***How To:*** *Run Convention Games*

*at Gen Con* **GAMES ON DEMAND 2014**

*by John Stavropoulos*

Short URL: <http://tinyurl.com/run-con-games>

START HERE

# [ What Is This ]

## Running Games at Gen Con's Games on Demand?

If yes, awesome! This document is for you.

## At Minimum

Please find 20 minutes to read this section, START HERE and the next section LEVEL 1.

## Why?

It could save you hours of making mistakes we've all made in the past by preparing you with solutions that have helped us countless times.

## Download This Document

In addition to reading this here (which is live doc that will be updated with changes), you can download this as a static PDF, ePub, Mobi here: <http://tinyurl.com/run-con-games-download>

## How to Use LEVEL 1

LEVEL 1 takes around 15 minutes to read and is broken down into subsections: Before Con, Before Game, Game Start, During Game, Game End, and After Game. **Why?** So you can read and reference only what you need when you need it.

## LEVEL 2 and 3

LEVEL 2 and 3 take around 20 minutes to read each, are structured the same way as Level 1 but are for advanced topics. The more advanced, the more specific the advice… which could be very useful OR so specific it might not apply to your game. So thus those sections are optional. We know you are busy so we want to save you as much time as possible.

## Special Thanks To:

Mikael Andersson, Kira Magrann, Jason Morningstar, Alex Fradera, Steve Segedy, Kristin Firth, Jeremy Friesen, Mark Diaz Truman, Anna Kreider, Sean Nittner, Mark Causey.

## Questions About This Document?

Email [john@jstav.com](mailto:john@jstav.com)

# [ Disclaimer ]

## Not Universal Rules

These are not universal rules. These are specific to Convention Games. How you run for strangers might be different than running games for friends. Additionally these rules are specific to Gen Con's Games on Demand 2014 which is specific to playing in the United States with a potential international audience. This is NOT the one true way to run games.

## Keep In Mind

There are always exceptions. Some ideas may not apply to your specific game. Additionally, many ideas might sound obvious or like common sense. But what is obvious is often not practiced (or simply forgotten in the moment) and what is common isn't, especially when you play with people from different backgrounds and cultures from all over the world. It's best to be safe, assume less, listen to each other, and learn how to run amazing games together!

LEVEL 1

# [ Before Con ]

## Your Game

Verify that your game is correct here: <http://tinyurl.com/DemandGames/available-games/> If it is not, email [god-org-gc@googlegroups.com](mailto:god-org-gc@googlegroups.com).

## Your Schedule

Overall schedule (RPGs & LARP): <http://goo.gl/WxcE6c>. LARP details: <http://goo.gl/F5aMeK>.

Questions? Email [god-org-gc@googlegroups.com](mailto:god-org-gc@googlegroups.com). **NOTE: subject to change.**

## 2014 Games on Demand Location

Note that Games on Demand will be held at the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown on the 2nd Floor in Ballroom 6:

* Address: 350 W Maryland St, Indianapolis, IN 46225
* Map: <http://tinyurl.com/DemandGames/map/>

## Free Thursday, August 14th 2014?

Thursday night at or after 8pm we're going to spend time socializing and gaming with just staff, volunteers, GMs, and friends at the Games on Demand Location above.

## New Player Friendly

Players are often new to the game you are running and possibly even new to gaming altogether (who are some of the most fun people to play with)! Don't assume anything. Bring everything you need to run the game including dice, paper, pencils and anything else required that new players may not have with them. Be prepared to teach any rules as needed.

## Public Space Friendly

Games are held in a large space with other games. Please be respectful of your neighbors. This means keeping noise at a reasonable level, no music, and minimize exceptional loudness (yelling in character).

## What Is Your Goal?

Do you plan to run a full complete session with a beginning, middle, and end? Is this a demo to teach players how to play? (it's ok to say, "we don't have time to play a full session, consider this an extended demo that will teach us how to play and leave us wanting more) Is this a playtest? Are you running an entire game with all the rules or just part of the rules? Decide what experience you are aiming for and plan accordingly. Additionally be prepared to tell your players what the experience is that you are aiming for to set their expectations and give them a chance to opt out if this is something they aren't interested in. It's better to lose a player than hang onto to someone who isn't interested in the experience you are providing.

## Sensitive or Potentially Offensive Content

Does your game deal with sensitive, potentially offensive, or controversial content?

**CONTENT / TRIGGER WARNING:** Examples include (but not limited to): sexual assault, rape, endangering or harming children or animals, highly sensitive issues around pregnancy, murder of loved ones, mental illness, torture, explicit sexual content, horror that is meant to scare the actual players, and excessive gore.

If yes, note that while Games On Demand allows most content as long as it does not break our or Gen Con’s rules, please consider the following:

* Warn your players before starting the game that it includes this content.
* We highly suggest using the X-Card (Level 2:Game Start).
* Ask yourself: Why is this content important to your game? Do you feel prepared and knowledgeable enough to include this content responsibly and sensitively?
* If you are primarily including this content to be “edgy”, we highly suggestion not doing so. This content can be handled responsibly but if the main reason for including it is to be “edgy”, that’s a warning sign that you may need to think deeper about these topics.

## Less Time Than You Think

2 hour games are often actually 1.5 hours and 4 hour games are 3.25 hours. Why? When you take into account late starts because of players signing up to play your game, players needing to leave a few minutes early to make it on time to their next event, and breaks… you end up having less time. Keep this in mind when preparing your game materials. It is better to end a little early than to go too long.

## Make or Provide Characters

We recommend that if it takes longer than 20 minutes to make characters, to instead provide pre-generated characters for your players, unless a huge part of the fun of playing the game is making characters. A compromise is to provide partially pre-generated characters that have some options for players to choose from quickly. Options don't have to be extensive, even simply 2 choices can give players a sense of ownership. Either way, please remember to bring all supplies needed to play your game (paper, dice, cards, tokens).

## Limit Character Options

You don't have to make use of every option in the game. If a game features a wide array of character types to choose from, feel free to restrict what's available. If a certain character type is difficult for new players or more challenging for a convention game, leave it out. \*World type games with too many playbooks can give players paralysis via analysis (offer 2 more than your number of players so they have choices but not too many). If you are curious, ask another GM what works well. Same with Fiasco playsets, offer 2-3 you really love, not 40.

## Character Backstories

Avoid making players read pages and pages of material just to get started playing your game. Players will get bored quickly and they may only skim this material or only remember parts of it so that it's not actually useful in play. Where possible cut down on what player have to read. Use bullet points. Provide summaries. Highlight the most important parts. Be honest, if you cut out half of this material… would it matter? If no, do it! Then cut out even more!

## Character Motivation

Depending on your game it can be helpful to be as transparent as possible. Who are the characters? Why are they important? Why should we care about them? What problem do they have to solve? Why do they care about this problem? Why do they have to solve the problem right now? What do they have that will help them solve the problem? If they don't have what they need, how can they get it? What obstacles stand in their way? What happens if they fail? What ties the characters together? What keeps the characters together? Why should the characters actually do whatever you want them to do? What can you cut out, simplify, or combine?

**Note:** One way to help ensure the players care about the answers to these questions is to answer them together with your players at the table.

## References

The less flipping through rule books during a convention game the better. If possible create or find rule cheat sheets you can reference. Or if you need to flip through rule books add tabs or bookmarks to mark often references pages for quick access. Additionally, especially if you are using prepared material… highlight the most important parts to make skimming faster.

# [ Before Game ]

## Need to Contact us at Gen Con 2014?

If you need to contact us at Gen Con 2014 (you have a question or have an emergency and can't make your game) you can do so one of three ways:

1. Talk to one of our Hosts at the Marriott Downtown Hotel (350 W Maryland St, Indianapolis, IN 46225) on the 2nd Floor in Ballroom 6 during the hours Games on Demand is open.
2. Email us at: [god-org-gc@googlegroups.com](mailto:god-org-gc@googlegroups.com)
3. Text Message us at: (317) 406-6995

**Note:** If you Email or Text Message us please identify yourself, briefly and clearly state your question or message, and tell us the best way to contact you.

## When Should I Arrive at Games on Demand?

Please arrive 15 minutes before your scheduled game. Check with the Host to tell them you are here and to find out which table to run your game at.

## When Should I Expect My Game To Start?

Because it can take a few minutes for players to sign up for games, games will often start 10-15 minutes after the start of your scheduled time slot. If you’re playing in a Games on Demand slot before your GM slot, let the hosts know so they aren’t looking for you.

## Familiarize Yourself With Games on Demand

We will have Community Standards posted to every gaming table. Take a minute to review them. Please feel free to ask the hosts any questions.

## Own Your Space

Sometimes tables are too close together with room to move them apart. Ask the Host if you can move your table to cut down on noise. Additionally Gen Con has many spaces available for running games. In some cases once a GM has all their players they will ask the Host about moving their game to a quieter nearby location if available. Do what you can to make your experience as comfortable as possible, including politely asking other games to quiet down.

## Set a Timer

It's important your game starts and ends on time. It is especially important that it ends on time! If possible you may even want to end a few minutes early or give yourself extra time if parts of your game take longer than you expected. We suggest setting a timer or alarm to remind you when you have half your time left and when you have 30 minutes left. That way you can make adjustments to ensure your game ends on time.

# [ Game Start ]

## Set Expectations

When players sit down make sure they are in the right place, at the right game, and this is something they actually want to play. Sometimes players see the name of the GM or even just a piece of art that catches their fancy and signup to play without actually know what this really is.

Be Clear. Remember your answers from "What is Your Goal?" (LEVEL 1:Before Con). Use those answers to tell players: What is this? Who is it for? Who is it not for? How long is the game? Is it cooperative or competitive? Is this a game with lots of acting, math, improv, combat, puzzles? What is the tone? Silly? Serious? Scary? Is this game Rules as Written? Is it a Hack? Why do you want to run this game? What do you hope to get out of the experience?

Let people know if this is not the game for them, no problem, they don’t have to play, they still have time to find something else, and we would rather they play something they are excited to play than suffer something that isn’t a good match for them. And even if they find out later that this is not the game for them, the door is always open and they can always leave and no one will take it personally. I like to take a break early on to give people an easy out in case they feel more comfortable leaving the game during a break.

Don't hesitate to turn someone away. Defy geek social fallacy (<http://goo.gl/bg11s>) that you should take on just one more player or adjust an 18+ game because a younger person wants to play. This is the first step to a successful game. Match the right game to the right players.

## Content Warning

Does your game deal with sensitive, potentially offensive, or controversial content?

* Warn your players before starting the game.
* We highly suggest using the X-Card (Level 2:Game Start).

## Introduce Yourselves

* Introduce yourself (optionally state your preferred pronoun and cultural background).
* Have everyone introduce themselves. Write everyone's names down.
* Ask, "why did you signup to play this game?"
* Ask, "has anyone played this game or type of game before?"
* Ask, "does anyone need to leave early or leave at a specific time?"
* Ask, "does anyone have trouble hearing and need me to sit or stand closer to them?"
* Ask, "any questions or does anyone need to tell me anything before we start?"
* Remind everyone, "the Host will come by soon to collect Generic Tickets, one for 2 hour games, and two for 4 hour games."
* Finally mention, "thank you for being here today, I'm excited, we respect each other here so let's be sure to listen and help each other have a great time, and I look forward to having a lot of fun playing this game with all of you."

## Review Community Standards

Point to the Games On Demand Community Standards policy taped to the center of each table. Give players a few minutes to review the policy and ask any questions.

## Table Rules

Feel free to come up with your own rules and let players know what is or is not acceptable in your game.

* Will there be an official break? Should we just take a break anytime we want?
* Is there a list of content not allowed in this game? Can players add to this list?
* Can players text or browse the internet at the table?
* Can players eat or talk on the phone at the table? **Note:** at GoD 2014, the answer is no.
* When it's someone else's turn can players have side conversations?
* Is out of character metagaming ok?
* Can we split the party? Should we stay together?
* Is this a railroad and we're expected to follow the GM's plot?
* If we don't know how a rule works, does the GM just make a call or do we look it up?

## Transparency and Honesty

We encourage you to be transparent and honest with your players. If the game requires the players to do a specific thing to work, just tell them you need them to do that to make the game fun. Don't try to trick them to do it. Don't handle it in game, having an NPC ask the PCs if they want to go on a quest when you NEED them to go on that quest. Just talk to your players person to person. If your game is a railroad (or less pejoratively a rollercoaster ride), tell your players. If this game is about uncovering a pre-scripted plot, say that. If it's a game where the players have to make up a lot of stuff on the fly, say that. If you are describing a scene, like a video game cut scene, tell the players that and ask them to be patient. Be transparent. Be honest.

## You are NOT a Dancing Monkey!

Some GMs feel they are responsible for the game's fun. A literal fun dispenser! But what is fun is relative to each participant and you already have enough to do that you don't need to add "reading player's minds" to the list. Make it clear to everyone that **we are ALL responsible for the group's fun and each responsible for our own fun**. We aren't mind readers. If there is something that will help make the game more fun for you, tell us. A wise CEO once said, "I don't take all the credit but I don't take all the blame." **Don't forget to have fun yourself!**

# [ During Game ]

## Hosts Will Come By To Collect Tickets

At some point during your game a Host will come by to collect Generic Tickets from your players. If you have any general questions for the host this could be a great time to ask.

## Do You Want to Play in the Next Game Slot?

Say you're running a game between 12-2pm and want to play a Games on Demand game at 2pm. When the Host comes to each table to collect tickets from your players, ask the Host for a Boarding Pass for the next game slot. The Host will also remind you if you forget.

## How to Teach Rules

**Teach as you play.** Spend more time playing than learning. Be enthusiastic.

**Teach general concepts first.** Who you play. Why. Goals. How you win. How you lose. Obstacles. Start simple and get detailed as you play. Teach exceptions later. Teach strategies later. Start with Why you would use a rule, then What the rule is, then When to use it, then How to use it.

**Use examples to illustrate** the above. Avoid being too abstract. Be brief. Teach something, then have the players do something, then repeat. Avoid overwhelming them.

**Teach what players need to know to make informed decisions.** Avoid referencing rules you haven't explained yet or asking players to make important decisions that they don't have enough information yet to make.

**Offer fair warnings as players play.** Let players take back choices if it will help them learn and if bad choices will mainly make them lose interest. Some players prefer to learn by making mistakes. It depends on the player. Offer options. If a player is about to make an ill advised choice, re-explain the rule but don't play for them.

**Guide players when to ask questions.** A player may ask something you plan to cover later and explaining now may be too confusing. Assure them you will explain that later. If it helps them, have them write down their questions so they don't forget. But questions asked to clarify a rule you just explained should be answered soon as it may be a sign players don't understand.

**Make players active in learning.** Have players read materials for you, handle game components, and help come up with examples.

## Dealing with Problematic Behavior

**You are Not Alone.** If a problem occurs in your game, first and foremost you don't have to be the person to confront anyone involved. You can call for a break and talk to the Host, ask them to intervene for you, or deal with the problem together. You are not alone. You do not have to put yourself in a position that makes you uncomfortable. If you aren't sure, talk to a Host.

**Focus on the Behavior NOT the Person.** Sometimes people who seem to act problematically may not be doing so on purpose. Sometimes the problem isn't about any specific individual but miscommunication about what we are doing, who this is for, who this is not for, what behavior is ok, and what behavior is not ok. It might simply be a mismatch of goals and a misunderstanding of what the game is. The first step in avoiding problems is being clear what we are doing, who it is for, and who it is not for and give people a chance to leave themselves before the game starts.

**Correct Miscommunications.** Often when we take a break to clarify again what a game is or isn't, the seemingly problematic person will stop or opt out of the event. Some people are distracted, some people are bad at picking up social cues. Being subtle may not be enough, Be direct but polite, know what you want and don't want, and tell people clearly and directly.

**Maybe They Don't Intend to Act Problematically BUT their Actions still are.** Someone might be behaving problematically without intending to do so. Maybe their actions, for example, are internalized sexism or racism from their larger culture that they don't consciously realize how they are hurting other people. They might think of themselves as a nice person, their friends and family might think they are the greatest person ever, but their specific actions might still be problematic. That's why avoid focusing on the person, focus on the person's specific actions right now. We don't care if someone is a racist, we care if someone said something racist.

**Tolerating One Person's Behavior May Mean Ostracizing Five Others.** GMs sometimes worry or feel bad confronting a person for problematic behavior. People who have been ostracized themselves may feel bad about ostracizing others (or simply want to avoid conflict). But if I am at a table with six players… and one is behaving problematically… by not stopping that one person's behavior we may inadvertently ostracize 5 other people. To be clear, their behavior is NOT your fault. This isn't about blame but making the best out of a difficult situation.

**How To Ask People to Leave.** If you do feel comfortable asking a person to leave your game (if you don't, talk to the Host), we recommend:

* Call for a break.
* Talk to the person away from the table (so they feel less defensive) but still in public (so you and they feel safe).
* Don’t assume they are acting problematically on purpose. It could be a miscommunication or possibly a mismatch of goals or styles.
* Don't attack. Don’t make it personal. It's not about WHO they are, it's WHAT they did.
* Be direct, be clear but polite.
* You might say, “I noticed X seems to be happening and I wanted to talk to you about it away from everyone else. Is everything ok?”
* If it becomes clear that it is NOT a miscommunication, then point to the code of conduct or rules posted everywhere and ask them to stop doing that specific thing or if they want, they can leave. If you prefer you can skip asking them to change the behavior and jump right to asking them to leave. If you want them to leave, don't paint this is a negotiation.
* If they want another chance and you are comfortable giving them one, recommend alternative specific actions they could do that would best fit the group and game.
* Just because we ask someone to leave does not mean we are now enemies or we hate each other. We can wish them a good time at the rest of the convention. Maybe this specific event is simply a bad fit for them. Don't make it personal.

## What if YOUR Behavior Causes a Problem?

We all make mistakes. If you do something that offends or hurts another player we recommend the following:

**Talk.** Offer but don't pressure to talk away from the other players. Sometimes having an audience can artificially intensify the situation. That said, while it might be a good idea to talk away from the other players we recommend still talking in public so that you both feel safe and not isolated. Always give people space and easy outs if they want to leave the situation. Sometimes having a third party can also help. Feel free to ask a Host for help.

**Apologize.** Embrace what you may have done. Even if there are multiple sides and nuance to what happened, even if what you did was not intentional, if your actions hurt someone… apologize. Don't say, "I'm sorry you were offended". That makes it about them and not you and can be patronizing. Say, "I'm sorry I did [specific thing]". Acknowledge what you did.

**Listen Hard.** Listen to what they have to say. Given them space. Don't interrupt. Show them that you want to listen. Be open. Don't be defensive. Don't think of yourself as objective or "the rational one" and the other side as "too emotional". Even if you don't agree with specific points, keep listening. This isn't a debate or about winning. Sometimes you might need to listen to parts you may not agree with to get to the parts that will help you avoid this situation in the future. Be patient. Have empathy. Be respectful.

**Learn and Improve.** Use what you gathered from listening and incorporate any lessons into your future actions and behavior. A lot of progress comes from making mistakes, listening, learning, and growing.

## Model Behavior

Lead By Example. If you want players to be excited, be excited. If you want players to use colorful descriptive language, use colorful descriptive language.

## Be Direct

Many people don't get what they want because they don't ask. Don't want the players to split the party? Tell them. Want them to split the party? Tell them. You don't have to do everything "in game" or "in character". Tell them player to player what you want and don't want. Even better, say WHY. People are more likely to comply if they know the reason. "Let's split the group into two, but not more, so we can cover more ground since we only have 45 minutes left to play and I want us to finish on time so you can all get to your next game."

# [ Game End ]

## Don't Go Over Your Time

It is best to end a little early than to end late.

## Fast Forward or Remove Resources

If you are running out of time, fast forward the least interesting, important, and dramatic parts of the game. If you are playing a game with resource management, detailed combat, or numerically based victory conditions that determine when the game ends, then ask the players if it is ok to change those numbers so that you can end the game on time. Ask, be transparent, explain why, and aim to do so earlier than later so players don't feel like you are just "giving them a cheap victory" and there is still plenty of game to play and uncertainty and choice after you've made the needed changes.

# [ After Game ]

## Clean Up

Please ask your players to help clean up your table. Throw away any garbage, clean any spills, move things back to where they started. The next GM and players will be very appreciative and we can use all the help you can offer.

## Event Feedback

Is there anything we at Games On Demand could have done better for you? Please leave any feedback with the Hosts or email us at [god-org-gc@googlegroups.com](mailto:god-org-gc@googlegroups.com).

LEVEL 2

# [ Before Con ]

## Know your Strengths and Weaknesses

When preparing to run a game, you can minimize your prep by recognizing your strengths and weaknesses. For things you are strong at, you may require less prep. For things you are weaker at, more prep may help. For example, I'm bad at character names so I prepare a list of names to use. But I'm great at coming up with surprise twists so I don't need to prepare anything. What you need to prepare will depend on your specific game but also on your specific needs. Don't be shy about leaning on other GMs and Host for help, we're a very supportive community.

## Write a Script

Most of us forget things. That's ok. When people run Monsterhearts, I've noticed most of the times people forget to Highlight character stats. What I do is write down a quick checklist of things to do when I run my favorite games so I don't have to bother memorizing anything. And if I know there is something I frequently forget I will highlight it so it stands out.

## Diverse Characters

Avoid having all available characters simply be straight white males. Offer options with diverse genders, diverse sexuality, name that don't all sound like "Bob Smith", diverse races, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, beliefs, economic and social classes, family types, diverse places of birth, personality types, flaws, and body types.

Let players change these options. If one of the character options is male and a player wants to play them as a trans woman, let them. And don't assume female players want to play female characters and vice versa or that female players want to play healer roles or male players want to play fighters.

**Note:** people understandably think that if they leave all of these options blank, if your game has no race for example, that is diverse or inclusive. But unfortunately this does not seem to be the case. Without intending it, many people fill in blanks with whatever is default in their local status quo. Which often isn't very diverse and characters end up being similar.

# [ Before Game ]

## Don't Lose Your Voice

Especially if you run games back to back, it's easy to hurt your voice. Conventions can be loud and people end up talking louder and louder over each other. In the section BEFORE GAME (below) we'll talk about tips on how to deal with the noise problem but for now let's focus on your voice. No one size fits all, so not every solution may be a good fit for you but there are plenty of options to try out:

* Sleep at least 7 hours a night
* Drink room temperature water and stay hydrated
* Drink tea instead of coffee, especially tea with honey and lemon (also Throat Coat tea)
* Slow down, don't talk too fast, remember to breath deeply
* Avoid shallow breaths
* Avoid dairy
* Chew on throat lozenges (pectin based are recommended, avoid sugary options)
* I've never tried it but some people claim hot water with apple cider vinegar helps
* Don't talk when you don't have to
* Avoid talking in overly loud bars and parties at night
* Have players do as much of the talking as possible (give them handouts to read)

# [ Game Start ]

## X-Card

An X-Card is an optional tool (created by John Stavropoulos) that allows anyone in your game (including you) to edit out any content anyone is uncomfortable with as you play. Since most RPGs are improvisational and we won't know what will happen till it happens, it's possible the game will go in a direction people don't want. An X-Card is a simple tool to fix problems as they arise.

**To use, at the start of your game, simply say:**

*“I’d like your help. Your help to make this game fun for everyone. If anything makes anyone uncomfortable in any way…* **[ draw X on an index card ]** *…just lift this card up, or simply tap it* **[ place card at the center of the table ]**. *You don’t have to explain why. It doesn't matter why. When we lift or tap this card, we simply edit out anything X-Carded. And if there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately. I know it sounds funny but it will help us play amazing games together and usually I’m the one who uses the X card to protect myself from all of you! Please help make this game fun for everyone. Thank you!"*

**Notes:**

* Sometimes the speech above is more useful that the X-Card itself!
* Use the X-Card early, even on yourself, to lead by example, and model the behavior.
* The X-Card does not have to be a tool of last resort. The less special it feels, the more you use it, the more likely someone will use it when it really is badly needed.
* The X-Card is not a replacement for conversation. If you prefer to talk about an issue that comes up instead of using the X-Card, please do. Just because the X-Card is available does not mean it has to be used. But when it is used, respect the person who uses it and don't ask why or start a conversation about the issue.
* The X-Card is a safety net, but not everyone will feel comfortable using it in all situations. If a player had a problem with the game and wants to talk to you about it afterward… please listen. It it not okay to say "but you didn't use the X-Card" as a defense. Don't use the X-Card offensively. Listen and talk it out.
* If you aren't sure what was X-Carded, call for a break and talk with the person in private.
* Don't use the X-Card as an excuse to push boundaries. It's not a Safe Word.
* The X-Card is not an excuse to try to get back to the game as soon as possible. People matter more than the game. If you need to take a break, take a break.
* Read more here: <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>

## Tent Cards

It can be useful to use tent cards to remember everyone's character names. Each player grab an Index Card, fold it in half, write your character's name on both sides in dark text (markers are great), and stand up the index card in front of you.

# [ During Game ]

## Golden Rule Sucks

Don't treat people how you want to be treated. Treat people how THEY want to be treated. And the only way to know that is to simply talk to your players. Don't try to trick them to reveal information. Just ask. Most gaming problems are social problems and most problems are often resolved by simply talking to people honestly, respectfully, politely, without accusation or aggression, and listening to each other with empathy.

## Customize Conflicts to Characters

Characters are often alibis indicating what a player wants from the game. Often it is obvious… a player may choose a fighter because they want to fight. If it isn't obvious, simply ask them what excites them about their character choice and what they hope to see in the game that can give them chances to shine. Take notes. Then tailor your game's scenes, conflicts, and challenges to the character's strengths and player's desires. You have a driver, thief, and fighter? Create situations that involves a chase, stealing, and fighting.

## Be Enthusiastic

Encourage players. Be enthusiastic. When they have good ideas, tell them. Be their cheerleader. Cheer them on. Be their biggest fan even as they are destroying your NPCs and plot!

## Be Non-Judgmental

Reserve judgment. If a player comes up with an idea that sounds questionable don't shut it down, instead ask questions. "How do you see that working?" "What do you hope to accomplish?" Sometimes a boring idea is exactly what is needed. Sometimes a questionable idea only sounds questionable because you are missing key details or misunderstood. Think of new ideas as newly born. It's easy to destroy something when it is newly born and defenseless. Instead work with your players to build up their ideas and allow them to grow. That said, if an idea is offensive or hurtful to other players or damaging the tone of the game, feel free to talk to the player and offer alternatives. Don't just say no. Say "no but…" or "yes only if…" Don't just stop momentum, redirect it, while keeping the player's engagement in mind.

## Recruit Players

Ask players to help you to make running the game easier. If a player has played before, ask them to help teach other players. If a player has a rule book, ask them to look up rules. If a player has great handwriting, ask them to keep notes. If a player loves drawing, ask them to draw maps. Ask players to read handouts. Recruit players to run NPCs, threats, and monsters. You might be surprised how much you can delegate to players! Soon they might GM the game for themselves and give you the credit!

## Quiet & Loud Players

Note who is quiet and who is loud. Stand or sit closer to the quiet players, further from the louder players. This way it's easier to hear everyone.

## Player Asking Too Many Questions?

Do you have a player asking too many questions again and again? Call for a break. Talk to them. Sometimes they aren't expressing what they really want to ask so they keep asking. Do a little digging. Cut to the chase and simply ask them directly and politely what they want or what they are afraid of. Address their real question or concerns. Or maybe they are asking lots of questions because they are confused about the rules. Enlist other players who know the rules to help them. Maybe they are anxious, afraid of making the wrong choices so they ask lots of questions to protect themselves. Go easy on them, give them easier challenges, and offer to let them take back choices if they misunderstood how something worked so they can be less defensive and hesitant in their choices. If it continues to be a problem, perhaps they are not a good fit for your game.

## Players Want Different Things?

One group wants to fight, another group wants to talk in character… if the two groups are stepping on each other's toes… separate them! Split the party. Then play scenes at the same time cutting back and forth.

## Play Problematic NPCs Without Being Problematic

Sometimes you play a villain who is just awful… and sometimes you do such a good job playing them people might actually feel emotional or confuse you with the villain. If I know a villain is particularly awful, I can create distance to keep things from getting too emotional by simply describing what the villain does in third person (rather than speaking in their voice). Alternatively if I'm using a tool like the X-Card (see above) I will encourage players to X-Card me, "this villain is a jerk and if me playing them gets too much for any reason please X-Card what I'm doing and I'll take a step back". And finally I'll acknowledge that the villain is a jerk and how they are jerk, "wow this NPCs is a conceited classist jerk", which makes it clear that I and the NPC are not the same person. Obviously the NPC is not real, and obviously this is a game, but as humans we have an amazing capacity to empathize with others, including fictional characters. We can sometimes feel things we imagine that we are not actually experiencing. We're amazing that way! That's partially why roleplaying is so powerful but this is also why things can get out of hand. Luckily with just a few precautions you can minimize the potential negatives and enjoy all the positives.

## Start Scenes with WHY

Normally to start a scene (often called framing a scene or scene framing), GMs simply answer When, Where, Who, What, and Why. More specifically:

* When is the scene?
* Where is it?
* Who is there?
* What are they doing?
* Why is the above important enough to spend time playing out?

Instead start with WHY. Starting with why quickly tells you if everything else makes sense for your game and players. When thinking about WHY, ask yourself:

* What questions haven't we answered yet?
* Who hasn't had enough of a chance to shine?
* What themes haven't we explored?
* Given the types of characters the players chose, what types of conflicts or situations would let them show off their strengths? What would challenge their weaknesses?
* Is the game too predictable? What twists can I introduce that will keep players excited but won't break their suspensions of disbelief?
* What do we need to move the game forward?
  + Do the PCs have a clear goal?
  + Do we know why the players should care?
  + Are there clear options for accomplishing that goal?
  + Have we shown what is at stake if the PCs fail?
  + Have we shown what obstacles stand in the PCs way?
  + Have we foreshadowed future obstacles?
  + Have we shown or explored the consequences of past scenes?

## Add Drama to Scenes

You can add drama to most scenes by simply adding:

* Stakes that put what the players care about at risk.
* Environments that isolate so running away isn't an option.
* Constraints so players have meaningful choices but aren't infinite and overwhelming.
* Time limits. No time to make the perfect plan. You have minutes or seconds to act.
* Escalate. Time is running out. The more time that passes, the more the stakes increase.
* Twist. Question and challenge expectations but don't break suspension of disbelief.
* Hope. The situation isn't impossible. We shouldn't just give up. We can do this!

## Skip Conflicts Without Stakes

Is there a fight but nothing on the line? Is the result a foregone conclusion? Are we just going through the motions because "we're supposed to" but we don't really care because there is nothing at stake, no personal investment, no surprise, and no matter what happens things won't really change. Skip it!

## End Scenes

End scenes before they become boring. Cut away earlier than later. And look for that right moment… where something significant changes or a player comes to a revelation or a player asks a crucial question that points to future possibilities to end the scene. Look for forward momentum to spring forth to the next scene before the energy of the scene runs out.

If I'm running an investigation game where each scene involves finding clues, I will use the Scene Card (from Gumshoe) to indicate that there are no more clues to be found (simply write "Scene" on a card and lift it up when needed).

If I'm running a game where players are making up a lot of the game's content, I will simply say "Last Line" (technique from Kristin Firth) to indicate the players can say one last line before the scene ends. That way the cut isn't sudden but there is a clear warning to wrap everything up.

## Keep Notes

Take special note of what players pay attention to. Which objects do they inspect? Which NPCs do they talk to? What do they ask questions about? What do you mention that excites them? What questions do players investigate that are still left unanswered? Write these things down. If players pay extra attention to them, make them more important. Reincorporate them. Note, you don't just have to reincorporate or write down literal things like person, places, and objects. This also works with tones and theme. Especially theme.

## Not Sure What's Next?

Slow Down. Take a break. Ask the players questions to fish for Ideas. "What's the best but realistic thing that could happen to your character next?" "What's the worst?" "What does your character wish would happen?" "What does your character fear might happen?" "What is your character thinking right now?" "What does your character think about what happened and what consequences might happen next?" You can ask in the open or even have player's write their answers secretly on a note and pass them to you so you can mix and match answers. Or be direct and ask for help, "I'm not sure what should happen next, what do you think?"

## Spotlight

Where possible offer players the opportunity at equal spotlight. Note, it's important that we offer it, not that the offer is taken since not everyone wants to be the focus of attention.

It can be difficult to track how much spotlight players are getting, or if someone is being left out, especially in games where there are no official turns and you have a lot to remember as the GM. Here are multiple examples of how to track spotlight:

* Player who was least active goes next. Unsure? Ask.
* Write down each player's name. When that player does something significant (roll, make a choice, use a move, have a conversation) add a check next to their name. Try to give opportunities to each player to earn an even number of checks relative to each other.
* Give each player 3 tokens. When a player wants to do something significant, they spend a token. Everyone gains more tokens after everyone has spent their tokens. If a player has tokens but doesn't know what to do, they may give their tokens to other players.
* Grab a blank index card for each player. Write their character's name on each side. On one side, write "ready", on the other "acted". Start all cards with the "ready" side face up. When a player acts, flip their card to the "acted" side.
* Have players choose who goes next. Emphasize that everyone should have a chance to equally participate.
* If your game has initiative, roll it, and use this turn order for everything including actions outside of combat.

**Note:** if you know who is going next, remind them so they can be ready. If someone plays a scene that is going long, cut away from that scene and then after everyone has had a chance to play, cut back to that scene.

## Failure is Fun

Roleplaying is roleplaying despite if a character fails or succeeds at an action. Failure can be even more fun to role play and show everyone who your character is and how they behave when things don't go their way. Let players both describe how they succeed and fail.

## Fail Forward

When a player fails that doesn't mean the game has to hit a dead end or stall. Use failure to give players what they want but at a cost, or to present new opportunities and obstacles that move the game forward. Since a convention game has so little time, try to avoid anything that slows the game down like red herrings or rolling for information you NEED to move forward.

## Fail Logically

If you are playing a game where you decide what failure means, try to make choices that don't catch the players off guard or make them feel cheated. Even better foreshadow the potential consequences before a player tries an action. Or even simpler tell them what the consequences will be so that the player can make informed decisions. Avoid sudden surprises that may break suspension of disbelief.

# [ Game End ]

## Epilogues

They say how you start and end is more important than the middle because those are the parts people remember. Endings especially. And endings are especially hard because what is a good ending for a particular player and their specific character is difficult to know let alone fit everything in given the time constraints of a convention game. So what do I do? I have multiple endings. Multiple endings that the players completely determine. How?

I end 5 minutes early, turn to everyone and say, "tell us what happens to your character… anything… could be seconds from now… hours… days… years… decades… no resolution rules, just tell us how you want their story to end, even if you died, tell us the legacy you left behind but if it involves another player's character or something they care about, ask their permission first. Beyond that, anything goes! Who wants to start?"

And it's amazing. Anything a player wanted to do but there was no time for or was left unfinished they can wrap up seamlessly and to their complete satisfaction within minutes and it leaves everyone on a high note and feeling great about the overall experience.

# [ After Game ]

## Make Friends

Offer your contact information to people you enjoyed playing with. Don't pressure them to do the same in case the feeling isn't mutual. Be friendly. Many people end up making long term friends at these events and will even go onto organize more games later at the same convention!

## Player Feedback

If you feel comfortable, feel free to ask your players for feedback on your game. We recommend avoiding closed questions like "was it fun" which is unlikely to get a "no" even if players had a bad time and a "yes" doesn't actually tell you much. Instead ask open ended questions that are unlikely to be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" for example: "what was your favorite part of the game", "what one thing would you like to be different", and if players are uncomfortable giving live feedback offer them a blank sheet of paper to write thoughts down or given them your email so they can write you later.

LEVEL 3

# [ Before Con ]

## Games on Demand Diversity Training

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcQX4Rjk5NE>

Text Notes: <http://goo.gl/8LNLQD>

## Character Sheets

Especially if you are not running a full game, hide any information on the character sheet that you won't actually use. And the reverse, if you know there are specific parts of the character sheet that are especially important, highlight those parts so they stand out. Additionally it can be helpful to provide a basic rule summary of the most important and most used rules on the character sheet for player's quick reference.

## Scale Down

Some games include resources, meta points, or tools that assume you are playing multiple sessions. Sometimes these resources do not scale well to a single session leaving the players with too many options or too much easily spendable power with few consequences making the game way too easy. If this is the case, consider scaling down those resources. You can even do this with less obvious aspects of the game. If it's a game like D&D, maybe you start the game wounded with less hit points than normal.

## Scale Up or Fast Forward

Some games really shine when you play multiple sessions. Sometimes you can capture the feeling of playing multiple sessions by starting characters off with enough experience points (or the equivalent) so they can level up in play and experience that part of the game. You may even be able to shorten your game or fast forward certain elements so you can play the equivalent of 2 sessions in a single game. That way if there are any interesting end of game systems that feed into future sessions, you can actually experience them in a convention game.

## Don't Play Racist or Sexist NPCs

* Google "[Specific Race/Ethnicity/Culture] + Stereotypes". Also read: <http://tinyurl.com/jwbruz9>. Avoid these stereotypes!
* Google "Gender/Woman/Female/Man/Male + Stereotypes". Also read: <http://tinyurl.com/ove3mzq>. Avoid these stereotypes!
* Don't use bad accents, especially to represent marginalized people.
* Don't talk in gibberish in place of real language. Do NOT "ching ching chong".
* Don't represent everyone who shares specific characteristics as all being the same.
* Don't **just** feature women, people of color, LGBTQ people, people with special needs in evil or weak roles, villain roles, victim roles, or roles of people who need to be rescued.
* Treat characters as real people with real motivations. Put yourself in their shoes. What would you do? Are their motivations stereotypes or tropes? If so challenge or break them.
* Try to avoid giving female NPC the stereotypical gamer healer role.
* Avoid white, heterosexual, north american, able bodied, male being "normal" or default.

## Avoid Making Every NPC You

If I'm short on time, without intending it, I often make NPCs essentially… me (or at least similar). To avoid this habit, first I need to be conscious of it, second as a general rule I will try to make 51% of NPCs not the same Gender/Race/Sex/Age/Class/Body Type as me, and thirdly I'll construct lists of diverse characteristics appropriate to my game that I can quickly look up to make NPCs:

* Genders
* Names from all over the world (so characters aren't all "Bob Smith", I use <http://www.parents.com/baby-names/> and <http://www.babynames.com/Names/search.php>
* Ages
* Jobs, cultural roles, family roles
* Economic and social classes
* Races, ethnicities, backgrounds
* Locations they were born at, grew up in, or live
* Sexual Orientation
* Personality traits: <http://ideonomy.mit.edu/essays/traits.html>, <http://goo.gl/PKuA0>, and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Five_personality_traits>
* Flaws: <http://goo.gl/tb82oh> and <http://goo.gl/f7wEn>
* Body types
* Hair styles
* Fashion styles

**Tips:** I will then roll these randomly or choose the options I want and then cross them off so I can force myself not to use the same options again and again. For lists with few options, like gender, I might list the same options a few times so I have more to choose and cross off.

# [ Game Start ]

## Player vs Player

Some games might involve players conflicting with other players via their characters. Be careful. It's easy for people to get carried away and what starts just as a game leading to real life bad feelings. Be careful and jump in before things get heated. Additionally check with all participants before starting with a PvP conflict to ensure that everyone wants to participate. Be clear what the stakes of winning and losing are. Remind players that their characters might be antagonistic but both players should be having fun. If they aren't it's a good time to skip these conflicts and move forward, even if that means a conflict is cut short or left unresolved.

## Ask Permission

Sometimes characters have antagonistic or romantic connections to each other that could make someone uncomfortable, especially if they did not opt in to such a connection. Ask permission before establishing these connections. Instead of saying, "my character is totally your character's rival", say, "would it be ok if our characters are rivals" or even, "who here wants to be rivals with my character?"

## Warning - Leader Characters

In general I prefer that all characters are equivalent in terms of power or status. I especially try to avoid leader type characters who might end up with too much spotlight or ordering other characters around (possibly taking choices away from players). If you need to include such characters, I would suggest giving these characters to one of two types of people:

* Quiet or new players. This may give them extra room to shine and they're less likely to abuse such a position. But make sure they are ok with it and the extra attention won't make them anxious. Don't pressure.
* Experience players who run games themselves and are sensitive to managing spotlight. These players can grab the spotlight and treat it like a ball to pass around and keep it moving. They can use their position to highlight others.

# [ During Game ]

## Start Slow

Establish what is normal for the characters. What is their day to day lives like? What do they care about? Who do they rely on? Who relies on them? Where are they weak? Where are they strong? What gets them up in the morning? What keeps them up at night? Build the foundation to twist and turn.

## Start Strong

Alternatively to starting slow… start in the middle of a problem, in the middle of action… skip the introductions, history lessons, and origins stories and jump right to it. Learn the background details as you play or later via flashbacks. Show don't tell. Start with a fight, chase, or death.

## Flashbacks or Twists Fix Problems

Something Doesn't Make Sense? Maybe it doesn't make sense because we are missing context. Flashback! Use quick flashbacks to give context to fill in any missing logical puzzle pieces. Or… maybe it DOES make sense in a surprising way that could provide fun twists. For example, I had a game where the players were defeated but their enemy, a stranger to them, left them alive. One player exclaimed, "that doesn't make sense, why would they leave us alive?" Instead of getting defensive, I said, "EXACTLY… why would they? why… unless… maybe they know you… maybe they aren't a stranger… maybe there is a larger plan…" and all of a sudden the player went from momentarily annoyed to intrigued. Players vocalizing their thoughts might seem negative if its harsh sudden criticism but ultimately it's a gift… you don't have to read the player's minds… they are telling you what they like, don't, or what is confusing and then you can quickly and seamlessly course correct.

## Use Mistakes

When we play we may not be imagining the same things. You describe a bar but in your head they only serve cheap beer, in another player's head customers are drinking expensive wine. Someone makes a comment revealing that you aren't all on the same page… and while it is tempting to correct people… STOP… why? Is it really important that this bar serve cheap beer only? Or, maybe that is true… but… the customers the other player imagined are special opening new possibilities. Maybe the bar owner is trying to impress them. Maybe the customers are high status conceited people who refuse to drink what the bar has to offer and brought their own alcohol with them. Don't be quick to shut down diverging ideas… maybe they are opportunities to say yes to and then build on them.

## Rule Mistakes

What do you do when you got a rule wrong in a way that stopped a player from getting what they wanted when it should have been, by the rules, theirs? Rewind? Give the player something else or a choice of options as an alternative to compensate for the loss? There is no one right answer so choose what you think is appropriate for the situation but be careful not to ignore the situation in case it upsets the player in question. Usually this is very easy to fix but if ignored could lead to a player withdrawing from the game.

## Pacing, Information, and Secrets

Try to make all the very basic info clear within the first 30 minutes of the game. The basics of Who, What, Why, When, Where. Quickly the players should know what is expected of them, their options, why it is important, what is stopping them, and why they should care.

Between the halfway point and the game's climax, we encourage you to reveal any secrets. Secrets can be great when they feed directly into playing the game but frustrating if they are never revealed or revealed too late. Try to reveal secrets early so players can play with them.

Climax early. If you game has a big battle… don't wait till you have just a few minutes left in the game. Sometimes what's great about the big scene is what happened afterwards. The consequences and exploring them. But if you run out of time you will miss out.

## Ask Provocative Questions to Connect PCs to NPCs

Ask provacative questions and build on the answers to connect PCs to NPCs even if you have to make up those connections at the moment you meet a new person. "Last time you met they bested you, how?" "That scar on their face… you gave it to them, how?" "You recognize that voice… those eyes… that smell… from [insert possible meaningful connection]... who is it?". It can be more engaging to encounter people you are connected to rather than stranger after stranger. That said, don't over do it. At some point if everyone knows everyone else and it doesn't make sense in the specific setting you are playing in… you could break people's suspension of disbelief.

## Quick NPCs - People You Know

Write down the name of 2 people you know or characters you like from Film/TV/Books (that aren't racist or sexist caricatures or stereotypes). Describe each in 3 words. Mix and match till you have a new character to use.

## Quick NPCs - Reflections of the PCs

Use the PCs as inspiration! Imagine your NPCs are twisted reflections of the PCs themselves. Hold a mirror up to them… turn it inside out, upside down, crack the glass… what do you see? Specifically look at the PCs and describe what stands out about them, what makes them special. Make a list. Then take each item on the list and make a new list by writing down its opposite and a version that is similar but made extreme. So if a PC is Loyal, write down Betrayer (opposite) and Obsessed (extreme). Then pick 3 options from this new list and make an NPC.

## Quick Names

Look at your NPCs description and give them a Literal name or Ironic name. Like Pig Face (literal) or Tiny Giant (ironic). Alternatively you can take the name of a friend and change one letter and/or add letters. John becomes Ohn or JohR.

## Repeat Names

Names can be hard for players to remember. Repeat NPC names. Write them down on index cards and place them on the table where everyone can see them. Make it clear who's talking (point to the NPCs name).

## Breaks - Cliffhangers TV Style

I like to have something dramatic happen right before calling for a break to build anticipation so players are excited to come back to the game after the break. Maybe right after a fight starts… or a big twist happens… or a big reveal occurs… call for a break and resolve it or show the consequences after everyone gets back.

## After Break

Ask players to summarize what happened. Note what they remembered and what they forgot. What they forgot might have been uninteresting to them or too complicated to remember. Maybe leave it out or simplify. When they recall what they remembered, take special note of anything they describe in detail or with excitement. Give extra focus to those elements and build on them.

Alternatively it can be fun for players to take a moment and roleplay as normal people in the world and tell us from their perspective what they think is happening in the form of rumors and gossip. This is can tell you what players feel about the game but also give them a fun chance to quickly further flesh out the world.

## Describe - Show Don't Tell

Describe around something, what something does, how the world reacts to it, the sounds, smell, texture, shapes, movement… describe as much as possible without explicitly naming what you are describing. But be brief and only say enough to convey meaning and emotion. For example, instead of simply saying you arrive in NYC… I might describe the sound of honking horns in gridlock traffic, the vibration of a subway train shuffling by underneath the sidewalk under your feet, the impossibly high skyscrapers obscuring the sun, the smell of sweaty people overcrowding each other interrupted by burned meat on a stick from a street vendor hawking their wares at you. Of course if being in a city isn't actually important and someplace you will only pass through for a few seconds… simply calling it a city, telling not showing, can save you time.

## Describe - The Camera like a Movie

Imagine your game is a movie. What does the camera see? Where does it focus? Zoom? Pan? Describe the camera cutting from scene to scene. Describe who the camera focuses on to indicate who has the spotlight (the rest of you are on the scene but out of focus as the audience wants to see what X is doing now). Describing from whose perspective the camera looks (a monster stalking the heroes, a survivor hiding inside a closet). Use the camera to show dramatic irony. As a character brags what they will do to another character if they were here, focus the camera on the person they are talking about quietly rolling their eyes behind them (unbeknownst to the braggart but obvious to us the audience). Use the camera as an alibi to cut off people who are talking too long when it is time to move to another player. Pretend your hands are the camera and point the camera towards who's next as you pan between players.

## Warning - Convention Gonzo

Keep your games human and grounded – over the top is a lot of fun but at conventions sometimes players tend to already go over the top themselves since this is only a single game with strangers. The stakes feel low so they might throw caution to the wind and act gonzo. Which is ok depending on your specific game but if you are going gonzo and the players are going gonzo right away… soon nothing might matter as everything feels consequence free and quickly what might feel super amazing awesome may soon feel emotionless, detached, and "who cares"... and you may still have a hour left to play. Escalate slowly. If a scene is gonzo, try to have the next scene more grounded. Keep a balance.

## Forget Awesome

People worry about being awesome which doesn't make them more awesome, it makes them more anxious! Or they think of something they think is awesome, spring it on everyone, and no one cares leaving them disappointed. Forget being awesome. Instead focus on making things for players to interact with. Then actively listen to your players. React to their actions. Show consequences. Present opportunities. Do what makes sense. Forget being original. Forget creativity. Given what just happened, what makes the most sense to happen next? Do that. Sell your players actions. Did they just give an inspired speech? Have NPCs act inspired! Did they just intimidate someone? Show that person scared. What's more important that being awesome is listening and reacting. Establish a rhythm. Help each other.

## Metagame Techniques

Before using these techniques in game we recommend you practice them with your players before the game starts:

* **Whisper**: the GM whisper ideas to the player, thoughts their characters might have, ideas of what to do, or questions to ponder, that they can feel free to ignore or use as they wish. Inspired by Bird in Ear from Nordic LARP.
* **Monologue**: the GM will point to a player and say Monologue. Then the player places two fingers against their own temple and speaks their character's thoughts aloud. Players can also volunteer to do this themselves to make subtext in game transparent. It's also a great technique for quiet characters. Just because a character is quiet does not meant the player has to be quiet.
* **Harder:** the GM says Harder and motions with their hands in a "come here" gesture to indicate to the player to escalate their actions.
* **Softer:** the GM says Softer and motions with their hands in a "pushing away" gesture to indicate to the player to soften or de-escalate their actions.
* **Act / Time Restrictions:** the GM can set meta rules tied to time. For example, "no killing each other's characters till we have 30 minutes left."

## Player Engagement

What's dramatic, exciting… what holds player's attention? **Contrast.**

Contrast as the balance between the known and the unknown and the relatable mixed with surprise. As human beings we look for patterns. If someone says 1 then 2… we expect 3 to be next. By identifying patterns we can make assumptions, feel less stress, pay less attention, and be comfortable. Patterns seemingly normalize the world around us and makes things predictable. Humor and Horror use this against us.

Jokes work in 3 steps. 1. Introduce something that feels normal, relatable, and understandable but interesting enough to pay attention to. 2. Reinforce number one through repetition or introducing what logically comes next to create a pattern and expectation that the next step will be more of the same. 3. Break the pattern suddenly in unexpected and surprising ways that don't break suspension of disbelief. Horror does the same thing. 1. Something normal but feels slightly wrong. 2. More normal. 3. HORROR… what is normal is turned inside out!

The key points here are introduce elements that players find relatable and understandable but interesting, repeat them, and then add surprising twists that don't break suspension of disbelief. You can do this with locations, plots, and NPCs. This Person/Place/Thing is just like X and X BUT Y!

Additionally RPGs are an interactive medium so you can build player engagement by giving players meaningful choices and then show them how their choices created impactful change in the game.

And lastly you can build player engagement by involving them in the game directly. Ask players questions that help define the world and build on their answers.

That all said, please note that what is relatable and what is exciting is relative. You might say, "this bar is just like that bar from that video game" but if I have not played that video game I may have no idea what you mean. Also, combat may be exciting (for some people) but three combats in a row may become boring for everyone. Again, use contract to your advantage. Think of your scenes as different parts of a song, vary the rhythms and types of sounds so people don't become bored with what was once exciting and is now predictable. Have scenes rotate back and forth between short and less short scenes, fast scenes and slower scenes, talking and fighting, exploring and reflecting, emotion and data, loud and quiet, small and big. Keep things moving and varied to help players stay interested and focused.

# [ Game End ]

## Movie Credits

Players seem to jump for joy when the game ends and I describe the screen going black and the credits starting to roll. Immediately it frames the entire experience as a story in our collective imagination streamlined inside our imperfect memories to perhaps be something that was even better than it might have actually been. It's magical. It's why I love gaming and love people.

As the credits roll I like to push the metaphor by listing:

* Starring [ Character Names ] played by [ Player Names ]
* Featuring [ NPC Names ]
* Directed by [ GM Name ]
* Written by [ All Our Names ]
* Thanks to [ Game Name ] by [ Designer Name ]
* Special Thanks to Games On Demand and Gen Con [ Insert Year ]
* Till next time!

A fun extra I sometimes throw in is have a video box pop up next to the rolling credits with very brief glimpses into some of our favorite moments from the game.

## Debrief

Some games are emotionally intense and benefit from a debrief to unplug from the game's intense emotions before moving on. If I feel a debrief is necessary (rarely for RPGs, more often for intense LARPs) I will read some variation of the following:

*"Please get comfortable, we are almost done, I just want to run us through a quick debrief. Please feel free to be honest but also feel free to say nothing. Don't talk over each other and don't comment on each other's thoughts. Talk about your own honest experience, even if it contradicts someone else's. If you don't have an answer, great, simply say pass, which is totally ok. There are no wrong answers. If you aren't sure what to say, just talk aloud, ramble, and say whatever. Please be brief, as we don't have a lot of time."*

Then we will take turns, going around in a circle, asking one question (listed below) to one person at a time. Wait for everyone to answer the current question or pass before moving to the next question. Be patient, if someone's struggling, give them time (count to 20 in your head). Thank people for their answers.

Example debrief questions:

* Is there anyone who your character was especially aggressive towards? Feel free to apologize to them and make it clear you aren't your character.
* Is there anyone who made the game especially fun for you? Feel free to thank them.
* Were there any moments that were especially painful or emotional?
* Were there any moments that were especially memorable for you?

THANK YOU

# [ See You At Gen Con ]

## Questions About This Document?

Email John Stavropoulos at [john@jstav.com](mailto:john@jstav.com)

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