

## schrödinger and the gm

The game world exists as a black box. By interacting with the various elements of the world, the PCs and their players devise a mental image of what the world is like and how it works. In some games, the players have freedom to contribute to the setting, including NPCs, and this discussion also applies to these Player-GMs.

In a dogmatic campaign, the contents of the box are fixed. The GM sets the gears in motions, but like a deist God, never fiddles with the works. However, because it is a black box, how would the players know if the GM fiddled with the contents? Like a stage magician's assistant who moves and contorts to avoid piercing blades, the GM can alter the setting while maintaining the illusion of dogmatism.

My guidelines for this kind of campaign prestidigitation are as follows:

- The GM can modify any element of the game the PCs have not encountered.
- The GM can modify any game element the PCs have encountered so long as the change is not inconsistent with the previous encounter(s).
- Even an inconsistency is allowed so long as a plausible rationale is in place, even if the players do not know what it is. If the game has a dénouement, this rationale would be presented.
- The GM must not use this technique if the players object. If the players either do not notice or they notice but do not object, all is well.
- The GM does this without fudging die rolls, changing rules, or other methods of "cheating" the game system.

Some GMs have been doing this for years, even when dungeon crawling was the norm. PCs too hurt to escape the next encounter? Simply reduce the number or strength of monsters or place a healing potion in the next treasure. Of course, GMs who abuse and overuse this technique may find themselves beset by players who flaunt their immunity or who feel jerked around by a capricious GM.

I have seen campaigns die because GMs are unwilling to modify the contents of the box, often called their *vision* even though it is obvious the PCs are not interacting with the box as expected. I have seen two superhero pbem games die

when the heroes bit off more than they could chew and the GM froze and become paralyzed with indecision.

This method allows the GM to progress with the game even if the details are not determined. I know CoC GMs who write down an introduction but follow the players' lead when it comes to the plot. As the players conjecture on the meanings of clues, the GM picks which of these conjectures are true. So long as the established facts do not contradict themselves, it is a very efficient way to create a solvable mystery.

Of course, there is ample opportunity for abuse. As with any deceit, even if hidden from view initially, things can snowball until inconsistencies show through and/or rational explanations become impossible. On the other hand, this is fine if you want a setting, such as Al Amarja, that defies rational thinking.

Roleplaying games require trust between the GM and player. The players have to trust the GM is not trying to win—the GM can always win. This technique, as with diceless systems, gives the GM a powerful tool that can be used against the players. Used judiciously, however, it can help form a campaign that is fun for everyone.

What is good for the setting is also good for the characters, PCs and NPCs alike. Each character is a black box. Players (and GMs) can redefine the character so long as it does not contradict what has already been established in the campaign, such as a list of abilities on a character sheet. Again, inconsistencies in established traits or behavior are not allowed unless they can be reasonably explained. This also works well if the players are allowed to keep skill points in reserve during character creation and can introduce "new" skills during the game.

Of course, this must be done in moderation or else the game devolves from a roleplaying challenge to an exercise in making excuses and exceptions. However, it does allow players a path to resolve character-level conflicts that may otherwise shatter a group and the campaign. It also allows players to adjust characters to the setting and tone of the campaign, especially if the setting is new and unfamiliar.

Over time, as players explore their characters and the world, both become more defined and fixed in everyone's mind, such manipulations become impossible.

**robert dushay**

Regarding the mythos, it depends on what you mean by “knew could not exist.” I think I would be more likely to rationalize such things as optical illusions or alien life-forms. Though they may tweak my assumptions about the universe, I do not think they would drive me insane. I am not saying I would grok them any more than I truly grok quantum mechanics, but I can accept them in the way I accept QM.

**lee gold**

I was, and still am, searching for a way to formulize when rolls are required and when they can be skipped—to find a smooth transition between diceless and non-diceless decision making. At what skill level can something be considered routine, a gimmie, and when must you roll for it? Last month, I tried to show that it depends on what type of task it is but it has not gotten me much closer to rules that can be implemented.

I saw Ricky Jay on television throw a playing card into a watermelon. His bio on [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) says, “From ten paces he can throw a playing card into the flesh of a watermelon.” When I saw him, it took him several attempts, the release point was no more than a meter away from the melon, and only a few millimeters of one corner of the card was lodged into the melon’s skin.

**richard orio 2**

My *Truth and Beauty* game, detailed in my fiftieth zine, begins by presenting the players the different perspectives on the same event. Some say a mundane murder; others saw something far more supernatural.

It drives me nuts when people describe their character’s abilities with rules rather than how a writer would. I see this all the time with superhero games and I think the legacy of Champions is mostly to blame. You never hear this kind of talk out of V&V or Marvel players. : )

**joshua kronengold**

“Blowing the top off” dice in OTE is an optional rule that I never use and had forgotten about. I would be more inclined to either allow all

sixes to “explode” or use the “Unstoppable Six” optional rule.

**paul mason**

I think it would be fairly easy to roleplay a paralyzing phobia—just do not do anything. : )

**jonathan nicholas**

Sometimes it is acceptable for PCs to send NPCs for specific tasks, especially if the PCs lack the appropriate skills. In fact, forcing the PCs to do *everything*, such as those things that do not interest the players, can spoil the game. Part of the joy of rpgs is having your characters do things *correctly* and not like how we often see characters behave in film, on television, etc., and sometimes this means using hirelings.

**lisa padol**

Not doctor, “Doc.” You want to be known as Doc Padol or Doc Cthulhupunk now? : )

**eugene reynolds**

Your comments to me anticipated my discussion last month about how failed rolls can mean increased time to complete a task rather than failing completely.

**brian rogers**

What does it say about me that I read “B&B” as Bunnies & Burrows?

It is exactly the “we’ll give you crunchy bits (bennies) if you agree to role-play a certain character” idea that I find objectionable. Roleplaying should be its own reward. RPGs should not require carrots to make people create interesting backgrounds and personalities for their characters. As I was playing what was labeled as a “Noble Warrior” (or some such) when *The Fighter’s Handbook* first came out, and doing so without any the benefit of extra crunchy bits, I found the added kit bonuses insulting.

**jonathan d woolley**

FYI, the D&D SRD.

**final note**

Esper Road, my online modern psychics campaign is going well and has swelled to four players. The session write-ups and Fudge rules are available on my website.