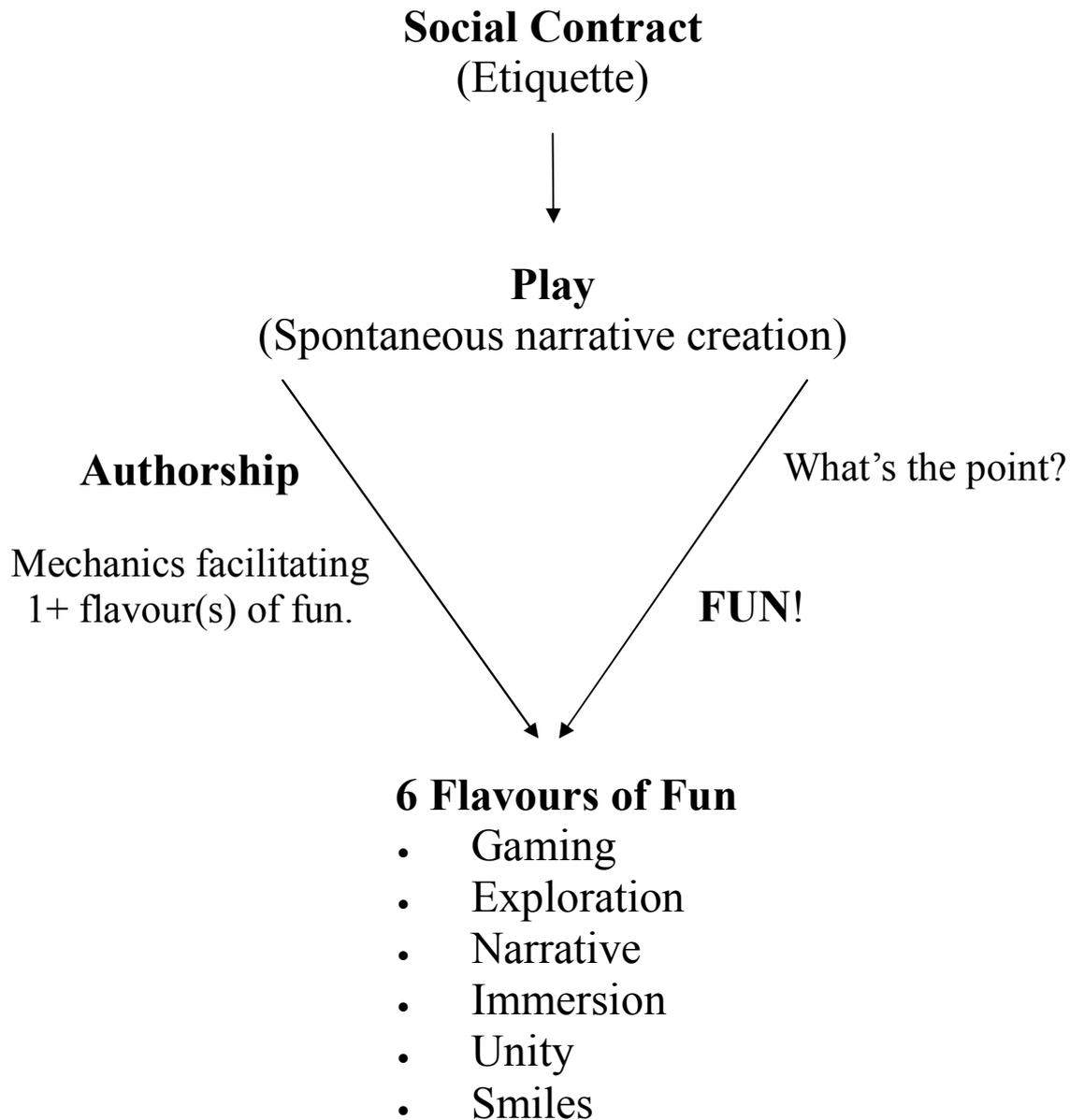


# The FUNnel Model

## Of Role-Playing Games & Entertainments

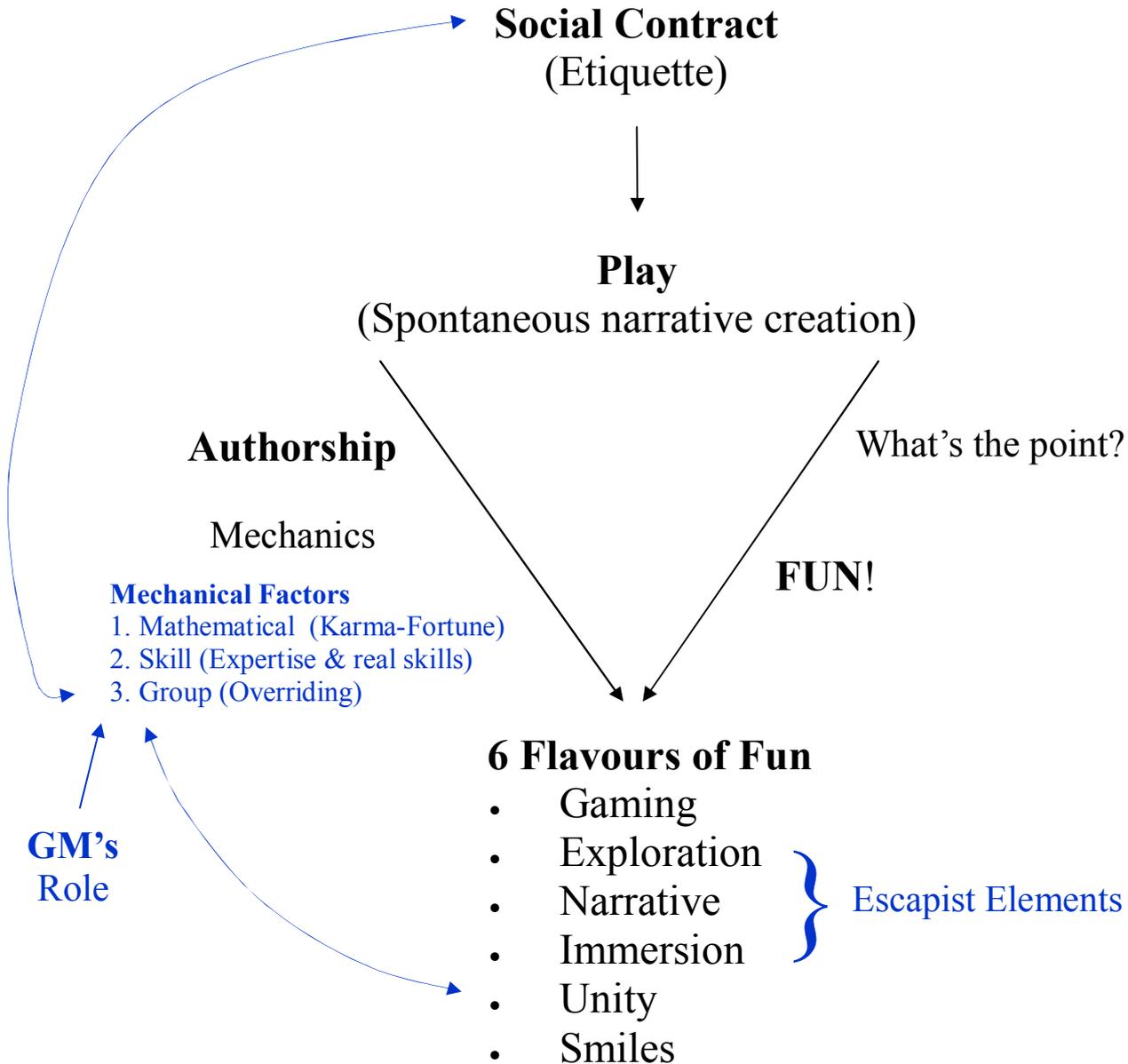


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2006

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# The FUNnel Model

## Of Role-Playing Games & Entertainments



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# RPG vs RPE: ART FORMS WITH ELVES

BY JJ PRINCE

2006

A: What're you doing?

B: Playing a game.

A: Who's wining?

B: No-one can win.

A: You're certain it's a game?

B: I'm playing aren't I?

A: Maybe, you're not playing a game.

B: What?

A: Perhaps you're just playing.

B: Well I don't care what you call it, it's fun.

WHAT IS A GAME?

Difficult to define!

To paraphrase Nietzsche, anything with a history defies definition.

Yet according to Socrates, a term without a definition is meaningless.

'Game' is a textbook example of what is known as a woolly or fuzzy category.

I told you this would be difficult...

Greg Costikyan in his essay *I Have No Words and Must Design*, does a good job, he states:

[A game is a form of art in which participants, termed players, make decisions in order to manage resources through game tokens in the pursuit of a goal.](#)

Ironically, as the author of the D6 based *Star Wars* RPG, Costikyan shoots himself in the foot here - *Star Wars* had neither goals nor true player choice, so could not be termed a 'game'. The same holds true for most of what are called pen and paper RPGs. From *Dungeons & Dragons* onwards RPGs have had no explicit goals, you can't ever win.

That said, there's nothing to stop participants focusing on one or more aspects of a RPG and self imposing goals to "make a game out of it" in a principal Skinner stylee.

## WHAT IS ROLE-PLAY?

Role-playing is portraying a fictional character, without a script. Basically, role-play (RP) is a (marginally) more structured version of improvisational acting.

## SO WHAT'S A ROLE-PLAYING GAME THEN?

A role-playing game is a form of self-expression & entertainment lying somewhere between theatre and war-gaming (or the boards and a board). A role-playing game hinges upon the participants (termed players) immersing themselves in the roles of various fantasy alter egos.

However, as mentioned previously, most of these entertainments termed role-playing games are not games at all, because they lack victory conditions. No-one can 'win'\* or 'lose'.

There are notable exceptions to this, Robin D Laws' *Rune* and *Pantheon* and James Wallis' *Baron Munchausen* are all true role-playing games as they have specific victory conditions.

Still not convinced? How can there be the sense of fair competition necessary for a game when the rules provide one of the participants infinite resources and ultimate control?

More on this in *The GM's Role: The Godot-Monkey Unleashed*.

I propose re-labeling (most) RPGs as ***role-playing entertainments*** (RPEs) since that's what they are. Interestingly, live action role-plays (LARPs) are less likely to be termed as games - probably because they fall closer to theatre in the war-games - theatre RP continuum.

RPEs are really an art form (though many aesthetes and role-players alike will be galled by this fact). A unique art form which facilitates a collaborative, spontaneous creation of narrative, by players portraying fictional characters constrained by set rules.

Don't be mistaken into thinking that I'm saying competition isn't a component of RPEs, competition is a component of all human interactions, unless you happen to be Buddha.

## WHAT'S THE POINT OF RPEs?

They're supposed to be fun.

Role-playing is the only narrative art form in which the (participatory) audience can actually influence the unfolding story — as such it is the only art form which can truly explore the concept of free-will.

## SO WHAT'S FUN THEN?

I'm getting to that - please read my essay *Role-Playing Where's The Fun? GENIUS Theory*. Then post angrily on forums if you disagree.

\*This explains the role-playing community's largely hostile reaction to players who play to win, who are variously termed: munchkins, power-gamers, min-maxers, hardcore gamists, number crunchers, beardy cheese mongers....etc

# ROLE-PLAYING - WHERE'S THE FUN?

## GENIUS THEORY

I'm starting from the assumption that everyone who role-plays does it to have fun. This leads us straight to the thorny issue of what is fun? I propose that 'fun' in a role-playing entertainment consists of six different elements or flavours (none of which are mutually exclusive):

- Gaming
- Exploration
- Narrative
- Immersion
- Unity
- Smiles

### GAMING: PWNED

Humanity, indeed all life, is driven to compete - it's an evolutionary necessity.

Games set up arbitrary rules which create an arena for competition. When playing games, individuals submit to these rules and pit their skills against one another in order to see who triumphs.

Hence much of the fun from gaming comes from besting one's opponents. Yet, once the game and rules are understood, lots of fun can be gained from an appreciation of the tactics and techniques displayed by the participants. It is especially appealing to the male psyche to analyze and discuss the minutiae of games.

Chess represents a pure form of gaming.

In role-playing, gaming oriented fun springs from competition, tactics and analysis.

That said, role-playing has a somewhat bizarre relationship with gaming - I'll address this further in *RPG vs RPE: Art Forms with Elves*.

### EXPLORATION: WHAT WOULD *REALLY* HAPPEN.

Exploration is the first of the three *escapist* elements that necessarily exist in all true role-playing games & entertainments.

Exploration is best explained as exploration of the imaginary world in which the story is set.

Exploration is an aspect unique to role-playing, it's about giving the players the power to investigate the fictional world as if it were real. It's about building and 'living in' a coherent fiction.

Exploration can be a difficult concept for non-role-players to grasp and there is a 'geek factor' involved. By geek factor I mean a pre-existing investment in the fictional world - you know the people who talk at length about the *Star Wars* or *Lord of The Rings* universes as if they were real. This hints at the potential conflict between exploration and narrative - *Star Wars* and *LOTR* are *stories* following the universal plot structure - they are not intended to be simulated

realities.

Exploration oriented play can become quite insular, often meta knowledge of setting becomes a desirable commodity even outside of the game! However, exploration can be hugely rewarding when done well, but it's all about the individual's investment in the fictional world.

There is no pure form of exploration - it is always linked to narrative (exploration creates narrative) and immersion (there must be an explorer).

## **NARRATIVE: ONCE UPON A TIME...**

The earliest known story is the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, which survives today over 5000 years after it was first told in Mesopotamia. Surprisingly the plot structure follows the formula for a Hollywood blockbuster. This is more than mere coincidence, it shows that humanity has a universal need for and appreciation of stories. Intuitively, who doesn't enjoy a good story?

In certain circles, there is much discussion of premise being the foundation of narrative. However, as Christopher Booker shows in his literary tour de force *The Seven Basic Plots*, there is in fact only one universal premise - Good vs Evil, Altruism vs Ego; Light vs Dark\*.

This is further supported by briefly considering three of what are commonly termed *Narrativist* role-playing games: Ron Edward's *Sorcerer*, Vincent D Baker's *Dogs in the Vineyard* and Paul Czege's *My Life with Master*.

The heart of *Sorcerer's* premise is humanity - essentially how light or dark a character is. *Dogs'* main narrative thrust is how far do you go for your vision of what is right - essentially when do you cross the line into darkness (the genius of this game is that it will often be the drawing of a gun which represents movement into darkness).

In *MLWM* the characters live under the shadow of the wholly dark master and only by performing enough good acts can they gain the power of light (represented as love) which allows them to overthrow the shackles of darkness.

Narrative enjoyment comes from the fulfillment of the universal plot structure - darkness sowing the seeds of its own destruction to be finally overthrown by light. Of course there are stories in which light does not triumph, the *Dark Inversion* as Booker calls it. Interestingly these stories have only been written within the last couple of centuries and are less psychologically satisfying since they conflict with our intuitive moral values. Hence Hollywood's obsession with (the more bankable) happy endings.

This is also the problem with balancing gaming or exploration against narrative - it's all too possible that the dark powers will 'win'.

There are countless examples of the pure narrative form: novels, plays, movies...etc.

\* This is a vastly simplified synopsis of Booker's work. I implore anyone with an interest in the narrative form to invest the necessary time to read *The Seven Basic Plots* as it is the most important book on narrative ever written.

## **IMMERSION: WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?**

Immersion is of huge importance, it literally *is* role-playing. Immersion is the final escapist element, alongside exploration and narrative. By immersion I refer to the act of losing oneself in the fictional character one is portraying. At its deepest level, a player feels like they actually become the character, taking on the character's persona and psyche.

It's difficult to explain why immersion is fun, but if you've ever experienced it you'll know how exciting it can be. By immersing, a player invests a great deal of energy in their character, which is why it can be very upsetting for a player to lose their character during role-play.

Immersion can conflict with narrative, as it stresses character over and above plot.

Amusingly, immersion is often claimed as a justification for gaming oriented play. Often known as the "*My character would...*" defence.

I separate immersion from exploration to highlight its importance, but also because it is possible to have exploration oriented play with very little immersion or immersion oriented play with very little exploration.

A pure form of immersion is what the dramatist Keith Johnstone describes as *Mask-Play* in his book *Impro* - the actors literally become the masks. Other forms of acting and improvisation also constitute pure immersion, but none so dramatically.

## **UNITY: ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE!**

Unity relates to a feeling of belonging, social acceptance, group cohesion, camaraderie and a sense of shared purpose. In social psychology terms unity can be thought of as in-group identity. This sense of belonging is a basic human need and as such it's pleasurable when experienced.

I refer primarily to unity between the real people involved in play, although in-character unity can also be fun - indeed this explains the 'party play' phenomenon inherent in most role-playing systems.

While it's true that unity is mainly facilitated by the social contract, group unity itself is still a source of pleasure during role-playing. And if the mechanics encourage unity then the social contract can in turn be strengthened by this.

Gaming and immersion present the greatest potential for clashes with unity.

Merely socializing with friends is a pure form of unity.

## **SMILES: CHEER UP YOU OLD BUGGER IT'S THE END OF THE ESSAY :)**

Smiles, well what is there to say about smiles? I could start by explaining how they are a universal human conveyance of happiness, since I'm big on human universals today.

What makes each of us happy is hugely subjective, but we all know intuitively when something does. If something during role-play makes you smile then it's good whether or not it relates to one of the previous five flavours of fun or not.

Find your own smile and the more you wear it during role-playing the better you're doing.

Remember, the ultimate point is to have fun and the more fun you have the more you smile!

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## KING AUTHOR : DRAMA - FEATURING KARMA, FORTUNE & SKILL.

Role-playing is a form of drama - imitation of life.

Play progresses as players propose additions to the narrative, for brevity I'll refer to proposed additions as *statements*. A statement which is non-contentious is automatically added to the narrative\*. Most in-character statements are non-contentious as a player is assumed to have control over what their character says.

When a contentious statement is declared then the system mechanics determine how the statement alters the narrative.

Mechanics generally operate via three real-world factors:

- **Mathematical:** Karma - Fortune continuum.
- **Skill:** Expertise and real-world ability.
- **Group:** Social interaction & negotiation.

### MATHEMATICAL FACTORS

These are what most people consider the core of game mechanics. Mathematical Factors refer to any time there is a numerical calculation which determines the effect of a statement. A dice roll is an exemplar of a mathematical factor.

All mathematical mechanics occur on a continuum between total order (Karma) and total chance (Fortune). The closer a mechanic to Karma, the more predictable the result. One extreme is total Karma which eliminates chance entirely. The other extreme is total Fortune which is utterly random, thus unpredictable.

*E.g. in Dungeons & Dragons a player states "I slash the orc with my scimitar". A D20 roll plus a modifier is compared to a fixed target number. If the player's score equals or exceeds the target number then the orc will be struck - that is to say the act of the scimitar hitting the orc will become part of the narrative. Consequently the orc will take damage and maybe even die from the scimitar blow as contingent Mathematical Factors come into play.*

### SKILL FACTORS

Skill operates in two distinct ways within role-play. The first, perhaps more obvious, way is that some players will have a greater knowledge of the system or role-playing in general which means they know how to stack Mathematical or Group Factors in their favour. I refer to this as role-playing expertise.

The second, more distinct type of Skill Factor involves some real-world activity built into the mechanics. The most obvious example of a Skill Factor operates in what are known as 'boffer' Live-Action Role-Plays (LARPS). During a boffer LARP participants dress up as their fantasy personas and enact battles using mock weapons. The players who are more skilled with their weapons will beat those less skilled (in a fair fight).

It's difficult to come up with pen and paper RP examples, but my games *Piledrivers & Powerbombs* and *Swansong* both incorporate bluffing mechanics, which utilize player skill over Mathematical Factors.

\*This is actually a Group Factor operating.

## GROUP FACTORS

These are the most powerful factors determining narrative direction, because role-playing is by necessity a social activity which individuals agree to play. Group Factors are hugely influenced by the Social Contract (group etiquette), however Group Factors refer specifically to how a statement influences the narrative and so are separate from the Social Contract. All Group Factors are constantly open to group negotiation. This flexibility is very useful as it allows each group to tailor the narrative to whichever flavour(s) of fun they find most appealing.

In most traditional RPGs, a single participant is given the final say in all matters, this person is usually termed the Games-Master (GM). Often, the GM is the only participant allowed to directly add to or author the narrative. This gives the GM a mighty Group Factor which can overrule all other factors and mechanics.

## WHAT'S THE POINT OF GAME MECHANICS?

They determine how player statements translate into the emerging narrative. Mechanics are supposed to facilitate the fun. See the FUNnel model.

Game mechanics are also the only tangible part of a role-playing system, they're the actual meat, what people pay for. A system will live or die by it's mechanics.

Well actually people seem to pay for the fictional backgrounds aka 'fluff'. Fluff is ultimately subjective so can't really be commented on critically.

Sadly, most commercial RPGs depend upon the geek factor of hobbyists buying into their fluff to support their games. As such mediocre mechanical systems flourish in the so-called mainstream and the roleplaying hobby becomes more and more niche - shamefully so. I know many role-players who would never dream of telling their work colleagues about their reprehensible hobby.

But Role-playing is a dramatic art form no less worthy than any other art form. And no fewer people would enjoy it than enjoy any other art form - if only they could try it. So this is my goal, to get more people role-playing and see this narrative art form taken more seriously.

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## GM'S ROLE: THE GODOT-MONKEY UNLEASHED

The shadowy figure of the Games Master hunched behind his screen clutching the precious books of power and the special dice has been a staple of role-playing games (RPGs), or role-playing entertainments (RPEs), since before I was born.

It doesn't matter what your character sheet says, it doesn't matter what your character does, it doesn't matter what the 'rules' say, it doesn't matter what the game designers say, system doesn't matter, setting doesn't matter and story doesn't matter - all that counts is the will of the GM.

I learned this the hard way. Crushed by random falling masonry. AGAIN?!

Traditionally RPG/Es give ultimate authority to a single participant - the GM. This is the biggest stumbling block to new players and hugely counter-intuitive. It also places a massive burden of responsibility onto the GM - it's their RPG/E, whether the whole exercise succeeds or fails is down to the GM maintaining the goodwill of the players.

In terms of GENIUS theory the GM:

- Is the gaming balance.
- Authors the narrative.
- Decides what is explored.
- Provides the opportunity for immersion.
- Fosters group unity.
- Determines acceptable humour.

Yet all the time the GM must provide the players with the feeling (or illusion) of control.

The GM must strive to be an invisible, imperceptible force within the fictional world, yet remains the cause of everything, the meaning of everything - like Godot in Samuel Beckett's masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*. Unfortunately, the GM is, like the rest of us, merely a monkey (unless you believe those wacky Creationists). Hence the Godot-Monkey. And a monkey has difficulty wielding the immense power of Godot. Absolute power corrupts absolutely...

Some may argue this is a social contract issue, but one of the immutable clauses in a RPG/E social contract is to obey the rules - which usually hand ultimate power to the GM.

Add to this the practical difficulties - finding someone willing to put in the time and effort to be the GM can be a nightmare even for long established role-play groups.

Where am I going with all this?

Death to the Godot-Monkey! We don't need them! Equality among players!  
Role-playing for role-players!!! Encourage the democratic art-form!!!

Or if you're set on having a GM, why bother with any other rules?

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