

One-on-One RPGing: Interactive Storytelling
Part One: Changing The Group Mentality

by Jim Zubkavich

It's easy to slip into a group-based mindset regarding tabletop role-playing games. Almost every RPG cliché involves the typical 5 or 6 people sitting around a table rolling dice, eating junk food and heading out on quest after quest in search of glory. In the last few years though, I've been finding that smaller groups have made the game much more entertaining and that a one-on-one gaming session (one player and one Game Master) can be one of the best experiences available. So, if you've never thought about attempting to run or play in this type of game, let me sell you on its virtues.

Focus: Simply put, it doesn't get any more focused than this. Unlike a group game where each player may have their own agenda and style of play, the solo-based game is sharply focused on one character. No matter who that PC interacts with, their story is paramount. There's no need to worry about players being bored waiting for their turn to speak or a group of characters getting split up: One character, one simple focus. Whatever twists and turns the plot throws their way, they're involved and you've got their attention.

The story isn't just a rag-tag band of individuals all trying to grab the spotlight. It's the adventures of one hero, and we get to see the full range of reactions they have to the events that take place around them. Other people in their life can live or die, but their story is the constant that keeps the whole thing running.

It allows for increased drama or intrigue and heightens the survival-driven tension of the game. All the choices rest on that one player, and they can sink or swim. Think of the strength of singular personas from movies or novels and you'll see just how much potential is available.

Have you ever written up a dizzying history for your character only to have it left to the wayside by everything else happening to the group? This is the type of game where all of these pieces can come into play. Your character can grow and change based on the situations they get caught up in without worrying about wrecking things for other PCs.

Consistency: With only one player and one GM, it's easy to organize sessions and know that the game can start as soon as the two of you get together. Instead of a revolving door of players who have commitments or job schedules, you've trimmed it down to the bare essentials: a storyteller and the active participant. There's no more worrying about missing players or people not being "in" to the game. As long as both people are ready to play, it's ready and waiting.

Depth and Flow: Good role-playing can really shine in a one-on-one game. As long as the player is engaged and entertained, character interaction can be as limited or deep as you want to make it. Unlike a group game where conversation tends to be minimized so that everyone stays involved, dialogue can really drive story farther in one-on-one. The encounters are still important, but the moments before and after the big events can be filled with character reaction to the events happening around them.

Best of all, things can be sped up or slowed down to keep pace with where the player wants to put the emphasis on the session. The little things that might normally slip away in a large group game can take on special meaning here. If both the player and game master are enjoying an in-character discussion, why not see it through and learn how the character thinks or feels?

Unique Gaming Experiences: With only one player, game balance is less of a problem. If the Game Master or player want to run something out of the ordinary or even high-powered, it's a lot easier to justify. With only one character, there's no one else to complain that a character is unbalanced. You can set up unique house rules at the start, agree on them and let it roll! It can free your game from rules heavy restraints and allow for a lot more creativity in character creation, progression and encounters.

Have you always wanted to play an evil character, a "lone wolf" type, or a unique and/or strange race/class? A one-on-one game gives you the freedom to experiment with these ideas without having to convince a group of other players of the validity behind it.

Introduction: Do you have a player who wants to try role-playing for the first time? Are you a first-time GM? In either case, a one-on-one game can be the perfect introduction to the hobby. A new player can learn the rules as the game progresses without feeling like they're falling behind others or slowing everyone else down. Freed from those restraints, they get to be the biggest part of the story without throwing off a group. It's a great way to get a player "up to speed" and make them an enthusiastic part of the role-playing community. A new player's first role-playing experience should be one of the best, to keep them coming back for more. Put your best foot forward, and use the one-on-one experience to make them feel comfortable and involved in your game.

If you're a first-time GM, the benefits are very similar. Your player can help keep the game moving along while you work the kinks out in your delivery, rules understanding and general storytelling. Build up a repertoire of good gaming skills that you can use to impress a larger group later on without subjecting them all to the fits and starts that tend to creep in when you first start out. You can also use it as a way to play test house rules, new races or even campaign settings.

Have the ideas started flowing?

Running a one-on-one game can be a profoundly rewarding experience for a player and GM alike, but it does require some changes to the way you approach your campaign. In subsequent articles, I'll discuss elements like game balance, adventure creation, building better NPCs and unique game play situations that can help to build a long lasting one-on-one experience. In the meantime, find your best player or a GM who loves to run games and start brainstorming. The more you two understand what you want out of a campaign, the better it can be.