

How To Keep Gaming After Adulthood

or, Everything I Needed To Know About
GMing I Learned From Watching Television

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Art by Dan Smith

Popular wisdom has it that the gaming habit does not survive adulthood. Many of us who were gamers in high school and college find that, when we get our first 40-hour-a-week job and perhaps a mortgage or a marriage, the gaming habit falls away. It's a sad thing to hear the wistful tones of people who once loved gaming but can't find time for it anymore. Often people will talk about having tried it once or twice, but finding themselves unable to sustain it. They mutter something about "you can't go home again" and sadly close the book on a hobby that once provided a great deal of pleasure.

This doesn't have to happen. But it does far too often. The reason for this, I suspect, is that the conditions under which most of us learn to roleplay -- high school and college -- are ones that afford us more free time than we ever see again. As a result, we tend to develop a roleplaying style that involves hanging out for hours, slowly meeting NPCs in town adventures or making our leisurely way through a room-by-room dungeon or a massively epic adventure, secure in the knowledge that whatever doesn't get finished can be picked up next week. After all, you have the time and no one's going anywhere.

Gaming in this milieu is a form of hanging out that actually seems to invite a time-wasting approach -- one that lends itself to very intricate game worlds modeled on all those bulky fantasy trilogies that have maps at the front, or sci-fi novels that have the answer to every technical question worked out in advance. The GM probably whiles away the idle hours during the week by adding new game-world information for fun, and the players (if they're anything like me and my friends were) make up characters that will never see use, just because they can. Random events (such as wandering monsters and binge shopping



spress) occur all the time, sprinkled into the main action like pleasant detours along a scenic path.

This is all well and good for that life-stage, but if you try this as an adult, you're going to spend a few bored hours waiting for the excitement and then going home wondering if it was all worth the time. Usually it isn't.

What you need to do to survive the transition is to rethink your playing style. This is a fairly major shift that encompasses everything from session length to genre to player selection. Through the course of this article, I hope to lead you through a system that has worked for me. It involves a sacrifice or two, but in my experience the payoff is well worth it.

One: Preliminaries

Before you even start, you need to tell people you're starting, and feel out friends who might be interested. You'll also need a time and place. (I've found that Saturday afternoons -- say, 1-5 or 2-6 -- are excellent, even for busy people, since they've had time to get up and run some errands, but they can still go somewhere else for dinner dates and such.) Then, while you're looking at your pool of potentials and selecting candidates, you need to consider the following factors:

1. **Keep the Party Size Small.** In college, when everyone was simply hanging out, seven players was not an unheard-of size for a party. That won't wash anymore. Two to four players is all you should need. I find even in four-player sessions that usually one player doesn't get much to do. A fifth player should be avoided whenever possible, or should be as low-maintenance as possible to justify their inclusion. (Someone who just wants to show up and roll dice would be perfectly fine here; a fifth person who wants to be engaged with the game world will be too much of a time drain, and is bound to be disappointed anyway.) If you don't like turning people away, consider breaking them up. Running two satisfying three-person campaigns is often much easier than running one satisfying six-member one.
2. **Keep Player Expectations Modest.** Let people know you will not be running epic adventures. There will not necessarily be full-color maps, dressing in character, sound effects records in the background, etc. You will probably not lavish time composing paragraphs of evocative description to read aloud at key moments. The point is simple social entertainment, not fictive absorption.

In a related note, don't expect this to last more than three or four weeks. If it happens, as it often does, then great. But it is hard to accomplish, even with this system, and it's better to keep your hopes modest than make grand plans and feel like a failure. Pretend your campaign is a mid-season replacement show. If it's popular enough to get picked up for an additional season, hooray. But a cancellation shouldn't surprise or upset anyone.

3. **Keep the Logistics Flexible.** You'll want one or two people you can count on to show up every week as your core group. (See point 5. below.) But after that, anything goes. This means that the party itself may not gel like the heroes of old (or, or that matter, like the ensembles on TV, who are at least paid for showing up). If you have four regulars and only two can make it one week, fine. Play with two.
4. **Don't Cancel Unless It's An Absolute Emergency.** I particularly recommend not cancelling for the first three weeks (getting commitments from people ahead of time helps), and *never* cancelling two weeks in a row. Ideally, you should have one or more PCs who are capable of GMing in a pinch, so that even if the GM has to leave town suddenly, the game itself can continue. This way, you establish a habit of meeting and people learn to trust that the game will be there if they just remember to show up.
5. **Have a Core Group.** As mentioned in 3. above, you'll want one or two players you can always count on to show up, and who you will play with even if no one else can make it. Choose people who don't travel for work, don't have family they frequently visit on the weekend, and so on. Homeowners and people with children (no offense if you're reading this

and you're one of them) are often a bad risk, since their lives are at the mercy of one or more endless unpredictable sources of emergencies.

A Brief Word on Rules

Once you have your players set up, you'll have to establish the game system. But since the emphasis of the game is on speed and efficiency, the rule here is "Simplify, Simplify!" New players will not have time to read an entire *Players Manual*, and it would be laughable to expect someone to. Also, the game itself cannot be permitted to devolve into a discussion of whether someone firing a gun 15 hexes away gets a -1 for every 5 full hexes of distance or a -2 for every 10. In my **GURPS** campaign, optional rules such as Advanced Combat and called shots are only used if all the players know them well enough to agree on most numbers without looking them up. And any rule that slows things down is history, no matter how official it is. (My rule of thumb: when all action stops while at least two players are thumbing for a reference, it's time for a GM snap decision.) I try to limit all introductory information to 3-5 typed, single-spaced pages. Three pages on character creation and combat, and two pages on the actual game world we'll be adventuring in. I supplement with additional stuff two or so pages at a time every game session, but those five pages should be all anyone actually needs to know in order to play.

Two: The Adventure Proper

Instead of going to books for your inspiration, start paying attention to T.V. shows -- particularly (but not exclusively) the fantasy/sci-fi genre shows like *Star Trek*, *Highlander*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the like. What makes them good models is that they do the same thing we try to do as adults playing RPGs: tell an interesting story in a compressed amount of time. The following guidelines are what I use when writing adventures for my fellow adults.

Have An A-Plot And A B-Plot

Most genre shows (in fact, most shows period) tell two stories simultaneously. One of these -- the "A-plot" -- is the main story of the episode; what it's theoretically about. The starship's engineer gets kidnapped by moronic aliens; the agents explore a haunted funhouse; the hero and the bad guy switch bodies for a few hours -- all of these are A-plots. They give the heroes some obvious thing to do, and they either succeed or fail. Either way, when the challenge is ended, you know the episode is over.

The B-plot is a secondary story that is usually more character-driven and is where the actual philosophical or emotional resonance comes in. (Read: roleplaying!) When the hero and the bad guy switch bodies, the hero learns how it feels to be judged on appearances, or sees life as the bad guy sees it, or has to answer questions about what constitutes identity. While exploring the funhouse, one of the agents has to cope with an impending visit from an estranged ex-lover, while the other agents wonder what the ex is going to be like. While the engineer is busy being kidnapped, the rescue party has to face the fact that the kidnappers have a legitimate grievance and find a way to come to terms. All of these deepen the original stories by giving the players challenges that they can't just fight, skill, or advantage their way out of.

I generally make the B-plot an excuse to emphasize a **GURPS** character's Disadvantages. This is where someone's Hunted or Dependent NPC come in. This is where a bout with Alcoholism or a Phobia can become a major plot issue. This is also what the best shows do: by making every episode relate in some way to the characters -- challenging their personalities or pasts -- every episode becomes important in some minor way. Your adventures mean more when they're not just "the time we fought the giant," but "the time we fought the giant, and Grundar the Barbarian discovered who his mother was."

If you're going to add a third plot (which some shows do), make it only take up two scenes or so.

C-plots tend to resolve quickly, and are only just sizeable enough to feel that something has happened. I don't usually even bother with a third plot. PCs tend to create them on their own when faced with an open-ended situation. Which leads me to my second point . . .

Have A Loose Structure

TV shows do not usually have everything worked out in advance. The first episode presents you with some basic facts (what vampires are like, how space travel is set up, which kingdom is where) and the unanswered questions are left to be filled out as the show progresses. Obvious questions should of course be settled in advance. Less obvious questions (such as when a player asks, "What are the histories of all the rulers of all the baronies in this area?") should be answered with either "you don't know," or "I can't answer that this week, but fortunately it's not relevant at the moment and I'll get back to you." In many cases, TV shows have their details worked out, not by the official writers, but by talented fans (such as Captain Kirk's back story -- like his birth in Iowa and his middle name being Tiberius -- which was fleshed out by fans and eventually became canonized in the movies). So when I find that a player is particularly interested in some detail about the game world, I encourage them to make up whatever they think reasonable and show me what they've done later. A good player's work can save the GM lots of time, and it makes both GM and player more involved in the game.

This "loose structure" idea also affects the individual adventures. On a TV show, although theoretically anything can happen, what never changes is that you've got a teaser (that setup before the title sequence), three acts, and a closing sequence (right before the final credits). Similarly, I divide every adventure into 3-5 scenes, each of which is set up as an improvisation. For every scene I try to have one thing that *must* happen (in order to lead into the next scene), and a bunch of variables that I've only vaguely predetermined. So, for example, if the characters meet a woodsman who bears a birthmark revealing that he might be the emperor's long-lost twin, and if that's the core of the story I have planned, then of course there's no point in leaving it to chance: the guy's sleeve drops open as he shakes their hand, someone notices the birthmark, and we're off. It may *look* random, but it isn't: I simply ask everyone to make perception rolls, and whoever makes it most readily is informed of the mark.

But if that's all the players get, you're going to waste some time. Each "must" moment should also contain at least one obvious follow-up action -- in this case, maybe they met an agent earlier who is looking for the emperor's twin, but the players don't know if he wants to kill the twin, embrace the twin, or try to pull some Byzantine switcheroo. In any event, a return to the inn where the imperial agent is staying -- either to talk or to spy -- would be the next obvious course. Although it can be tricky to motivate players, I have found it generally safe to say that most players seek pleasure and avoid pain, and try to do the same thing for NPCs that they like if it's not asking too much. Don't count on pure altruism to motivate your players or it'll just break your heart, and don't expect them to leap at a fascinating puzzle if it looks like it'll be hard to solve and doesn't have a sure and magnificent payoff. If your players aren't doing what you want, you either need a bigger stick or a sweeter carrot.

Once they're motivated, don't mess around. Part of the concept of "structure" involves getting players where they need to be with a minimum of distractions. Do it like TV: when they decide to go back to the inn, *Poof!* -- the next scene is at the inn. Don't describe each individual building as the characters wander through town, don't roll for wandering monsters, don't roleplay the part where they stop to buy rope on the way, don't deny information until just the right question is asked and don't randomize a damn thing. You'll just waste time on irrelevancies, which will dilute the impact of your nice story.

That's the "structure" part; the "loose" part is that I never presuppose that the players have to get along with the NPCs, or that some player might not do something disastrous. (Note, by the way, that you can almost always prevent the players from committing a killing by having an innocent eyewitness show up unexpectedly at a safe enough distance to run away and call the cops. Happens

in the movies all the time.) To cite my previous example, once the players get to the inn, how they approach the agent is entirely up to them . . . but one way or another, they're also going to come across a letter from the emperor's wife, whether he has to leave it in his room or keep it on his body. As long as the one "must" element occurs, the adventure can continue and things are happy. If you had a really nice dramatic effect that the players missed, you can always tell them about it afterward instead of shoehorning them into doing what's perfect.

A final note that deserves separate mention: I never put any kind of "must" occurrence in the final climactic scene of an adventure. If someone dies, okay. If a valuable item is broken or lost, that's what happened. If someone manages to reasonably acquire an item of extreme power, I roll with it. That's a concern for next week. For the purposes of the individual adventure, however, I try to never have any preconceived notion of how it's going to end. I just try to make the entire situation as potentially clear to my players as possible and let them decide how to deal with it.

Establish a Pattern and Then Break It

Almost every genre TV show spends its first several episodes establishing the pattern of its default story. An anomaly shows up in Missouri, Mulder and Scully go and get baffled by it up close, then they go home and the episode ends on an uncertain note. A planet sends out a distress call, the Enterprise answers, they correct the culture, beam back to the ship, and end with a joke that provides closure. Whatever your "episodes" are going to be like, you should be trying in your first few sessions to establish a consistent world and a consistent way of interacting with that world.

Then, by episode/adventure four, you can start playing with the players' expectations. The players encounter a member of a "bad" alien race who happens to be good! Someone invents an exception to the laws of magic that affects a PC wizard! The town that is the player's home winds up invaded! One of the players discovers they're really a clone! In a long, deliberately paced campaign, major changes can have terrible impact on everything the GM has been thinking through. In a short-term campaign where the game world is open-ended anyway, it's much easier to do dramatic things to the entire game world and not face disastrous consequences. So do it, and have fun!

An adventure like this is a good time, by the way, to break another rule: don't worry about doing it all in one session. Think of a major story like this as a "special two-part episode." But remember that it has to *feel* like a two-part episode: that is, the first episode has to build to a climactic, cliffhanger revelation that leaves everyone wondering what the devil is going to happen in the second adventure. Expanding to a second session just because you made the dungeon too large to get through is a crappy thing to do to your players. If you have to interrupt the game because of time problems, you'd better make the halfway point exciting somehow. You want them tuning in next week because of anticipation and wonder, not out of duty and a desire to get it over with.

This guideline applies on the individual PC level as well. Most characters naturally fall into certain high-concept one-sentence patterns: The Strong Guy Who's Emotionless; The Sneak Thief With a Past; The Wacky Dilettante Who Causes Trouble. When players first make their characters, the first few adventures ought to establish exactly the expertise that they designed their characters to exercise. The Brain should be supplied information readily. The Brute should have some wussies to beat up. The Trickster should be able to trick someone pompous and powerful. And all of this should happen fairly publicly so word gets around about our heroes. Then, once these patterns are established, you can start to mess with the different characters' self-conceptions and public reputations. TV shows do this all the time -- establishing character stereotypes, underlining them for a few episodes, and then, once the expectations are established, violating them in some way. But the last step is only entertaining if the character stereotypes are already in place. The sooner you provide opportunities for the players to perform their characters for each other, the sooner you'll be able to have fun messing with them later.

Give Everyone Something To Do

This is why the party size has to remain small. Ensemble TV shows can occasionally afford to let one or more characters take a back seat now and then, giving them only one line and a brief walk-on. That can't happen here. Since everyone has bothered to take the trouble and come, the least you can do is make them all important to the story in some way. Combat-oriented characters are easy to please here -- just throw in some combat and they're bound to shine. (See point 5., below.) But in practice, what this means is that within each adventure I try to have two reactions rolls and at least two skill rolls every time -- featuring at least one Contest of Skills (for all you *GURPS* players) whenever possible.

Note that this doesn't mean that players have to be *good* at something to matter. They can also have their peculiarities and ineptitudes showcased, just as long as they personally affect the adventure in some way. What is important is that the players be challenged and happy. Try to have each of them cry "Oh no!" at least once per game ("How can I pick the lock when my hand's in a cast?"), and then (if appropriate) cheer triumphantly as all the NPCs see how cool they are.

What this also means is that you, the GM, have to have options and back-up plans. If you "must" have someone to pick a lock in order for the characters to continue, and only one player has lockpicking skill, then when this player picks the lock they're going to feel like they're not really acting on their own, but simply serving a plot that's already outlined for them. And if that's the only skill they use all adventure, they're not going to be happy. But if the player's skill is optional somehow (the party has to face the evil cultists anyway, but it'll be easier if they can open a lock and get access to niftier weapons), then the roll actually matters more. I generally try to come up with three plot options for every reaction roll (bad, good, terrific) and two options for every skill roll (success, failure). And I never make these rolls central to the adventure's continuance.

Always Feature Sex Or Violence

Perhaps this should read "desire and conflict," but the point is the same. Although there is a tendency for the authors of articles like this to go on about the importance of roleplaying over combat, what's often overlooked is that talky, peaceful, character-driven adventures almost never work. This is because the episodes we see on TV always feature the gradual revelation of certain qualities in a character we're trying to get to know. ("Will Amanda ever reconcile herself with her grandmother and yet continue to grow as an artist?") In a gaming situation, all the characters know themselves already, and self-revelations are unlikely to deviate much from a character's initial conception. Another problem is that dialogue is tricky to write, and while it's possible to carefully time a revelation or statement when you're in control of every character, this same power is almost entirely absent when you're simply improvising, and as a result true dramatic impact rarely happens. It's great when it works, but as a former improv comic, I can confidently state that unless you have a terrific team that meshes well together, the occasional payoffs are not worth the time spent on misfires.

This is why I emphasize the importance of examining genre shows as opposed to mainstream family dramas. (Note, by the way, that even non-genre shows like hospital dramas, police dramas, and melodramas all feature love stories set on a framework of life-or-death A plots.) Genre shows tend to have more thinly drawn characters (after all these years, we still know very little about McCoy's family life, voting record, or taste in music) and play instead to the genre's strengths -- visual flashiness, the monstrous and the nefarious, big dangers limned in broad dramatic strokes. An episode of *Highlander* that doesn't feature swordplay is a true rarity, and *Buffy* always fights something, even if it's not a major part of the story.

In mimicking this, I try to schedule at least two combats in every adventure: one or two small ones that last no more than two or three rounds, and one climactic one that can end any way the dice see fit. I try to make the small ones avoidable with the appropriate actions (be it clever avoidance, capitulation, high reaction rolls, or bribery). If they take too long -- more than three rounds, or two if it's not a very interesting fight -- then the bad guys either begin to fall easily or run away. (They're usually not out to kill the heroes anyway; they're testing their strength or sending a

message or something.)

Since this makes combat a little rarer than in the pre-adult years where you roll dice to beat up kobolds every half an hour, it's worth it to try to make every fight scene different and specific somehow. Have rain obscure everyone's vision! Make a barrel spill slippery stuff on the floor! Turn out the lights and put them near a gas tank! Ruin their ammo and force them to pick up a nearby axe! Anything that affects a character's competency in a battle -- making a sure thing less sure or making a scary opponent more takeable -- is worth choreographing. Figure out the modifiers in advance so you won't have to turn to books in the middle of a fight. Develop an environment that enables the players to select options about how to fight instead of just automatically doing what they always do. They'll thank you for it later.

I also try to make desire part of every scene -- the characters want something, and the NPCs want something else, even if it's something as simple as wanting this conversation to end so the NPC can go to the restroom. Actual sexual situations can be tough to pull off -- especially if you're all straight males and you're uncomfortable adopting cross-gender roles in public view -- but an undercurrent of sexual attraction is often surprisingly motivating. Playing on disadvantages helps here: an ugly sorceress will almost never refuse an invitation for dalliance with a blind man who finds her funny; a greedy gladiator will happily spend the night in a rich woman's room -- and might even countenance an offer of marriage!

Generally speaking, however, violence is an A plot and sex is a B plot. Life and death questions are the most important ones to resolve; after that come considerations about the quality of that life and who you'd prefer to spend parts of it with. In fact, as relationships and sex develop over the life of a campaign, fandom becomes more important and helpful . . .

Encourage Fandom

Thanks to *Star Trek*, every genre show with its head on straight tries to establish a room for fandom -- often a chatroom or e-mail list. This gives the fans a chance to discuss questions about the characters, speculate about upcoming episodes, trade rumors, and in general keep love for the show alive in those 167 hours every week when it's not actually airing. This can have a similar salubrious effect on a campaign as well. I set up an e-mail list for all the players to share, and I try to send out one update every week -- just a paragraph or two -- about what's happening in the campaign. This includes announcements that are both "in character" (Castle Banwyck is reported to be under siege 300 miles to the north) and "out of character" (we're meeting at Steve's this week but his air conditioner's not working so dress accordingly).

This is an opportunity both for the GM and for the players. The GM can fill in game-world information that would be too time-consuming or irrelevant to bring up in an actual session. (The disposition of current politics, who just got promoted, what the weather's been like lately.) And the players can communicate privately to the GM with details about their off-time activities (this is a chance to use *GURPS* job success tables and training rules), and can role-play things like love scenes and secret agendas that are awkward or inappropriate for the larger group. If you have a small enough group, this isn't much of an imposition.

Obviously, though, this is an idea that asks for a little more time commitment than usual, and I've found that some players (often those with boring day jobs that allow them to goof off at their computers) will overuse the system if you give them the merest chance, tying up time you need for other parts of your life. So I try to make it clear that I will accept only one e-mail per week, and that it may describe no more than two relatively simple actions that the player is engaging in -- or one complicated action if it's important enough to work out in a short mini-adventure. (By the way, I never roll dice in a mini-adventure. I just decide on a narratively pleasing result and negotiate later if the player objects to something.)

Final Thoughts

As I mentioned earlier, I plan for three-hour sessions and accept it if it goes for four. I figure the length of my adventure according to the following rough formulas:

- NPC encounter: 15-30 minutes.
- Short combat: 20-40 minutes.
- Big climactic combat: 45-75 minutes.
- Figuring out a plan for what to do next: 30 minutes to 1 hour or more.

The system still isn't perfect, but I have found that the TV-efficiency model I have just described has turned the gaming sessions with my adult friends from sporadically interesting seven-hour marathons that are impossible to maintain from week to week into punchier crowd-pleasing sessions that actually last two to three months before collapsing. I like to imagine that one day I may eventually come up with a gameworld so enticing that it takes on a life of its own, inspiring fan fiction, T-shirts, in-joke bumper stickers and (maybe someday) a convention. For the time being, though, I'm just glad to be able to give my friends an opportunity to wedge in some role-playing entertainment in the midst of all the other demands adult life places on us. I hope it does the same for you, too.

Article publication date: November 17, 2000

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