

Odyssey

The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management



By Phil Vecchione & Walt Ciechanowski • Foreword By Kenneth Hite

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In memory of Lynn Willis

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to all the players in all the campaigns I have managed over the years.

With special thanks to the original Amber group, the Eagle Eye cell, the Heist crew, and the Heroes of Elhal. You are the great ones. – Phil Vecchione

To my beloved Zoeanna, whose odyssey is only just beginning. – Walt Ciechanowski

Contents

Introduction	4
How to Use this Book	7
On Campaigns	10
1: About Campaigns.....	11
2: Management.....	18
Starting a Campaign	28
3: Starting Campaigns.....	29
4: Campaign Concept.....	36
5: Campaign Framework.....	45
6: Campaign Creation.....	62
7: First Session.....	73
Managing a Campaign	81
8: Campaign Management.....	82
9: Story Management.....	91
10: Player Character Management.....	110
11: People Management.....	125
12: Risk Management.....	143
13: Change Management.....	152
Ending a Campaign	162
14: When It's Time to End Your Campaign.....	163
15: Killing a Campaign.....	169
16: Suspending a Campaign.....	177
17: The Managed Ending.....	186
Conclusion	193
About the Artwork	195
Index	197
Contributor Bios	204

Phil's Introduction

I don't run campaigns. I manage them.

I use to think that I ran campaigns. If you asked me what I was running, I would say something like, "I am currently running a *Corporation* campaign." What I have come to learn is that you don't *run* your campaign, you *manage* your campaign.

What you run are *sessions* of your campaign. When you're running a session, you're at the table with your players and together you tell a story, with each of you contributing parts of that story. As the game master (GM) you're representing the setting, the story, and all the non-player characters (NPCs). The players, acting through their characters (player characters, or PCs), interact with and guide the direction of the story.

Managing a campaign, though, is done away from the table. "Managing your campaign" is the collection of activities and efforts that you, as the GM, work on to advance the campaign and to keep it viable. It is as much about creating things such as plot lines and NPCs as it is about reacting to changes and new elements that are introduced with every session you run—changes like rising and falling player interest, the growth of the characters, and the effects of the passage of time in your game world.

The goal of managing your campaign is the production of good gaming sessions. What you run during your sessions is a product of the management you have done away from the table, in between sessions. Sessions are where the GM interacts with the players and where drama is created, where good battles evil (or evil battles good), where heroes and villains are made, and where characters die. It is during sessions where changes occur as the players react to, and drive, events in the game and the unfolding story.

In the aftermath of a session there are all manner of loose ends that need to be managed: unresolved plot threads, escaped villains, NPC reactions to what happened during the session, etc. All of these are seeds to be gathered and carried into future sessions. Thus, *running* and *managing* are locked in a continuous cycle, one feeding the other and in turn being fed by it.

*We manage in order to have something to run, and
we run in order to have something to manage.*

I'm a project manager by profession, and I spend a great deal of time working with teams and managing projects. It turns out there are a tremendous number of similarities between a project team and a gaming group.

What I want to do in this book is take the techniques that I've learned for managing teams and apply them to the gaming group. There's nothing magical about what I've learned—everything I've learned is a skill that can be taught, learned, and improved. It's my hope that these skills and techniques will help you and your players create stronger and more enjoyable campaigns.

Phil Vecchione • Buffalo, NY • February 2013

Walt's Introduction

I'd like to introduce myself by stating that I'm not Phil.

Phil is a highly organized and dedicated GM who carefully plans out his games and keeps a tight rein on managing them. He's even written an excellent book about session preparation, *Never Unprepared*.

If I'd written that book, it would've been called *Barely Prepared – Maybe*.

I've never been the type of GM that spends a lot of time preparing for my sessions. I rely heavily on improvisation and my players' interest in the campaign to keep my sessions moving. For me, a page or two of notes is enough; I improvise the rest as necessary.

When Phil first proposed this project I was tempted to pass; compared to Phil I'm a slacker. As I thought about it, however, I realized that there are a lot of GMs like me who enjoy running campaigns but don't do heavy preparation. After all, regardless of whether you wing it or prep extensively, you still encounter the same challenges when managing a campaign. GMs who wing it simply have to think more on their feet, and even prep-heavy GMs know that no prep survives the gaming table unscathed.

For me, roleplaying is a journey, an odyssey, shared amongst friends around a gaming table. GMing should be a labor of love, not a chore, and a well-managed campaign eases that burden. It is my hope that, regardless of your GMing style, you find this book helpful when managing your own odysseys, from beginning to end.

Walt Ciechanowski • Springfield, PA • March 2013

How to Use this Book

ODYSSEY: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Campaign Management is about managing your campaigns. It's about what you, the GM, do away from the gaming table that keeps your campaign going, helps it grow and mature, and makes it fun. The list of potential activities involved in managing a campaign is long, but we've grouped like activities and divided this book into three parts:

- **Starting Your Campaign**—A lot of the success of a campaign comes from setting it up correctly. This part of the book is dedicated to talking about what goes into setting up a campaign, and getting everyone on board and excited about playing.
- **Managing Your Campaign**—Once a campaign begins, it's all about managing the story and/or world, characters, and players as well as anticipating problems and dealing with things that arise during play—all the while keeping the campaign entertaining and healthy.
- **Ending Your Campaign**—Every campaign ends. Some end with glorious conclusions, some are shelved with hopes of returning another day, and some die suddenly. We'll close the book by showing you how to end your campaigns well.

Every campaign in every game system starts, requires management, and ends at some point. Campaigns are one of the cornerstones of tabletop roleplaying, and for good reason: There's something special about the campaign structure, a unique blend of elements that combine to make a compelling experience. That's what *Odyssey* is about: what makes campaigns tick, and how to make your campaigns awesome.

Whether you've been GMing for a week, a year, a decade, or since the dawn of the hobby, you'll find something—hopefully many things—in *Odyssey* for you.

What this Book Isn't

Odyssey isn't a guide to running individual sessions within your campaign, though that topic will be discussed when it relates to campaign management. That isn't to say that improving your ability to run a session isn't important—it is. Running gaming sessions is a topic that gets a lot of attention in books, on blogs, and on podcasts, as it well should. Engine Publishing also publishes a book on session prep, *NEVER UNPREPARED: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep*, by Phil Vecchione, if you'd like to explore the topic in more detail.

Why a Book about Campaign Management?



We wrote *Odyssey* because campaigns are a unique and central aspect of the roleplaying hobby, with their own lifecycle and challenges, which have never been addressed comprehensively before.

Campaigns are like snowflakes: unique and fragile. Campaigns are unique in that the coming together of you and your players—and the story that you all create—will be unlike any other group's campaign, even if you're exclusively using published material. It's lightning in a bottle, and this is one of the main reasons that many gamers are drawn to this hobby.

A campaign is fragile in that it doesn't take much for it to end prematurely. Campaigns need to be encouraged to grow as much as they need protection from things that can harm them. You culture ideas and stories within a campaign to develop new material for your sessions, but at the same time you also need to protect your campaign from the risks that surround it. When you can't protect it from those risks, you have to shepherd the campaign through whatever changes are necessary for it to remain viable.

Why Campaigns Die

I've been GMing for over 30 years. In that time I have had a handful of truly great and memorable campaigns—the kind that you never forget. I've had numerous enjoyable campaigns that never quite reached greatness, and I've had hundreds of failures. I've seen campaigns die because of the GM's actions and inactions, and I've seen them killed by players' actions and inactions. I once started and killed a campaign before we'd even made it to the first session.

What has been constant in all my campaigns is that I've learned something from them—what worked that I should do again, and what didn't work and should be avoided. I have tried to carry these ideas forward bringing the best ones to future campaigns.

When I started considering the reasons why campaigns have failed, I saw patterns. Although each reason may manifest itself differently (each campaign being unique), when you look at them closely there are only a few reasons why campaigns fail:

- **Lack of consensus**—Not everyone in the game is on the same page within the campaign, leading to disharmony.
- **Failure to manage expectations**—This can occur at a group or individual level, when one or more people have one idea about what should happen and others have a different idea. (This ties into the first reason, lack of consensus.)

- **Inability to deal with change**—Something happens in the game, either suddenly or gradually, and the GM isn't able to manage that change, causing the campaign to fail.
- **Loss of energy**—The players, the GM, or both lose their passion for the game.

All of these problems can be managed, and when they are actively managed a campaign can remain healthy and continue for a long time. It is when we take our eye off the ball, when we get distracted or complacent, that our campaigns can be injured or even killed.

Managing a Campaign is Work

It's no secret that campaigns are work. Managing a campaign isn't difficult when you have ample free time to dedicate to it, but it becomes much more challenging to accomplish as you get older and more of your time is dedicated to work and family. The techniques that we share in *Odyssey* are designed to help you manage your campaign more easily—to get better results while expending less time and energy.

Why Two Authors?

Each of *Odyssey's* authors brings their own perspective and expertise to the table. Given the material, one author seemed like too few and three-plus seemed like too many; either way you would lose something. Campaign management is a big topic, and two authors felt like the sweet spot for tackling this subject in a clear, concise way that would be useful to as many GMs as possible.

As you read *Odyssey* you'll notice little icons that show up at the beginning of each chapter or section. These icons tell you who wrote that section, Walt or Phil. In case you don't care who wrote which bits ("I'm just here for the advice, man!"), we made them fairly unobtrusive:



Walt Ciechanowski



Phil Vecchione

Show and Tell

Throughout this book we'll use a fictional gaming group to provide examples of *Odyssey's* techniques in action. This group—Gemma (the GM), Renaldo, Patti, and Adam—will embark on two campaigns, one fantasy and one science fiction, throughout *Odyssey*. The members of this group and their characters in both campaigns are illustrated on the cover and in the interior artwork, and their stories are summarized in the About the Artwork section.