

RANDOM GM TIP

INNER MONOLOGUE PROMPT

[by Justin Alexander - June 27th, 2023](#)



A roleplaying game, at its heart, lies at an interstice between game and conversation: In a conversation, we informally take turns sharing information. In a game, we formally take turns using the mechanics of the game. Roleplaying games dance freely between these two turn-taking dynamics, and in that dance the GM and the players are partners.

One of the ways I find this analogy useful is thinking in terms of action and reaction: The GM takes an action, and the players react to it on their turn. But then, of course, the GM takes their turn and, playing the world, reacts to what the PCs have done.

Often this conversational handoff is **unprompted**: The GM talks, the players talk, the GM talks again, and so on in a seamless back-and-forth.

In some cases, however, this will be **prompted**. Probably the most typical example is the GM, after presenting events in the world, saying something like, "So what are y'all doing?"

There can be a lot of different reasons for using a specific prompt, but it usually boils down to clarity in the handoff ("I'm done talking, so now it's your turn," in a fashion somewhat akin to saying "I'm done" at the end of your turn in a board game) or an effort to refocus the table ("let's stop talking about which flavor of Cheetos is the best and get back to fighting the bilious zombies"). It's kind of like saying "over" when you're using a walkie-talkie.

Open prompts like this are almost always the purview of the GM, but more specific prompts from the players aren't exactly uncommon. For example, while roleplaying their PCs chatting about recent events around the campfire, one of the players might turn to the GM and ask, "Do I know anything about King Roderick?"

GMs can also use a **targeted prompt**. Instead of prompting the table as a whole, the GM instead prompts a specific player: "What is Emily doing?"

Targeted prompts will formally arise from initiative counts or similar priority mechanics. ("Emily, it's your turn.") Even without formal mechanics, however, they can also commonly occur as a process of elimination: Everyone else has declared their action, and so, "While that's happening, what is Emily doing?"

A specialized technique is the **inner monologue prompt**. This is a targeted prompt in which the GM asks a player to share and describe the inner life of their character.

- "Emily, how does the music in the tavern make you feel?"
- "What does Alfarr think of the minister's proposal?"
- "Roscrucia, is this is the first dragon you've seen since the death of your parents? How does that make you feel?"

This technique doesn't work well for all players and, personally, I only find it appropriate for certain campaigns. But when it *does* work, it can have amazing results!

If we were all Hollywood screenwriters we would have both the time and the talent to expertly reveal our characters' inner lives through expertly crafted dialogue. But we aren't and we don't, so the best way to bring those character dynamics into the light may be to just cut directly to the point. It can also be a way of crystallizing and making strong emotional choices that might otherwise remain undefined and unrealized.

As noted, for some players this technique will be disruptive to their creative process and their relationship to their character. That should be respected. But one reaction that can be useful to push through is a feeling that this is "fake" or "artificial." This is true, but, frankly, if it was good enough for Shakespeare, it's good enough for us.

We do not, of course, have to whip out a soliloquy in blank verse. But the basic function of laying bare the character's thoughts for the audience remains dramatically valid and emotionally powerful.

In this case, of course, the audience is our fellow players.

Thanks to Seven Wonders Productions on [my Youtube channel](#) for suggesting this topic.