

GAMING THE CAPTAIN



A Discussion of the Power and Privilege of Command by William A. Barton

One of the many experiences that I was looking forward to at Origins last year was the opportunity to play **STAR TREK: The Role Playing Game**. Up until then, I was always the gamemaster whenever our local group got together. I'd never had the chance to boldly go forth in the role of one of my favorite Federation characters. At preregistration, I signed up for an adventure sequel to the episode "A Piece of the Action" and anxiously waited my tour aboard Star Fleet's finest.

At the tournament, the gamemaster passed out the characters, allowing players to state preferences for whom they wished to portray. Before I opened my mouth, Kirk was loudly snatched up by another player whose volume led me to wonder whether we'd even need communicators to contact the ship. His manner of asserting his desire to play the captain gave me a few qualms, but I figured he would get more into the spirit of Kirk's character once the game started. (Here, as on many occasions in the past, I reaffirm that my calling in life was definitely not that of a prophet). As the rest of the *Enterprise* crew was assigned, I found myself with the part of Uhura. Okay, no real problem there. On the few occasions in the series when Uhura actually got to do something, she proved a more than capable figure. Besides, I thought this would give me a chance to do some real role playing; I always enjoy a challenge.

The gamemaster introduced the scenario, and we arrived at our destination. It was time for the Captain to choose the landing party. All the main series characters were represented by players, along with a couple of security men. So our brilliant (like a black hole) captain named the landing party (i.e., playing the adventure). As I listened incredulously, he decreed that all the players, even including Yeoman Rand, plus two NPC security men, would be beaming down, while Scotty and Uhura STAYED ON THE SHIP! In other words, neither the player portraying Scotty, nor I, got to play! Oh, of course, Scotty got to make a few repairs (and got to command the *Enterprise*, for what it was worth), but my entire contribution in the next four hours was repeating, "Mr. Scott, I have the Captain," whenever our fearless leader decided he needed the ship's computers or wanted phaser fire to scare the locals. I might as well have put my piece on cassette and left. Great, huh? I travelled several hundred miles to the con, spent money on the event, only to sit around and be bored for several hours. Forget that I had no chance to win the prize in the game. I didn't even have a good time. Captain Loudmouth did his best to see that nobody else, even among

the landing party, got to do much either, as he blustered and bullied his way from encounter to encounter, hardly letting anyone else get a word in edgewise.

Why did this happen? Well, in a way, it was the gamemaster's responsibility for letting the gamehog dominate things the way he did. And I'm reasonably certain the loudmouth didn't set out to see that everyone else missed out on the fun (although there are some determined to win events at any cost). The whole problem is that the loudmouth simply didn't know the first thing about leadership. Specifically, he had no idea how to effectively game the captain of a Federation starship.

Unfortunately, it would appear from complaints I've heard from other quarters that there are a lot of gamers out there who are a bit hazy on exactly how to properly game the captain in ST:RPG. So the problem is not limited to just a few loudmouths out there. Leadership isn't always an easy thing, especially if you haven't had any experience at it in the real world. To bring it into a gaming session in which you suddenly find yourself in command of an entire starship (and yet actually are responsible for a handful of gamers who are there to have a good time) can be a bit bewildering if you've never done it before.

This article is intended to help those of you out there who'd like a crack at gaming the captain (or other Federation leader) by noting a few basic leadership principles as they apply to the position in ST:RPG. Although I'm aiming my remarks at players of ST captain characters, the same principles are applicable to any game system where the players are under military command. If you've had problems playing a starship captain in the past, you might find some of these suggestions will improve your gaming to everyone's benefit.

Be A Leader, Not A Dictator

One of the responsibilities that goes with being a leader is giving orders. However, it is important that they *be* orders, not decrees. A good leader is a servant. He doesn't sit back on his lofty pedestal and tell the underlings when to breathe. He does his job, doing more than those under him, if possible, leading by example. A dictator merely sits back and tells everyone what to do, expecting blind obedience.

As the captain of a Federation starship, it is your duty to give the necessary orders to the personnel under you. And it is their duty to obey these orders. Remember, however, that these are really players, not military personnel under your command. They have simply chosen to take on these roles for this gaming session. The captain can't treat them as he or she would in real life. Dedicated though their characters may be, you can't push them too far. As gamers, they may resent it, and next game session you might

find yourself a captain without a crew.

Tone is a lot of it. While, as captain, you don't want to sound indecisive, you don't want to lord your position over the other players either. When you give orders, how are you doing it? Are you loud, as though you're trying to shout out any objections? Is your tone arrogant, hinting your orders better be obeyed or else (how does one keelhaul a person at warp speed)? The best leaders don't need to shout, but can give orders in a tone of quiet assurance.



Above all, don't give your players any reason to resent your orders; for example, belittling them by overstating the obvious, implying that you don't think they're competent, or indicating that you are their fearless leader and they are merely peons. And *never* give an order that you wouldn't be willing to carry out yourself. Finally, don't use the excuse that you *have* to be insufferable because that is the way your character is and you have to role play him as such. If your character was such a martinet, he probably wouldn't have made it to command rank in the first place.

Solicit Advice From Other Players

A good leader can always use advice. It is his decision in the final analysis, but the more input he has, the better the decision he'll be able to make. Just look at all the times Kirk called a meeting of his seniors officer in the TV series. His approach was, "Opinions, gentlemen?" Give the other players a chance. They're intelligent, too; otherwise, they wouldn't be role playing in the first place.

Delegate Authority To Other Players

Okay, you're the captain. That means you're in charge. But you're only one person and can't do it all. A good leader realizes that. You can get the other players to follow you willingly if you simply show confidence in their abilities as players. Of course, this doesn't mean giving the conn to a player the whole game while the adventure is happening planetside. On the other hand, if there are enemy vessels in the area, that player will probably get "a piece of the action" as well.

While, as a gamemaster, I'm not advocating splitting up an adventuring

party in a RPG scenario (it often becomes difficult to moderate), such action sometimes becomes necessary in a game. As captain, you are in charge.



But, if you have to split up, you will have to put another officer in charge of the group you're not with. When you do this, it is important that you only give general orders and let him use his own discretion on specifics. Otherwise, you aren't really delegating anything. Let him and his party find the ways to achieve their particular goals.

Know The Other Players And Their Characters' Abilities

Other than at conventions, when you normally are playing with a lot of people you don't know well, you should have a fair idea of what each player can and cannot do well in a gaming situation. This sometimes means matching real personalities with characters with the same traits (unless you are lucky enough to have a few actors in your group who like to try new things, most players take a lot from themselves for their characters). Know the character's stats as well. Who would want to send someone with a STR of 37 to tackle a Gorn? At the start of the adventure, find out what skills and attributes each character has from all the players. If the gamemaster won't allow this for some reason, tell him you are accessing the computer's personnel files. After all, as the captain, it is available to you.

Make Certain Everyone Gets To Play

Absolutely the worse thing any leader can do is relegate some of the other players to a nonplaying status, whether it's only for a part of the game or, heaven forbid, the whole session. As the captain, it is *your* responsibility to make certain all the other players have enough to do. Don't hog the action, or let NPC's do things a player might enjoy doing. There might be some players who don't mind sitting around for hours doing nothing, but I come to a game session to play! And I think others do, too.

There are doubtless countless other smaller, but still significant, things you can do that will help you game the role of the captain more successfully with your own gaming group. The above, however, will give you a good starting ground to ensure that your ST:RPG sessions become even more enjoyable than they already are. If you've already been incorporating these principles in your own play, then congratulations! And please, if you ever sign up for a ST:RPG tournament at a convention and I'm playing, please take the part of the captain before some loudmouth gets it so we all can have a good time!

