

# Chatty's Monthly Tips : Intro to Tropes

*(Musings of the Chatty DM)*

Submitted at 9/8/2008 8:25:18 AM

I have a monthly column on Johnn Four's Roleplaying tips newsletter.

This month, I adapted the material I wrote in our Gen Con 2008 GM-FU seminar to introduce his readers to the concept of tropes. Long time readers will notice that its a re-edition of some of my earlier posts.

I'm re-posting it here because I have been asked a few times by recent readers to define tropes and how they apply to RPGs, plus I'd like to allow comments on the article.

Do subscribe to Johnn's Newsletter, it's by far the best free RPG newsletter I've found on the net so far.

Enjoy! Understanding, Using And Subverting Tropes In RPGs

Roleplaying adventures are a form of narrative entertainment. As such, they share common elements with movies and TV shows, as well as graphic and classic novels. Some elements are obvious, like characters, background, plots, and action scenes.

There is also a lesser-known type of element common to these forms of stories. These are tropes, and learning to use them (or subvert them) can make writing an otherwise-ordinary adventure stand out and become a very satisfying experience. What is a Trope?

A trope is a narrative "figure of speech," shorthand for some concept the audience will recognize and understand instantly. Above all, a trope is a convention. It can be a plot trick, a setup, a narrative structure, a character type, a linguistic idiom. It's like leadership (or porn): hard to define yet you know it when you see it.

There are a lot of tropes out there, many of which you probably already know about without knowing about it.

For example, in a fantasy story, there often is a Dark Lord (trope) amassing an army of Evil Monsters (trope) to take over the world (again). There's also often a clueless 'chosen one' (trope) surrounded by a band of Heroes (trope) who end up defeating the Dark Lord. What's a Cliche?

A cliche is an overused trope that ends up becoming intrusive or too obvious. It distracts the audience rather than serving as shorthand.

## Wild Cards Returns to Roleplaying

*(M&M News)*

Submitted at 8/29/2008 4:23:39 PM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
WILD CARDS RETURNS TO  
ROLEPLAYING Green Ronin  
Releases Wild Cards Campaign

**I, Lego**

*(Greywulf's Lair)*

When the audience groans, the trope has become a cliche.

Examples of cliches in fiction:

- "Nooooooooooooooooo!"
- The evil laugh
- Fruit carts and panes of glass in chase scenes
- "Luke, I am your father."
- The ethnic comic relief
- "It's quiet...too quiet."

Tropes in RPGs

Tropes work just as well (if not better) in RPGs, because the audience controls the main protagonists. Since tropes are shortcuts, this can allow a GM to elicit a reaction from players while spending limited effort.

Cliches also have their use in RPGs; they aren't inherently bad. They can be a useful tool for introducing new players to the game, as they bring familiar territory into an otherwise unfamiliar game, facilitating participation.

All adventures (published or homemade) already use tropes liberally because writers steal/borrow ideas all the time, consciously or not. It's the careful and conscious choosing of tropes to elicit an emotional response from players that add value to your adventure. The Two Fundamental Rules of RPGs

The Rule of Fun:

Games must be fun to play. Sure, we like pretty graphics and a good plot, but the fun's the main thing. If they're fun, a lot of incongruities can be forgiven. Go ahead, try to explain why the yellow circle loves dots and why the ghosts are out to get him, or why the frog needs to get across the road. You can't. Doesn't matter.

Just replace "pretty graphics" by "cool mechanics" and the definition applies perfectly to tabletop RPGs

A lot of shortcuts are made in the mechanics and premises of an RPG to make it fun. The Rule of Fun should also be applied by GMs to everything in the game, from choice of game to character generation, the color of dice, the miniatures players choose, the adventure used, etc.

With regards to adventure preparation, I suggest you apply the Rule of Fun whenever you think of adding a challenge (a fight, a trap, or a skill roll) by asking yourself, "Will playing this out be fun?"

If the answer is no or "probably not, but it's logical" you need to rethink

Setting for Mutants & Masterminds  
RPG August 29, 2008--SEATTLE,  
WA: Green Ronin Publishing  
released the highly anticipated Wild  
Cards Campaign Setting for the  
Mutants & Masterminds...

"One of us."

your design choice. Rolling a climb check to climb a tree to see the advancing enemy troops 50 miles away is not all that fun. Climbing it to avoid a horde of berserking goblins has a better chance of hitting the fun mark

Try to apply the Rule of Fun to any instance of travel, investigations, or NPC interactions. It will make a game session better. (Hint: random encounters, unless everyone wants them, are not usually fun.)

The Rule of Cool:

The limit of the Willing Suspension Of Disbelief for a given element is directly proportional to its degree of coolness. Stated another way, all but the most pedantic of viewers will forgive liberties with reality so long as the result is wicked sweet and/or awesome. This applies to the audience in general, as there will naturally be a different threshold for each individual in the group.

To transpose to RPG terms: your players will put up with almost any illogical or wobbly plot devices or encounters as long as things get cool enough for them.

A GM's efforts should be not so much on far-reaching world building and tight, nitpicking-proof plot lines. They should go all out for encounters and roleplaying that will swamp players in coolness.

For example, think about combat on ice bridges, negotiating the release of prisoners in a flooding underground prison, or hopping from floating islands to pieces of flying ruins to catch the thieves of the Star Jewel of Radnia. Adapting Tropes to RPGs

With the Rules of Fun and Cool in mind, the idea in creating adventures or campaigns is not to copy a whole movie or novel in game form. The trick is to extract the tropes you found cool and engaging and import them into your game.

Since tropes are easily recognized, players will pick up on them and start building expectations. A useful technique then is subverting the trope by having it go in the opposite direction of what players expect. If you mix and match straight and subverted tropes, you will be able to elicit stronger reactions from player which will lead to more satisfactory involvement in the adventure.

For example, if you want to recreate

## Character du Jour: Paragirl One

*(Greywulf's Lair)*

Submitted at 9/7/2008 2:33:46 PM

Meet Sara Chambers, the Genetically Modified Gal. Born to loving parents, little did she know she was just one more experiment to her

some of the feeling of the Star Wars movies in your games, you can deconstruct the series in the tropes you liked best (this is my personal list):

- Dark Tower (Death Star)
- Power Glows: Lightsabers
- Mystic Ninja: Jedi
- Badass Villain: Darth
- Face Heel Turn: Darth Vader
- Empire vs. Rebels
- The Chosen One: Anakin/Luke
- Kung Fu geezer: Yoda
- I am your father: Cliche!

The idea is to borrow a few tropes and build an adventure around them.

You could build a world where an Evil Empire threatens a small coalition of planets/states (rebel equivalent). Players are young Spiritual Knights (Jedis) in a monastery, being trained by an irascible old Crone (Subverted Geezer) who looks to be a few hours shy of croaking.

The Empire has an order of evil Hell-knights (Subverted Jedi) powered by pure hatred and led by an ancient pupil of the Crone (Badass Villain). They trash the monastery and kidnap the crone. The party finds a prophecy that talks of the Five Nascent Stars (The Chosen Ones) chasing away the darkness and guess that it's them.

They track the Hell-knights back to their "Invincible" Citadel of Woe (Dark Tower). They infiltrate it and battle through mooks and a few Hell-knights. As they enter the cell compound, they come face to face with Granny Sensei kicking Hell-knight butt saying, "What took you so long?"

Then the Badass appears, gets a tongue lashing by the Crone; he goes mad and says, "shut up mom" (Subverted "I am your father") and the final fight starts. Near death, the Badass implores his mother and she turns against the PCs (Subverted Heel Face turn).

It's as simple as that. References

- The Tropes Wik i - Contains description on thousands of tropes covering all forms of narratives, including RPGs and video games:
- Chatty DM's "Mining Tropes for RPG nuggets" series

father, evil villain (but loving family man) Doctor DNA. Sara was created to be everything her father wanted for mankind ; a super-strong living weapon with the power to destroy tall buildings [...]

# Kobold Love: Intro, Background and Summary, Part 1

*(Musings of the Chatty DM)*

Submitted at 9/6/2008 3:01:17 PM

I'm the type of person who needs to understand a process before tackling it head on.

That's why this post is more about context and theory than actually writing Kobold Love's first part.

Bear with me, it will be worth it.

First Impressions are capital

When a DM opens up a D&D adventure booklet, the Introduction, Adventure Background and Summary are the first things that will be read.

While layout, art and gorgeous maps will entice a DM to read the adventure, that first section will, IMHO, make or break the adventure more than any other section.

If you fail to hook the reader within the first paragraph, your adventure will be put away and may never be picked up again.

This section is also the one that sets the tone for the whole adventure, it puts the adventure within the context of a story and gives the DM a rapid overview of what's going to happen in it.

This makes writing this section a very crucial task that must be tackled with care and blow the reader's mind away by laying down what the adventure truly is about in the shortest number of words (yeah that's going to be a challenge for me).

The evolution of the adventure's introduction

I'm a DM that buys and peruses a lot of published adventures. Ever since the era of the original Advanced Dungeons and Dragons game, I've purchased numerous modules, and

copies of Dungeon magazines.

Throughout the years I've seen a shift in the way the first part of an adventure was written. In Gary Gygax's D&D era, published adventures had a few paragraphs of background in the likes of "The local Duke requires you to investigate this cave or he'll jail you all" followed by a short context (A wizard is entombed here and no adventurer ever one came out alive) and sometimes a list of rumours.

Sometime during the evolution of the Dungeon magazine format, the 1st section was divided into the 4 parts that are now common practice in the industry which more or less follow these conventions :

The adventure's Elevator Pitch, followed with the nuts and bolts of the adventure like what level it was designed for and for how many characters. If the Adventure was published in Dungeon Magazine, it also mentioned if the adventure was setting neutral or specific (Greyhawk, Forgotten Realm, Ebberon, etc). This is usually one or two paragraphs.

The Adventure Background: The backstory of the adventure. It covers the emplacement of the action, the main protagonists, the villain, his plan and the events that lead to the quest/events that will drive the adventure. This takes a few paragraphs and usually fits in a few hundred words, depending on how 'fluffy' the adventure is.

The Adventure Summary: One or two paragraph description of what the players will go through during the adventure.

Adventure Hooks: Some adventures



provide Hooks, a series of short quests (usually 3 or more) and or motivations to get the PCs involved in the adventure. In D&D 4e, such hooks are often major and minor quests with appropriate XP rewards.

Fluffy vs Old School introductions

From my point of view there currently is 2 schools of thoughts on adventure background design. One, espoused by Paizo Publishing and Dungeon Magazine was to have detailed, rich back stories that involve several organizations and emplacements. Adventure path adventures like Paizo's Pathfinder and Wizards of the Coast Scales of

War are good examples of this.

The other, represented by Goodman Games' Dungeon Crawl Classics and Master Dungeon series is much lighter on context and backstory. They provide a quest and/or a villain, a few hooks and that's often it.

Each type responds to different play styles and needs.

Where are you going with this lecture Phil?

It's quite simple, I have to chose what 'school' of adventure Kobold Love's intro will espouse.

KL-1 (like good old time modules) will be written to stand on it's own as a one shot, one evening adventure (if the DM does not expand it). Furthermore, as all 3rd party D&D 4e adventures, it will be need to be easy to adapt to all settings (including the Point of Lights non-setting) as well as all home brewed world.

Furthermore, it's a limited scope adventure as I need to keep it rather short so I don't spend 6 months on it.

So I'm going to write it closer to the old school way. It will feature limited fluff with lot's of narrative hooks and grey zones to let imaginative DMs some leeway. At the same time, I'll write enough to let a DM use it as a pick up game and still immerse player in the (half) kobolds' experience.

Up next, Phil actually writes the adventure's intro.

Credit: Wolfgang Baur's Kobold Quarterly you should subscribe! (Image art by Darren Calvert)

## Drunken D&D: Funny Quotes

*(Musings of the Chatty DM)*

Submitted at 9/4/2008 6:12:20 PM

I'm too exhausted to write a real post. But I have something funny to share it with you.

At Gen Con, I played 2 sessions of Drunken D&D (designed by Dave the Game, DMed by yours truly) with my fellow bloggers friends.

I wrote a 5 scene adventure for it and Graham created the PCs.

We ended up playing only 2.5 scenes out of 5 because I put too many elite Brutes in Encounter one, we needed a lot more time to absorb the powers of 12th level characters and we actually roleplayed for about one hour in one scene.

But these 2.5 scenes were among the funniest, most entertaining hours of D&D I have ever played.

I will not post the adventure, as I can't be seen to encourage drinking in any form of social entertainment. However, all players were consenting adults, we had a designated driver

### Excerpts: Scepter Tower of Spellgard

*(Wizards.com - Dungeons & Dragons)*

Submitted at 9/9/2008 12:00:00 AM

Over the broken walls of Spellgard and the broken dreams of those who seek it looms the Scepter Tower. One

and we played in the safety of an Hotel Room.

So with no further ado, I give you:

The DD&D quotes!

(BTW: Tequilus was the name of the God of Spirits, Hangovers, Shame and Porcelain featured in our game)

- Vanir: I answered the call of Ernie ( Keebler), and all I got was this T-shirt.

- Yax: I'll come over there and we can pound flesh together.

- Yax: Oh, wow, I just found a new power under my sheets.

- Dave: I have bloody Parkinson's, and I'll have you not to laugh.

- Bartoneus: Let's attacks some bitches with some hoes.

- Vanir: All my congratulations are in my stomach.

- Bartoneus: Solar Wrath!- The golden ray of Tequilus bursts from me... or maybe I just had to pee. I mark them all!

- Dante: "I may be topless at this point."

- Dave: You would not believe how

of the few structures left standing after Spellgard's fall, the tower has become home to a dark presence that seeks to control the power of Lady Saharel's prophecies.

many ninjas have tried to put clothes on him.

- ChattyDM says: If your tables become undead and if they are vanished, they will burn better.

- Vanir: "Are you a wight supremacist?"

- Yax to Vanir: "You have a very high sentence to 'WHAT?' ratio."

- Dante: "Everything in life I learned from watching Yax"

- Yax: "I want to behead him with my maul."

- Chatty: "What's the armor class to hit puberty?"

- Vanir: "We call that a critical mistress"

Next Year we'll do parts 2 and try to get Mike Mearls to play with us!

Cheers!

Credits: Dave Chalker (Game Design), Graham Poole (Character design, adventure co-design), Wizards of the Coast (Image)

### Spotlight -- Mighty Blademaster

*(Wizards.com - Dungeons & Dragons)*

Submitted at 9/9/2008 12:00:00 AM

Different DDM creatures serve all sorts of functions. Some are ranged

### Character du Jour: Sky

*(Greywulf's Lair)*

Submitted at 9/8/2008 1:12:42 AM

"Perspective. That's what it's given me.". The hero known only as Sky leaned forward into the camera, "Sometimes I just stay there, twenty thousand feet up on a clear day, watching. You can see everything from up there, and it all looks so.... peaceful. If I spot something wrong from that distance - an explosion [...]"

### Ecology of the Genasi

*(Wizards.com - Dungeons & Dragons)*

Submitted at 9/9/2008 12:00:00 AM

Imagine for a moment that every day, when you awaken, the first thing you feel is the heartbeat of the world around you. You feel the ebb and flow of the very elements. They are so strongly a part of you that your body feels bonded to the world around you. You are genasi.

attackers and artillery, others offer lots of technical backup and combined-arms synergy. Then there are the straight-up beaters. They can be refreshing in their simplicity.



## Chatty's Twitter RPG (TwittRPG): Beta Test

*(Musings of the Chatty DM)*

Submitted at 9/8/2008 5:36:58 PM

After one of my Twitter followers asked me innocently if I could create a Twitter Game World for them to play in, my brain literally exploded with possibilities...

For those who don't know what Twitter is, it's mostly a micro-blogging platform where users can post little texts of no more than 140 characters long. It comes with the possibility of following the musings of other twitters or to search it.

It's used by many for Spams, Updates of Blog posts and the occasional Twitter Poop alerts.

Thing is... Twitter is slower than Chat but faster than email. That and the 140 characters limit to post makes it a very interesting candidate for a mini-RPG.

I played with it for one day and 11 guinea pigs and I refined the concept based on participant's feedback.

I'm currently running a Beta game with 6 players and you can see the

### Now Available: Time of Crisis Second Edition PDF

*(M&M News)*

Submitted at 9/1/2008 10:55:24 AM

Time of Crisis, the classic adventure for the first edition of Mutants & Masterminds, is now updated for M&M Second Edition. It appears in print bundled with the Mutants & Masterminds Deluxe GM Screen, and is now available on its...

rules and follow the highlights here.

It's a lot of fun so far for a very limited time investment (for the DM).

I was told on good authority that I might be the first one to attempt something like this. I feel this might become very big!

Feel free to look my rules over and provide feedback.

I'd like to thank the following people for providing the idea's spark, their support and help:

- David Dorward (For starting the ball)
- Stacy Lang (For asking me to do a Twitter RPG)
- Darvin TrueShot (For constant support)
- Fang LangFord (For useful feedback and superb twitter search skills)
- Brent Newhall (For technical support and overall enthusiasm)
- Greywulf (For support and for being nearby if I ever stumble over my nascent improv skills)

### D&D Podcast: Episode 24 (September 2008)

*(Wizards.com - Dungeons & Dragons)*

Submitted at 9/5/2008 12:00:00 AM

In this episode, we look back at the recent conventions—namely Gen Con and PAX 2008, especially as they helped showcase the latest RPGA campaign: Living Forgotten Realms.

### Now Available: M&M Deluxe GM Screen

*(M&M News)*

Submitted at 8/27/2008 10:00:15 AM

Available now in our our Green Ronin Online Store, the Mutants & Masterminds Deluxe GM Screen is both sturdy and practical and looks great on the game table. All the charts and tables you need to play the World's Greatest...

### PDF Update: Time of Crisis Second Edition

*(M&M News)*

Submitted at 9/1/2008 9:25:15 PM

If you bought the second edition Time of Crisis PDF and had trouble decompressing the .zip file, that would be because the file was corrupt. We have uploaded a fixed version, so please use the same download link and login...

### When Fey Step Goes Wrong

*(Greywulf's Lair)*

Submitted at 9/7/2008 10:20:36 AM

Set Laser Clerics to stun. Anyone want to suggest additions to an Eldarin Eladrin Grey Elf Fey Step Mis-Step Table?