Fundamentals
Of Tabletop Roleplaying

LH'12

- Second Iteration -

The Very Basics

While playing a tabletop roleplaying game, you will pretend to be someone else – a *character*.   In a tabletop roleplaying game, there are players, each with their own character, and a Guide (also commonly called a GM), who takes on the role of the situation itself.

Before we try to explain this in detail, just imagine that we're sitting at a table, and I say to you "So, you're a dragon, and you're up on a mountaintop, looking around. You've just seen a group of people making their way towards your lair, and they look like dragon hunters. What do you do?" - and you respond "Well, I guess I'm going to try and figure out if I can beat them in a straight fight, first, so I'm going to slip down closer and scout them out". I think about it, and tell you a couple of possible ways to slip down the mountain to get closer, and you pick one, and I respond with more stuff; and we're playing. I'm the Guide, and you're the player. We have a fictional role (you're a dragon), and we've got a situation that works, one where you have a goal, some obstacles, stuff like that. So far, easy.

Now, we might not agree on just how tough your character is, or how sneaky, and those matter, so I get you to describe him a bit more, and we figure some way of resolving it so we don't end up bickering. We'll bias things in your favor if your dragon is good at sneaking and fighting, or against them if they're bad at it. In the interests of being fair, we'll try to codify how we did it this time, and write it down, so that we can keep it in mind for the next time that character has to bash some stuff; it's good to be consistent. And we'll make up a few other rules to make it *feel* more like being a dragon.

Those are the basics of a roleplaying game. If you have a published game system, the work of finding clear and consistent ways to create and resolve situations, and describe characters in ways that everyone can agree on, has been mostly done for you.   Only *mostly*, because when you play in any roleplaying game, the group may find things that they want to add to, adjust, fine-tune, or change hugely - and that's fine! That is, to many, part of the fun. As you might expect, the situations tend to get a lot more complex - a simple situation like the dragon hunters won't last us long unless there's a lot more to it than it appears, and building more involved ones is a bit of a trick, but one that can be managed easily enough. Having solid and understandable descriptions of 'who the characters are' and 'what the world is like' get a great deal of attention in roleplaying games, and ways of making those things central to play.   There are rewards and methods for keeping everyone interested and engaged in the game at hand that some games use. But if you've read up to this point, you already understand how the basics work.

What's In A Game?

A roleplaying game is made up of people using a host of different rules – some of which are rules of etiquette, some of which are tools at the table, and others which only exist in the imaginations of those present. Here's the stuff that's in a roleplaying game:

Basic Practices: *Who Says What*: The pages you're reading right now describe basic practices – back & forth description, setting and skipping scenes, division between Guide and player authority, in-character dialogue, and movement in and out of rules.

A Fictional Setting: *Where You Are*: Before players can have fictional characters, those people need somewhere to exist. This could be just about anything; "a spooky manor in modern times" is a setting; so is "the 'verse of the Firefly TV show" or "the ancient Assyrian empire".

A Premise For Action: *What You Do*: Before creating characters, it's also good to have a basic premise for action. This can be fairly constrained, such as having the characters as elite military officers in a special squad that will receive missions to carry out – or it can be almost entirely open, such as saying "You're all down-and-dirty in Wharf Town, you could all use some coin. The rest is up to you". A published game might or might not include a premise.

A Situation: *What's Going On*: If the premise is "you'll be sent out on missions", then a situation is a mission. If the premise is being cash-hungry in Wharf town, the situation starts with "ways to get money", but might extend into getting entangled in all kinds of town affairs, making that whole mess the situation. Where the premise points the characters at the setting material, that's where situation goes. In general, building situations is the province of the Guide.

A Rules Engine: *Rolling Dice*: Methods used to resolve "I shoot! Do I hit? What next?" are the parts of the game most commonly called rules. Often, these are arranged in a systematic way, with numbers, dice, and on, creating an engine, the *game* part of a roleplaying game. "Light" versions of games are often nothing *but* engine.

Characters: *Who You Are*: The point of all this is to provide a space, motives, and support for people pretending to be characters – the roleplaying part of a roleplaying game. Characters will have traits and ratings that describe them in the rules, will be built in light of the setting, situation, and premise, and brought to life by playing them.

The Game Session

At least two people are required to play a tabletop roleplaying game - one to take on the job of being the Guide, and the others as players. The Guide should have access to their rules engine at all times, and be pretty familiar with it. Most often, a prospective Guide decides to "run a game", sorts out a setting, premise, and the bare bones of a situation, and then invites potential players to take part. Players will need enough familiarity with the rules engine to build characters, but that can happen at a session or beforehand, whichever works best.

Setting Up: *Place And Props***:** A group will need somewhere to play that is free of interruptions. They'll need all the various props that their game engine uses, which usually means having pencils, paper (or character record sheets), and dice of the sort their engine uses. This might also include poker chips, cards, maps, tokens, or other devices for managing the game elements that the engine provides.

First Session: *Group Check-Up:* The opening of a first session will often involve a quick run-down on the engine and setting being used, and the parts of it that the Guide will be paying special attention to. If a session is being used to introduce the players to the rules engine, setting, and so on, this might be a whole lot more extensive; doing a run-through of the engine and building characters can take up a whole session just by itself, depending on the setting and engine.

First Session: *Creating Characters:* Each player will need a character. Sometimes, this is done before the group sits down for play, and the Guide will simply do a quick check that everyone has their character stuff ready. Other times, the group will want to toss around ideas as a group, looking to build characters that mesh and aren't likely to upstage each other too much. Once characters are complete, the Guide may need to adapt their situation so that their material fits.

Actual Play: Once the Guide has their material ready to go, the players have characters, and everyone has their various dice and other bits set up, the group can start playing, with the Guide setting up the starting circumstances of each character. Play lasts until the group needs a break or is done playing for the night (you can come back to it later), or the current situation is resolved, in the opinion of the group. At first, play will usually pause to reference the rules and get familiar with how things work fairly regularly, but as the group gets more comfortable with the rules, such delays will occur less and less often – it takes time to settle into a groove, and that's okay.

Starting Circumstances

One of the tropes of tabletop roleplaying games is "So, you all meet in a bar" - but the most important part of that phrase is actually "So, *you all meet*". It's possible for the Guide to run scenes for each character individually – and sometimes it's a very good thing to do that! But a game where the characters don't meet up and work together is a game where players are sitting around the table as audience a great deal of the time, and most players are mainly at the game to *play*, not to watch.

Some engines, and some premises, will link up all the characters right from the beginning. Others don't do that, and the Guide will instead engineer the situation so that they get thrown together. Players are generally expected to try and 'go along with this', even if it's a little bit clumsy, and Guides are expected to try and avoid having it be too clumsy.

Sometimes, the starting circumstances are best thrown out there as an active scene – if the Guide starts in with "So, you're all travelling on the Vantia Highway, going north, when the goblin army comes into sight on it's way south.", the characters don't have to know each other to fall in together; there's plenty of reason to just get rolling.

The Flow Of Play

Most of a roleplaying game is played out just by talking, but there are a couple of different *ways of talking* and of between action that might take some getting used to.

Descriptive Action: This is the basic way of playing. The Guide will set a scene, the players will describe what their characters are doing. The Guide will state how this affects the scene, telling them what happens next, and back and forth it goes. If the Guide described some ruins, a player might say "I explore the ruins, looking for anything interesting". The Guide might check with the other players to see what they're doing at the same time, and then jump to the first interesting thing in the search, or the first thing that interrupts it. So, the Guide is adding new details to the setting all the time. Here, players are in charge of, and concentrate on, their characters; the Guide manages everything else.

In-Character Speech: Sessions will include portions where players take on their characters, speaking as if they were those characters. These may be lengthy discussions, or quick exchanges of a few words. Moving to this kind of play is easy; if your character, Arathmus the dragon, does some scouting and discovers that the dragon hunters are, on close examination, something else entirely, you might suddenly state "Why do you little ones intrude on my territory?" as if you *were* Arathmus. When someone begins speaking this way, it's normal to go with it, speaking in response. This can end just as easily, returning to descriptive action. Smooth changeovers to and from in-character speech, without division, are standard. While acting, everyone is in charge of the same thing - the character they play.

Rules-Bound Action: In the middle of descriptive action, a player might describe their character doing something, and the Guide might respond with "Give me a roll for that", or some other reference to "Let's use the engine to resolve this". This can be an rapid jump out of and back into descriptive action; you roll a die, state if it's higher or lower than some number, and jump back. Or it can be very extensive; "You enter the Temple of Night. Let's lay out the map." might be a call to move the action into rules terms, where movement, fights, and many other features are handled by the engine, and descriptive action and in-character speech are things you do as asides while engaging the rules, rather than the reverse. Different engines have different degrees of rules-bound action available; some assume that groups want to avoid extended engagement, others assume that it's desirable.

Scene To Scene

A scene is a chunk of time in which the overall location, characters, and action remain generally the same. When any of those things changes in a "jump", that's a new scene - though transitions in the midst of the action, such as an argument turning into a fight, or a few bit part characters entering or leaving, don't make for a new scene.

Setting The Scene: The Guide sets a scene by describing it and how the characters enter it. This description will start with a basic sketch - the characters are in deep in the catacombs of a cathedral, soaring over an island chain by night, whatever the case is. It will move on to the most overall sensory impression; by describing the stench of the catacombs, the darkness of the night. A few more details of setting, describing the street below or the tables and crowds around them, finish that sketch. After making that sketch, the Guide will almost always go on to add an active element - something that is happening that is there for the characters to interact with, whether that's someone to talk with, enemies to fight, or whatever the case may be.

What To Set: Not all scenes deserve attention. Characters sleep. They eat. They move about the setting. Sometimes, there will be fascinating stuff to deal with here. But most of the time, nobody at the table will care how the characters slept, or the details of how much they ate, or other such trivia. Most of this will just be glossed over with "You sleep. You wake. The next day…", or something equally quick. Equally important to the skill of setting a scene well is the skill of knowing when to set a scene at all. A good scene always includes at least one of the following, and often has the potential for more:
♦ An obstacle - from a fight to a calm bargaining situation.
♦ A significant choice to be made about what to do next.
♦ Something important to the situation the characters would know.
♦ A chance for the characters to acquire something that they might want, or get closer to achieving a goal.

Scene Changes: While the Guide describes the changeovers from scene to scene, players will often make it clear through action what the next scene should be - "We go talk to the ancient one he told us about". Players will also occasionally 'cue' scenes with action; if the Guide is describing the transition with a few details, and a player declares that they want to do something about one of those details, that's a player initiating a scene, and may very well mean it's time for the Guide to set it up. Both of these are not only normal, but should be expected.

Being The Guide

The Guide has more of a *variety* of stuff to do for a game than players do. In general, this shouldn't be a chore - and if it becomes one, seriously consider "farming out" some of the tasks to players that enjoy them. Here are some things a Guide does and coordinates:

Create Situations: The Guide manages and details the world. Creating and showing off an interesting world, at least in the places and situations relevant to the characters, is often aided by solid preparation. This includes assigning and managing traits and numbers for the obstacles that the characters will encounter.

Introduce & Describe Scenes: When the characters go somewhere new, the Guide describes that location and the characters in it. As characters interact with scenes, the Guide usually invents and describes the results (though getting the engine to do some of the work here is expected).

Play Guide Character: When players take on character roles and speak as their characters, the Guide speaks as others. It's possible to "hand off" additional roles to players whose characters aren't on the scene; some players enjoy this challenge, while others don't.

Help Players With Rules: During character creation and play, the Guide is often the person that knows the rules best. As such, Guides often act as teachers and reminders in play as the group's understanding of how to play a game solidifies.

Manage Spotlight & Pace: The attention of the Guide focuses the attention of the group. When scenes drag, it's often the Guide that moves the group along. When one character isn't getting enough spotlight time, it's often the Guide that provides things to change the focus. While the whole group should always be invested in keeping the action interesting, the Guide is in the best position to manage this.

Balance The Game: Characters can often be specialized in very different activities. It's important for a Guide to attempt to provide opportunities which will make the different kinds of characters that the players choose to play equally viable. Getting a good balance is all about providing opportunities for every character to enjoy their chosen traits and specialities; as a Guide, always keep this in mind – a "balanced engine" won't correct for it if all the challenges you throw out there are oriented to one or two specialities

Preparing Situations

There are a number of ways to prepare situations. Almost all of those methods, have a few key components that need to be included:

The Chain Of Events: An situation is always rooted in events - something is happening in the world. Perhaps the group has enemies that are trying to set up a base nearby, or a patron of the group has come under attack. That's the basic action; find one that suits you, and decide on reactions from different groups you have in the setting already, until you have a chain of interesting events that is going somewhere - aim somewhere full of struggle and conflict. Decide where it will go if the characters *don't* have an effect (and make sure you're all right with that result; when the characters get involved, they might not want to stop those events).

Some Possible Objectives: No preparations you make matter unless they matter to the players and the characters. Having a Guide character offer the characters territory in order to fulfil some mission matters only if the characters want territory. With 'what the characters want' in mind, think of several different ways that they could get those things from the situation you've sketched out - either by way of their own ambitions, or in response to an outside offer. If the premise is one where the characters are normally given missions, finding character motivation is easy, but there should still be clear bits that come across as "Doing these things will change the action".

Obstacles & Antagonists: Every objective has some form of resistance to whatever it is that the characters are attempting to accomplish. These are obstacles, and might range from storms at sea, to loyal bodyguards, to cryptic puzzles. Come up with a few obstacles that stand in the way of achieving the objective, and possible locations and "set pieces" you might use to show those off. Many games will have entire sections dedicated to antagonists, enemies, and challenges that might end up between the characters and the objective.

Twists & Secrets: Most good adventures also have a twist or two. A twist is something that complicates things, or which the characters do not know going into things. If the group is assigned to take out a dictator, but that dictator knows about it and has sent out mercenaries to intercept and kill the would-be assassins, things are cooking; if one of the mercenaries is actually an old friend of one of the characters, and looking to warn them, that's better yet. Twists that spring from the place where the characters live can spur new adventures at home.

Presenting The Pieces

In play, you won't just tell the players about events and possible objectives, straight out. You'll present those by having them see things, having Guide characters come to see them - by setting and unfolding scenes. Consider each of the pieces, and a couple of ways that you might present it to the players, in advance.

Have Guide Characters Who Want Things: Information presented as statements made by other characters is more entertaining if those other characters are interesting. One big part of this is having those Guide characters want things that the player characters can help them get, or that the player characters are in the way of them getting. It's sometimes good to be a little bit mysterious about what a Guide character *really* wants, but don't overdo it; when you play a Guide character, you want to be pushing the players to do stuff, and that's easiest if that character is pushing, too, in a way the player characters can understand. Take the time to have recurring characters develop changing attitudes relating to the player characters – good and bad.

Mystery, Danger, Reward: When presenting some piece of your prepared stuff, always make sure that each piece you can is presented as containing mystery, danger, or possible rewards. Encounters, twists, even "the short history of what happened" can be cast in terms of these things, and should be. If there's treasure involved, or is likely to be in the opinion of the speaker, mention it. If something is weird and not-right, say so. If the captain of the guards is a killing machine that moves with well-oiled grace, describe that.

Keep Scene Descriptions Simple: A description of a scene that takes more than two or three sentences is probably longer than is helpful. Noting that the characters are hidden in the trees behind some undergrowth, looking at an encampment of loud, shouting human beings that have long spears, traps and strange cages is plenty to set a stage. It's good to hit a couple sensory impressions in a description, and use active words - the dragons are looking, the humans are shouting. But trying to make every scene a tactical or sensory extravaganza is just a way of making your players eyes glaze over.

Keep The Structure Loose: There's a temptation to structure the objective, obstacles, opportunities, and twists rigidly, creating a complete "plot" for the adventure. Avoid this! It's almost always more fun to go with the players, work the pieces in on the fly, make up additions as needed and discard bits that get 'skipped'.

Keeping The Piece

As play begins and progresses, there will be moments where it will be useful to get things moving more quickly, or slow things down a bit...

Don't Stop Engaging: Many Guides present a few 'adventure hooks' to the players, and when just one of those gains their interest, stop attempting to grab the players and move on to the rest of the material. This isn't a bad thing, but there's no reason not to engage the players more, give them more ways to approach a situation, and present them with more conflicting opportunities. You don't want players to be asking "What do we do now?" with a feeling of having nothing on the agenda; you want them asking that question because there's *so much*.

The Next Thing Happens: If things are going slowly, don't shy away from having events in the world carry on entirely without the characters. And never be shy about presenting obstacles - if there are enemies about, don't wait for the characters to go looking for them; have them see someone not far back on their trail, or just throw them straight into a fight. When all else fails, push ahead.

Something Unravels: If the characters are working on some plan that has several distinct stages, even if they are very simple stages, have things they've already completed fall apart once in a while. Their captives might escape. Their entrance to a fortress (and intended escape route) can be loudly discovered. And so on. This isn't something to overdo, but it's good to toss in here and there.

Breaks & Retrenching: Sometimes it's important to slow things down a bit, and give the characters time to discuss, plan, interact, and hit a few of their quieter bits. Or it's time to change the spotlight to a different kind of action. In such cases, you can have the opposition or the targets of the action change what they're doing. They might retreat, or drag out the objective the characters seek and threaten it in an attempt to force talks. They might just hide, or call in help.

The Showdown: Closing off an situation is most satisfying when there's something big involved - a climactic event. Try not to plan these as "stage pieces" in advance; if you do, you've decided how things end, and you're making the choices of the players meaningless. Improvise these; reveal your twists or remaining obstacles, in one big scene where the characters at least have the *opportunity* to close things out. Players will sometimes set these up for you; when they do, go with it - with a few unexpected turns, if needed.

Advice For Everyone

1. Come For A Good Time: If your primary goal at the table is something other than having an experience you enjoy, and that others can enjoy with you, you should be doing something else. Generally speaking, that means having fun. Sometimes it might be more specific - crafting a satisfying story together, or having the experience of seeing things from the perspective of your character, either in addition to or instead of classically fun stuff. But if what you want when you sit down at the table on any given night isn't enjoyable to you, or does not allow enjoyment for others, do not sit down at that table. Not gaming is better than bad gaming.

2. This Is Your Space, These Are Real People: Accept and understand that the players around you are real people that are also here to have fun. Nobody comes to the table to watch one player discuss their personal character's stuff with the Guide when it could wait, or to watch two players crack inside jokes at each other and exclude everyone else. Nobody comes to the table to be treated to the personal aroma of another player, or to closely observe their food being chewed. Nobody hosts a game hoping for a marathon cleanup session at the end. Nobody comes to the table to be the ego-boosting kick-toy of anyone else. Never, ever, forget that you are playing the game with real people.

3. Accept Responsibility: Taking the same point as #2, and bringing it into the game - what you do at the gaming table is your responsibility, and you should accept this. What others do is their responsibility, and they should accept that, too. This absolutely includes what you decide that your character does. This absolutely includes the actions of the Guide as world. If playing your character as written could very well interfere with the fun of others, you need to decide where to go with that – it's your call, though; excuses are lame. If you ruin the game by playing your character or the world 'correctly', then you still ruined the game.

4. Give Feedback: Anything from telling the Guide "I had a good game tonight" to "here's ten specific moments of play I really liked, and ten moments I really didn't", can help. For the Guide, telling the players what they loved about their play, and what they found dull, works the same way. The Guide can't read the minds of the players here (or anywhere else), and the players don't know what's going on internally for the Guide either. Unless they tell each other. This doesn't need to be formal – in fact, it seems that it often works best if it isn't. But the clearer it is, the better; and it's often good to get a quick idea of this stuff before you start.

5. Share Creativity: No one person at the table has full control over what happens in the game. If someone does, you get some really boring times. At the very least, a player generally controls most of one character in the game. There are an infinite number of little variants on how the Guide and the players share control over who gets to put stuff in, and things work best once the group hits a level of input from each person at the table that they're comfortable with. Find that level. If you're looking for ways to muck about with that level of input, there are quite a few ways to do that.

6. Seek Consensus: The people at your table have, if your game is actually running at all, a consensus. The ideas in their heads of what the game is and does match up well enough to produce good play. Sometimes a group will hit on little moments when their ideas just don't match up, and they'll need to talk about what this specific thing looks like in their heads and agree on one way to go about it. Once in a while, one of the people at the table will want to bring something in that they aren't sure will match up with what the others have in their heads, and it's a good idea for them to mention that before they do.

7. Negotiate Honestly: When problems come up in your group, the first step is to make sure that everyone at the table is onboard with at least the basic ideas of the first five things here – they don't have to be "skilled" at these things; being onboard is plenty. If they aren't, I don't really have any good advice for you – for myself, I likely wouldn't play with them for much longer. If they are, and you still have a problem, then it's time to sort that out. It's usually a very bad idea to try and solve out-of-character problems with in-game events. That's dishonest, and doesn't generally work. Also, using the rules to 'punish' your players or 'get back' at your Guide? Same thing.

8. Consider Your Options: When someone makes an attempt to alter 'your part' of the fiction - the world if you're the Guide, your character if you're a player, you have choices. You can simply agree, or disagree; you can put it to the mechanics, you can modify what they've stated and give it back to them. Limiting your options in this case is silly; most advice to limit these options in a 'positive' way comes from a desire to keep the energy of the game high, or allow for trust between players above and beyond the basic average; those are good goals, but instead of using limits on yourself and others to achieve them, simply remember that your decisions will affect those things as well as the specific matter at hand.

9. Watch The Spotlight: At any given instant of play, someone has the spotlight. This doesn't just mean 'one person is talking'. It means that if there are a whole string of scenes, one person is usually "centre stage"; the scene revolves around their stuff, whether that's world stuff or character issues or whatever. If that person isn't you, then you're a supporting character in that scene; try to play good support, whether that means keeping quiet, offering support or advice, playing up the effects the setting has on your character a bit, whatever. If that person is you, then fill that scene; it's there for you to step into. If nobody is sure who should have the spotlight, then act as support for each other, until the focus hits. But watch that spotlight, too. If you're getting more than a fair share, work to make more scenes about other characters. If you're getting less than your share, then when a scene doesn't really have a focus, step up and take it. Sometimes the players will think that different people are getting too much, or not enough spotlight time – talk about it; most of the time, whoever's being a hog or hiding away just needs to know about it.

10. Play The Game At The Game: This is a close partner to sharing creativity. Sometimes, you'll have an idea about the game before you sit down at the table, about something you'd like to see happen there, or even a whole string of them. That's good stuff. But when those ideas start to look like a storyline, you need to be careful with it. A storyline is great raw material, but don't get too attached; if you stuck on it, you'll find yourself pushing to make it happen, and ignoring or working against all the other good ideas and creative input at your table. Don't play the game before it starts – play the game when you're at the game.

11. Show Your Stuff As You Go: Almost everybody wants to feel like the fictional world, and the characters in it, are real to them enough to imagine. This is achieved by describing things, but nobody wants a drawn-out description, or huge whopping chunks of detail. If someone rattles off ten facts a scene or a character, only a few will be noted. The key is to describe as you go. If a player wants us to know that her character Jill is a graceful woman, she shouldn't simply tell the group that at creation; her character should 'glide' and 'move nimbly' in play – her description at creation need only be a single, vivid image, that she can build on by describing not only what the character does, but how. This works for the GM, too; when the characters walk into a abandoned study, it can simply be old, dusty, smelling of books; as the characters interact with it, the thick books, the puffs of dust as things are moved, come out. Good descriptions start small, and grow over time.

12. Learn To Speak The Same Language: This is an ongoing effort that every group needs to make together. Every single person thinks that different phrases and wordings imply slightly different things, and this is one of the biggest things that can knock down even an honest attempt at talking to other people. Your group, to communicate both well and quickly, will sometimes need to hash out things related to this; accept that it's going to happen and try not to get too serious about a problem until you're sure this isn't it.

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Building Your Game

1. Know The Fundamentals: *Fundamentals Of Tabletop Roleplaying* is a basic run-down on what tabletop gaming involves, and how to go about it.

2. Get The Engine: The *Ouroboros Engine* is a general-use system for fantasy gaming, with **just** enough density for both tactics and flexible stakes, but is otherwise light.

3. Choose Your Setting: Three distinct settings are planned for the *Ouroboros Engine*, each of which does something a little different:
♦ Tenocha: The Old Empire
♦ Hoard: The Reach
♦ Awen: The World Begins With You.

4. Build Situation: Six methods for building situations for play are available; these can be used for any system, but the settings above directly link to them:
♦ Broken Places
♦ Predator Souls
♦ Nine Rooms
♦ Transgression
♦ Long Knives
♦ The Quest