

## One-on-One RPGing: Interactive Storytelling Part Three: The First Session

by Jim Zubkavich

This is the third article in a series dedicated to one-on-one gaming (one Game Master and one player). In previous articles, I discussed the different factors inherent in a solo gaming experience and some methods for collaborating on both of your ideas to create a solid basis for a campaign. In this article, we'll discuss the importance of the first session.

Before everything begins, the Game Master needs to arm himself with some important tools. Beyond the obvious ones like rulebooks, dice, paper and a crafty grin, there's a few other things that can make the first night go smoothly.

First of all, create a series of point form goals for the session. They don't need to be set in stone, but they should be clear enough to be useable as a springboard for the adventure to come. Simple ideas like: "introduce information sources", "foreshadow evil magic", "show corruption" or "hint at mysterious benefactor". These are bare bones concepts that can be delivered in any order and provide a framework. Remember, this isn't a dungeon crawl or step-by-step module we're trying to force the player in to. We're creating a complex freeform story with one character at its core.

Second, look over the supporting NPCs that you brainstormed earlier while the player fleshed out the stats for their character. Get a feel for their personalities, attitudes and possible history. In a solo game like this, the Game Master is going to be playing more roles than ever before, so it's important to be well prepared! More important than a full set of stats is the NPC's overall attitude and possibly a primary skill that could help the story along (ie. Gather Information). For each NPC, write a few words in terms of their demeanor towards the player character. Simple things like "nice but slimy", "always means business" or "distracted". This is just a starting point for your role-playing and will obviously evolve as the character interacts and changes their relationship over time, for better or for worse.

Next, you want to have a safety net for any other NPCs that may pop up unannounced. Brainstorm up a list of 20-30 male and female names that can be used for any characters that come up which you haven't planned for beforehand. Having a quick name you can refer to will make the introduction process much easier than trying to come up with one in the heat of the moment. If you end up using any of the names during the game, jot a quick note beside them indicating what role they've filled and add them to your full NPC repertoire after the session is over. For a modern game, I find baby name websites and telephone books to be invaluable resources for new and interesting names that are realistic. For fantasy or science fiction, the sky's the limit. Slam together different vowel and consonant combinations until you find sounds that are interesting. While you're doing all of this, jot down any nicknames that come to mind too.

Finally, take a good hard look at the player character sheet. Write down the character's specialties or strengths and try to get a feel for the types of encounters that can emphasize these aspects. Players take skills because they want to use them, not just to take up space on their character sheet. Most heroic protagonists in fiction are introduced as capable people and your player should be as well. You want to create challenges, but give the character a

chance to shine while doing so. The first few sessions are incredibly important at setting the tone for the character's personality and the campaign to come. Generally speaking, a proactive character will be more interesting than one who is gun shy. If the first session has a few moments where the character uses their skills and abilities effectively, they'll be more likely to take little risks and get involved instead of running away at the first sign of trouble. It'll give them a chance to "test drive" their new character and give you a way to gauge how effective they are.

With these steps taken care of, you're ready to tackle the first session. Keep it atmospheric, remember to describe the scenes in depth and try to keep the player involved at every step. With only one player to worry about, you always have to make sure that they're at the center of attention. Slowly cover the story elements that you first jotted down without forcing the character along a predetermined path. When they meet new people or discover tid bits of information, encourage them to jot things down on a scrap sheet of paper. Most of all, give them choices. There's no one else for them to plan with, so the weight is squarely on their shoulders to make decisions. Even the most simple of choices a player makes can be empowering to them, especially when they don't have to confer with anyone else to do it. On top of that, surprise choices can lead to some unexpected story twists for both of you as the game progresses. Let them guide the story at this early point, with you providing places and occasional prodding if things slow down.

I can't stress enough that this first session is used for introduction. Keep the action to a minimum unless the character is a complete fighting machine. There will be lots of time down the road for pitched combat, we're trying to slowly ramp up the story with future possibilities. If a conversation between the PC and an NPC is going well, ride it out as long as it's entertaining for both of you. It'll give the player a chance to "slip into character" and you a way to learn what their motivations are.

A quick note of caution: in your enthusiasm to introduce plot hooks and NPCs, don't smother your player with too much at once. You want to give them a healthy amount of material to play with, not leave them confused and overwhelmed. As long as you introduce three or four juicy things for them to chew on, it will be enough to get your player excited about future gaming nights.

When the session ends, you want them to have far more questions than answers. The first session is the initial thrust of momentum that will be the catalyst for events down the road. Even if you're not sure what the big bad guys are at this point or where it'll all lead, you've planted some seeds that will germinate later on.

Lastly, get feedback. Ask your player what they liked or didn't and what kinds of things they see in the future based on what's been introduced. You don't want to hand them everything they expect on a silver platter in later games, but you can use this as a baseline. Use their comments as fodder for missions or surprises when you twist their expectations a few degrees from what they thought would happen. Compile what you've done and what you've heard from your player to build upon your plot list with new "branches" and add to your NPC list with more details when you get the chance.

This type of gaming is a more flexible way of playing and involves both of you far more intensely than a typical group-based role-playing game. Although the initial effort can be daunting for people who have never tried it, the end results are extremely entertaining for both.

In the next column, I'll talk about the changes needed for dealing with combat in a one-on-one gaming environment. In the meantime, get planning and planting.