think more on their feet, and even prep-heavy GMs know that no prep survives the gaming table unscathed.

For me, roleplaying is a journey, an odyssey, shared amongst friends around a gaming table. GMing should be a labor of love, not a chore, and a well-managed campaign eases that burden. It is my hope that, regardless of your GMing style, you find this book helpful when managing your own odysseys, from beginning to end.

Walt Ciechanowski • Springfield, PA • March 2013

# How to Use this Book

*ODYSSEY: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management* is about managing your campaigns. It's about what you, the GM, do away from the gaming table that keeps your campaign going, helps it grow and mature, and makes it fun. The list of potential activities involved in managing a campaign is long, but we've grouped like activities and divided this book into three parts:

- **Starting Your Campaign**—A lot of the success of a campaign comes from setting it up correctly. This part of the book is dedicated to talking about what goes into setting up a campaign, and getting everyone on board and excited about playing.
- **Managing Your Campaign**—Once a campaign begins, it's all about managing the story and/or world, characters, and players as well as anticipating problems and dealing with things that arise during play—all the while keeping the campaign entertaining and healthy.
- **Ending Your Campaign**—Every campaign ends. Some end with glorious conclusions, some are shelved with hopes of returning another day, and some die suddenly. We'll close the book by showing you how to end your campaigns well.

Every campaign in every game system starts, requires management, and ends at some point. Campaigns are one of the cornerstones of tabletop roleplaying, and for good reason: There's something special about the campaign structure, a unique blend of elements that combine to make a compelling experience. That's what *Odyssey* is about: what makes campaigns tick, and how to make your campaigns awesome.

Whether you've been GMing for a week, a year, a decade, or since the dawn of the hobby, you'll find something—hopefully many things—in *Odyssey* for you.

## What this Book Isn't

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*Odyssey* isn't a guide to running individual sessions within your campaign, though that topic will be discussed when it relates to campaign management. That isn't to say that improving your ability to run a session isn't important—it is. Running gaming sessions is a topic that gets a lot of attention in books, on blogs, and on podcasts, as it well should. Engine Publishing also publishes a book on session prep, *NEVER UNPREPARED: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep*, by Phil Vecchione, if you'd like to explore the topic in more detail.

# Why a Book about Campaign Management?

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We wrote *Odyssey* because campaigns are a unique and central aspect of the roleplaying hobby, with their own lifecycle and challenges, which have never been addressed comprehensively before.

Campaigns are like snowflakes: unique and fragile. Campaigns are unique in that the coming together of you and your players—and the story that you all create—will be unlike any other group's campaign, even if you're exclusively using published material. It's lightning in a bottle, and this is one of the main reasons that many gamers are drawn to this hobby.

A campaign is fragile in that it doesn't take much for it to end prematurely. Campaigns need to be encouraged to grow as much as they need protection from things that can harm them. You culture ideas and stories within a campaign to develop new material for your sessions, but at the same time you also need to protect your campaign from the risks that surround it. When you can't protect it from those risks, you have to shepherd the campaign through whatever changes are necessary for it to remain viable.

## Why Campaigns Die

---

I've been GMing for over 30 years. In that time I have had a handful of truly great and memorable campaigns—the kind that you never forget. I've had numerous enjoyable campaigns that never quite reached greatness, and I've had hundreds of failures. I've seen campaigns die because of the GM's actions and inactions, and I've seen them killed by players' actions and inactions. I once started and killed a campaign before we'd even made it to the first session.

What has been constant in all my campaigns is that I've learned something from them—what worked that I should do again, and what didn't work and should be avoided. I have tried to carry these ideas forward bringing the best ones to future campaigns.

When I started considering the reasons why campaigns have failed, I saw patterns. Although each reason may manifest itself differently (each campaign being unique), when you look at them closely there are only a few reasons why campaigns fail:

- **Lack of consensus**—Not everyone in the game is on the same page within the campaign, leading to disharmony.
- **Failure to manage expectations**—This can occur at a group or individual level, when one or more people have one idea about what should happen and others have a different idea. (This ties into the first reason, lack of consensus.)



- **Inability to deal with change**—Something happens in the game, either suddenly or gradually, and the GM isn't able to manage that change, causing the campaign to fail.
- **Loss of energy**—The players, the GM, or both lose their passion for the game.

All of these problems can be managed, and when they are actively managed a campaign can remain healthy and continue for a long time. It is when we take our eye off the ball, when we get distracted or complacent, that our campaigns can be injured or even killed.

## Managing a Campaign is Work

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It's no secret that campaigns are work. Managing a campaign isn't difficult when you have ample free time to dedicate to it, but it becomes much more challenging to accomplish as you get older and more of your time is dedicated to work and family. The techniques that we share in *Odyssey* are designed to help you manage your campaign more easily—to get better results while expending less time and energy.

## Why Two Authors?

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Each of *Odyssey*'s authors brings their own perspective and expertise to the table. Given the material, one author seemed like too few and three-plus seemed like too many; either way you would lose something. Campaign management is a big topic, and two authors felt like the sweet spot for tackling this subject in a clear, concise way that would be useful to as many GMs as possible.

As you read *Odyssey* you'll notice little icons that show up at the beginning of each chapter or section. These icons tell you who wrote that section, Walt or Phil. In case you don't care who wrote which bits ("I'm just here for the advice, man!"), we made them fairly unobtrusive:



**Walt Ciechanowski**



**Phil Vecchione**

## Show and Tell

---

Throughout this book we'll use a fictional gaming group to provide examples of *Odyssey*'s techniques in action. This group—Gemma (the GM), Renaldo, Patti, and Adam—will embark on two campaigns, one fantasy and one science fiction, throughout *Odyssey*. The members of this group and their characters in both campaigns are illustrated on the cover and in the interior artwork, and their stories are summarized in the About the Artwork section.

# Starting a Campaign



*Artist: Matt Morrow*

# Chapter 3:

## Starting Campaigns

Starting a campaign is like the first day of school: full of possibility. There are new rules and settings to study, new characters to meet, and of course new supplies to buy. Having just come back from vacation—or in this case, off a break after your last campaign—your personal energy is high. You’re looking forward to seeing how this campaign will turn out.



The start of the campaign is an exciting, anxious, and critical time. It’s during this stage that the seeds for a highly successful campaign are planned, but also where micro-fractures can be formed that eventually cause the campaign to crumble. How you manage starting up the campaign plays a large role in its ultimate success.

### The Goal of Starting a Campaign

---

Isn’t the goal of starting a campaign to start the campaign? Well, yes, but if that’s all there was to it you could just grab a game off your shelf and start running it. Campaign started.

But the goal of this stage is deeper than just starting to play. Specifically:

*The goal of starting a campaign is to create a shared vision for the campaign that is mutually agreed upon, interesting to everyone, and sustainable.*

Let’s break that goal down section by section.

### “To create a shared vision that is mutually agreed upon . . .”

---

This stage is about laying the foundation for the rest of the campaign. The decisions you and your group make, and how you collectively make them, will have an impact on the campaign. There are numerous decisions to make: game system, setting, style of play, the role of the PCs, frequency of play, length of the campaign, and more.

Your ability to make those decisions as a group determines how strong the campaign will be. As many people in the group as possible should agree on every decision, and there should be a feeling of consensus throughout this stage. Strong campaigns can withstand changes, missed sessions, disagreements, and other issues that arise. Weak campaigns, those that lack a good foundation, fall apart over rules issues, lack of direction, and lack of interest.

## “ . . . interesting to everyone . . . ”

---

Starting a campaign is like the initial push that sends a sled down a hill, or pressing the gas pedal when the light turns green. The campaign goes from being a concept to being a game. How connected the players are to the campaign, and how committed they are to it, is grounded in this stage. That connection and passion will give the campaign a forceful launch with the momentum to propel it forward. A campaign lacking these elements often starts softly and, if you're lucky, builds up speed as the sessions go on; if it never picks up speed, it will likely sputter out at some point.

## “ . . . and sustainable.”

---

As you plan out the campaign and the group makes the decisions that form its outline and contours, attention must be paid to ensuring that the campaign can last as long as you're planning for it to last. Campaigns can be unsustainable because of the availability of the GM and players, the range of power levels within the game rules, and the type of story the campaign is going to tell. Sometimes a group comes up with a fantastic or wild idea for a campaign only to find out after a few sessions that it's no longer fun to play, and the campaign is canceled. Planning for sustainability can prevent these problems.

## Phases of Starting a Campaign

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While it often seems that a campaign just starts up *de novo* (fresh, from the beginning), the process of starting one involves four discrete phases:

- **Campaign Concept**
- **Campaign Creation**
- **Campaign Framework**
- **First Session**

## Campaign Concept

---

As soon as you intend to start a campaign, you've begun the campaign concept brainstorming phase. In this phase, the first ideas about the campaign are discussed; they form the campaign concept. The campaign concept is a high-level summary of the campaign, often called an “elevator pitch,” so-called because you should be able to deliver it in its entirety during an average-length elevator ride (under two minutes).

This phase is all about learning what everyone wants out of the campaign, and then determining a game system, choosing a setting, and establishing PC roles that match those desires. This is done in broad strokes, leaving room for further development. Your campaign concept should be detailed enough to describe the major elements of the campaign but not so detailed that you could start playing right then.

# Chapter 8:

## Campaign Management

**G**EMMA finally had a chance to organize her thoughts about her new *Invasion from the Aquatic Empire* fantasy campaign, which she'd been hoping to run for months. It had been a rough couple of weeks with her therapy and new job; although she'd hoped to devote 10 hours a week to prep she'd made do with three hours total, four if she counted this hour right before the session.

With so little time to prepare Gemma chose to run a published adventure that she could shoehorn into the campaign. She didn't have time to read it, so she hoped the challenges were appropriate. She also hoped Renaldo, who'd continually whined about having to play "yet another fantasy campaign," wouldn't be too distracting tonight. She sighed and started flipping through the adventure so she could see what abilities the characters would need to complete it. The doorbell rang.

She quietly cursed. Patti tended to arrive early, but not usually this early. Gemma shrugged and closed her book. She'd really be winging it tonight. This definitely wasn't what she had in mind when she committed to this campaign.



It would be a huge relief if we could just design our campaigns, set them into motion, and then sit back and reap the rewards as our players run through the session smoothly and efficiently without any further need for management. Unfortunately, that's not often the case—heck, it's rarely the case.

More often, you're going to need to keep your manager hat on throughout the session. Sometimes the adventure drifts off course, the PCs evolve differently than expected, or a player has an issue that is affecting play. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, something unexpected manifests in the campaign that threatens or changes it. All of these issues need to be managed.

How you handle managing your campaign has a significant impact on how much fun everyone has at the table and how healthy the campaign remains moving forward. It also affects your future campaigns because how you manage your current campaign becomes your résumé when pitching new ones.

# The Goal of Campaign Management

---

As Phil stated so succinctly in his introduction, when we talk about *running* campaigns what we're really talking about is *managing* campaigns. After all, running a campaign would be easy if you didn't have to worry about those pesky players mucking up your grand designs! Of course, that would make you a storyteller more than a game master, and you probably wouldn't be reading this book.

Still, unless you're truly winging it you do most of your campaign management away from the table (a fact poor Gemma laments in the chapter opener). All of your prep work is designed to make the game flow naturally and grow organically through your interactions with the players. Obviously, the more thought and preparation you've put into the campaign, the easier it is to run at the table.

## Danger Ahead!

One of the problems with truly winging it is that you're forced to do campaign management while running the campaign. This divides your attention and can really harm the flow of the session when you reconsider an NPC's purpose, present a plot element in a way that conflicts with your goals, or confuse your players with conflicting clues.

While I'm a "wing it" kind of guy, I always jot down a page or two of notes for each session just to give me a bit of structure to work with. These notes don't need to be heavily detailed; they're just mnemonic prompts for my brain while it's preoccupied with running a session.

## Management Is an Active Process

---

Managing a campaign isn't like creating a computer game—you can't just write the code and then let the players explore it. In fact, that's not even desirable; if it were, you'd be spending your free hours in front of your computer rather than putting together a campaign.

Campaign management requires that you actively manage the campaign from the time you were inspired to run it to the time when you thank your players for participating at the end of your last session. Between those two points, which can be separated by months or years, there are a lot of factors to manage.

Remember, campaign management may take a bit of work, but it's also a lot of fun. It's deeply rewarding to craft worlds and stories, present them to your players, and watch them interact with and reshape them. It's only when it starts to feel like work, or when we've allowed our management to suffer to the point where we've lost interest or the players have lost interest, that it becomes a problem.

# Chapter 12:

## Risk Management

*“COME on, not now. Just start, you stupid computer!” Gemma pushed on the edge of the table and rolled back slowly in frustration. Her laptop stared back at her, dark and inert. Her session notes and campaign materials were trapped on its hard drive, inaccessible.*

*Adam looked over the laptop for Gemma, but all of his efforts to fix it were fruitless. Patti and Renaldo were sympathetic, but all the same the energy for tonight’s game was fading fast.*



From the moment a campaign begins, all sorts of changes lurk in the wings waiting to shake up the delicate ecosystem that is the campaign. Some changes may only create minor complications that are easily overcome. Other changes are major enough to pose a threat to the continuation of the campaign.

All change that impacts your campaign needs to be managed. In the context of *Odyssey* and campaign management, change you can manage in advance is called “risk” while change you can’t plan for, or neglect to plan for, is simply “change.” Just like all thumbs are fingers but not all fingers are thumbs, all risks are changes but not all changes are risks.

You can choose not to think about these things, and placate yourself by saying that you’ll deal with changes as they come along—or you can be proactive, taking time to think about potential issues and solutions in advance. When these previously unexpected changes occur (and they always occur), you won’t be forced to react; instead you’ll be able to act based on a plan you formulated earlier on. After all the time and effort you have put into creating this campaign and nurturing it, why not devote some time to preparing yourself for these situations?

This chapter and the next, Change Management, draw heavily on my project management background, and they include terminology ported over from project management. These chapters are written under the assumption that you’re not a project manager by profession, though, and they focus squarely on things that happen to campaigns.

# Risk Comes in Two Flavors

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What is “risk,” anyway? Most industries have their own definition of risk, but outside of the risk/reward cycle that’s part of many RPGs—a very different context than what we’re talking about here—it’s not generally considered in relation to gaming. Consequently I’ll use a basic and broad definition of risk in *Odyssey*:

*Risk is the uncertainty surrounding a decision, action, or goal which results in a positive or negative outcome.*

That means that when you make a decision, take an action, or set a goal there are things that can happen which may be fortunate or unfortunate with regards to the result you desire. When risk generates a favorable outcome we call that *opportunity*. When risk generates a negative outcome we call that a *complication*.

When a risk creates an opportunity you want to be able to capitalize on that opportunity and turn it into a positive change to your campaign. When risk creates a complication, you want to get around or go through the complication and still come as close to your desired outcome as possible.

## The Goal of Risk Management

---

Risk management is comprised of the actions you take to control the uncertainty inherent in the decisions you make in your campaign. You want to be able to capitalize on any opportunities that arise and make your outcomes more favorable. Being able to capitalize on an opportunity comes from being able to recognize the opportunity and having some idea of what to do with it when it comes along.

You also want to minimize any complications so that they don’t jeopardize your goal. In an ideal world, you eliminate all risk outright, but in the real world you’re generally going to be working to minimize the chance that risk will occur. At the same time you will plan for what to do should your attempts to avoid the risk fail.

The tricky thing about risk management is that it’s a rabbit hole of paranoia and conjecture. It’s easy to get caught up in looking for risk everywhere and trying to plan for every possible thing that could potentially go wrong. That course of action will result in a large expenditure of energy or in doing things to avoid risk completely, which is neither possible nor desirable.

In gaming terms, you will either spend precious time that you could be using to manage your characters and story (or prep your game) worrying about things that might happen, or you will avoid making risky decisions in the campaign, draining it of everything that makes it interesting. To avoid all that you need a process to guide you, one that will help you manage risk without going down the rabbit hole.





Artist: Daniel Wood

## Super-Streamlined Risk Management

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The actual practice of risk management is a full-fledged career that requires training and certification. Expertise in risk management is like a katana crafted by a master sword smith: precise and beautiful to behold. *Odyssey* can't make you an expert in risk management, but what we can do is give you a simple, practical tool that's crude but effective—a rusty box cutter, to continue the previous analogy. You can get a lot done with a rusty box cutter, and what follows is a crash course in risk management for your campaign intended to teach you to do just that.

We're going to cover a four-step process for managing risks in your campaign:

- 1. Identification**
- 2. Likelihood**
- 3. Mitigation**
- 4. Contingency**

Ready? Hang on tight, here we go.

### Step 1: Identification

---

Every choice you make involves some risk, so considering them all would be impossible. Instead, consider your campaign framework document, your story notes, and your “What’s Really Going On” document. Most of the critical decisions made about the campaign are in your campaign framework; those not found there are likely to be in one of the other two places.

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# Odyssey

Do you ever wish you had a guide to help make running ongoing campaigns easier and more fun? Then you need **ODYSSEY: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management**—to our knowledge, the first system-neutral book solely dedicated to the art of managing campaigns.

Written by award-winning authors—and veteran game masters—Phil Vecchione and Walt Ciechanowski, *ODYSSEY* is jam-packed with in-depth advice on starting, managing, and ending campaigns. Whether you're an old hand or are new to game mastering, you'll find a wealth of tips and techniques you can put to immediate use in *ODYSSEY*.

*ODYSSEY*'s authors bring unique perspectives to the topic of campaign management. Phil is a project manager and wrote *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep*. Walt is an improvisational game master with years of experience in the tabletop RPG industry. Both write for the award-winning game mastering blog *GnomeStew.com*, and they collaborated on *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game* and *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters*.

*ODYSSEY* is full of practical guidance on campaign management for almost any RPG:

- A guide to starting a new campaign, from coming up with the initial concept to running a smooth first session
- Tips on structuring stories, handling problem players, and making your campaign thrive
- Advice on actively managing every element of your campaign—stories, characters, players, risk, and change—while avoiding common pitfalls
- Examples of how every aspect of campaign management looks when handled well or badly
- How to end campaigns on a high note, including what to avoid

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