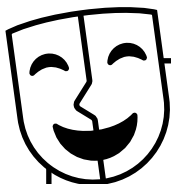


KAREN TWELVES

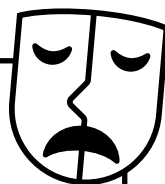


IMPROV FOR GAMERS

SECOND EDITION



IMPROV FOR GAMERS



An Evil Hat Productions Publication
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IMPROV FOR GAMERS

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A lot of work from a lot of talented people went into making *Improv for Gamers*.

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Huge thanks to Jason Morningstar for patiently listening to a stranger's lengthy pitch in a noisy bar and responding with nothing but enthusiastic support. Thank you also to Steve Segedy for joining in to make our very first workshop a roaring success.

Thank you EndGame, Oakland's friendly local gaming store, for putting up with all our noise during your weekend CCG tournaments. We'll miss you! And thank you, Big Bad Con and Go Play Northwest, for always finding space for us, even if it was on a balcony.

Thanks to everyone at Evil Hat for the opportunity to turn a complicated collection of lesson plans into something anyone can pick up and play.

And thank you, Sean Nittner, for everything, but most of all for responding to my idea of "I should design an improv workshop for gamers" with "Yes!"

FORWARD

This book falls right in the center of many overlapping aspects of my life: gaming, improv, and teaching. I don't think it would have happened without experience in all three.

I loved roleplaying from my first roll of the dice in an AD&D game in high school. I could create whole worlds and play out situations I could never experience in real life. It's also through gaming that I've made so many amazing friends.

Improv has helped me with my confidence, my problem-solving, and how I approach day-to-day life in general. Improv introduced me to some of my very best friends. From my first improv class, I realized how much improv could improve my roleplaying skills. I could create more vibrant characters, take more narrative risks, and encourage more collaboration at the table.

As an ESL teacher, I was largely responsible for creating my own lesson plans and heavily supplementing the course curriculum. Having been disappointed by one too many substitute teachers who went off-book (who spends 4 hours debating public vs. private healthcare with intermediate-level ESL students??), I kept meticulous notes and detailed instructions for each and every lesson.

When I first started teaching Improv for Gamers as a workshop, I approached it the same way—extremely detailed notes, scripted introductions for each exercise, and lots and lots of marginalia about how long everything should take. I did the same for the improv classes I taught, either extensively reviewing the existing curriculum or making my own.

Sometimes, after an Improv for Gamers workshop, people would ask if they could get a copy of my notes, so they could pass these exercises on to their friends.

I was reluctant to share it at first—not because the content was proprietary, but because these notes were written for me and my co-facilitators in the context of teaching a full workshop. I wasn't sure how well others could parse it all.

But eventually, I made a shareable digital copy for people who asked. I don't know if anyone ever tried to use it.

After teaching the workshop for a few years and being asked more and more for a copy of the exercises, I finally decided to pitch it as a book.

A fourth area of experience that has greatly influenced this journey is my career as a technical editor and a games editor. In both roles, I help authors make their instructions make sense, and especially for gaming, also be fun to read. But I'd never been on the other side of the writer-editor relationship before, so even though I was confident that my draft would have very few typos, I wasn't sure how I'd fare as a writer.

I revised a few things here and there and handed the first draft over to my editor Josh Yearsley, who came back and wisely said, "This is written for an improv instructor. Who is your actual audience?"

I mean, it's right in the title. It's for gamers. I should have known that.

So I wrote the whole thing over again from the perspective of teaching gamers who are likely new to improv how to learn improv and also how to teach improv to other gamers who are likely new to improv.

And that worked a lot better.

I kept teaching the workshops, and teaching other improv classes, and taking classes myself, in order to keep practicing and learning. I knew that even though eventually I would have to call the book "done," the workshops would keep evolving.

As I was promoting it, I already saw the book's flaws. I had written it for gamers but always imagined it in a workshop environment: in person and lasting at least an hour or two. I hadn't considered that a GM might want to run through an exercise at the top of a session that would tie into their game. I hadn't assessed how the exercises would work for online play. And although I had adapted exercises on the fly for various accessibility needs, I hadn't addressed that at all in the book.

And I knew that the book would be stronger if it showcased other dual-class improv-gamers (there's a lot of us out there!) to add other perspectives and experiences than just my own.

So I already wanted to make a second edition as soon as the first one was sent to print.

My goal is that this edition doesn't just offer more exercises, but more of everything. More ideas, more tips, and even more encouragement to make the exercises within work for you in whatever way it needs to.

I'm very grateful that *Improv for Gamers* has had the opportunity to grow and evolve as much as the worlds of improv and gaming have.

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WHAT THIS BOOK IS

Improv for Gamers started out as a one-day improv workshop at EndGame, a hobby store in Oakland, California. The goal was to share improv with our local gaming community to show how many of the skills used by improvisers are directly transferable to tabletop gaming.

We selected exercises specifically for gamers to practice how to encourage creativity in their gaming groups, create dynamic characters, and collaborate effectively and enthusiastically—practical applications of improv’s “Yes, and” tenet to our favorite hobby. Many of these exercises originated from great improvisers such as Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, or were picked up from colleagues and coaches over the years. In many cases, we adapted them to better suit the purposes of the workshop.

Propelled by the success of this initial workshop, we started running it at local gaming conventions. Soon after, we added *Improv for GMs* (game masters), highlighting how to direct scenes, share the spotlight, and balance setting versus narrative.

It wasn’t long until we developed *Improv for Larpers* (live-action roleplayers), which explored shifting between high and low status, developing relationships, and acting without physical props.

But these workshops don’t just apply to story games and larps. They’ll give you the tools for solid teamwork necessary to develop any engaging and effective story, be it about the complicated lives of teenage monsters or a lucrative dungeon crawl.

We’ve had a blast running these workshops at conventions and friendly local game stores, and now we get to share some of our favorite exercises with you! We hope you will try out some of them with your friends. Viola Spolin said, “We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything.” We hope that with this book, you can put theory into practice. And as Patricia Ryan Madson put it, “An excellent manual on swimming is useless until you jump into the pool.”

So jump in, and enjoy!



WHAT THIS BOOK IS

1

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We've picked our favorite exercises from our workshops and grouped them into categories of general skills. Each chapter starts with low-pressure games and progresses into exercises that may be more challenging. If you'd like to lead your group through a few exercises (or even run your own workshop!), here are some suggestions for how to put it all together.

Select a few exercises that interest you. Depending on your focus—whether it's general roleplaying or something more specific to GM or larping skills—you may find some sections more relevant to your interests. Here's what you can find in each chapter:



WARMERS has some quick and easy exercises that involve silly sounds, big physical movements, word association, and other fun stuff to activate your creativity.



YES, AND explores the number-one rule of improv—listen to your partner, and add your ideas to theirs—as practiced through collective storytelling.



CHARACTERS is all about using one small starting point to build a multifaceted character. You'll play around with different mannerisms, ways of speaking, facial expressions, and emotions to make the basic archetypes your own.



RELATIONSHIPS connects all those interesting characters together—who are you to each other, and how does that influence your actions?



STATUS explores the ebb and flow of power, within one character or among many. Have some fun revealing secrets and playing to lose!



SPACE OBJECTS looks at the invisible objects that you might pretend to interact with in a scene. You'll practice creating imaginary objects that have believable weight, dimensions, and details.



TIMING focuses on knowing when and how to end a scene. There are exercises for directing scenes by consensus or individually, and for rapidly shifting the spotlight between protagonists.



SCENEWORX has a variety of exercises to put everything you've learned into practice, in scenes that range from three lines to a few minutes.

To get started, try one from **Warmers**. These will get you and your group energized and more comfortable with each other. Grab an exercise or two from **Yes, And** to get into a collaborative mindset. From there, you can go to whichever skill you'd like to learn more about and try out as many that sound fun to you. Each section starts with exercises that can work as warmers themselves for that specific topic, so you can start small and challenge yourself more as you go. There's no set order for these exercises, though we do recommend saving the more performance-focused exercises—mostly found in **Timing** and **Scenework**—until the end, as a way to bring together everything you've worked on. Many exercises also have suggested expansions or variations if you want to dig into one aspect a bit more.

Check in with your group after each exercise. Ask them: How did it feel? What was challenging, easy, fun, scary? What was something someone else did that was really awesome? What was your favorite moment? Take a minute to share what you're thinking, and how it might relate to your own gaming experience.

Review the glossary and appendices. Starting on page 148, we give a glossary of the improv terms used throughout the book, suggestions for maintaining a safe space, and lists of locations, relationships, and character aspects to help start scenes. There's also a recommended reading list if you want to learn more about improv in gaming, on the stage, and in your daily life, plus recommended games that use many of the improv skills discussed in this book and advice for pulling improvisers into your game!

Take what works for you. There's a time slot for every type of improv—the 7:30 show can indeed be much different from the 10:30 show in both content and maturity level—as well as myriad formats to produce different types of scenes. Improv can be rapid-fire comedy, sometimes framed as a competition between two teams. But improv can also be measured and serious, with improvisers taking their time to build poignant, dramatic scenes. Similarly, there's a vast array of games with which you can tell wildly different stories. This book is not the definitive guide to either improv or gaming. We're not laying down the law for the one true way to game, but we hope that these techniques will enhance the games you like to play.

HOW TO PLAY NICE—AND WELL

Having someone in your group with a little improv experience never hurts, but if you're all new to improv, we welcome and encourage you to try out these exercises on your own. That said, you'll still want someone as a facilitator—and if you're reading this book, that's probably you!

As a facilitator, you're empowered to introduce the exercises, perhaps model an example if needed, and maybe even take some light action where appropriate to give feedback. If someone has gotten off track or misunderstood the point of an exercise, it should be easy to course-correct. As long as you're kind, clear, and quick with the correction, your fellow players will appreciate your guidance!

We put in your hands the power to walk people through these exercises and introduce a few ground rules for the group to uphold:

BE KIND. Improv can seem scary at first. Acknowledge everyone's bravery (and your own!) for trying out something new, and pay attention to how people are feeling.

BE POSITIVE. Applaud each other's choices and be mindful of giving criticism. You're not trying to train to be better actors but to discover ways to improve your gameplay—and have fun doing it.

BE AUTHENTIC. Don't worry about being clever. In fact, don't try to be funny. The laughter will come from the unexpected surprises as you explore these exercises, not from forcing jokes. Just have fun with what you're doing and be yourself. If you are playing a character in a scene, allow yourself to have genuine responses to whatever challenges your characters face; let them feel their feelings.

If this sounds a lot like advice that a GM would give to their players, it should! Roleplaying encourages the same excitement to be creative while maintaining respect and trust within the group. We want to create a safe and fun place where people can offer a lot of ideas and then work together to make those ideas even better.

MODIFYING EXERCISES

You can take what works for you (and leave the rest), but you can also *make* it work for you. In this section, we include tips for adapting exercises for accessibility, for online play, and for your specific game.

ACCESSIBLE IMPROV

By Aser and Megan Tolentino

So, you're flipping through *Improv for Gamers*, and you're thinking, "This is great, but what if this exercise doesn't work for someone in my group?" If you find an exercise potentially problematic for someone because it requires visual clues, moving around in a crowd, listening to and repeating phrases, or the like. They're unable to participate, and you've just been handed a terrific opportunity. You get to put those potentially nascent or not-so-nascent game design muscles to use.

In figuring out how to provide equal access to everyone in your group, you'll need to sit down and identify what the key activity in the exercise teaches the participants and how it does that. You can then think of other ways to accomplish the same thing. In exercises where players take turns saying something to contribute, they could write or sign it instead to include a player who is deaf or hard of hearing. Instead of using eye contact or pointing to indicate who should go next, players could identify each other by name or some distinct characteristic so that a blind player will know when it's their turn and to whom they should direct their action. Rather than moving around a space, participants can sit in a circle and describe their actions to one another to avoid mobility challenges or difficulty coping with crowds.

Most importantly, if an exercise isn't going to work with one or more members of your group, feel free to toss it. If the rest of the group wants to try, that's fine too. Just ensure that the person is given another opportunity to shine in the next activity. After all, not all exercises will resonate with everyone, and the important thing is to ensure that all participants feel safe, valued, and welcome to return on their terms.

Improv is all about collaboration, the magic of creating something together. The easier we make it to build things together, the more spectacular our creations will become.

ONLINE IMPROV

By Marcus Sams

2020 video conferencing... am I right?!?!

We've all been in that VC and received the forehead show. It's that moment when you're looking at your screen, and you see the forehead or nasal passages of the person on the other end because they really wanted to talk to your face or forgot where the camera was. Maybe we have even been that offender. No judgment, but seriously. **sudo: Stop.**

Here are some tips that will help you tele-navigate the world of the video conferencing internetz while actually connecting with the person on the other end.

Are you an actor? Have you gotten on-camera training? No? Why not? Because you're a human, just trying to human on the internet. That makes sense. Learning some on-camera techniques will help you human at a higher level. What we're talking about is connection.

As an improviser, I like to say we are in the business of letting ideas and concepts land. To do that, we have to make sure we're communicating effectively. When communicating, we generally want to look at the person we're speaking with, so it makes sense that we get so much of the forehead show. Unfortunately, until we get cameras installed into the middle of our screens, our ability to connect may feel hampered. That is until we break up communication into its individual parts.

The first thing to realize is that VCs aren't a fluid form of communication. If they were, there would be no talking over one another, and we would easily be able to sing together. Anyone who has had an online birthday party knows all too well that this is NOT the case. STOP singing.

If we break up the communication process into two parts, it's much easier to own our communication. We're either in "send" mode when speaking or "receive" mode when listening. Look just slightly above your camera to make it feel like you're speaking to the audience. For the person you're speaking with, it looks like you're actually talking to them. When you're in receive mode, simply drop your eyes to your screen to fully take in what is being said. Over time, this becomes more fluid, but like anything, it takes practice.

This simple on-camera technique elevates the video conferencing experience for all in the “room” and allows you to communicate with impact. These skills are invaluable to anyone in sales, the arts, online gaming, improv performance, and yes, even acting. No matter your profession, we are all storytellers. When the medium to communicate changes, to be effective storytellers, we must change with the medium.

CHAT CONNECTION

- ▶ Take a piece of tape, fold it about an inch in length (still leaving some of the sticky part), and stick it to the top of your camera (don't cover your camera!).
- ▶ Players work in pairs.
- ▶ Pick a topic to discuss (it needs to be a two-way conversation, not a monologue).
- ▶ While speaking, look at the tape above your camera to be in SEND mode.
- ▶ While in RECEIVE mode, drop your eyes and connect to your partner's eyes on the screen. Avoid bobbing your head up and down (unless you dig headbanging).
- ▶ Practice for 3–5 minutes. The more you practice, the better you'll get, and the more impact you'll have in future conversations.

♦ TIPS! ♦

You might be asking, “But how can I see my partner when I'm talking to them if I'm not looking at them?” Remember that you have peripheral vision! You can still drop your eyes every now and then.

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR ONLINE PLAY

- ▶ If an exercise usually passes turns in a circle, designate the order beforehand. Alternatively, when a player is finished, pass the turn to anyone else by saying that player's name first.
- ▶ Take advantage of breakout rooms so players can work in smaller groups.
- ▶ Agree on a way to indicate being "onstage" or "offstage." For example, if you're offstage, turn your camera off, or the host can highlight just the active players. Or if you're using speaker view, mute all players not in the scene.
- ▶ If you find yourself distracted by seeing yourself on the screen, turn off the option to view yourself!

PERSONALIZED IMPROV

We provide a lot of suggestions in this book to draw inspiration for characters, relationships, and locations (check out **Appendix E**, page 160). But what if you want to make the exercises relevant to your specific PCs? Here are some suggestions of how you can reskin exercises for different personalized contexts. Feel free to play around and adapt the exercises for yourself!

In the context of your setting

"Three Things," "I'm a Tree," and "Tableau" are great ways to world-build and discover more about your game's setting. What are the three values listed on the royal crest? What trios of things can you find in this cyberpunk city? What are all the various items in this apothecary shop? You can pose these questions to your group during session zero or at any point when it would be fun to add a bit more color to the scene.

Space object games like "Comparing Objects" or "Giving a Present" can also help paint the setting by visualizing items with more specificity. And "Yes, Let's!" gives you the opportunity to engage in your setting in new ways as a group.

In the context of your characters

"Hot Seat" (page 76) is already designed for you to use with specific characters. You can just as easily take other character or scenework exercises and use your own PCs. How does an exchange as short as "Been Waiting Long?" play out between two PCs with a whole campaign of history? What does your PC look like when heightened through "Golden Goose?" What types of conversations does your party have when split up in "Coffee Shop?" What happens if you do a montage with your PCs? Oh wait, that's a larp!

If you feel like your PC is stuck in a rut, try shaking things up with a status game, or use "Work/Home/Play" to explore their different relationship dynamics. Or play "Lead with Your Body" with a particular PC in mind to fully embody them.

Also, try playing an in-character round of "Animal Secrets" to explore your PC's vulnerabilities.

In the context of a new game

Use "Yes! Characters," "Classic Cast," or "You Make Me Feel" to create the PCs you'll play that session.

Play around with "Conversation Trio," "What's My Name," or "Lead with Your Body" to discover new characters and non-player characters (NPCs).

It IS the game

Take your PCs and tell a short story about them with "One Word at a Time," "String of Pearls," or "Color and Advance."

Play "Fortunately/Unfortunately" but flip a coin to find out if the next sentence will be good or bad for the character. Oh whoops, you just made a GM-less game!