

# KOBOLD GUIDE TO GAMEMASTERING

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**WITH ESSAYS BY**

**KEITH BAKER, DAVE "ZEB" COOK, SHANNA GERMAIN, BRANDON HODGE,  
JAMES JACOBS, KEVIN KULP, FRANK MENTZER, STEVE WINTER, AND MONICA VALENTINELLI**

**EDITED BY SEAN K REYNOLDS**

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*With essays by*

Keith Baker	James Jacobs
Wolfgang Baur	Steve Kenson
Clinton J. Boomer	Kevin Kulp
Dan Clark	Frank Mentzer
Lillian Cohen-Moore	Stefan Pokorny
Zeb Cook	RpgGamerDad
Dan Dillon	Michael E. Shea
Shanna Germain	Monica Valentinelli
Ed Greenwood	Bill Webb
Amanda Hamon-Kunz	Steve Winter
Brandon Hodge	

Edited by Sean K Reynolds

**KOBOLD**  
**Press**



## **KOBOLD Guide to Gamemastering**

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**Editor** Sean K Reynolds

**Additional Editing** F. Wesley Schneider

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	9
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## UNDERSTANDING PLAYERS

Making Players Shine <i>Dan Clark</i> .....	13
Let's Play: Creating a Fun and Inclusive Game For All <i>Amanda Hamon-Kunz</i> .....	19
GMing for Kids <i>RpgGamerDad</i> .....	25
Giving Initiative: Engaging Shy Players <i>Shanna Germain</i> .....	31
The People at the Table <i>Frank Mentzer</i> .....	37

## PLANNING THE GAME

Advice for New GMs <i>Dan Dillon</i> .....	47
Tips for Long-Time Gamemasters <i>Michael E. Shea</i> .....	55
Planning Your Campaign in Four Stages <i>Monica Valentinelli</i> .....	61
Character Love Interests <i>James Jacobs</i> .....	67
Gamemastering on the Fly <i>Brandon Hodge</i> .....	73
One-Shot Adventures <i>Keith Baker</i> .....	79
Winning Player Investment <i>Lillian Cohen-Moore</i> .....	85

## THE GAME IN PLAY

Knowing the Rules vs. Mastering the Game <i>Bill Webb</i> .....	93
The Art of Theatrical Gaming <i>Stefan Pokorny</i> .....	99
Laughter, Cellphones, and Distractions from Serious Gaming <i>Clinton J. Boomer</i> .....	105
Roll With It! What to Do When It Doesn't All Go As Planned <i>Steve Kenson</i> .....	111
Feasts And Famines: Handling Large Groups or Just One Player <i>Ed Greenwood</i> .....	119

Ditching the Miniatures: Playing A Smoother RPG <i>Wolfgang Baur</i> .....	123
Getting Things Going Again <i>Steve Winter</i> .....	131

#### IN BETWEEN SESSIONS

Dealing with a TPK: How to Save Your Players, Your Campaign, and Your Reputation <i>Zeb Cook</i> .....	141
Moving the Perspective <i>Kevin Kulp</i> .....	147

# INTRODUCTION

The people who wrote this book are an incredible assortment of GMing talent. Some ran games for or with this hobby's founders. Others were creators of famous game settings, editors of the biggest gaming magazine in the world, creative directors for the world's most popular RPG, novelists for fan-favorite fantasy and sci-fi settings, or winners of marathon-like GM competitions. These people have faced and defeated all sorts of crazy game problems; now their collective wisdom is in your hands so you can use their experience to prepare for your next campaign, make your current one better, or prevent a small problem from becoming a full-on disaster.

In the first section, *Understanding Players*, the authors talk about things you should think about before starting a campaign—what you want or don't want from the campaign, what the players want or don't want, handling communication, tailoring the game to be suitable for the players, and making sure everyone has the opportunity to be in the spotlight. Of course, all of these articles are useful in an ongoing campaign; it's helpful to pause every now and then to evaluate how things are going.

The second section, *Planning the Game*, is all about preparation, such as how much think-work you need to do before a session, how to handle romantic storylines, how a one-shot game is different than an ongoing campaign, and what sorts of things you can put in your campaign that'll make the players eager to come back for more.

The third section, *The Game in Play*, is advice for things that come up in an actual game session—what to do when the players try something weird and you're not sure there's a rule for it, how to enhance your GMing using



theater acting tricks, using imagination instead of miniatures, dealing with players who pay more attention to their texts than to you, or when the PCs race in the opposite direction as the prepared adventure.

The final section, In Between Sessions, covers issues that require quick thinking at the table and also some work outside of the game, namely what to do when the entire party gets killed and how to keep the PCs informed about other things going on in the world.

Whether you're a newbie GM or you've been doing this a long time, there's plenty of great advice in this book. The point of gaming is to have fun, and as the GM, you have the most influential role and the greatest amount of responsibility for the fun everyone has in your game. As you read these articles, think about how this information applies to your campaign and how to put your own unique spin on it. Be open to experimentation—try a piece of advice you've never done before or that goes against your normal inclinations. Just as a good writer improves their craft by trying new techniques, a good GM becomes a great GM by considering new ideas from other GMs who've had to deal with the very same things that happen in your campaign. Good luck and good gaming!

Sean K Reynolds

# UNDERSTANDING PLAYERS



# MAKING PLAYERS SHINE

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*Dan Clark*

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A gamemaster is a “service sector” job. As GMs, we are there to provide service to players by way of refereeing tactical activities, giving rules judgments, providing story hooks, and keeping the wider world of the game spinning. It’s a lot of work, but keep in mind that the right group of players can keep a game going without a GM, a GM is useless without players. We’re there to make the players shine and the world come to life, and the nice thing about doing so is that both activities feed into each other. The more engaging the world is, the more players feel encouraged to get involved and make their characters shine. The more the PCs shine, the more engaging the world becomes.

GMs can make players shine by giving them as many chances as possible to succeed and look cool while they do it. That’s it! Where things get complex is in the different ways that can happen. A strong warrior or paladin with a big sword has many opportunities to succeed—and in the most obvious, public, and stereotypical way possible in tabletop RPGs—by slaying the bad guys! Every character has a chance to do this, of course, but it’s not always a big moment for them. For example, a bookish wizard PC is a professor at a school of arcane arts; not only would this character probably avoid confrontations that would lead to combat, but destroying a rare or unique monster might well be abhorrent to them. The GM’s goal is to help a character like this have cool moments of success, ones that all the players at the table celebrate, and how that character’s contributions can lead to as many great table experiences as the mighty warrior slaying monsters.

Thinking of GMing as a service job helps make the game as great as possible for all of the players. If your focus as a GM is on your players and their awesomeness, and you are constantly engaged in making “shine moments” happen whenever they can, then you create a positive feedback loop: Players work to do cool things with their characters, you make the world react in a cool way to what they do, the whole table recognizes and celebrates the cool moment as it’s happening, which encourages the players to do more cool things with their characters, and the loop continues. Players get more invested in the game, the world, and the story, and contributing more great ideas and story grist as a result. Everybody wins!

There are many ways that players can shine. The following topics cover some of the most common and frequent ways you can help make it happen, and include techniques that work for any kind of player character—especially if you stay in the mindset of GMing as a service job.

## Shining With Dice

When I first started playing tabletop RPGs, I was young enough that I had a hard time understanding how they were supposed to work at the story level. I understood why I was rolling dice, but the whole concept of “collaborative storytelling” was beyond me. I didn’t know how to get to the dragon and treasure depicted on the cover of my gaming books, but I knew how I was supposed to beat him. As such, my earliest memories of excitement in RPGs all involve rolling a good old natural 20, or at least rolling well. I’ve since learned this is a common experience—a new player focuses on the dice results as obvious signs of success and only later learn the other ways to succeed.

As GM, when your players roll well, remember our definition of making players shine and why it’s desirable; we want to give players as many chances as possible to succeed and look cool while doing it because it encourages engagement and proactive playing. In this case, the chance to shine came from rolling a die, and the success came when the player rolled well. As GM, when this happens we can help the high-rolling player shine by making sure we celebrate their roll by prolonging the moment; make sure everyone at the table knows what just happened and how important it is, and then really get into the description of the roll’s results; if it’s an attack, play up how devastating that attack is to the enemy, including their dismay at the hero’s skill and power. If it’s a skill check, create a vivid description of the actions performed and the startling result. Even