

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Why use gamespeak when all it does is reduce your roleplaying to repeating statistics? **Antony Johnston** suggests ways that referees can make their sessions more colourful.

STORYTELLING

"Jezret the Valiant crept silently round the edge of the door frame. Slowly the room beyond came into view – first the green haze of sorcerous smoke, then the arcane inscriptions on the high walls, indecipherable to his uneducated eyes. Next he saw the stone steps leading up to a dais in the centre of the room. Atop the altar stood Barg the evil sorcerer, his eyes glowing fiery red. In his right hand he held the legendary Elf-blade, in his left a glowing green orb..."

An unoriginal but evocative description of a typical scene. Now compare this: "Jezret walks into the room, using Silent Move. It's full of green smoke, and the walls have got inscriptions on, but they're in High Magickal so he can't read them. In the centre of the ten by ten room are some steps leading to an altar. Barg stands at the top, holding a magic sword in one hand and a Sphere of Clouding in the other..."

This is more than just a matter of storytelling style. It's a question of player knowledge and character knowledge. I remember being terrified at the mere mention of a beastie with big horns and nasty fangs in *Tunnels & Trolls* – 13 years on it's hard not to be jaded. We all know what a Dryad looks like, we know that Wights drain your life-force. But there is a way to delay the inevitable. "Oh look, a skellie. Elf, don't

bother, you'll only do half damage. Wizard, fireball it." How? By not telling your players anything their characters wouldn't know. This is easy to do if you're starting a new game in a new setting, but you can still put the mystery back into a long-established game.

DATA CONTROL

Keeping player and character knowledge separate is never easy, but as a referee you can minimise the chance of the two crossing over by restricting information, even during character generation. This may sound a little harsh or impractical, but it isn't. It just requires a little more work by the referee. When it comes to choosing abilities – skills, spells, powers, whatever – ask your players what they want to be able to do rather than giving them a list of descriptions. Give them the most appropriate skill according to what they describe, but don't tell them how the mechanics of it work. This also discourages powergaming.

This can easily be done with magic, too (or any form of mystical powers). Ask Mages what effect they want to achieve, from the simple, "I want to be able to hurl lightning bolts around," to "I want to communicate with the spirit of a tree." If they belong to an order of Mages or have a mentor, give the spell a name other than the one in the rulebook. If they're training themselves ask them to make up their own spell names. Different orders

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REWARD CEREMONY
Perhaps it's worth trying a reward system for players who manage to ditch the rulespeak and talk in descriptive form. More roleplaying experience points, or whatever reward system your chosen game uses, should be awarded at the end of the session.

of wizardry and other self-trained Mages should have different names. What may be 'Storm's Fury' to one Mage could be 'The Hand of Zeus' to another.

During play, try to keep the mechanics invisible. Instead of saying, "You hit the Orc in the arm for 6 points of damage, but he's wearing chainmail so it only does 2," try, "You swing at the Orc from the side, striking his sword-arm. It's a strong hit but it practically bounces off his chainmail and he seems unhurt."

When a player wants to use a skill, tell them what dice to roll, but not what they need to roll to succeed. Describe the difficulty instead, such as, "You've seen locks like this before. It should be easy to pick," or, "That rock looks pretty solid. It'll probably take two of you to budge it." This requires a lot of trust on the players' parts, but it's worth it for the extra tension. Only through experience will they learn just how high they can leap, or how many well-placed blows it takes to slay a goblin, just like real life.

Remember other characters will have different perceptions. A local

innkeeper might describe the bandits terrorising local merchants as, "horrid, gigantic, black-skinned creatures with yellow eyes and huge fangs. One of them is enough to kill six men." That should be enough to have the PCs looking over their shoulder as they travel the road.

But the innkeeper will have heard the story from a dozen different people, all elaborating and then probably exaggerating himself. So when the PCs are ambushed by Orc bandits they may not even realise this was who the innkeeper was talking about, and carry on looking out for the alleged beasts. (At which point you could have them meet one, as described.)

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CHANGE THE RULES
Some referees find that preventing players from reading the rulebook is the most effective way of ensuring that they don't learn the rules, but this can't always be enforced. So, what to do? How about changing rules and developing a house system that your players can't possibly know?

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CHINESE WHISPERS

Misinformation is a wonderful thing. Players' minds are inventive things. When you combine the two, the players only need a few unconnected rumours and half-truths to send them flying off into worlds of conspiracy and theory that you could never have dreamed up in your most convoluted moments.

And stop telling them they're in a "ten by four room with a door in the north-east". Do any of them have an

unerring sense of direction? Or an architect's training? Tell them it's square, about ten by five, with a door in the left-hand corner. If their map matches yours exactly, something's wrong.

The same goes for treasure. Unless one of the party is trained at evaluating gems just tell them it's a big ruby or whatever. And if one of them is trained, allow for deviation – make him roll for the accuracy of his estimate (bear in mind he's not likely to have his scales to hand). Coinage can be foreign or archaic. Unless any members of the party have travelled to the neighbouring lands, they won't have a clue what the currency's worth: "20 Hruurgian ducats, eh? I'll give you five gold for 'em." "Er, is that a lot?"

Finally, magic items should be kept mysterious. Telling the players they've found a Ring of +2 Defense will have them moaning, "Oh no, not another magic ring. Well I've already got one, and the fighter's wearing plate... thief, you have it seeing as you're only wearing leather armour." [FX of referee gnashing his teeth.] Instead tell them they've found

a golden ring with an inset jade, engraved into which is the shape of a mountain. They'll soon be squabbling over it before they even think of asking the wizard to check it for magic.

Once again, only experience will show them that the thief doesn't seem to get hit as often as he used to in battle. And even then they may not put it down to the ring. Better still, they may incorrectly guess the ring's abilities due to some lucky coincidences.

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ENFORCED AMNESIA
The task of keeping the rules separate from the gameplay becomes even more difficult when the players also referee the game that's being played (perhaps with another group). In these situations, you simply have to persuade the players to forget what they know as best they can.

A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION
Feng Shui, a game in which the rules are kept in the background for the most part, was reviewed in issue 1 of *arcane*. Unfortunately that issue is now sold out, so you'll just have to borrow your mate's copy.

intended to take out one of the bad guys, but instead of telling the referee that he was going to plug the chap with as much lead as he had left in his weapon, he announced that his character was going to leap over the bar, grabbing the mook from behind, at which point he'd slam the poor bloke on to the bar-top and slide him down it, face-first, so that the guy's head ended up in the pizza oven at the far end. Yes, it's an ugly scene to envisage, but it had the whole group of players laughing, and the referee reacted appropriately (hell, there wasn't even a pizza oven at the end of the bar until the player had said so – this is the kind of detail which most refs haven't got time for, and so the player was actually helping the referee out by taking some initiative in setting the scene).

So, yes, referees should keep the players in the dark about the rules as much as possible, but players too should do their best to forget what rules they know if it's going to increase the sense of storytelling in a session, and cut down on superfluous rulespeak. Roleplaying is, after all, a group activity, and just because it's the referee who's running the show, it doesn't mean the ref should also be the one who puts in all the effort.