
RUNNING STONETOP

Agenda & Principles • What to Say • Other Things to Do • What Not to Do • Prep

There are dozens of ways to GM a roleplaying game. There's a particular way to run *Stonetop*. This is how.

Remember: **the game is a conversation**. You'll say things, the other players will say things. You'll ask each other questions, interrupt, talk over each other. And the game's rules kick in at particular moments and show us where the conversation goes.

As the GM, you have a special role in the conversation. **It's your job to describe the world, say what happens, and portray NPCs**. You'll facilitate. You'll make rulings. You'll frame scenes and point the spotlight. The game invests you, the GM, with a lot of power. What follows, then, are instructions on how to wield it.

If you're familiar with *Dungeon World* or *Apocalypse World* or similar games, a lot of this will be familiar. Even if you aren't, a lot of what follows might seem obvious or just like good advice. But it's not advice; it's rules. **It's your job to follow these rules**. The rest of the game is built on it.

Here's how to GM *Stonetop*. First and always:

- ☉ Pursue your agenda
- ☉ Follow your principles

And when it's your turn to say something:

- ☉ Establish the fiction
- ☉ Make a GM move
- ☉ Ask: "What do you do?"

FIRST AND ALWAYS...

Pursue your agenda

When you run *Stonetop*, these are your goals:

- ☉ **Portray a rich and mysterious world**
- ☉ **Punctuate the characters' lives with adventure**
- ☉ **Play to find out what happens**

Everything you say and do as the GM is meant to support these three goals, and no others. It's *not* your agenda (for example) to challenge the players, or to provide “fair” fights, or to tell a preplanned story. It's absolutely not your agenda to control the players, to pass judgement on them, or punish them. When in doubt, ask yourself: this thing you're considering doing, which of these three goals does it support? If the answer is “none of them,” then don't do it. Do something else.

Your first goal is to **portray a rich and mysterious world**: alive and breathing, filled with detail and humanity and depth. Mundane concerns—crops, trade, weather, the opinions and well-being of your neighbors—are important. Fantastic elements are important, too, but they are strange and scary are poorly understood. The past sleeps unquietly.

Questions abound.

Your second goal is to **punctuate the characters' lives with adventure**. The PCs have lives to live, homes to take care of, families to feed. They have demands on their time. Your job is to make that stuff matter, but to interrupt it with threats and opportunities that only the PCs can act on. Adventure will occupy the bulk of the *players'* time, but they shouldn't occupy the bulk of the *characters'* time.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, **play to find out what happens**. It's your job to portray a rich and mysterious world, to threaten that which the PCs care about or dangle opportunities in front of them, and then *to see where things go from there*. You'll make plans, yes. You'll make preparations. But once play begins, it's your job to follow where the players lead, where the dice lead, and where the fiction leads.

And the reward is this: to being genuinely surprised by the story that—naturally, organically, magically—unfolds. A tale you could never weave by yourself.

Follow your principles

These principles are your guidelines, your best practices, your rules of behavior for running *Stonetop*. Follow them, always. They are the surest way to achieve your agenda. Whenever you say something at the GM, say what the principles demand.

- ☉ **Embrace the fantastic and the mundane**
- ☉ **Begin and end with the fiction**
- ☉ **Address the characters, not the players**
- ☉ **Exploit your prep and the established setting**
- ☉ **Ask questions and build on the answers**
- ☉ **Be a fan of the player characters**
- ☉ **Portray your characters with integrity**
- ☉ **Think offscreen, too**
- ☉ **Bring it home**
- ☉ **Let things breathe**
- ☉ **Let things burn**
- ☉ **Follow the rules**

Following your principles isn't always easy. Sometimes it's not clear what a given principle looks like in the moment. Sometimes (often), the principles will conflict. A big part of your job is to interpret these principles and apply them how you think best. You'll often do this instinctively, and how exactly you follow your principles is a big part of your own personal style of GMing. This is art, not science.

EMBRACE THE FANTASTIC AND THE MUNDANE

The world is filled with fantastic elements: spirits, monsters, fickle fae, the ancient works of the Makers, the darkness of the Things Below. The restless dead. Forgotten lore. Play up these elements. Use them to make the world mysterious.

But at the same time, ground the game in real-world concerns: the turn of seasons, the coming harvest, friends and neighbors. Threaten the PCs with real-world dangers: harsh

weather, wild beasts, starvation and exposure. Spend time asking about the provisions they brought with them or how they got that cloak. Make the world rich with mundane detail.

Use the fantastic and the mundane to contrast each other. If an adventure revolves around a supernatural threat or opportunity, then be sure to include perfectly mundane challenges, dangers, and discoveries. If a session involves mostly mundane concerns (like a trade mission to Marshedge or an aurochs hunt), sprinkle in some fantastic elements. The interplay between the two makes the world that much richer and more mysterious.

BEGIN AND END WITH THE FICTION

“The fiction” means the shared, imagined space that you and the players establish through conversation, and the various characters’ actions and relative positions in that imaginary space.

When rules are invoked—when a player triggers a move or someone rolls damage or someone spends “hold” or whatever—ground the rules in the fiction. **To do it, you have to do it.** If you can’t picture what the character is actually doing or how they’re doing it, then ask questions and clarify the fiction before going to the dice. After the dice are rolled, and the rules say what happens, describe what that looks like in the fiction (or ask the player to). Fiction >> dice >> fiction. Always.

Likewise, when you make a GM move, make a move that flows from the fiction as established. Don’t say the name of the move—keep that to yourself—but describe how it manifests in the fiction. Show, don’t tell.

Bad: *“You attack the hagr? Cool, roll Hack and Slash. A 10? Do you open yourself to its attack or not? Okay, roll your damage +1d6. How much damage did you do? 7? It’s still up, and it hits you back for 1d10+3 forceful, knocking you down. What do you do?”*

Good: *“You attack the hagr? Cool, what’s that look like? Stabbing upward into its gut? Yeah, sure, roll Hack and Slash. A 10+? Do you open yourself to its attack or not? Okay, roll your damage +1d6. 7 damage? Okay, so like you said, you like stab up into its gut and it goes in but not all the way, and the hagr like doubles over, howling in pain, and before you can get away it*

just uncoils and backhands you across the face. Take 1d10+2 damage as you go flying and land in a heap, head spinning. You hear it lumbering towards you, grunting in pain and anger. What do you do?"

ADDRESS THE CHARACTERS, NOT THE PLAYERS

Don't say "Brian, what is Vabid doing to keep awake?" Say instead: "Vabid, what are you doing to keep awake?" Say "No way, Rhianna, you know I'd never do that," in the NPC's voice but then "he looks away and there's a hitch in his voice and you just know that he isn't going to fess up unless you put the fear into him." Ask the characters what they do, tell the characters what they see and hear, tell them what's obvious to them.

By speaking this way, you keep the game focused on the fiction. You push the players to think, speak, and respond as their characters. You push yourself to establish fiction as the characters perceive it, because that's who you're addressing.

EXPLOIT THE ESTABLISHED SETTING AND YOUR PREP

Stonetop comes with a lot of established setting, but it leaves a lot of blanks for you and your players to fill in during play. The setting is intended to serve as a springboard for your creativity. It helps set a tone and gives you all a common starting point. It provides details to riff on. It hints at answers but doesn't always give them. Use the established setting to **portray a rich and mysterious world**.

Between sessions, you'll make preparations. You'll write up threats and NPCs, create or choose dangers and discoveries, and come up with possible encounters or points of interest. You'll draw maps. You'll make plans.

During play: exploit both the setting and your prep. Really *exploit* them. Use them up to and no further than they are useful to you. If the players give you something better, build on that. Set your prep aside. Cannibalize the established setting for parts. Let things burn.

Ultimately, the point of both the established setting and your prep is to give you interesting things to say when it's your turn to talk. But until you've actually said it—until something is established "on screen" in the fiction and with the players—it's just an idea.

Notes. Plans.

Plans change.

ASK QUESTIONS AND BUILD ON THE ANSWERS

Ask questions all the time, all over the place.

Ask questions **to establish intent**. *“Before you all head out in the morning, is there anything else anyone wants to do?”*

Ask questions **to clarify intent** and get yourself on the same page as the players. *“I feel like this is Parley, but what exactly do you want them to do?”*

Ask questions **to clarify the fiction**. *“Sure, you can Discern Realities. What does that look like?”*

Ask the characters **what they’re thinking or feeling**. *“Caradoc, you’re standing there, bleeding from where Wynfor stabbed you, and the look in his eye—you barely recognize him. What’s going through your head right now?”*

Ask the characters **about their past or their day-to-day lives**. *“Rhianna, who taught you how to hunt and track?” “Blodwen, you live with your mother, right? Any other siblings? What’s the place look like inside?”*

Ask the characters **about things they would know**. *“Rhianna, you’ve met Brennan before. What’s his most distinguishing feature?”*

Ask the characters **about things they’ve heard or what they believe**, where their answers might not be entirely true. *“Blodwen, what stories have you heard about the Quiet Twins and how they came to haunt the Stream? What do you think the truth is?”*

Ask questions **that assert details while asking for input**. *“Vahid, what have you noticed that all the missing children have in common?” “Rhianna, what little ritual do folks always do when crossing the Stream?”*

Ask the characters **to paint the scene for you**, by asking them for details on a theme. *“What here tells each of you that this is a place touched by the fae?” “What do you see here that you’ve seen a thousand times before?” “What’s the most striking thing about the Flats in early spring?”*

Ask questions **that do more than one of the above**. “*Caradoc, when you all got back to town, whose reaction to your return surprised you the most? How did they react?*”

Reincorporate their answers into the fiction, right away or later on. Don’t shut down their answers unless it’s to point out a contradiction. Ask follow-up questions. Think about what their answers imply and extrapolate from there. Let yourself be surprised by their answer, but then carry on as if that answer has always been true and an obvious part of the established world.

When you ask your players to contribute to the fiction, it helps you **play to find out what happens**. Your players will always come up with details that you wouldn’t, and that makes the world you’re all creating a little more surprising. When you build on the details that players have established, it helps you **portray a rich and mysterious world**. People are often more invested in things they helped create, and when you bring up a character or a detail that they introduced four sessions back, and it *matters*, that really brings the world to life.

BOX TEXT: The Line

(Inspired by John Harper’s blog post, “Apocalypse World: Crossing the Line”)

In *Stonetop* and games like it, there’s a line between what the players are responsible for and what you as the GM are responsible for. The players are in charge of their characters: what they do and what they say; what they feel, think, and believe; how they live; what they’ve done or experienced in the past. As the GM, you’re in charge of the world: the environment, the NPCs, the dangers and the discoveries.

Some of the questions described here blur the line. When you ask Vahid what the missing children all have in common, you’re really asking Vahid’s player to do something that’s generally the responsibility of the GM: make up details about the world.

The trick is to **address the characters, not the players**. Invite the player to contribute by sharing something about their character and their character’s past. Don’t ask the player to make up details about something their character has just encountered, and don’t ask the player to say what happens here and now. Ask the *character* about

something they know, something they feel, something they have experienced. It's a sleight of mind, but it's an effective one.

Even so, blurring the line can be uncomfortable or off-putting for some players. Some players are totally fine with making up details about the world, but others will find that it takes away from their sense of immersion or makes the world feel hollow and made up. Adjust the questions you ask, and how you ask them, to fit your and your players' preferences.

BE A FAN OF THE PLAYER CHARACTERS

The PCs are the protagonists of the story. Keep the focus of the game on them. Root for them. Celebrate their victories. Lament their losses. Let yourself wonder things about them, and then find ways to get the answers through play. Care about them. Be their fans.

Note that being a fan of a player characters doesn't mean letting them do whatever they want. You're the author of their adversity. You need to **punctuate their lives with adventure**. Threaten them. Hurt them. Go after the things they care about. Give them all sorts of difficult choices.

But also: give them opportunities, both to shine in the moment and to make things better in the long run. Let them enjoy the things they work for.

Stonetop gives the player characters lots of agency. Respect that. Don't shortchange them out of their moves or their rolls. See what they do with their power, status, and competence. **Play to find out what happens.**

PORTRAY YOUR CHARACTERS WITH INTEGRITY

Name your NPCs. Give them personalities. Wants, needs, quirks, and traits. If you can manage it, portray them with distinct voices or mannerisms. Bring them to life and play them as if they were real people.

Don't let PCs walk all over your NPCs. Be a fan of the PCs, sure, but remember that the NPCs are people, too. The Parley move (and the dice) will help you stick to your guns when the PCs start manipulating your NPCs, but only if you play them with integrity.

Extend this principle to your non-human characters, too. Beasts, spirits, even the utterly alien Things Below—they all have personalities, too. Develop a sense of their motives and how they act under pressure. For beasts, think about their ecologies. For the undead, what keeps them from passing through the Black Gates? For magical entities, think about the strange rules they follow. For perversions of nature, how are they both *more than* and *less than*? For all of the above: put those details on screen, or at least hint at them. It goes a long way towards **portraying a rich and mysterious world**.

THINK OFFSCREEN, TOO

When you establish fiction, answer a question, or make a move, think about events off-screen. What are your characters doing? What have they done? What traces did they leave? What have they been up to that becomes evident? What are they doing now that might become relevant later? Weave the answers into what you say.

Think, too, about what the PCs are doing and how it would shape off-screen events. If they make a lot of noise moving through the Great Wood, who hears them coming and how do they react? If they make an alliance with Gordin's Delve, how do the Hillfolk respond? If they told the town that they'd be gone for five days and they're gone for two weeks, who assumes that they're dead? Who steps up and tries to take charge? Who takes the opportunity to do what they want?

Thinking offscreen helps you **portray a rich and mysterious world**, because the world will feel larger than PCs. It helps you **punctuate the characters' lives with adventure**, because off-screen threats and opportunities quickly become things for the PCs to deal with. And it helps you **play to find out what happens**, because it gets you thinking about consequences and cause/effect on a broader scale.

BRING IT HOME

Make Stonetop itself the foundation of your game, the beginning and end of the PC's adventures. Threaten the town, its livelihood, or its citizens. Give chances to make progress towards improvements, or to finally put down lingering threats.

When the PCs set off on an adventure, show how their neighbors react. Who turns out to see them off? Who is sick with worry that they won't return? Who grumbles that this is folly? Who gives them something to take, because it's dangerous to go alone?

During adventures, ask questions that tie back to the PCs lives in Stonetop. Who taught you how to hunt? Who came here with you all those years back, and what happened to them? Which old-timer once had a run-in with these creatures? Whose life would be most changed by this treasure? Whose smile do you find yourself thinking about, out here, under the stars?

When the PCs return home, consider what has happened while they were gone and describe how the townsfolk greet them. Who is happiest? Who resents their return? Who blames them for stirring up all this trouble, anyhow, never mind that they've put things right?

And between adventures, ask the characters about their day-to-day lives and relationships. Show how the town changes in response to its troubles or the opportunities the PCs have seized. Describe NPCs growing older, having children, aspiring to more, settling for less. Show how they've been affected by the PCs adventures. Bring it home.

LET THINGS BREATHE

Allow stretches of time to pass between adventures, or even between individual moves.

It's a big world out there, and the PCs have mundane, daily tasks to attend to. Avoid the temptation to follow the PCs lives from day to day, hour to hour, making GM moves and asking what they do. Have weeks or months go by with a single statement: *"The next three weeks keep you all occupied with the harvest, and then..."*

When a threat looms, it need not be immediate and dire. You can show signs of it stirring but keep it distant and remote. Ask the PCs what they do about it, but you can resolve their response over days or weeks. Zoom in only when the fiction calls for immediate, specific action; zoom back out as soon as that's over. Allow the threat to simmer until it boils over and becomes something the PCs have to deal with.

LET THINGS BURN

As much as you like your plans, as much as you come to love some of your NPCs, as much as the players will grow attached: protect no one and nothing.

Many GMs have a tendency, a very natural tendency, to coddle the PCs and to shield the NPCs that they care about. To preserve the status quo. To save their villains for a future confrontation, even when the PCs' moves and rolls and bold action should rightly put them in the ground.

That tendency? Burn it away. Then let everything else burn, too. You're not playing to preserve your darlings. You're **playing to find out what happens**.

This doesn't mean that you should go out of your way to destroy the things that the characters love. It *does* mean that you should threaten those things, and that if the characters fail to save them, you should follow through. Be okay with hard, irrevocable consequences. Play with fire. Let things burn.

FOLLOW THE RULES

There are many rules, especially in the form of player-facing moves: basic moves and follower moves, special moves, exploration moves, and steading moves. Each playbook has moves. Inserts have moves. Arcana have moves. Dangers, discoveries, threats, and points of interest might all have player-facing moves.

Hopefully this is obvious: when a move is triggered, follow the procedures in the move and say what the move requires of you.

You don't get to invoke a move unless its trigger is actually met. That means you *don't* get to say "the crinwin attacks you, roll +DEX to Defy Danger!" Gods, no. You tell them that the crinwin leaps at them and ask them what they do, and *if* they say that they do something that triggers a move, then you do *that*.

Don't cheat the players. Give them the results that their moves promise them. It's okay if, in service of your other principles, you suggest that you apply the spirit of the rules instead of their exact letter, but be up front about it when you do this and get consent.

"You got a 7-9 to Hack and Slash? Roll your damage. 9!? Yikes. So, I know it says you expose

yourself to your enemy's attack but I'm thinking the 'attack' in this case is that your axe is just wedged into his skull and it's gonna take a bit to get it free. That okay with you?"

Don't fudge, either. If the PCs do enough damage to a monster to drop it, they drop it. If they don't, they don't (but it's totally in your purview to **offer them an opportunity** and be like *"that last blow didn't drop it, but it did knock the wind out of it... it's gasping for air, trying to recover, you could finish it off easily, what do you do?"*).

You might end up making custom moves, as part of your prep or sometimes on the fly. These are rules, too. Follow them. But also: make sure everyone knows about them and is be open to discussion about whether they're working as they should.

BOX TEXT:

The agenda and principles listed here are the ones specific and particular to running *Stonetop*, but there are more general agendas and principles that you'll hopefully follow whenever you get together with other people to play a game.

Your agenda, of course, includes **have fun** and **enjoy each other's company** and **play the game you want to play**. Because if you're not achieving those goals, why are you doing this?

Your principles, hopefully, include...

- ☺ **Treat each other with respect**
- ☺ **Listen to each other and pay attention**
- ☺ **Laugh, joke, don't take it too seriously**
- ☺ **Communicate wants, needs, and limitations**
- ☺ **Set and respect boundaries**
- ☺ **Talk about what you enjoy and what you don't**
- ☺ **Make changes as needed**
- ☺ **Put each other above the game**
- ☺ **Don't be a jerk**
- ☺ **Take breaks as needed**
- ☺ **Talk about real life stuff, too**

...because if aren't going to do those things, it's hard to see how you'll have fun, enjoy each other's company, or play the game you want to play.

WHEN IT'S YOUR TURN TO SPEAK...

When the conversation flows so that it's your turn to say something—because everyone's looking at you, because someone made a roll and they want to know what happens next, because you just think it's your turn jump in—then:

- ☉ Establish the fiction
- ☉ Make a GM move
- ☉ Ask “what do you do?”

Establish the fiction

It's your job to curate the fiction, the imaginary situation that the game takes place in. Before anything else can happen, we all need to know what's going on and what the situation is. Remember your principles: **begin and end with the fiction**.

If you haven't already done so, **frame the scene**. Establish: who, where, and when. Address yourself to one or more of the PCs and say (or ask) where they are. Say (or ask) who else is there. Say (or ask) when this is happening (the season, the time of day, how long after the last scene, etc.).

When you frame a scene, think like a film editor. Where does the situation start to get interesting? Where do the details start to matter? Jump straight to there. Skip the stuff that doesn't matter. If you don't know where or how to frame the scene, then **ask questions** until you do.

Once the scene is framed, **describe the situation**: what's going on, who's doing what, where is everyone relative to each other, what can they see, what's out of sight? Is there emotional content to the scene? Describe it. Is there a striking visual? Describe it. Is the situation in motion already, with momentum and energy? Describe it!

Give impressions—details of the scene that give it texture. Rule of thumb: include a single, strong impression from each of 2-3 different senses: the shocking red of blood on snow; the sound of wind shaking the trees; the feel of gravel crunching underfoot; the smell of rain and wet earth. Sometimes, include emotional impressions (the tension in the

room, the grief on his face, the cold dread in your stomach) or moral impressions (the dirty, desperate beggars contrasted with the finely dressed, well-fed gentry).

Provide just enough detail to establish the situation and give it color. Focus on the details that *matter*. Keep it short and simple, with no more than 3 impressions to start. Players will zone out if you give them more than that, and they'll ask for more detail where they need or want it. You want punchy and evocative, not flowery. Hemmingway, not Tolkien.

Remember, too, that you don't have make it all up. **Ask questions** about a place, especially if it's a place the characters know. *"Caradoc, what's the most overwhelming smell in the tannery?" "Vahid, you've been to this pool of still waters before. What's it look like? Describe it for us."*

Once the action ramps up and you all start making move-after-move, constantly come back to the fiction and **recap**. *"Okay, cool, so Caradoc's wrestling on the ground with one crinwin and Rhianna just put in an arrow in the one that was threatening Blodwen. All around, Rhianna's crew is ducking, moving, taking shots at crinwin. Vahid, you see..."*

When a scene ends, **transition to a new scene**. Maybe have a meta-level conversation and ask what they plan to do next. Maybe take care of some bookkeeping (expending rations or bandages, healing HP, etc.). Maybe they trigger a transition mechanically by Making Camp or telling you they want to search the area carefully (Discerning Realities). Or, maybe you just frame a transitional scene—like a montage in a movie—where you describe (or discuss) them moving between or locations or how time passes or both. Put the old scene to bed, negotiate the transition, and then figure out how and where to frame the next scene.

Make a GM move

When everyone looks to you to see what happens, make a GM move. Say something that **provokes action from the PCs, that establishes badness, or that raises the stakes**. This is how you propel the game forward.

YOUR BASIC GM MOVES

When you're not sure what move to make, pick one of these and do it:

- ☉ **Announce trouble (future or offscreen)**
- ☉ **Reveal an unwelcome truth**
- ☉ **Ask a provocative question**
- ☉ **Put someone in a spot**
- ☉ **Use up their resources**
- ☉ **Hurt someone**
- ☉ **Separate them**
- ☉ **Capture someone**
- ☉ **Turn their move back on them**
- ☉ **Demonstrate a downside**
- ☉ **Offer an opportunity (with or without a cost)**
- ☉ **Tell them the consequences/requirements (then ask)**
- ☉ **Advance a grim portent**

These aren't technical terms. When you reveal an unwelcome truth you just *do that*. You use the fiction to reveal something that the characters wish wasn't true. When you hurt someone, you describe how a PC or NPC got hurt.

You have other lists of GM moves, too. Use these when circumstances warrant:

- ☉ Exploration moves, used when the PCs are on an expedition or exploring a point of interest (see pages [XX](#) and [XX](#)).
- ☉ Threat moves, that represent specific ways that your threats cause trouble (see page [XX](#)). Use them to bring a threat (or it's influence) into a scene, or when the threat is already involved.
- ☉ Location moves, which represent specific things that might happen in a particular point of interest. See page [XX](#).
- ☉ Danger moves, which are associated with specific hazards or monsters. Use them with the hazard or monster is in play. See page [XX](#).

- ☉ NPC or follower moves, which represent specific behaviors and things the NPC can do. See pages [XX](#) and [XX](#).
- ☉ Homefront moves, which you use when the PCs are at home or in another stead, to make interesting stuff happen there. See page [XX](#).

Your basic, exploration, threat, and homefront moves are all in your GM Playbook for easy reference. Location, danger, NPC, and follower moves will be part of your notes for those specific elements.

MAKING YOUR MOVE

To start: make a softer move that provokes action or reaction from the players. Say what happens or what's about to happen but stop just short of the consequence. *"As your hand finds your knife-hilt, the crinwin is like 'hiisssss' and leaps, fingers going for your throat, what do you do?"*

The player then says what their character does. (Maybe they'll ask questions first, or clarify the situation with you; that's cool, answer honestly and helpfully, then go back to "what do you do?") If they trigger a PC move (like Defy Danger or whatever), then go to the dice and resolve that move. Establish what happens in the fiction as a result. If everyone's still looking at you, make another GM move (as above).

Now, when you make a GM move and the character...

...ignores a threat entirely, *or*

...does something with clear and obvious consequences, *or*

...makes a move but rolls a 6-

...then make as hard and direct of a move as you like. Something *consequential*. Establish badness and/or raise the stakes. *"Ooh, a 5, huh? It's too fast! Before your knife clears the sheath it's on you, WHOOMP, take a d6 damage and you're on your back, one of its claws is on your throat and the other is pinning your knife-hand by the wrist, what do you do?"*

Remember your principles! **Begin and end with the fiction** and **address the characters, not the players**. Don't say the name of your move; just say what happens in the fiction.

Don't say *"You rolled a 4 so I'm separating you."* Say *"Rhianna, you wake up and realize that Caradoc's not on watch anymore. He's doesn't come back anytime soon. When you look about, his blanket is discarded by the edge of the firelight."*

Use the lists of GM moves as inspiration, not as constraint. If you think of something cool to do—something that provokes the PCs to act, that raises the stakes, or that establishes badness—then don't worry about whether or not it's on the list or which specific move you're making. In retrospect, you can often classify any given move you made as two or more of the listed moves. That's fine. That's great.

Some GMs work intentionally and exclusively off their lists, even putting tic marks next to each one as they use it to help them change things up. Others GMs just make moves naturally and instinctively, referring to the list only for inspiration or when they're stumped. As long as your move follows logically from the established fiction and your prep, as long as it addresses the characters, and as long as it provokes them to act, raises the stakes, and/or establishes badness, you're golden.

EXAMPLES OF YOUR GM MOVES IN PLAY

Announce Trouble (future or offscreen): This is one of your most versatile moves. Use it to set yourself up for harder, more consequential move later.

"WHOOMP WHOOM WHOOM! Rhianna, there's a banging at your door, waking you up from some much-needed sleep. Llowry's calling your name and you hear the watch-bells clanging. What do you do?"

"As Caradoc and Blodwen leave, this nasty piece of work watches them go. He's got a face full of scars, a cruel sneer, and a knife at his hip. He nudges the guy next to him, nods at the door, and they get up and go after your friends. What do you do?"

"The wisents are all twitching ears and tails. 'They of the Many Legs are on the move,' grumbles the leader. 'Breeding. Hunting. Spinning webs. Their Mother goads them on. We flee. But they follow. They will be here soon. Days. Maybe hours.' What do you do?"

Reveal an unwelcome truth: Establish something as true, something that they really wish wasn't. This is a great move to use when they Spout Lore or Discern Realities. On a 7+, you owe them honest answers or interesting (maybe useful) information, but there's no reason they have to be happy about what they learn. And on a 6-, you can really twist the screws.

"Vasssil? Heavensssss, no. Vasssil left town lasssst autumn, headed back down to Lygoss.' He smiles, and it's like he has too many teeth. "But ssssurely we can make ssssome ssort of... arrangement?"

"What happened here recently? Well, there's like a half-dozen sets of boot-prints in the mud, all churned up like there was a fight. A few splashes of blood, too, on the foliage. It's pretty clear Tegen got jumped by the bandits."

"Cool, so you slip your knife between the shutters and flip the bar, quiet as a mouse. But as soon as you touch the shutter to swing it open, this purplish light flares all around the border as these runes light up and your hand just sears with pain. It's a trap! Take 1d10 damage, ignoring armor."

Ask a provocative question: Ask a question that spurs a decision or response, even if it's just an emotional response or a decision not to act. You can ask the question yourself, or put in the mouth of one of your NPCs. Alternately: ask a question that asserts badness but that gives the player a chance to author it.

"Rbianna, Eira's looking grim, and she's like: 'Garet's losing a lot of blood. I don't think he's gonna make it, and he's gonna slow us down something frightful. You want me to do the necessary?"

"Caradoc, you come in at the very end of all this, I think. You saw that cloud of smoke billowing out of Vabid's mouth. And there's Vabid, just acting totally normal about everything. What's going through your head right now?"

"Oof, a 4? Well, I think you manage to offend her, like really hurt her feelings. What do you say or do that does that?"

Put someone in a spot: Establishes badness, raises the stakes, and provokes action from the PCs, all at once. One of your best and most versatile moves. “Someone” can be a PC or an NPC, and you can turn the spotlight on someone else and ask what *they* do about it.

“So close! You make the jump, but land like chest-first on the bough. The air gets knocked out of you and start to fall, just barely grab on. You’re hanging from that branch like this, gasping for air, like 80 feet up, and you feel your grip starting to go. What do you do?”

“Rhianna, you see the big guy stand up and stare down at Andras. ‘What’d you just call me, you skinny little rat?’ And you realize that like three other guys, big burly miner types, they’re standing and looming too, not a smile among them. What do you do?”

“So, it’s like you said, you that drake calms as you place your hand on its snout, and all the sudden it’s like a mewling kitten. But, Caradoc, you’re watching from the brush, right? As Blodwen’s calming that one, you spy another drake, sorta behind her to her left, slinking up. It’s about to pounce on her, you’re sure of it, what do you do?”

Use up their resources: Something happens that whittles away at their stuff, or that takes it away from them entirely. “Resources” here can be:

- ☉ Concrete and specific (their shield, their torch)
- ☉ Concrete but abstract (their rations, their adventuring gear)
- ☉ Intangible (their reputation, someone’s trust)
- ☉ Entirely mechanical abstractions (HP, Fortunes, Loyalty, etc.)—though you should always bring that back to the fiction and show how it manifests

A lot of times, this is a pretty soft move. Losing a resource doesn’t feel very consequential when you’ve got a lot of it, especially if the loss is expected and planned for. But what you’re doing here is raising stakes. The fact that they’re down 6 HP might not matter much right now, but a few more blows and they’re going to start getting *nervous*.

When you use up a specific resource, the loss can be temporary (“*he swats the knife out of your hand, it goes flying across the room*”) or permanent (“*the blow shatters your shield*”).

You’ll find yourself making this move at the same time as other moves, and that’s okay.

HP, in particular, get ground down part and parcel with other moves (see the **Damage, Debilities, and GM Moves** sidebar, page [XX](#).)

“It’s been like an hour since you came down here. I think your torch is getting low. Like, maybe you’ve got 10 minutes of light left? What do you do?”

“Yeah, so your grip slips and down you tumble, smacking against branches all the way, WAM WACK WHOOMP. You land flat on you back, and you’re pretty sure you felt something break in your pack. Lose 2 uses of adventuring gear and take a d8 of damage, ignores armor. What do you do?”

“Yup, he was totally standing right behind as you said that last bit. You look back and he’s just beet red, on the verge of crying or yelling, you’re not sure. But he just turns and stomps off into the fields. I think his Loyalty just took a big hit, drop it to -2, okay. What do you do?”

Hurt someone: Inflict a specific, concrete injury or wound on a PC or an NPC they care about. Something unignorable. Something more than just losing HP. Something painful, bloody, problematic, or all three.

When you use this move on a PC, they are almost certainly *suffering a calamity*, which triggers Defy Danger. Ask them how they deal with it and follow the move from there.

How bad you hurt them depends on the fiction, whether the harm came from a 7+ or a 6-, the damage rolled, and the tags on the damage (*messy, forceful*, etc.). When you hurt them because they rolled a 7-9 to Hack and Slash a guy with a club, and they only took 2 damage, that’s going to look a lot different than a 6- against a rage drake dealing 12 *messy* damage.

As a rule, don’t inflict a permanent, disabling injury unless you’ve warned them its possible (explicitly or by telegraphing/demonstrating the danger), and either they rolled a

6- or they knowingly ignored the danger. If you're like *"that thing has like 6-inch long teeth and jaws that can crush trees... it chomps down on you, you're going to be missing bits, you sure you want to just stand there and swing at it?"* and they're like *"yeab, no guts no glory!"* and they Hack and Slash and roll a 7-9... well, you warned them. Say goodbye to that arm and hello to a fountain of blood. But don't spring that on them. If you've presented this thing as a threat but not an arm-chomping threat, on a 7-9 you can be like *"it chomps down on your arm, oh gods it hurts, there's blood everywhere, and it starts to shake you around. There's this weird, calm part of your brain that's like 'oh my arm is about to get torn off,' but the rest of you just AAAGH. Take a d10+3 damage and mark Weakened. What do you do?"* Still a pretty hard move, I'd say, but one they might still recover from. Taking their arm without warning? *Lame.*

With that said: feel free to hurt NPCs more aggressively and brutally than you hurt the PCs. Taking a *follower's* arm (for example) is a great way to show that this thing's attacks are *messy* (and simultaneously raise the stakes) without deprotagonizing the PCs. (Word of advice, though: don't brutalize an animal companion; players get super precious with their pets.)

Once inflicted, a wound or injury is part of the fiction. It might cause the PC to Defy Danger to do something that wouldn't otherwise be dangerous. It might be the fictional justification for another move you make. It might prompt you to make moves that escalate the injury.

For more about HP, damage, debilities, and lasting wounds, see the chapter on ["Harm and Healing"](#) (page XX).

"I think what happens is: you stumble on a root and trip, and before you know there's this horrible pain in your left leg and the boar is just goring your calf oh, gods, that hurts, and it's grunting and squealing, it's so awful, and did I mention how much it hurts? What do you do?"

"It's like WHAM you get smacked in the head and everything's just white and your ears are ringing and what is even going on? Take a d10+3 damage and mark Dazed. Rhianna, you see it club Vabid in the head and he just went flying and landed in a

heap. What do you do?"

"Oh dear. 9 damage? And you're still up? Yeah, um... I think as you try to wrench your arm free, it, um... crap, I think it just chomps down hard and there's just this searing pain and you go staggering back. You're free, but you look down and your left hand is just gone. Blood is spurting out of it, and you feel cold and you think you might faint. What do you do?"

Box Text: Dealing Damage & Inflicting Debilities

"Dealing damage" isn't a GM move by itself; it's a thing that happens as part of another GM (most often: **hurt them** or **use up their resources**). When you make a move that involves a character getting banged up, hurt, knocked around, or injured, then deal damage to them as part of that move. Tell the player how much damage they take (usually a die roll, based on the monster that inflicted it or the circumstances surrounding it). They lose that many HP. If they're reduced to 0, they're either out of the action or (more likely) at Death's Door.

Likewise, you don't have a move for "inflict a debility." You can choose to inflict a debility when you **hurt someone** or **use up their resources**, when you **tell them the consequence** and they do it anyway, or just by **revealing an unwelcome truth** ("*you realize that your hands are shaking, your legs wobbling... mark Weakened*").

For more on damage and debilities, see the harm and healing chapter.

Separate them: Split the party. It's okay. But also: put foes or obstacles between them. Have one of them fall behind. Have a follower or other NPC go missing. Send someone tumbling down the slope, taking them out of the fight. That sort of thing.

This move often pairs well with **put them in a spot**. Because what's worse than being in a spot? Being *alone* in a spot.

"Blodwen, after maybe twenty minutes of pushing through the tall grass, you all get a little spread out and you realize you can't see anyone else. At first you can hear them so no big deal, but then the sound of them moving through the grass is lost in the constant wind. What do you do?"

“Oof. Yeah, as you give her your spiel she’s kind of stone faced, no response. Then there’s this pause, and she sorta gasps and sobs and then come the waterworks. ‘Dammit, Caradoc.’ And she turns and slams the door and you can hear her weeping. What do you do?”

“Okay, cool, so Vahid you’re a bit further down the hall, right? With Lowri holding the torch for you? Well, as you start to make out the runes—something about ‘portal’ or ‘doorway’ or maybe ‘road’—there’s this CUH-CLUNK that you feel in your chest, everyone does, and then a screeching metal-on-metal sound and this steel curtain drops from the ceiling, cutting off the hallway. BOOM. Vahid, you and Lowri are on the far side of it, cut off from the others, dust billowing all over. What do you do?”

Capture someone: On a softer version of this move, capture them but stay in the scene, give them a chance to escape (or others to rescue them). On a harder version, cut straight to the next scene—captured, bound, dragged off who knows where—and just gloss over the details of how they got there.

“Brennan whistles and Ragan, calm and quick as anything, he just grabs Morwenna by the hair and spins her around and steps back, knife to her throat. Brennan sort of sighs, steps back behind both of them. ‘I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but you don’t really leave me a choice. We’ll be going now, and I’d appreciate it if you all kept your hands where I can see them. Hate for something to happen to the nice lass.’ They start backing away, what do you do?”

“Caradoc, as soon as you touch the sphere it’s like WHOOSH and you’re floating in space, looking down over your body. Everything’s kind of gray and hazy and washed out, and you can’t really feel your feet. Vahid, you come home maybe a couple hours later and find Caradoc’s body just slumped over the ice-sphere, his fingers touching it and all blue, maybe a little black already, and he’s not responding. What do you do?”

“Yeah, Vahid, Lowri is like waving the torch around in the dark and you’re both peering out, looking for whatever made that noise, and we the audience see this shadowy form loom up behind you with these long, spindly fingers. Those fingers

clamp down over your mouth, Vahid, and another shape grabs Andras, and the torch falls and there's a brief struggle and then the camera like pans down to the torch burning out on the floor and we hear sounds of you two getting dragged away. Rhianna, while this is happening..."

Turn their move back on them: This is a good one to use on a 6-. Take the move they were making, and flip it somehow. Maybe you give the advantage to their foes, maybe you have *them* come up with something bad for you to work with, maybe their move constrains options instead of creating them. Get creative.

"Oh, I think you know all about this evil quicksilver, Vahid. Why don't you tell us about the horrible encounter you had with it back down south, and how it's left you shaken to this day."

"A miss, huh? Tell you what, ask one of the Discern Realities questions anyhow, but you don't get a bonus to act on it. In fact, you'll take a -2 forward to do anything BUT act on the answer."

"Yeah, she's just not buying it. There's no way you're going to convince her to squeal on Tseri. In fact, she starts twisting the conversation around, asking you questions, tripping you up, getting you flustered. What do you think it'd take for her to get you to spill the beans on where Vahid has the weather vane hidden?"

Demonstrate a downside: Show the limits of their moves, the baggage that comes with being (e.g.) the Heavy. Show them just how a *crude* weapon fairs against an iron sword or shield. Show them why wearing *warm* armor in the blazing sun is a bad idea. Show them why is stinks to be short, or tall, or young, or old, or whatever.

"Caradoc, Rhianna, as you're watching the crinwin from the brush, you hear this, ka-chunk ka-chunk ka-chunk. Vahid's pack, for sure, and the crinwin hear it too."

"Caradoc, the second time you try to interject, Brennan's like 'Grown-ups are talking, kid.' And he turns back to Rhianna. 'Now, you were saying...?'"

"Your dagger sinks in, and it bellows, but you can tell it didn't do any real damage."

It's just too small. And the aurochs rears and spins and those huge, yard-long horns are coming right at you, what do you do?"

Offer an opportunity (with or without a cost): Give them an opening, a chance to act. The opportunity can be specific (*"If you act now, you'll have the drop on them"*) or general (*"They don't seem to have spotted you, what do you do?"*). It can come with a definite cost (*"...but it'll make a bunch of noise and raise the alarm"*) or a potential cost (*"...but you'll have to hurry to make it in time"*) or no cost at all.

You'll often make this move without realizing it. When you just hand a player the initiative—when there's a tense, active situation and you ask "what do you do?" without first announcing badness or putting them in a spot or otherwise making them react—you're offering them an opportunity.

"3 damage? With his armor, that's not enough to drop him. I think he jerks back and you just like score a slice down his cheek. But he's on his heels, what do you do?"

"They're not taking the bait, Rhianna. But you if you made a show of heading out of camp and leaving Andras and Blodwen there alone? That'd do it. What do you do?"

"What here is useful or valuable to you? That glowing blue crystal set in the wall. If you smash it, it'll unleash all sorts of chaos, just the distraction you need."

Tell them the consequences/requirements (then ask): Use this move as an interrupt, as a way to clarify the fiction and set the stakes when they say they want to do a thing. *"If you do that, you realize that __, right?"*

Use this move, also, to give them a path forward when the way is otherwise blocked. Use it to force a meaningful decision. Use to make them pay (in time, resources, opportunity, etc.) if they want to follow a course of action.

"What about Gareth's body, Rhianna? If you leave it, the rest of the crew is going grumble—you know how superstitious they are. You could burn it, but that'll take time and give away your position. What do you do?"

"If you do that, cool, but you won't have a chance to get clear. You'll be caught in the blast for sure. You do it?"

"Yeah, no. Your hands are shaking, your mouth is dry, you can't think about anything but that baleful, hateful eye. You want to take a shot, you're going to have to get it together first. What do you do?"

"Vahid, you can't make heads or tails of these runes, not right now at least. Maybe if you took a rubbing and had time to study them back home, with all your books and notes and everything. But not out here. What do you do?"

"That thing is made of solid stone. Your arrows aren't going to do squat, Rhianna. You want to hurt this thing, or even slow it down, you're going to need to hit it with something big and heavy."

Advance a grim portent: Many of the threats (page [XXX](#)) that you create will have an impending doom and grim portents. When you make this move, you decide that one of those grim portents has come to pass, and you show it to the characters.

In practice, this move almost always manifests as another move. You **announce trouble** or **reveal an unwelcome truth** or **put someone in a spot** (etc.), in such a way that it demonstrates that the grim portent has come to pass.

Rarely, you might chuckle evilly and just check a box and tell them they've got a bad feeling, maybe have a cold wind blow, but otherwise not demonstrate the portent just yet. But when you do this, but sure to *commit* to the portent having come to pass offscreen. If you don't, you haven't really made a move at all.

"Blodwen, you find Nia like in that collapsed old house on the edge of town. You've got to squeeze through the opening to get in there, and it takes your eyes a bit to adjust to the light, but when they do, your stomach drops. There are chalk drawings of spiders all over the walls, and like, an... an altar? With this big mass of sticks and fur and webs that you realize is like an idol of a big old spider. Nia's all smiling and like 'Hi Blodwen, do you like my drawings?' What do you do?"

“Rhianna, a couple weeks later and you’re coming in from a hunt and Tegin, Andras’s mom, she catches you on your way in. She’s all like ‘Where’s Andras?’ as if you would know. But you haven’t seen him a few days. You thought he was home, nursing that leg injury. What do you do?”

“Caradoc, as you drift off to sleep, you find yourself dreaming. Like, a really weird, vivid dream. It’s like when you were in that old Maker-tomb and looking up, but... different. Closer. More claustrophobic. Like you’re buried in dirt, and have been forever, and there’s this light above, far away. But it’s, like, enough, you know? Something to move towards? And so you stretch, and claw up through the dirt, towards the light, and then you snap awake and holy crap, it’s an earthquake and everything’s shaking and people are screaming and kids are crying, what do you do?”

Ask: “What do you do?”

After you’ve made your move, look the player in the eye, address yourself to the character, and ask “what do you do?” This little phrase isn’t really a move in and of itself. It’s a cue, a way to hand the conversation back to the player and prompt them to say something.

In response, the player will very likely do one of these:

- ☉ Ask you one or more questions: about the fiction, about the rules, about what you just said. Answer them, but then put the ball back in their court.
- ☉ Say what they (as their character) does.

When they say what they do, ask yourself whether it triggers a PC move (a basic move, a move from their playbook, a custom move you’ve set up, etc.). If it does, resolve that move.

If you aren’t sure whether they triggered a move, or you need more info before resolving it, ask questions. Discuss with the table. Clarify their intent and/or how they’re going about it.

If you don't think what they declared is possible, valid, or reasonable, then ask questions to clarify their intent or their approach and (if you still aren't buying it) **tell them the consequences and/or requirements** and ask if they still want to do that.

If they do something that doesn't trigger a move, then you can:

- ☉ Say “okay” and leave the initiative with them (possibly with “*and then what do you do?*”)
- ☉ Establish how the situation has changed, quite possibly making another GM move yourself (and asking, again, “*what do you do?*”)
- ☉ Move the spotlight to another PC, maybe making a GM move or maybe just establishing their situation, and ask “what do you do?”
- ☉ End the scene, zoom out, and either set a new scene or starting asking questions until you know how and where to frame the next scene.

OTHER THINGS TO DO

Take notes. You'll end up generating lots of details, and it can be hard to keep track of it all. You'll need to figure out the best tool and the level of detail that works for you, but things you might want to write down include:

- ☉ NPC names (and traits, and relevant relationships)
- ☉ Historical events that you and players establish (and when/where/who)
- ☉ Interesting details that you don't want to forget
- ☉ A summary of events each session

You can write up formal session recaps to share with your players, but mostly these notes are for you. Write only as much as you'll find useful.

Draw maps. Lots of maps. Not just as part of your prep, but as a prop or a point of reference during play. When a fight breaks out and there's a lot going on, throw a quick sketch of the terrain on a whiteboard or a piece of paper (or throw out some minis if you have them). When they explore a ruin, draw a rough map (or encourage them to) to help establish the physical space. When they go to a new steading, give them a map of the different districts and parts of town.

Add to existing maps, too. Put the PC's homes on the steading map. Add points of interest that come up during play. Draw the course of their journey on the Vicinity or World's End maps.

Leave blanks in your maps and in your prep, to be filled in during play or at a later time. Leave yourself things to wonder about. If a question occurs to you, you don't have to answer it (or ask the players to answer it) right now. Leave it as a blank, maybe jot it down in your notes, and come back to it in a future session.

Keep things moving. Don't let the momentum of the game sputter out. Frame scenes aggressively, zooming in and out to match the level of interest (yours and the players'). When nothing's happening, either make a GM move or skip ahead in time to where something interest *is* happening.

Involve everyone. Keep moving the spotlight around the table. Make sure everyone gets some good screen time. Don't be afraid to shut down an overly eager or aggressive player with a polite-but-firm reprimand. *"Andrew, you're being rude. I'm talking to Jamie right now."*

Take breaks. They let everyone reflect on what's happened and think about what they want to do next. They let you—the real-world people hanging out—get to know each other better or catch up on real-world stuff or just joke around. That stuff's important, too.

Engage your players in world-building and make sure they realize the setting is theirs as much as it is yours. When they ask you something about the world, and you don't have an answer at the ready, turn it back on them. *"Good question. Blodwen, what DO the folks of Stonetop do with their dead?"*

Sometimes, disclaim decision making. Put an outcome in the character's hands (*"He's a bloody mess, but he's not dead. You can save him if you want. Do you?"*). Discuss an outcome with the players (*"What do you think? Is Andras alive or dead?"*). Let the dice decide (*"You know what, roll Death's Door for him."*). Let your characters decide, based on their

instincts, their wants and needs, your notes, and your own sense of their internal logic.

(“No, he’s not the type to come back as a ghost, so... yeah, he’s dead.”)

BOX TEXT: The Die of Fate

One way to disclaim decision making is to let the dice decide. Often, that means letting the results of a PC move determine what happens. But you can also use the Die of Fate.

The Die of Fate is just a die roll, usually a d6, with a lower result meaning bad and a higher result meaning good. Have a player roll the Die of Fate when you don’t have a particular opinion on what should happen or how something should go, and/or when it’s just a matter of luck. How’s the weather today? What do they encounter en route? How many uses of adventuring gear can they loot? In general, a 1-2 is bad, a 3-4 is neutral or mixed, and 5-6 is pretty good.

Sometimes, you’ll prep a set of results for the Die of Fate. For example, what happens when they make camp?

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 1 | crinwin attack camp! |
| 2-3 | crinwin try to lure someone out of camp |
| 4-5 | they’re out there, just watching you |
| 6 | you avoid their notice |

Don’t feel limited to a d6, especially not when you’ve got a table of results set up in advance. If you’ve got 12 interesting outcomes, have them roll a d12.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Don’t plan a storyline or a plot. Don’t plan a character arc. Don’t plan out a scene, where the PCs do *x* and then your NPCs do *y*. Don’t make a bunch of plans assuming the PCs take a certain course of action, or that they succeed or fail at a particular task. All of that flies in the face of **playing to find out what happens**. That’s you *deciding* what will happen, in advance, by yourself. Absolutely not what you’re here to do.

Instead: prep situations, and possible encounters, and places to explore. Prep threats and NPCs with good actionable instincts, maybe some grim portents and impending dooms, maybe some if/then statements. See “Prep” below.

Don't tell them what to roll before they've told you what they're doing. Like, you do *not* get to say crap like “the bandit attacks, Defy Danger with DEX.” Because 1) that's now how it works and 2) what if they don't act quickly or with finesse? What if they knock his attack aside and bash him with their shield? What if they just grit the blow and run him through? What if they throw dirt in his face and kick his groin? When you tell the players to make a move, without *them first telling you that they've done something to trigger the move*, you're breaking the rules of the game.

Instead: make your move and ask “what do you do?” Then, based on the answer, decide together whether they triggered a move and which move they triggered. They roll that move, and you resolve it from there.

Don't make them roll just because, or because “maybe they wouldn't notice,” or any of that garbage. Like, you know how in other games, you'll decide that a monster is sneaking up on camp and ask the PC for a perception check? That's not a thing in *Stonetop*.

Instead, you just make a GM move, like **announce trouble**, that hints at the monster's presence. *“You realize that the crickets have all gone quiet. And then, maybe it's just your imagination? But you thought you heard something... laughing. Out in the woods. What do you do?”* And maybe they wake the others or maybe they call out or maybe they Discern Realities and you run the game from there.

Don't stop making GM moves, especially when the players roll 10+. You'll describe what happens, yeah, and you give them the success that they earned. Sometimes a player will just grab the initiative and follow up (and that's cool, run with it). But usually, the players will still be looking at you to see what happens. The fiction churns along and bad guys keep doing bad things.

So when the Heavy rolls a 10+ to Hack and Slash and deals her damage and the foe's still standing and there are like two other baddies nearby, don't just go “cool, he's still standing, what do you do?” Instead: think about how the first foe responds to getting hit, and what the other two foes are doing. Make a move that takes all that into account, and *then* ask “what do you do?”

PREP

Prep is the work you do between sessions, the lonely fun (or for some, the stressful work) of getting ready for the next game. Prep involves reviewing your notes from previous sessions, thinking about what might happen in the next session, and doing stuff that you don't want to do during play.

Why prep? A few reasons:

- ☉ To give you **interesting stuff to say** when it's your turn to talk.
- ☉ To **speed up play**, and not make everyone wait while you decide what happens or you stat up a monster or draw a map
- ☉ To **shore up your weaknesses** or your blind spots. If you, like, always forget about the PCs' followers and let them fade into the background, prep some interesting things for those followers to say or do.
- ☉ To **hone your craft**. Some stuff is just better when you have time to think about it—it's more consistent or thematic, it flows better, it builds on stuff that came up earlier, etc.
- ☉ To **give yourself permission** to play hard and visit badness on the PCs. If you've got a tendency to pull punches (and don't we all?), it can really help to have an impending doom established or to give your bad guys a move like "tear an arm off."

Prep only as much as you find useful and valuable. Unless you're making something for other GMs to use, there's no point in writing down details that are self-evident to you. Don't write down what Nia look like unless you think you'll forget or it's something you specifically want to call attention to in play.

Things to consider prepping:

- ☉ **Threats**: the ongoing, recurring problems that cause trouble for the PCs. Things that are going to get worse if left unchecked, or complicated relationships that you want to explore more in play. There's a whole chapter on prepping and using Threats (page [XX](#)).

- ② **Hooks:** when you want to push the PCs into the field with a threat or an opportunity, it pays to prepare a hook. A hook involves: setup questions, a plan for framing the initial scene(s), some specific GM moves you plan to make, and some possible reactions. See the First Adventure chapter (see page [XX](#)) for guidelines on preparing a hook.
- ② **Expeditions:** if you know (or suspect) the PCs will leave town, you might prepare your choices for the Chart a Course move (see page [XX](#)). Consider drawing a map, prepping points of interest, and roughly imagining a few encounters they might have en route. See the “What to Prep” section of the Expeditions chapter (page [XX](#)) for details.
- ② **Points of interest:** think about each important place you expect the PCs to explore or encounter during a session. What’s it like? How will you describe it? What questions will you ask about it? Do you need a map or a visual aid? Are there dangers or discoveries within? See page [XX](#) for ideas.
- ② **Dangers:** the hazards and monsters and hostile NPCs that the PCs might encounter. Monsters in particular are important, because they have stats and moves. Either find entries in the Setting Guide to use or make your own. You can do this on the fly, of course, but it takes up table time and it’s best to have it done in advance. See the chapter on Dangers (page [XX](#)) for guidelines.
- ② **Discoveries:** Puzzles, mysterious scenes, treasures, arcana... these are all discoveries. Some of them you’ll just wing on the fly. Some you’ll want to make a few notes on. Some (especially arcana) you’ll want to write up in detail. See page [XX](#) for more.
- ② **NPCs:** If there are NPCs that you expect they’ll encounter in play, maybe think about their names, their traits, and their instincts. If an NPC might end up as a follower, consider writing down their stats, tags, moves, cost, and instinct before play. See page [XX](#) for guidelines.

All of this prep might seem like it goes against playing to find out what happens, but it really doesn’t. You’re not prepping a story, or a plot, or an inevitable series of scenes that follow one after the other. You’re prepping things that give you interesting stuff to say, that speed up play, that shore up your weaknesses and hone your craft, and that give

yourself permission to play hard. Good prep doesn't involve scripting everything out; it involves laying a groundwork to help you improvise.