

LUN FRAMED

The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters

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Dedication

This one's for Jonathan Jacobs and Fred Hicks, without whose inspiration there probably wouldn't be an Engine Publishing. Sláinte! —Martin Ralya

Introduction

Improvisation is at the heart of roleplaying. No matter what roleplaying game (RPG) you're playing, and no matter whether you're the game master (GM) or a player, you're improvising constantly during the game. Even if you plan out all of your adventures in advance, down to the last detail . . . you'll still find yourself improvising, in little ways and big ways, all the time.

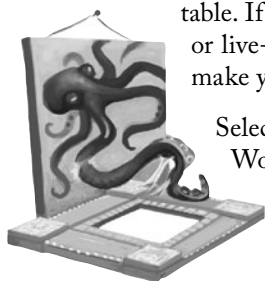
There are a few good gaming books out there that address improvisation; my favorite, other than this one, is Graham Walmsley's *Play Unsafe*, which changed the way I look at gaming. (It's seriously good; you should buy it.) But none approach improvisation from many different angles, and I wanted there to be a book that did; *UNFRAMED: The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters* is the result.

The title refers to two things about improvisation that I love. First, that ideas you come up with on the spur of the moment are sometimes rough and unfinished, but brimming with potential and wonderful in their own right—like an unframed canvas. And second, that what you improvise during play is often less constrained—less polished, less “framed”—than what you prepare in advance, and like a painting coming to life and bursting free of its frame those ideas tend to be surprising.

In *Unframed*, Engine Publishing's fifth system-neutral book for GMs, you get the collected wisdom of 23 GMs on improvisation—a core skill for every gamer. And not just any 23 GMs, but a diverse group of people with unique GMing styles, varied gaming backgrounds, and a wealth of knowledge and hard-won experience to share.

There's no One True Way to play RPGs, and there's no one way to improvise; by presenting different perspectives on the many aspects of improvisation for GMs, *Unframed* aims to be a toolkit you can draw from for the rest of your GMing career. Each essay packs a hell of a wallop into just a few pages. There's a flow to the book (a lot of thought went into *Unframed*'s topics and reading order), but every essay stands on its own and you can read them in any order.

Unframed is also a tool for players: It's full of tips you can use to better portray player characters (PCs) as well as non-player characters (NPCs), advice on putting forth ideas that are easy for other players to embrace, and tricks for quickly embracing—and running with—the improvisation your fellow players are doing at the table. If you play more often than you GM, or love GM-less games or live-action games (LARPs), you'll find plenty in this book to make your gaming more enjoyable.



Selecting “just” 23 authors for *Unframed* was insanely difficult. Working with them was not—it was a pleasure and a privilege. Thanks for buying *Unframed*, and happy improv!

Martin Ralya • Salt Lake City, UT • April 2014

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Improvising Dialogue Sequences

Robin D. Laws

Robin D. Laws' newest roleplaying game is *Hillfolk*, in which you weave an epic of dramatic interaction in an age of hungry empires. Previous RPG designs include *The Esoterrorists*, *Ashen Stars*, *Feng Shui*, and *HeroQuest*. His fiction projects include eight novels and the short story collection *New Tales of the Yellow Sign*. He comprises one-half of the Golden Geek Award-winning podcast [Ken and Robin Talk About Stuff](#), and can be found online at [robindlaws.com](#).

As a GM your most extended exercises in off-the-cuff invention occur during dialogue sequences. Internalizing the simple structure behind character interaction in fiction, scripted and improvised, allows you to sharpen these scenes, making them fun, memorable, and rich in story opportunity.

Petitioner and Granter: Understanding the Scene

A simple structure powers scenes of any character interaction in drama, fiction, cinema, or TV. One character wants something from another character.

- Wash wants Zoë to show that she cares more about him than she does about Mal.
- Cersei wants to reestablish her position of superiority over Tyrion.
- Loki wants Thor to let him out of his cell.

The first character makes a petition of the second character, hoping to get that thing. That makes the first character the *petitioner*. The character hearing the petitioner has the power to grant this request. That makes the character the *granter*—although granter's refuse requests as often as they grant them. In the above examples, Wash, Cersei, and Loki take the roles of petitioner, while Zoë, Tyrion, and Thor are the granters.

(If this all sounds familiar to you, you perhaps recognize it as the heart of my game *Hillfolk* and its DramaSystem rules engine. The terms petitioner and granter come from *The Conversations*, a book-length interview of the legendary film editor Walter Murch by novelist Michael Ondaatje.)



Roleplaying dialogue scenes work the same way. The only difference is standard to RPGs, in that they frequently feature an ensemble of protagonists. Often they'll make joint petitions of a single character, speaking en masse. Slightly more rarely, they'll be petitioned as a group, acting as a granter together. Often, you as GM will make a petition in a two-hander scene (one featuring two characters), your NPC and one PC. The PC may then take the petition back to the rest of the group and they'll debate what to do about it.

The first step, then, in sharpening your improvised dialogue scenes is to identify the petitioner and granter. Thankfully this is a simple call—if an NPC proposes something to the PCs, the NPC is the petitioner and one or more PCs acts as the granter.

- The March Warden (an NPC) asks the PCs to clear the great swamp of encroaching orcs.
- Euston Chau (an NPC) asks Dominic (a PC and his wannabe son-in-law) to have Mr. Bright (another PC) committed to a mental institution.
- The Mugwump (an NPC supervillain) tells Redblade (a PC vigilante) to lay off, or he'll reveal Redblade's secret identity.

Petitioning is active; it seeks to overcome the granter's resistance to put a new story point in motion. Assuming you're letting the PCs drive the story, they'll be making more petitions of your NPCs than vice versa.

- The PCs ask the old hermit they encounter out in the great swamp if he's seen any orc activity.
- Dominic asks Euston's chief security officer why he cares so much about Mr. Bright being sent to an institution.
- Redblade pressures the gatekeeper of a criminal dark data network for access to the Mugwump's file cache.

Identifying the petitioner helps by requiring you to pin down what the scene is about. When you're playing the petitioner, you usually know that from the outset. (Sometimes you'll shift your NPC's goal in response to what the player says, which is good. But you still know in the first place what the character seeks, and you still know even if that changes in mid-scene.)

When you're playing the granter, you find out what the scene is about partway through, when the players make clear their requests. You know your NPC is being petitioned, and immediately or gradually come to understand what the petition is about. When you figure it out partway through, it's often because the players are also trying to work out what they want from the character. Expect this to happen when you introduce a new NPC without establishing right away what her role in the storyline might be.

When a roleplaying scene seems shapeless, it's usually because neither you nor the players know what its purpose is, and are muddling around trying to find it. With the petitioner's goal identified, you see how it can proceed to a resolution.

Coherence and Contradictions

D. Vincent Baker

D. Vincent Baker is the creator and publisher of several critically acclaimed, award-winning, and controversial RPGs, including *kill puppies for satan*, *Dogs in the Vineyard*, and *Apocalypse World*. He lives in a little town in New England with his wife and co-designer Meguey Baker and their three sons.

“Prepare a list of images that are purely fantastic, deliberate paradoxes say, that fit within the sort of thing you’re writing. The City of Screaming Statues, things like that. You just write a list of them so you’ve got them there when you need them. Again, they have to cohere, have the right resonances, one with the other.” —Michael Moorcock, “How to Write a Book in Three Days” (<http://www.ghostwoods.com/2010/05/how-to-write-a-book-in-three-days-1210>)

Improvisational GMing is, in its way, like trying to write a novel in three days. Instead of the blank page, you have the eager and expectant players, hoping that you’ll say something delightful, startling, provocative, and fun, with no editing and no do-overs. Go!

Effective preparation is crucial. Moorcock gives us an easy and powerful way to go about it, a minimum of prep for a maximum of fun.

The GM’s Raw Materials

For our purposes, the raw materials an improvisational GM has to work with are the game’s setting and scenery—that is, its places and things—and its cast of NPCs. The players’ characters are their own to play, of course, and their belongings are theirs too. The game’s eventual storyline is strictly hands-off: The storyline emerges, develops in play, live at the table, as a result of the players’ characters interacting with the GM’s setting, scenery, and NPCs.

Because the future storyline is unknown, it’s impossible to give the NPCs their narrative roles in advance. The GM can’t know which NPCs will turn out to be antagonists, sidekicks, trusted friends, hidden influences, love interests, or even just forgotten, until the moment that it comes true in play. Before then, it’s just guessing, and the best policy is to give every NPC, even the most casually-invented, the potential to step into a major role.

The right resonances and deliberate contradictions can do it.

“The Right Resonances”

By coherence and “the right resonances,” we’ll take Moorcock to mean the principles that underlie the game world you’re creating.

Take a few minutes to think about *how the world is*, *how things work*, and *what people are like*, in principle, in the abstract. You’ve probably been doing this already, by gut, as you’ve been imagining the game and getting excited to play. It won’t hurt to make it explicit. Three or four principles should be plenty for a start, and you can always add more as they occur to you. Principles like:

- Nobody really likes their job.
- Every computer has a human face.
- The city is full of people of every culture.
- Religious devotion is usually hypocrisy.
- A person with a sword is dangerous to everyone.
- The sun is scorching, blinding, and unforgiving.
- Spaceships are noisy, close, and smell weird.

When you create a setting element, a piece of scenery, or an NPC, you make it cohere with the rest simply by remembering and following the principles you’ve established. Your principles help you improvise things that fit into the imaginary world as though they have always been there.

“Deliberate Paradoxes”

It’s the cracks, the seams, the tensions between things that make them interesting. When the players rely on you to improvise things for them to be curious about, to explore and seize upon, you can use inbuilt contradictions, Moorcock’s “deliberate paradoxes,” to provide the appealing texture.

Moorcock’s example, the City of Screaming Statues, is fun and over the top (“Screaming statues? How would a statue *scream*?”), but more modest paradoxes will do just as well. Even utterly down-to-earth features of a place, a thing, or a character can contradict one another.



I like to say it, simply, as “give everything a *but*.” The spaceship is hard-worn *but* lovingly maintained. The island sky is blindingly blue *but* today the clouds race in. The hocus of the desert cult loves his family with all his heart, *but* he knows that in the desert you have to choose who will have water and who will not.



UNFRAMED

Improvisation is key to running any roleplaying game. It's an essential skill for every game master and player, and can mean the difference between a good gaming session and a great one. Until now, there hasn't been a system-neutral book that covers improvisation for game masters from every angle.

UNFRAMED: The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters is that book. An anthology of 23 essays by a diverse group of award-winning authors, designers, and experienced game masters, **UNFRAMED gives you the tools and inspiration to improvise better**, "wing it" without hesitation, and get killer results.

Inside this book you'll find advice on improvising dialogue scenes by **Robin D. Laws** (*Hillfolk*, *Ashen Stars*), a look at "Just In Time" improvisation from **Jennell Jaquays** (*Caverns of Thracia*, *Dark Tower*), advice on listening to your players by **Jason Morningstar** (*Fiasco*, *Durance*), tricks for handling curveballs from **Jess Hartley** (*Changeling: The Lost*, *Geist: The Sin-Eaters*), tips on improv in horror games from **Kenneth Hite** (*Trail of Cthulhu*, *GURPS Horror*), insightful essays by the authors of the ENnie Award-winning game mastering blog **GnomeStew.com**, and many more. **UNFRAMED** collects the wisdom of 23 top designers and gaming industry veterans, and offers 23 perspectives on improvisation.

Running the gamut from old-school to indie, and featuring tips specifically for game masters as well as techniques any gamer can use to master the art of improvisation, **UNFRAMED** has you covered. Whether you want to create a social sandbox, get better at doing voices, or harness the power of "yes, and," you'll find the improv advice you're after in **UNFRAMED**.

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