Dispatches from the Raven Crowking V.7

Talking Primarily to Players

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Introduction

Most of what I write is from a GM's perspective. This is not terribly surprising; I spend most of my gaming time on that side of the screen. This volume of Dispatches will be a little different in that several articles are intended for players of these games. If you are a GM, I encourage you to share them with your group.

Of course, I haven't forgotten the prospective GM, either, and if you are running the game, hopefully, you will find the material on game philosophy worth reading. A lot of this material is just as valuable for the GM. At the very least, if your players start acting on the advice herein, you will know what they are up to. And players who are more engaged are worth their weight in platinum.

I will assume that I am talking to players rather than GMs for the rest of this volume. Please do not imagine that this is intended to exclude GMs from reading! I am also going to dispense with "in my opinion" and "your mileage may vary." I assume that the reader is smart enough to know that what follows is my opinion. I will assume that, if their experience is at variance with my own, they are smart enough to know that without my having to tell them.

I am writing this in Toronto as we are nearing the crest of the third wave of Covid-19. Gaming has been restricted to online venues for what seems to have been ages. It feels like ages since I have rolled dice in person. If you have found yourself trying to bank up the fires of your passion for this hobby, I hope this volume helps.

It has been a long road, but the end is in sight.

Should You Trust Your GM?

The answer is yes.

I am a strong advocate of not fudging and have been so for a very long time. I am also a strong advocate of the GM running the game that they wish to run. If your games don't start with mature cooperation and mutual respect, one has to wonder why you are playing at all.

There are a lot of people, online and otherwise, who will take the opposite approach. The GM should not be trusted. Indeed, there are some rulesets designed to codify enough game experience that mutual trust is barely required. But I will argue that these kinds of rules restrict you, as a player, more than they set you free.

Consider for a moment a video game in which there is no "live GM" component. No matter how amazing the graphics, no matter how carefully imagined, you can literally do nothing that the programmer has not designed. This might mean that you can exploit a flaw in the design, certainly, but if the programmer didn't make it possible for you to rifle a body for loot, that can't happen.

The more a game codifies what can and what cannot happen, the more it resembles that video game. Yes, you can know that you can kick down an average dungeon door with a DC 10 (or whatever) Strength check, but if the game intentionally limits you to 10 types of "fair" doors, that is all you will ever encounter. Unless you trust your GM.

In most games, a player advocates for their character. It is neither in their interest or in the game's interest that the player tries to make things more difficult for themself.
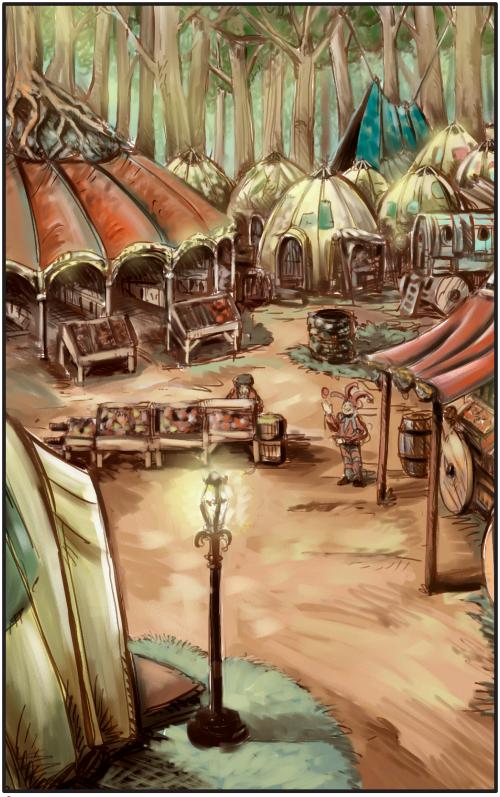
In most games, the GM tries to make things difficult for the PCs to, through effort, triumph more often than not. The GM is precisely in a role that requires that they provide the opposition for the player characters, essentially in the role of supplying all of the sudden reversals, unexpected dangers, WTF moments, and villainy that players enjoy overcoming.

Suppose the players do not believe that challenges are there to make the game better. In that case, these reversals do not seem like the GM doing his job, but rather like the GM being a jerk, the players lose motivation to overcome the setbacks, causing them either to miss out on the payoff or causing the GM to just give the payout to them. In either of these last cases, the game spirals into a sink of diminishing returns and, sooner or later, folds.

The GM must indeed give the players the "benefit of the doubt" that their attempts to overcome his opposition are in the game's best interests, and the GM must also give the players the benefit of their efforts. The GM need not "give the benefit of the doubt" that Class X, Combo Y, or Build Z will be good for the game. But within the parameters of what the GM does allow, the GM must absolutely be willing to "lose" to the players. Each roadblock, each sudden reversal, each problem that the PCs face exists to enrich the game and be overcome in some manner chosen by the players.

I believe that the GM must indeed give the players the "benefit of the doubt" that their attempts to overcome in-game opposition are in the game's best interests, and the GM must also give the players the benefit of their efforts. This is not in opposition to, but complementary to, the concept that the players must also provide the benefit of the doubt to the GM.

If you don't trust your GM, the game will suck.

Frodo, Bilbo, Conan, and Aragorn

Frodo is a character fleeing from danger and into more significant risk. He does take responsibility for his choices, but he is mainly reactive to the greater forces acting on and around him. He loves to talk about adventure with his uncle, but his greatest achievement is his willingness to sacrifice himself. Interesting to read, yes. Interesting to play? Probably considerably less so.

Conversely, while initially a reluctant adventurer, Bilbo really takes to it once he has decided his course. He tries to pick the troll's pockets due to a sense of professional pride. Once he has escaped the goblins, he really does consider going back under the Misty Mountains to look for his party. And, of course, he ends up having plans of his own - eventually becoming the driving force of the narrative (at least until the Battle of Five Armies). If you don't know what I am talking about here, forget the movies and read the book.

Frodo is driven by the pressures of the narrative. Bilbo takes the pressures of the narrative and bends them to meet his personal goals. The closest that Frodo comes to this is when he chooses to accept Gollum's aid - and, in the movies, this is played as though Frodo is a patsy to the wily Smeagol, whereas, in the novel, he knows exactly what he is doing.

It is completely okay to play a reluctant hero. Both Frodo and Bilbo are examples of that trope, but unless you want the GM to continually drive your character's decisions, it is better to model a PC off Bilbo than Frodo. Don't allow the needs of the Valar to move you; allow your own goals and dreams to determine what you do.

It is important to have goals.

Robert E. Howard's Conan is a fantastic example of a character who drives his own fate. Even when others hire him or attempt to manipulate him, Conan always has his own goals. There is more than one Conan story where a fundamental source of tension occurs because Conan's goals are not those the people around him want them to be - even if their coin is in his pocket!

It might not be obvious the first time one reads The Lord of the Rings - and they changed it in the movies! - but Aragorn is not a reluctant hero. He is, in fact, eager to sit on the throne of Gondor. Only when he is king can he wed Arwen, who he has loved for decades. The need to thwart Sauron is an impediment to his goals. Once he can finally act on them, he never loses sight of either the need to defeat Sauron or his hopes for the throne and marriage thereafter.

In-game terms, a PC like Frodo reacts to whatever the GM throws at him, whereas a Conan is actively forcing the GM to react to what he does. And an Aragorn or a Bilbo is actively trying to turn the narrative toward the direction he desires.

Have goals. It makes the game more interesting for everyone involved. And, if you have goals, the GM can use those goals as adventure hooks, making a game far more personal for your character (and, by extension, you). It doesn't even matter if your goals sometimes conflict with those of your party members - that tension will add spice to the game so long as it remains in the game, and we all try to remember that everyone is there to have fun.

If you want to make the game more fun, have goals. Be prepared to add goals. Be prepared to turn the game to meet your needs. Take possession of it. Just don't do so to make it worse for the other people at the table. And be prepared to meet a particularly grisly or heroic fate if your goals demand it. "Quest For It" is the beating heart of *Dungeon Crawl Classics*. Really, it is the beating heart of role-playing games. Quest for something.

Challenging Games

For me, a challenging game requires a chance for failure and a chance for success, and that the degree of failure or success is not an on/off switch. There has to be a palette of outcomes that depends upon the choices made by the players to determine just how much you win or just how badly you lose.

It must be possible to obtain enough context to make rational decisions, and the consequences of those decisions must follow from the context and the choices made. NPCs should be mostly trustworthy but follow the 10/80/10 rule, where 10% would never betray a trust, 80% could be motivated to do so if the right levers are found, and 10% are scum.

There should be lots of small-risk, small-reward jobs, quite a few high-risk, high-reward jobs, and a few low-risk, high-reward jobs.

There should be enough cleverly hidden rewards that all of "the treasure" will not always be found. Certainly, treasure does not teleport around behind you until you find it as convenient parcels that match your wish list.

Poor planning and/or bad luck sometimes means your cost in resources is greater than the benefits of an expedition. Conversely, good planning is rewarded, and good luck can bring you startling success.

The GM should be on the players' side but not sway their decisions or their die rolls.

To me, a challenging game is one where you take charge of, and ownership of, your victories or failures. Of course, a challenging game requires a fair GM who is interested in meeting the challenges imposed by adjudicating the players' clever ideas as it does players who are interested in meeting the challenges of the GM's campaign milieu.

(For the GM: Assume that the cultural sense of honor determines the norm. 10% are firmly entrenched in it, 80% can be persuaded to see it your way, and 10% are scum. In some societies, the "scum" might be the good guys. The other cool thing

about 10/80/10 is that it is easy to use with 1d10. Don't know if the guard can be bribed? Roll 1d10. "1" is a clear NO with real consequences, and "10" indicates that the guard will use the attempt to bend you over backwards later....just a bit of blackmail, squire. 2 to 9 are progressively easier to turn as the numbers get larger.

You can easily use it to decide the prevailing mores of society by using the same tool, where 1 is a society that is young and thriving and has strong social cohesion/ social capital, whereas 10 indicates a society on the brink of collapse. You can also use it for Law-Neutral-Chaos in a game like DCC where those alignments are definitive.)

Judgment Calls – Good, Bad, and Other

Part of running a game is making judgment calls. This is so true that in early *D&D* (as in *DCC*), the game master was often referred to as the "judge." Anyone who is even halfway decent at running a game will try to make judgment calls that make sense within the context of the game milieu, the rules, and their understanding of what the rules represent. Further, a good judge attempts to neither favor nor disfavor the players.

What makes sense to the Judge will not always make sense to the players. Role-playing games are built around information disparity. The Judge always has information that the players do not have. The information is never complete – not only would complete information be impossible, but it would be undesirable.

First, the more complete prep work must be, the worse the ratio from prep time to playtime. Even if the Judge manages to gain two hours of play from each hour of prep, this still means that they have to work for two hours to arrange a four-hour play session.

Second, while it is desirable to map out contingencies for the most likely courses of gameplay, mapping out contingencies for all possible courses would make gameplay dull for the person running the game.
It is the unconsidered plans of the players, and the unexpected turn of the game, which provides a true thrill for the Judge. And yes, my player friends, that does mean that the Judge enjoys your wild plans, and you should feel encouraged to make more!

Finally, determining all possibilities ahead of time, by tautology, delimits play to those possibilities. For instance, if a ruleset has no rules that allow for decapitation, and the ruleset determines all possibilities, then decapitation cannot happen within the context of the game.

I am one of those GMs who believes that RPG rules should not be written for lawyers. They should not require massive amounts of homework to determine how to "legally" make a monster, nor should they require the person running the game to memorize clauses and subclauses to play the game. Moreover, I strongly

believe that the game rules serve the fictional milieu, not the other way around. The game rules give support to the fictional milieu, but if there is a situation where the milieu and the rules are in conflict, the milieu wins.

For example, if a party is attacked by an ice elemental, I don't care if the author failed to note that it was impervious to cold – I can extrapolate that. Likewise, if the author failed to note a vulnerability to fire, and the players realize that an ice elemental is likely to be more damaged by fire than electricity, I will not penalize player ingenuity based on the writer's lapse.
I am very much fiction-first.

In the case of a game like Dungeon Crawl Classics, I am very much of the opinion that the Judge is intended to interpret the results of various tables and charts – including spell results – in a way that makes sense first in the fictional milieu, matches the rules second, and echoes the writing upon which both were based (the literature of Appendix N) as often as possible.

In the immortal words of Joseph Goodman: "*The Judge is always right. Let the rules bend to you, not the other way around.*" If the Judge believes that something should work in a particular way, that is how it works.

To make the game work, the Judge needs the authority to interpret the rules. This doesn't just mean interpreting the rules when the interpretation favors the players. It doesn't even simply mean when the interpretation is a good one.

Every GM is going to make bad rules calls. Sometimes those calls will work against the players. Far more often, they will work to the players' benefit. The Judge will forget that some monster has an extra action die.

They will decide that the 200 giants not currently engaged in melee don't throw their javelins. They'll forget a negative effect attached to some magical item that the party is using and, having forgotten it, will decide not to retroactively bring the pain. They won't make you go back and re-do the fight where the cleric casts full-round spells as actions.

Players do not usually demand that the effects of bad rules calls, or mistakes in their favor, get undone. Even when the battle is in progress, they do not generally wish to "roll back" to the first time a character got to take more actions per round than was strictly allowed under the rules as written. Some of those same players will scream bloody murder if they believe a rule call made against them was bad. Some will even expect the GM to justify any rule call that goes against them. Please do not be that kind of player!

I have no desire to run a game where I cannot make rules calls as I see fit. In all cases, I try to make what seems to me to be the best rule call at the time. I may make a mistake. I may not make the best call possible. But in each case, I try to do so. And I really, really don't want to grind the game to a halt so that we can argue for four hours about whether nor not you took 2 points of damage. I especially do not want to do so if the argument is hostile. Accept the call, move the game forward, and discuss it after the game or on a non-game day. If an adjustment needs to be made, it can be done then.

When a judge makes a rules call, it is not the only possible interpretation. It is not necessarily the best interpretation. It may not even be a good interpretation. It may even be a craptacular interpretation. The Judge has to make rulings and not be paralyzed for fear that one might be sub-optimal to run the game. Again, this speaks to the value of trusting your GM.

Anyway, I interpret this as falling under camp rules: If you insult the food, it's your turn to cook.

Balance of Power Part I: This Game is Two Games

All of the preceding really leads to the consideration of table dynamics that appeared in blog posts I first wrote in 2014. I strongly believe that understanding the balance of power at the game table will make you a better player. It will certainly make a GM better at what they do.

Wherever your game, and whoever you game with, there is a social contract at the table. In many cases, this social contract is unstated. In some cases, it may be formal. Every gaming group has its own social contract, which meets the needs of its participants.

In the "Balance of Power" articles, I will talk a little bit about the social contract that I use. I will also talk a little bit about some poisonous ideas floating around some parts of the internet. Please note that I am not demanding that you agree with me or adopt my ideas. Nor am I demanding that you do not accept the ideas that I will describe as poisonous. I hope that when you consider the social contract of your own games, you are empowered to examine it with a slightly wider viewpoint. Most of what I will say is probably obvious to most of my readers, so if your eyes start to glaze over, I won't be offended if you stop reading.

Anyway...

In a traditional role-playing game, you have a Dungeon Master, Referee, Judge, Game Master, Labyrinth Lord, Mutant Master, or whatever. I am just going to say GM, and you can fill in the appropriate title for your game of choice. You also have one or more players. Now, some people will tell you that the GM is also a player, but in this case, we are using gaming terminology: a player is a person who controls one or more protagonist "Player Characters" (or PCs). The GM does not control PCs. Anyone controlled by the GM is a "Non-Player Character" (or NPC) because the GM is not a player.

So, two senses of the word "player":
(1) someone sitting at the table and engaged in the game, and (2) someone who controls one or more PCs. Do not conflate them. Henceforward, in all that follows,

the word "player" is only used in the second sense, and if I need to, I will use "participant" for the first.

This split between players and GM is no accident. In a traditional role-playing game, the players are granted the opportunity to experience and take action within an imaginary milieu as though they were making decisions for an inhabitant of that milieu. The PC(s) operated by the player allow this access. Some game mechanics support the ability of players to make choices from the point-of-view of his PC (in which case they are called associated mechanics because there is a direct association between the game decision and the PC's decision in the milieu, or the result of the mechanic is mirrored in the changed conditions of the PC and/or milieu). Other mechanics are dissociated because there is no clear link between the player's choice in utilizing the mechanic and the PC's fictional "choice" of action.

(Some may prefer the term "immersive mechanics" instead of "associated." However, I feel that "associated" and "dissociated" are more obviously opposite ends of a spectrum. "Associated" may not be the best word in a descriptive sense when these mechanics are looked at separately, but I believe it to be the best word when examining both types of mechanics together.)

A dissociated mechanic damages the association between the player and the PC; an associated mechanic strengthens it. Many fun games are fully dissociated (chess, for example, or Sorry), and some people will claim that chess is a role-playing game if you whinny when you move the knight. However, I would argue that the associated mechanics in a game allow the game mechanics to encourage and reinforce role-playing. The degree to which any game is a role-playing game is, I would argue, based upon the relative strength of its associated vs. its dissociated mechanics. First edition *Gamma World* is a role-playing game. *Uno* is not.

Now, it should be relatively obvious that if the players are going to engage in this fictional milieu through the agency of their PCs, the fictional milieu must exist. Moreover, unless it is an unpopulated featureless plain, someone or something must devise and control all of the objects, creatures, and peoples which may be encountered therein. For the fictional milieu to seem real enough to allow for suspension of disbelief, the person doing all of this must know more than is being presented in the immediate area and at the immediate time. As a fictional world

needs rules to run believably, even off-the-cuff play requires that the person creating material in situ do so within an overarching framework which remains more or less consistent.

This is the job of the GM. The GM will present the roles of various creatures and peoples, but he will nearly always be in a position where his knowledge of the situation exceeds that of the NPCs portrayed. He must dissociate his knowledge from that of the creature being played to play it fairly. Similarly, the creation of the campaign milieu is primarily a dissociated process. The GM must view the milieu from the outside, dispassionately, to construct or present something worth playing in.

If you stop and consider this fairly, it should be clear that the GM will be engaged in a predominantly dissociative game which enables the players to play an associative game.

There is also a disparity in the amount of work and responsibility that go into being a player or a GM, and they will be touched upon anon, but right now, the above is all I really want to get across. The players play a predominantly associative game; the GM's game is predominantly dissociative, and much revolves around that single point.

Balance of Power Part II: The Associative Game

In a traditional role-playing game, most of the participants will be playing the associative game, so we will look at that first. The reason that most participants will be playing the associative game is threefold: (1) any given GM can run a game for several players, and in most cases, the game is more fun if there are at least 3 participants in the associated game, allowing the players to react to each other as well as to the game milieu, (2) it is the easier of the two games to play, in that it requires both less prep and a less skill-varied outlook to do well, and (3) for many people, it is where the majority of the fun and interest of role-playing games is to be found.

In its purest form, the players of such a game would not need to know or understand any rules at all. Who and what their characters were could be conveyed descriptively, and the players could make choices from that standpoint without knowing the rules that underlay their outcome. Of course, most players prefer to have some understanding of the basics of the game. The traditional role-playing game splits rules between those that the players should know and those that the GM must know. In the early days of the hobby, it was very much discouraged for players to examine the GM rules, not because it removed the authority of the GM, but because it deprived the player of the opportunity to learn how the game milieu works from actual play; i.e., from an associated stance.

How to strengthen the associated stance has been a question that many groups, and many game designers, have tried to answer over the years. For instance, in some groups, the large-scale creation of the game milieu is devised by the players and GM as a unit - in other words, everyone participates in the dissociated game - so that the players will have the basic knowledge of the world that their characters would presumably have. Other games stress a world in which knowledge is scarce and precious. Still, other games, like the classic *Traveller* and *Hârn* setting, produce materials designed to convey background information to players and GM alike.

Although some games have moved far afield in layering dissociated mechanics on the player's side of the table - *4th Edition D&D* being an obvious example - much of the fun and interest in playing a traditional role-playing game comes from discovering the unknown within a game milieu where the player can act from his

or her PC's point of view. If this is what you are interested in as a player, excessive dissociated mechanics are undesirable.

Likewise, excessive input into the game milieu's composition is undesirable. It seems fairly obvious to me that you cannot discover (through play) whatever parts of the world you have already decided together as a group, and you preclude the possibility of anything that would invalidate those decisions. By minimizing what you decided as a group, you minimized your loss of this aspect. The amount that you decide as a group directly impacts the amount of potential discovery that is lost.

Consider a world in which zombies are rising from their graves. If that is all you know going in, you do not have to worry about dissociating player knowledge from character knowledge. If you decide as a group that Necromancer X is responsible, you obviously cannot discover that fact during play. Your characters may discover it, and you may pretend that it is news to you, but that is not the same thing (at all) as learning squid-faced demons from the dark side of the moon were responsible. Or learning that something you did in your first adventure inadvertently set these events in motion.

There is a great deal of difference, in terms of discovery through play, between being given background information that your PC may know (which increases the association of decision-making between player and PC) and devising background (which makes the player an author and dissociates her from the position of her PC).

"A strange sickness appears, and nearly everyone who dabbled in the arcane arts was put to the sword or run out of town. Magic is feared and distrusted and in many places outlawed." This increases the players' questions and aligns those questions with the same doubts that the PCs would have. Magic may still be the root cause. There may be no cure. Etc. It remains possible that squid-faced demons on the dark side of the moon are performing a ritual that will destroy the world through a tide of the dead or that aliens have bombarded the planet with organisms intended to destroy the native sentient species.

"It is a natural disease, akin to the Black Death" ends all speculation and completely removes the sense of discovery when one realizes that it is a natural disease akin to the Black Death. It ends all speculation and doubt on that point. In fact, it suggests that isolating oneself as far as possible from all other people is the best way to survive. Smart players may well decide to hunt down disease vectors. This is in no way akin to choosing a rule set or a character class. Neither of those forces you to act against the interests of your PC. Asking players to ignore world creation elements that they helped to formulate does.

If there is any doubt that it matters that the players are being asked to dissociate what they know with what their PCs know, consider the following: The PCs one day encounter is a sorcerer-type being stoned by a mob. The PCs would have no way of knowing that the sorcerer did not cause the disease; the players know that he did not know for a fact. On at least one front, the complexity of the scenario collapses. In addition, why would the players have any interest in learning more about the disease when they are already well informed before play even begins?

Similarly, were I to participate as a player in an unaltered game of Bone Hoard of the Dancing Horror, the fact that I devised the scenario would perforce limit my ability to play a PC in a fully associated way. By which I mean, I would be forced to stand outside the PC's mindset and determine what the PC would make of the information presented, in the same way I would do so for an NPC were I GMing. I simply would not gain a true "player experience."

The more information the players have about the scenario that their PCs do not, the more the players must dissociate their knowledge with the PCs' POV. The more that this is true, the more the ability to play the PC within the associated game is lost, and the more the players' experience resembles that of the GM playing an NPC.

While this may not be obvious when the difference between PC/player knowledge is small, it nonetheless exists, and it grows exponentially as the difference increases.

Gamers love to tell stories about those moments in which the game turned 180° from what they expected when they came to a sudden understanding of the

connections that created a rational whole from what had seemed to be disparate parts when they miscalculated when they came up with a solution to solve what had appeared unsolvable.

It is easy to find a player who will talk animatedly about when he resolved a mystery or encountered the unexpected. It is very difficult to find a player who will be so enthused about when things occurred exactly as expected.

This is the primary tension one sees in role-playing games - The players want to win. They want to manage risk so that they increase the odds of their winning. Ultimately, the players strive to play it safe, but "playing it safe" only retains its interest so long as there is no way to play it completely safe. Managing risk is only fun when not all risk is manageable. A flat track does not a roller coaster make.

Balance of Power Part III: The Dissociative Game

On the GM's side of the table, we have the dissociative game. This game includes the creation of background materials - including composition and understanding of the game milieu - as well as running the game, knowing and interpreting the rules, and taking the roles of any NPC (including monsters and deities as well as sentient human[oid] types the PCs might encounter).

Even when the players share in the dissociated game of building the campaign milieu on a large scale, there will always be information disparity between the players and the GM. Some GMs do very little prep and largely make up the game milieu as they go along.

Well, that is obviously one way to deal with milieu creation, and I dare say that no matter how well the GM prepares, there are going to be times when the direction chosen by the players force them to make up material "on the fly" to some degree or another. Some people are very good at this; they need to do little or no prep work because they are capable of astounding works of unique genius at the drop of a die. I certainly cannot work like that, nor have I ever seen it in action. That doesn't mean that it doesn't exist, just that I can't recommend that as a working model.

When a television series is created, there is often a "series bible" that helps to maintain continuity within the series. Rather than making up the milieu episode-by-episode, the series creators take the time out to flesh out the story arcs and milieu in which the episodes will take place. When this is not done or is not done well, it can be irritating to the viewers. Surely I am not alone in wondering how Sheriff Rick can stumble on an unexpected prison within a couple of hour's drive from his house in *The Walking Dead*? Better care in the creation and presentation of the milieu prevents mistakes like this from occurring.

Earlier I had said that the prospective GM must view any given portion of the game dispassionately. I still hold that to be true. The GM can and should be excited about running the game. Still, they cannot be so invested in a location, encounter, trap, monster, or NPC that they become more important than the players' ability to alter, eliminate, ignore, or avoid them. Simply put, while the GM must decide

what, say, an ogre will do to avenge its slain pet owlbear, or what Captain Midnight will do when the PC superheroes go rogue, or where the Venusian Pirates are to be found, he must not advocate for any of these elements in the same way that the players advocate for their PCs.

One hears horror stories of "DM PCs" where the GM actually advocates for an NPC in the same way a player would for a PC. The GM's information disparity allows these NPCs to be more effective than the PCs in every way possible. Sometimes the term is used for an NPC with a long-standing in the campaign milieu, but again the GM must resist the temptation to play the associative game with these characters.

In a true "GM vs. players" game, the GM cannot lose. They control the pieces. They control the rules. They can create new pieces at any time and can replace die rolls with fiat. What an utterly boring and contemptible game that would be!

This is not to say that the dissociative game sucks - far from it! For some of us, this is the most interesting game. It offers creativity that even the most amazing associative play cannot rival. It is more challenging. It requires self-discipline. It is a joy to do well.

Balance of Power Part IV: Putting the Games Together

Some caveats upfront:

(1) If you have found yourself disagreeing with every post in the "Balance of Power" series so far, you probably won't agree with any of the parts to come.

(2) This series is about traditional role-playing games. In philosophy, there is something called the anthropic principle, which stems from the point that if we are here to observe the universe, the universe must exist in a condition that we can be here to observe it in. In other words, any universe observed by intelligent creatures must be a universe in which intelligent creatures can exist to observe it.

There are all kinds of versions of this principle, but one interpretation suggests that the universe we see results from our collective beliefs and expectations. i.e., if enough of us believe in unicorns, unicorns will not only exist, but they will always have existed.

A traditional role-playing game assumes that the players deal with a world whose basic properties are in some fashion set. In other words, the players, through the medium of their characters, explore that world, and their growing understanding of the principles by which that world works, including knowledge of peoples, places, etc., lead to increased success within the game. Just as we must adapt to the real world while attempting to use our increased understanding to alter our environment to our benefit, the PCs adapt to the fictional milieu and attempt to change it to their desires and/or take advantage of its properties.

If you are playing a game in which the PCs' beliefs and desires shape the world around them, or where the world remains formless except in the immediate field of view, where they're effectively is no "real world" within the game because flux occurs either due to lack of prep or the inherent nature of a world where the presence or absence of a guard behind a door is based upon a character's convictions. In contrast, that game may be incredibly fun to you; it is not a traditional role-playing game, at least for the purposes of this discussion.

That doesn't mean that the GM has to have planned every village and every blade of grass in advance. However, lack of preparation means that the players are not reacting to the world; the world - through the agency of the GM - is being formed in reaction to the PCs. There is always a limit to how prepared you can be. Still, there is a difference between that villager and his cow being a logical extension of already created work and that villager and cow just appearing because a PC wanted to buy a cow. Even then, the area is fuzzy because the GM is unlikely to have considered whether or not even pre-scripted cows are for sale.

Like a hot shower or a cold shower, you can have quite a range and consider the water to be "hot," but if someone comes along and dumps a bucket of ice water down your back, no matter how "hot" he might consider it, the odds are pretty good that you will resist that interpretation.

If your GM argues that they don't need to prep because their inconsistencies just add to the mystery (How come Sheriff Rick doesn't know about the prison within a day's drive of his home?), the odds are good that your shower is cold.

(3) There is certainly no obligation to agree with me. Assuming that I have thought through every objection, you might have, that I am automatically right, or that I know exactly what all the repercussions of any idea might be is certainly not necessary here!

Okay, then.

In the game that I am discussing, the players require something to explore and interact with. Although it is impossible (and, in fact, undesirable) to eliminate the information disparity between the GM and the players, the players seek to reduce the disparity to make more effective choices within the context of the milieu.

That information disparity also means that the players require the ability to trust the GM, and the GM requires trust from the players. (You knew this was going to come up again, didn't you?)

While much of the dissociative game is played alone in creating materials, and while the GM may move timelines forward without players being present, the GM

requires players to bring the whole to life. Without an associative element supplied by the players, a traditional role-playing game is nothing more than preparation for the game. NPCs cannot supply this - there is no discovery in "exploring" that you have already created, and if you have not yet created it, you are probably writing fiction rather than playing a game.

Writing fiction is a fun pastime; it is not a traditional role-playing game.

Likewise, there is a reason why solo play - for example, generating a dungeon using the tables in the *1st Edition Dungeon Master's Guide* while you play through it yourself - falls rather flat. Without both sides at the table, the prospective player-GM is like Gollum, who thinks that great secrets must be hidden beneath the Misty Mountains, but discovers only darkness and a sort of half-existence gnawing old fish bones.

Balance of Power Part V: Function and Dysfunction

One of the oldest problems in philosophy is the question of evil. Why is there evil in the world? Especially if you believe that there is Someone in charge of the universe, what is the purpose of evil? We are not just talking about wrongdoing here, but also illness, predation, the need to kill other things to survive, tragic accidents, and sheer bad luck. Surely an all-knowing and all-powerful Someone could arrange it so that these things simply do not happen.

We have all seen this thrust arise in gaming over the past decade - railing against PC death, save-or-die mechanics, campaign or adventure premises that seem to be one thing but turn out to be another, etc. In some game systems, characters can only die if the player chooses to put that option on the table. The rise of Challenge Rating (CR) type mechanics from 3e D&D onwards has led to an expectation that "challenges" be "balanced," where "balanced" all too often is taken to mean that the PCs should succeed without any undue loss. And, the advice now seems to go; you should consider fudging rolls or statistics to ensure that the expected outcome occurs. There is a sense that some believe that a saving throw doesn't represent the last chance at survival but is rather something that should be repeated until an encounter is over or the character wins. Medusa doesn't simply turn you to stone - she slows you down to make the fight harder, but ultimately you triumph!

All of this boils down to the same philosophical problem: Why is there evil in the world? With an all-powerful GM to look out for the PCs, why should the players ever fail?

None of us wants bad things to happen to ourselves or to those we love, but at the same time, most of us gave up watching programs or reading books where nothing bad ever happens long ago. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anyone making it through grade school without demanding more solid fare. I have found that few even make it past the age of 7 without developing some desire to have real problems occur in the fiction they are exposed to. This is not to say that they want Gollum to devour Bilbo Baggins or Smaug to catch the hobbit burglar out, but the destruction of Lake Town rings true, and the deaths of Thorin, Fili, and Kili seem right.

The GM has several jobs to do - provide a game milieu that makes sense to them and is interested in running. Provide the players with context so that they can make choices and determining the consequences of those choices. The players have a job to do - make choices within the context available, and role-play their characters.

If railing at the universe worked, we would all rail at the universe whenever something bad happened. Some players follow this principle in role-playing games because sometimes "railing at the universe" (through the agency of the GM) does work. A GM who changes rulings due to such railing does harm not only to his own enjoyment of the game but also to the enjoyment of the other players. Rewarding railing breaks the fourth wall and effectively punishes players who accept the universe as it is.

We can imagine a GM who both encourages rules disputes and then uses those disputes to split the party between "supporters" and "non-supporters" of the GM's position....but why would we do such a thing? First off, encouraging rules disputes perforce limits the associative game by forcing the players to think in terms of rules rather than the fictional "reality" of the game milieu. Secondly, rules disputes automatically split the game participants, whether it is the intention of the GM or not. If they did not split the game participants, there would be no dispute.

I am not encouraging the GM to be a dictatorial monster - if you are that GM, your players are right to leave your table. I am saying that the GM has a responsibility to be the referee to judge the rules as impartially as possible. Trying to foist off that responsibility onto the players helps no one. Yes, discuss why rulings were made at a suitable time removed from gameplay. No, do not encourage rules disputes during the game.

There is a reason that so many early games emphasized that the GM is always right, and it has nothing to do with stroking the ego of the GM. It is because - in the hands of a competent GM - that is how traditional role-playing games work best. And your goal, if you GM, should never be to be less than competent. A GM who uses "The GM is always right" to feed his own ego or make the game suck isn't made better by encouraging rules disputes. A GM who is doing a good job, to the best of her ability, is at best hampered by rules disputes, and at worst, hamstrung.

To be functional, any relationship must meet at least two criteria:

(1) Is power in the relationship shared fairly?

(2) Does each person in the relationship have the necessary rights needed to meet his or her responsibilities?

As to (1), either the players or the GM can end the game, but only all the players together can end a specific campaign, although the GM has the power to do so. Without the GM's materials, the other players can create a continuation of sorts by inventing (or buying) their own materials. Without the players, the GM can continue to use the same game milieu to attract new players.

The GM has the majority of the say because the GM does the majority of the work. If you expect someone to do most of the work but have no increased share in power, you are actually advocating a dysfunctional relationship. The world is full of people who advocate dysfunctional relationships. Usually, they advocate them for other people while blithely ignoring their own advice or advocating them in their own favor.

In my experience, in most games, there is no question about whether the GM or the players will walk, as long as condition (2) is met. Really, most people can talk out issues and make compromises, and most people can respect other people's work at the table.

As to (2), I have written - a lot - about what the GM needs. Let us turn for a moment and look at what the player needs. The player's primary responsibility is to play a character and make choices within the game milieu. That means that, unless there is some form of external compulsion involved that makes sense within the context of the game milieu - and even that should be used in very, very, very, extremely very limited amounts - the player gets to choose what the character does. Period. End of the sentence.

The GM does not get to tell the player what their character would do. The GM does not get to demand that the player approach the game with a specific goal or mood in mind. The GM does not get to demand that the players work together. All of

these things fall outside the GM's purview. Only in rare cases where an external issue is being played out inside the campaign milieu should the GM intervene. Demanding that the players choose a single goal to work together is the GM version of being a rules lawyer or demanding that the campaign milieu works per your expectations.

Now, if you are not interested in letting players play the associated game or the GM play the dissociated game, you can develop different forms of functional relationships. And, as a player, if you can find a GM who wants to run what you want, or if, as a GM, you can find even a single player, you should always run the game you want the way that you want.

But, there is always a chance that bad things will happen in the game world because it is necessary for the associated game that it be so. It is also necessary for an interesting game. My job, as GM, is to provide interesting context and consequences that follow rationally from your choices. Your job, as a player, is to play your character and decide what your character will do. I will respect your job, and I expect you to respect mine. We share this game. We share the power based upon what we contribute and what our jobs are. We share the success or failure of each session. I am not out to screw you over, but it is my job to make sure that you can make choices that do screw you over, just as it is my job to make sure that you can make choices that result in your coming out on top.

Gary Gygax talks about this in his *Inside*, and I quote here from pages 50-51:

> It should be hammered home by now that the role of a game master differs significantly from that of a fiction author. The job of the game master does not involve revealing to the players the private thoughts or motivations of NPCs and monsters, nor will a good GM dictate what the players' characters feel or how they ought to act – because he doesn't know that. In general, a player should not be forced to explain his character's actions or to justify his actions to another player even if asked, unless the character's normal demeanor has drastically changed or the action threatens the entire party's success or survival. Likewise, the denizens of a campaign world are known by their actions, their natures, and private thoughts kept

secret by the GM – unless learned by guile in play, ripped from them by magic or torture.

Also, no single antagonist or creature should become more important to the plot than the heroes. In other words, the game master should not make any NPC absolutely central to the unfolding story because nothing controlled by the GM is more important than the development and advancement of the PCs through their interactive play. Then, it is apparent that the game master is far removed from being a "third-person omniscient narrator." Sure, he might be omniscient regarding the details of his chosen milieu, but because he cannot know the future actions or thoughts of the PCs, he cannot be called a "storyteller" in the fullest sense.

Finding people who want to play, if you let them play their characters, and you don't punish the rest of the players by rewarding the weeds, has always been easy in my experience. Likewise, finding a GM if you respect the position and not acting like a weed has never been difficult. If you feel like you are coming to the game "cap in hand" from either side of the table, you might consider trying this yourself.

Advice to Players

The following was originally written as my attempt to create a section of advice for players akin to what Gary Gygax included in the back of the 1st Edition Player's Handbook. I have updated it to reflect the Dungeon Crawl Classics game system. I hope that some find some useful bits of advice therein.

I have always been prone to seek adventure and investigate and experiment where wiser men would have left well enough alone.

– Edgar Rice Burroughs, A Princess of Mars

At its heart, **Dungeon Crawl Classics** is a game about exploration and adventure. This doesn't mean that the Judge is a "storyteller" whose job is to devise a plot for Player Characters to follow, nor does it mean that Player Characters are necessarily destined to be heroes. Quite the opposite – the game itself admonishes you that "You're no hero."

Your Judge will certainly throw out "hooks" that may lead to adventures. Some of these will be red herrings, some will lead to riches, and some will lead to great adventures. It is up to you, as a player, to set goals.

Some characters may indeed grow to become great heroes. Others might die or become incapacitated through poor judgment or worse luck.
When things go against you, try to remember that it's part of the game. Dungeon Crawl Classics characters are pretty easily made, and it shouldn't take long to get back into the action. You can also use henchmen and hirelings to take part in adventures where your primary character has been killed or incapacitated.

Preparing for an Adventure
When you are preparing for a game session, there are some steps you can take to increase your success, regardless of what sort of adventure is in the offing or where it takes place.

Set a Goal: There is nothing more important than setting a goal for each game session. You don't have to be bound by this goal – if circumstances change, your goal can change too. Having a goal, however, helps to keep things moving during

the game. Anything can be a goal: Locating a new dungeon level, guarding pilgrims en route to a shrine, finding some specific area or treasure, or whatever else you can think of. It's completely okay to have more than one goal, so long as you know what your primary goal is. Likewise, everyone in a group can have personal goals, so long as there is some goal that unifies all the characters.

Update Your Character Sheet: This is a simple expedient – make sure that your character sheet is up-to-date. This is especially true if your character has gained a level. Did you gain some treasure you haven't marked on your sheet yet? Did you discover some clue as to what that magic gem does? Now is the time to mark it down.

Check Equipment: While you're updating your character sheet, check your spells and your equipment. Considering the goals you set, do you have the equipment that you need? If not, make a list, know how much you have to spend, and be ready to perform the necessary transaction(s) within as short a time as possible. With your Judge's permission, you may be able to do much of this before the actual game session begins. If you know that you will be scaling the vast pit of offal known as Filthfall Middens, and you fail to bring rope and spikes, it is not simply bad luck if you fall into a deep pool of refuse.

Contact the Other Players: All the personal preparation in the world is of little avail if you fail to contact the other players sharing your expedition and ensure that you share a common goal. Brainstorming sessions are a perfect time to review clues from previous sessions, make connections between characters and past events, and plan how to deal with problems you know you will encounter. Talking about the game with the other players will not increase your chances of success, but it may also increase your excitement – and hence your fun – in the actual game session.

Death is always beckoning in *Dungeon Crawl Classics*. Your job is to avoid answering as often as possible!

The Role of Intelligence
It is said that knowledge is power. This is certainly true in *Dungeon Crawl Classics*.

The more you know about an adventuring area or an encounter before you commit to it, the better your chances are of profiting from the game session.

There are many ways of gaining information in the game. The simplest is to gather whatever rumors may exist about the adventuring area. Be ready to spend a few coins to do this – loosening lips in the inn with a pint or two is a time-honored tradition among adventurers. The guards at the city gates, and watchmen on the night patrols, often see or hear unusual happenings. Beggars sometimes know things that others do not. Just don't assume that every wild story or bit of gossip is true.

Consider also, Who is affected?, and What might they know? For instance, if the Baron hires you to hunt down an ogre that has been stealing sheep from local farmers, those farmers might well have seen the creature's tracks and know what direction it was heading in. They might even know where its lair is!

Sages often know more but can be expensive to consult.

Local legends should not be entirely ignored.

At the same time, beware of misinformation. Even rumors that contain a grain of truth might also be misleading.

The haunted house might be an abode of smugglers rather than of the un-dead.

Divination spells are probably the most powerful and reliable source of intelligence available to Dungeon Crawl Classics characters. Use them! Although some spells and effects can skew the outcome, and the answers can sometimes be cryptic, they are included to be useful, and a good Judge will keep this in mind. Even if no PC can use divination magic, there may well be an NPC witch or oracle in the milieu. A wizard or elf might gain information from her patron - but there is always a price.

Finally, pay attention to your surroundings. Few creatures live in a vacuum. Monsters leave signs of their existence – "footprints" either figuratively or literally. Even constructed opponents can affect the environment around them.

If nothing else, the presence of a victim indicates that something – trap, spell, or monster – was the victimizer. Listen to your Judge's descriptions, and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Money
After your first successful adventure, you might be tempted to keep your share of the treasure or spend it all on new equipment and upkeep. Of course, gaining XP means gaining power. And kept gold can be used to better your equipment, which means bettering your chances of survival, at least in theory.

Yet, I would urge you to spread some of that wealth around. Consider giving that emerald as a gift to the Duke. Pass a few pieces of copper, and even silver, to beggars. Buy a round of drinks at the tavern. If the innkeeper's daughter is marrying, give something of value to the happy couple.

These are the actions that win you friends, and you cannot know ahead of time when you might need them.

When the beggars warn you that the militia is coming to arrest you, and the magistrate must consider your friendship with the Queen when the gaoler lets your friends in to see you. The gate guards refuse to recognize you as you escape the city; you will know that your money has been well spent.

If you have never seen *The Godfather* (1972), I urge you to rectify that. The film explores a microcosm in which politics and the exchange of favors fully illuminated. It is, of course, also a very fine film!

Friendship is a two-way street. Just as you might find yourself in need of aid, so might your friends need your help. Many Judges delight in using danger to friends as adventure hooks. Good Judges also have NPCs approach your character with offers of friendship and gifts as they gain power in the milieu – you will have to sift carefully through these offers to determine who you wish to associate with and who are nothing more than sycophants.

But friends are worth it. Good allies are worth more than gold.

In *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, equipment is also less important than you might imagine. That fine armor increases your AC but also increases your Fumble Die and your check penalty, and it might slow you down. That two-handed sword does more damage, but now you are roll 1d16 for initiative. Having friends really might save your life more than new stuff does!

Giving Them a Good Talking To
Sometimes it is possible to speak with other creatures, even if they are otherwise hostile. This is called a parley. Characters may be able to come to terms with other creatures, accepting surrender, surrendering, paying or accepting a bribe or ransom, or coming to terms in a truce.

The key to a successful parley is to determine what the other creature(s) want.

Sometimes the Judge will have creatures tell you that they don't want to talk. Unless such a statement is followed up by an immediate attack or retreat, you should take it as a clue that you simply haven't discovered what they want yet. Many Judges enjoy the opportunity to role-play that comes with a parley and reward their players accordingly. Remember that no creature has better intelligence about what a dungeon contains than one who lives there.

Remember, too, that by being willing to speak to creatures less powerful than your characters, you are setting a precedent that might one day save your characters' lives.

Keeping Watch
Keeping watch during an adventure is an important consideration. Characters need to rest to heal and regain spells, but lying down to sleep in the middle of a dungeon or the wilds, with no one to watch for danger, can bring a sudden halt to a promising career.

There are two important elements to a proper watch: staying awake and keeping alert. Your Judge might require a check for either or both. Staying awake usually requires a Fort or Will save. DC 5 is average – although if the day's events were particularly strenuous, or the characters are close to their last legs, the Judge is justified in raising this to 10, 15, or even 20.

Remaining alert requires a Fort save with a similar DC.

Failure may result in the watch being surprised regardless of being awake.

> **House Rule: Awakening**
>
> It is a DC 10 Luck check to awaken due to nearby shouting. Newly-awakened characters are groggy, taking a –2d on the dice chain penalty to all rolls (including attack rolls, initiative, and saves), as well as a –2 penalty to AC. These penalties are reduced to –1d and –1 to AC with a successful Fort or Will save (DC 15) and after that removed with another successful Fortitude or Willpower save (DC 10). A character who spends an Action Die trying to wake himself up gains an extra save with a +4 bonus

Beware the Classic Cons

If something seems too good to be true, it often is.

Judges delight in setting up situations where the PCs are faced with classic cons. Since the first die was rolled in the first session of the first role-playing game, this has been going on, and you can be certain that it will go in any game you play.

Some of the "classic" cons in adventure role-playing are:

- The quest where vital information is left out. Especially when it turns out that the PCs are hired by the villain.
- "Free treasure" that turns out to be a monster or a trap. Again, if it seems too good to be true...
- Creatures that look like other, far more dangerous creatures. Actually, this is a classic con in nature, too, called mimicry. Likewise, dangerous predators may attempt to pass themselves off as something harmless, the way a crocodile might appear similar to a floating log.

Dungeons & Ruins

The most common adventure locations in *Dungeon Crawl Classics* are in dungeons and ruins, including the ruins of cities, towns, castles, temples, etc. In this context, the term "dungeon" means any location, primarily underground, that limits

movement and visibility. These regions often contain the lairs of monsters and long-forgotten treasures waiting to be uncovered by the clever and bold.

Dungeons are popular because, by restricting options, they are easier for the Judge to build than other locations. They present clearer decision points to players (for much the same reason).

Dungeons can be roughly divided between limited boundary dungeons and mega-dungeons.

Limited boundary dungeons are generally small, of finite area – places characters enter with very specific goals or places that can be completely investigated over one or more game sessions. Often, characters enter limited boundary dungeons to accomplish some specific goals. Branches from those goals exist to tempt and trap characters, waste time, and otherwise distract them from their major goal.

Mega-dungeons, sometimes called campaign dungeons, are larger – they may be effectively infinite due to ongoing additions throughout a campaign. The point of a mega-dungeon is not simply to accomplish some specific goal (although specific goals certainly are the focus of given game sessions and adventures). A campaign dungeon exists to be explored throughout a campaign. Dipping into a mega-dungeon repeatedly, with a wide variety of goals, is characteristic of a campaign with such a feature.

A limited boundary dungeon is most often densely populated (in traps, creatures, and/or treasure). Still, mega-dungeons are often created using a mixture of large swathes of unpopulated areas mixed with small pockets of heavy population.

In this way, mega-dungeons are similar to a wilderness region. Groups of inhabited chambers, caves, etc., are analogues to limited boundary dungeons within the overarching whole.

Light
The importance of a trustworthy light source while traversing underground regions cannot be overstated. In the wilderness, one can often see a little by the

light of stars and moon. In the town, one can hire linkboys to carry torches even on the darkest night.

But in the deep places underground, barring some source of phosphorescence, natural or unnatural, creatures without infravision or light are utterly blind.

Secret Doors & Hidden Passages

Secret and concealed doors, as well as the hidden passages and areas they mask, have been a staple of adventure and fantasy fiction for well over a century. A secret door is devised to look like part of a wall, a bookshelf, etc., whereas a concealed door is a normal door that is hidden by some means (such as behind a tapestry or plastered over).

Simply finding a secret door does not guarantee an ability to open it. There is generally some opening mechanism that must be discovered separately. Taking a specific action that causes the door to always open works and usually requires no roll. Thus, if turning a wall sconce opens a secret door, and a player has her character do so, then the door opens.

Traps & Hazards

Covered pits (with or without spikes), poisoned needles, wire snares, sliding chutes that deposit characters in a new level, teleporters, and spells that are set to go off with a particular trigger occurs are all examples of traps. Traps are intentionally set by intelligent creatures or set by creatures using instinct.

Weakened floors that collapse under too much weight, rock slides, avalanches, undertows, and poisonous plants are examples of hazards.
Hazards occur naturally due to rot, erosion, and similar forces.

Wilderness Adventures

Adventures in the wilderness usually consist of two types – travel and exploration. Travel adventures consist of going from Point A to Point B and the encounters that occur while traveling. Exploration adventures, sometimes called hex-crawling (due to the tendency to map wilderness areas on hexagonal graph paper), consist of going wherever mood or the lay of the land takes you.

If they are only for short distances, travel adventures may not require special preparations. However, longer travel adventures and exploration adventures may require extensive provisions, requiring a baggage train, animal handlers, and possibly local guides. If the characters suspect large numbers of bandits or humanoids or are concerned with staying fresh themselves, they might need mercenary soldiers and guards. At the very least, guards can be posted as a night watch to allow the PCs to get a good night's sleep.

Wilderness adventures often uncover new opportunities. If you learn of a cave system, an old ruin, etc., be sure to make a note of it. Even if your characters are not equipped to explore it when it is first discovered, you can always go back at a later date when time isn't pressing, and the necessary gear is available.

When traveling in the wilderness, the possibility of getting lost or of encountering inclement weather and natural hazards (forest fires, avalanches, etc.) can be as dangerous as any creature that your character might meet. Of course, when traveling, a group moves at the speed of its slowest member. Encounters and hazards can slow these rates down. Favorable winds and/or currents can speed up water travel.

Provisions

Characters, their followers, and their animals all require a measure of food and water daily. A human requires half a gallon of water and one pound of food each day. Other creatures require more or less food and water, as is proportional to their sizes.

Starvation House Rules

A creature that fails to consume enough food can last for several days equal to its Stamina bonus (if any) plus its Level or Hit Dice before negative effects set in. After that, it must make a Fort save each day (DC 10) or take 1 point of Stamina damage. Moreover, each day the character must roll the Fort save, he or she suffers a cumulative –2 penalty to all checks, saves, and attack rolls. Worse, the negative effects continue until the character eats at least one pound of food. Penalties and lost Stamina are restored after that at the same rate as they were initially accrued until

the character is back to normal. Ability damage cannot be healed until the character has had a chance to eat.

Failure to consume enough water (or similar liquid) causes double these consequences – a cumulative –4 penalty to all checks, saves, and attack rolls, as well as a loss of 2 Stamina points per daily Fort save failed. As with food, these consequences are restored at the same rate they have initially accrued once a daily allotment of water is consumed.
Penalties for lack of water begin immediately on the day after failure to consume enough water.

Penalties for lack of food and lack of water stack. If the Judge so desires, bonuses can be given to Fortitude saves due to lack of provisions if some food and/or water is available.
Likewise, penalties for excessive activity can be assigned.

Normal Folk and Starvation
The average person has a 10 Stamina, has 1d4 HD, and has 3 hp. Starvation, therefore, begins at 1 day without food, and the average person can last an average of 9 more days before succumbing to starvation, depending upon making saves. An unremarkable peasant, therefore, starves to death in 1d6+7 days as a generous average.

Likewise, without water, an average person dies in 1d3+2 days.

Without either food or water, an average person dies within 1d3+1 days.

Sleep & Lack Thereof
Generally, a character must have 8 hours of rest (including 6 hours of sleep) each day to be in top form. If a character fails to get enough sleep, the Judge may assign penalties to his or her actions.

After 24 hours awake, a character must roll a Will or a Fort save (DC 10) whenever conditions conducive to sleep present themselves (including while keeping watch). Failure means that the character falls asleep for 1d6 hours (or until awakened).

After 48 hours awake, the save DC is increased to 20, and the period of sleep is 2d6 hours. After 72 hours awake, the save DC is increased to 30, and the period of sleep is 4d6 hours. Every additional 24 hours increases the DC by +10 and increases the period of sleep by +1 hour.

Town Adventures

Town adventures are considerably different from dungeon or wilderness adventures, if only because – within the confines of a city – there is the rule of law. In even the most unruly villages, some authority acts to limit (or oppose) the PCs' actions. In addition to the legitimate government, most towns of any size contain crime bosses, gangs, petty nobles, and other forms of "governing bodies," legitimate, illegitimate, or both.

Town adventures often contain heavy elements of intrigue. Problems exist that must be solved with a glib tongue and a ready wit... the force of arms is not always the best (or even a possible) solution. It is incumbent on players to determine who their characters can trust, what hidden motives exist, and whether or not things are really as they seem.

Town adventures can include flashing blades from time to time, however, and the sewers may well teem with creatures as horrible and aberrant as those in the darkest dungeons. Second-story jobs await thieves, audiences listen in rapt attention to minstrels, and every street corner is a potential pulpit for a proselytizing cleric.

The dangers in town are different than those in a dungeon – social, legal, and economic – but the prizes can be just as rich for enterprising PCs!

When Things Go Wrong

There are games where the GM has specific guidelines about how much funds and equipment should be available to characters based on their level. There are games where secret doors exist only to be found, or hidden treasure keeps moving until the PCs look in its most recent location. There are games where PCs cannot die unless they choose to make that possible, and games where the GM is intended to be a storyteller – where the PCs are all but guaranteed to get to the "final act."

Dungeon Crawl Classics is not that kind of game, and sometimes things go wrong.

Dungeon Crawl Classics philosophy is that adventuring is a high-risk occupation, where amazing things happen, for good or ill. Monsters do not care if you wish to live or die. Treasures do not teleport themselves around until you find them. In Dungeon Crawl Classics, a combination of good luck and intelligent play can make low-level characters rich and powerful – conversely, in some milieus (either through bad luck or because the milieu is devised that way), even high-level characters might have little in the way of money or gear.

Roll with it.

The odds are that everything will even out in the end, and Dungeon Crawl Classics characters don't need enough magic items to look like Christmas trees to be effective. Remember that a good judge wants you to succeed. But a good judge will also let you succeed or fail on your own merits so that success is your accomplishment, rather than the accomplishment of the game rules being stacked to make failure all but impossible.

Rich and powerful treasures are likely to be there for the taking if only you find them. Of course, so are deadly traps and monsters. Use your best judgment. Sometimes, when things seem grimmest, you are closest to glory. Other times, it just means you need to look somewhere else.

Don't let a little bad luck get you down or ruin your gaming.

Character Death
Sometimes characters die.

If a character's body is not eaten, lost, or abandoned, there is a chance that the character can be brought back to life by powerful magic, although this is by no means certain. In fact, in Dungeon Crawl Classics, even an abandoned character might be somehow recovered, or the action might pick up with the lead character(s) trying to escape from Hell.

You probably shouldn't throw your character's sheet away!

If you have a character stable, you can simply use another character. Perhaps it is time that the lead character's henchman becomes a primary character...at least until the PCs reach somewhere where another character can logically join the group.

You may have other leveled characters surviving from a 0-level funnel, or the Judge may allow you to bring in a new character of 1st or higher level. In this case, be ready to use your knowledge of the milieu and Appendix N fiction to make the character fit in. Don't be surprised if the Judge insists on your having both allies and enemies – including some you might not choose!

Finally, characters slain by undead creatures, who leave major business unsettled, or whose remains are improperly disposed of, may arise as un-dead creatures themselves. In this case, the former PC becomes an NPC in control of the Judge.

Multiple Characters

Whenever a player uses multiple characters in a game session, they should remember that each character is a separate being; they do not necessarily have the same personality or goals. In some cases, players will have characters who are members of the same family and/or organization, but this isn't necessary for a character stable. Indeed, it is possible (and, in some campaigns, desirable) to have a character stable in which some characters have a relationship with others in the stable, but some are completely separate.

Treasure!

Many adventures aim to acquire treasure – sometimes a specific treasure known to be lost in the adventure site, and sometimes whatever general loot might be available for finding.

Treasure may be obvious, as it comes in the form of precious stones, coins, and jewelry – or it may be less obvious, as when it comes in the form of trade goods, land claims, adventuring gear, and so on.

It should also be noted that it is not always necessary to gather every last copper piece to succeed in Dungeon Crawl Classics. If searching for treasure makes the game drag, it is probably time to take some other action. If players waste too much time, they may encounter wandering monsters, may lose opportunities, etc.

Provisions – food and water – can provide a sharp limit to how long characters can spend in pursuit of any stray coin. In some cases, an adventure site may impose other time limits.

Sometimes, picking up treasure is just a way to outstay your welcome. Excessive greed can lead to a bitter end.

Magic Items

The most valuable treasures are magical. Magical treasures can include single-use items (such as potions and scrolls), charged items (such as wands, staves, and some rings), and permanent items (such as many swords, rings, suits of armor, and various miscellaneous magical items).

Some magic items are easily identified as such. A sword, like the giant-forged sword in Beowulf, might blaze forth light when bloodied. The armor might be remarkably light. Few wands are created without magical powers (although a "wand" can be left unfinished, be used up, or could simply be a prop). Other items might appear mundane or even less than mundane.

Not everything is always as it seems. Even once a magic item is known to be magical, it might have additional powers that remain hidden. Some magic items are cursed, causing problems for characters instead of granting them benefits. In fact, in Dungeon Crawl Classics, it is not uncommon for an item to include both benefits and banes to its wielder. Other items might offer more mundane benefits not particularly useful to adventurers (or at least not obviously so), such as a stone that attracts butterflies to a garden.

It is also important to remember that not everything which appears to be a magical item is one. Vials may contain many things besides potions – ink, paint, green slime – and scroll cases might as easily contain documents or maps as well as magical scrolls.

As with every other aspect of the game, balancing caution with daring is the key to dealing with magical items.

Division of Treasure

There are many ways to divide treasure among characters. The most common method is to grant each character an equal share of all monetary treasures. Magic items, and items of undisclosed value, may require a bit more work.

It is recommended that magic items are either given to the PC most able to use them to the party's benefit. This might mean that one PC gains far more than another and might be considered unfair by some players. In this case, the PC gaining excessive magic might be required to pay a monetary forfeit.

Another method is to put all magic items into a large "pot" and allow each PC to choose an item in turn until all items are selected. Dice can be used to determine who gets to select first, second, and so on, or this could be based on seniority with the adventuring party.

Remember, too, that only a fool cheats people upon whose goodwill her life will later depend. Unless, of course, she is absolutely certain that she will not be caught!

Character Growth & Aging

All too often, characters in role-playing games do nothing more than amass money, magic, and power. If you want a well-rounded character, though, you will consider what else your character(s) might want.

Characters can (and quite possibly should) fall in love, marry, raise children, start businesses, and in all ways become involved in the campaign world. The more a character is involved in the milieu, the more the player gets from the milieu in return.

Final Words of Advice

Success in any role-playing game relies upon a willingness to give as much to the game as you expect to get out of it. Dungeon Crawl Classics is no different.

While you should expect to be treated with respect at the gaming table, you should treat others with the same respect.

Remember that the Judge is usually doing more work than you are, and – while the Judge is usually doing this because they enjoy it – doing that work is worthy of a little extra leeway.

This is not to say that you should play a game you do not enjoy or with people you don't enjoy gaming with. It is rather an admonishment to be a person others enjoy gaming with. If you are not willing to make that effort, you shouldn't be surprised when others are unwilling to make an effort to play with you.

Your Judge will do a lot of the work of keeping the game going. Nonetheless, most of the things the Judge can do to make the game move are less pleasant to the PCs than the things you can do – if the game begins to drag, therefore, it is incumbent upon you to do something! Simply sitting on your hands, waiting for the Judge to entertain you, may well prove lethal to your character. Even doing something wrong is more fun than doing nothing at all.

Finally, remember that Dungeon Crawl Classics is a game. Having fun is more important than success or even character survival. After all, the story of how Vismire the Valiant almost survived the dragon Glamorgan might get told more often and with more enjoyment than those of your many successes.

Have fun and good gaming!

Tough Love

Here is a little bit of GMing philosophy - when you play in my game, I am on your side. I really hope that you do well. I just won't do anything to ensure that you do well. Want to attempt something unusual? I will entertain what seem to be reasonable arguments. I will assign what seems like a fair chance to me. The odds are good that, if I make a ruling, that ruling is skewed in the players' favor.

But the dice still fall where they may, and I will fudge neither rolls nor statistics nor monster behavior to ensure either your success or your survival. I want you to succeed - I really do - but I want you to succeed in a meaningful way. That means giving your opponents the brains that they should have, and it means allowing bad things to happen as well as good. That means allowing a TPK to happen. And happen again. And happen again after that. Unless you do something to make it not happen.

I have been told that it was smoke and mirrors - the GM cannot both be on the players' side and act as an impartial referee. Let me rephrase that because what I am saying is that the GM can be on the players' side and still understand the importance of refereeing impartially. Just as a player can advocate for his character fairly, without cheating. Hoping for a good outcome does not mean you screw the game to ensure it occurs.

If I was acting against the players or even creating a completely impartial scenario, it would be all too easy to create situations where TPKs were inescapable. I would have a thick folder filled with the dead and no players at the table because, really, what would be the point? Even a "killer" dungeon-like Death Frost Doom or The Tomb of Horrors is more player-friendly than a similar situation would "realistically" be.

I play games with people I like. I feel for them when they lose a beloved character. I am happy for them when they succeed beyond hope.

I am on their side.

But I won't do anything to make them win. And the dice may not be.

It is not always obvious to the players that I am on their side, either. It's fun when the going gets tough, and I am grinning like a hyena waiting for a wildebeest to fall. Even though I hope they find a way out, I relish the tight spot for what it is.

These are not contradictory positions to take. Any player worth his salt relishes the dangerous moments as well. Although they might not be able to focus on their enjoyment of those moments at the time (being busy with trying to find a way to survive or mourning the loss of a character), but those are the moments that are relived through gamer chatter days, months, and years later.

A good GM is on the side of the players and wants them to do well and have fun but is not on the side of the characters. A good GM knows that pulling punches removes the value of choice from the players, just as a good GM ensures that context is available for choices but doesn't force context on the players if they choose to ignore it/not look for it. A good GM allows the players to make choices and allows the characters to live or die by the quality of those choices.

A GM who punishes characters when the players make good choices, or coddles the characters when the players make poor choices, is undesirable. Both remove the greatest value that the tabletop game offers over other forms of entertainment.

Some players may think they want easy victories or even guaranteed victories, but handing crap like that out is not what someone on your side does.

Call it tough love.

Big Damn Heroes...Or, playing with 1-2 players

It sometimes happens that you only have one or two players available, and you want to run a Dungeon Crawl Classics campaign. This isn't as crazy as it sounds. Plenty of Appendix N fiction follows the exploits of a single adventurer or a duo.

 The Judge who wishes to run games for only one or two players can use this simple hack. Others have suggested means to deal with the funnel - see various articles in The Gong Farmer's Almanac for ideas. Herein I am only looking at what happens when a character gains 10 XP and chooses a class.

 Allow the character to select two classes and get all the benefits (hit points, hit dice, save modifiers, etc.). The character is still considered level 1, although they might be a warrior/thief (Conan, Fafhrd), a warrior/cleric (effectively a paladin), a warrior/wizard, etc. The cleric/wizard combo, in particular, offers something much closer to many of the sorcerous beings found in early fantasy fiction.

 Demi-humans must choose their race-class as one of the two classes. Humans cannot choose to become elves, dwarves, or halflings. In the case of Deed Dice, just bump the character's Deed Die +1d up the dice chain. Halfling thieves gain a +1 bonus per Luck Die but only grant +2 when they spend Luck for others.

 When the characters hit level 2 (at 50 XP), they can add one level of either of their existing classes. And so it goes, up to level 10.

 What if a player wants to take the same class twice? I.e., start as a warrior/warrior? Treat as a level 2 warrior with 10 XP, considered level 1, and who gains level 3 at 50 XP. By the time you reach level 10, the character might have to add another class, but the odds of reaching such heights in the short term are extremely slim.

 There you have it. Nothing else is required, save the native wits of the players themselves.

 And, these characters can join larger groups by considering their actual hit dice rather than their levels - at least for a short time. If the group gets larger, just start

using normal XP progression from their hit dice. Suddenly, that 2nd level wizard/thief/thief is considered a 3rd level character!

 The funny thing is, this might allow PCs to represent Appendix N protagonists more closely than the core rules do. It makes the PCs stronger and more versatile, allowing them to insinuate themselves into places where angels fear to tread.

Don't Be A Weed

One of the most poisonous memes to raise its pestilent head in recent years is the idea that all players, or for that matter, all GMs, are equal. It's cool, and it's inclusive, to note that there is no One True Way, but this doesn't mean that All Ways Are Equal.

I know – and if you've been doing this for any length of time, I will hazard that you know – that some players make the game a joy to run. Some players make the game better for everyone else at the table.
There are some really excellent players out there.

And some players peek behind the GM's screen when they go to the bathroom, buy and read the module the GM is running, question every decision the GM makes, and complain if anything doesn't go their way.
Some players want to be in the spotlight every moment of the game session, some players want to "get" the other players (not just their characters), and there are players who want to bring a Teletubby Space Ranger into a carefully crafted 17th Century game setting and seem unable to understand why the GM is saying no.

Most players fall between those extremes, of course.
As do most GMs. That's cool. But, just as the GM should try to improve themself – to be more than "just good enough," so should each player. When you sit down at the table, no matter what you sit as, player or GM, you need to ask yourself, "Am I making the game better for everyone?"

If the answer is "No," then you should ask yourself, "Why not?"

If you're running the game, the odds are good that you are making the game better just by running it. If you are not making the game better for everyone at the table, the odds are good because one or more players at your table don't belong there. If you want a nice garden, sometimes you have to get down on your hands and knees and pull out the weeds.

If you are a player, not only should you strive to make the game a better experience for everyone, but you should also strive to make it more fun to run. Why? Because if it is more fun to run, your GM will keep coming back. Or keep inviting you back.

Don't be a weed.

You will hear a certain segment of the player population claim that their fun is more important than the GM's or the other players'. You will hear a certain segment of the player population claim that the game should revolve around them or that the GM is simply not being "creative enough" if he says No to a Teletubby Space Ranger in a 17th Century European game. In fact, a certain segment of the player population will claim that the GM should always say Yes to player propositions.

Pay attention to who says that. They are letting you know that they are weeds. And, yes, a weed might be cultivated into a worthwhile addition to your garden. And some weeds have other good qualities that make them more like wildflowers.

But at least you'll know what you're letting yourself in for when you invite them to the table.

And if, as a player, you discover that your GM is a weed? Quietly and calmly excuse yourself from the table and find a new GM - or better yet, run your own game. The world can always use new GMs.

Don't be a weed. It applies to most of life's little problems.

In Conclusion

By this point, you might be telling yourself, "I thought this volume was supposed to be for players? What is with all this game philosophy BS?"

Fair enough. You can go an entire gaming career without ever considering your role at the table or how it differs from the GM's role. It won't necessarily hurt you to not consider these things. I tend to think that understanding the underlying (and usually unspoken) dynamics helps you be a better player, though. It helps you be a better GM. It just helps.