

Using Description to Enhance Your Game

By Vicki Potter, Tabletop Adventures

A key factor in any role-playing game is the “willing suspension of disbelief.” This is what allows players to envision themselves as heroes doing great deeds, rather than students or business people gathered around a table with their friends. Anything that can help this “suspension of disbelief” adds to the role-playing experience.

People do many different things to try to enhance this suspension. Sometimes people may dress in a sort of costume, which can be representative (for example, a person wearing a shirt with long, loose sleeves when playing a magic-user) or more literal, such as a player wearing a long robe and carrying a thin stick to wave whenever a wand is called into play. Many groups use music as a background, to help set a mood and block out the sounds of everyday life. Dimming the lights and adding candles to a room could also suggest a medieval, fantasy, or horror feel. All of these possibilities boost the imagination through the use of the body’s senses.

Another way to go about it is to simulate the use of the senses through the imagination. By describing what is seen, smelled, heard, touched, or even tasted in a scenario, a Game Master can help move his or her players, in their minds, away from the mundane world and into some other world altogether.

Individuals usually each have one or two senses which are stronger than the others, or “dominant.” Sometimes a person’s speech patterns may give a clue to his dominant sense. For example, someone who says, “I see what you’re saying,” probably has seeing as her dominant sense. On the other hand, “I hear you” might indicate that hearing dominates. Using “That stinks!” to describe a bad situation could be the choice of a person with a dominant sense of smell.

Because people are different, it’s important for GMs to use descriptions that appeal to every sense. That would help stimulate the imaginations of all the players in a game, regardless of their dominant sense. Like the players, GMs also have a dominant sense, and it’s easy to give descriptions that include only the senses important to them. A really good description could emphasize two or more senses, but a variety is what is important.

In fantasy RPGs, the Dungeon is the classic adventure location. Many GMs really enjoy drawing up complex maps and filling the dungeon with dangerous creatures, but their imaginations falter when it comes to describing the areas where there are no encounters.

It’s hard to explain how there could be a monster living in every room. Magic might make it possible, but it threatens the suspension of disbelief. What, then, is to be said about the rooms that are empty?

Player: “Do we see anything in the room?”

GM: “No, it’s empty.”

Player: “There’s nothing in there at all?”

GM: “Well, there’s some dust on the floor.”

Player: “Dust! Are there any footprints in it?”

GM: “No! It’s just dust! What part of empty do you not understand?”

How much better instead to fill the emptiness with a little creativity!

Some descriptions could be geared to people who like to visualize the setting surrounding their characters.

“At an intersection of corridors, your flickering light reveals a charcoal mark upon the wall. It appears to have been made by either a stick plucked from a fire or from the burned out stub of a torch. The smeared mark is about five feet from the floor and forms an arrow that points back the way that you have come. There is no indication as to who could have made it.”

“You come across a backpack that appears to have been ripped open by a clawed hand and teeth. Its worthless contents have been scattered around, torn, and trampled. There are scraps of cloth, a broken flask and some straps of leather but nothing of value. There is also nothing to indicate who the former owner was nor who (or what) the vandal may have been.”

Other descriptions could set the scene with sound:

“The moss is deep, and growth covers walls and floor. Your voices all sound deadened and seem to fall lifeless and still just a few feet away from you.”

“You hear a sound like sobbing and whimpering echoing through the corridor. It is distant and the source is unclear.”

This description could suggest mystery to the person who favors the sense of smell:

“A hint of an odor teases your senses. It is a rich, slightly sweet smell, possibly incense. Just a whiff comes to you, and then the scent disappears.”

Be alert for occasions when a description could appeal to more than one sense.

“You have entered what was once a finely decorated room. A faded tapestry depicting a woodland scene is now frayed but hints at former luxury as do the desk, chair, and table. Dim light reflects off the very tarnished silver and brass fittings. A slightly sweet smell of decay permeates the room.”

“The air is damp and cool and the smell of mold torments your nostrils. The light casts deep shadows and you peer ahead into the darkness beyond. The shadows are unyielding of their secrets and as you strain to listen, all you can hear is the creak of leather and clink of mail as your comrades shift their weight. Everything else is very still.”

Opportunities for description can be found in any setting, not just fantastic dungeons. How many adventurers have wandered through a town or city and asked, “So, what do we see as we walk down the street?” This is the perfect place for a description of sensations that can engage the players’ imaginations and pull them out of their mundane existence into a world of heroism or fantasy! Just a few words can be enough to stimulate the imaginations of players and Game Masters alike.

About the author:

Vicki Potter writes and edits material for Tabletop Adventures, which publishes the “Harried Game Master” line of products. TTA is producing books with brief, colorful descriptions to assist Game Masters who, for whatever reason, find themselves short on time or creativity. The first was “Bits of Darkness: Dungeons” (quoted above), which details things to be experienced in a fantasy dungeon setting. Coming in Winter 2004 will be “Bits of Darkness: Caverns” which will describe some of the wonders and horrors of underground exploration. In 2005, “Shards of the City” will explore the fantasy urban street-scene, with sensations galore for the wandering adventurer. Visit TTA online at www.TabletopAdventures.com.

