

MEANING BUSINESS

Text: Daniel Schenström

Originally written in 2000, some edits done in 2022. The opinions here might no longer reflect what I think, but I think the topics were interesting enough to publish here even if the execution is flawed.

I'm writing this risking Words from my esteemed colleagues in the game mastering business - but I'm not afraid.

You know the mail address if there's anything on your minds.

I'm the only one that runs serious campaigns in my gaming club and possibly even the world. With that I don't mean dull and boring or even serious moods but that I take them seriously. I play often, in lengthy session and I put a lot of effort into my campaigns. I write short stories, I write about the setting's history, about its tales and legends. If my players ask me for information about the worlds we play in they'll get it. In short - serious. This I've missed in all the other campaigns I've ever played in. But this doesn't mean that each and everyone of my campaigns are totally serious. The amount of work I put in often reflects how much my players put in and the enjoyment I get out of playing the campaign in question.

All clubs' games can be divided into three categories; Those that never get played, those that are played for a short while and those that run for a long time. In the first category, in my club, there's Underground, Talislanta and Spacemaster which have fallen victim to lack of interest from the various game masters. In the second category we have Shadowrun, Aliens and Wastelands. The reasons for their eventual disappearances vary, but usually they fall victim to more popular games. In the last category we find such mainstays as Greyhawk, Drakar och Demoner and Forgotten Realms. I thought I'd present my thoughts on why some campaigns survive, some die, and some never sees life and offer some advice on how to get a campaign up and running for a long time.

The first roadblock to pass on the road to success is player interest. No matter how excited a game master is over a game, a setting, or a story, he or she still needs the players support. Games that have disappeared from my roster this way are Star Wars and Marvel Super Heroes. When I've asked my players about this they often say it's fun to try it once but that they don't want a whole campaign of it. The best way to solve this situation is to tell the players what's so great about the game so that they get interested too. After getting them hooked, you've got to work to keep them.

The first adventure had better be both exciting and fresh. After that crucial introductory adventure it's important to hear what the players thought about it. I try to get as much feedback as I can from my players after sessions but it's never enough. I think spontaneous comments have come maybe six times, other times I've had to ask for them. I really don't know why that is so but I put out inquiries every now and then to gauge interest.

The second roadblock is game master interest. In some campaigns I've lost touch with what made it fun to play in the first place, my interest has faded or doesn't match the players. Vampire is one of those games I bought because I thought it was fun to play, but I later discover game mastering that game wasn't as fun. If I could freely choose I'd referee mostly Dark Sun, Greyhawk, S.F. Blues and Mystara. (I'd play in Star Wars, Forgotten Realms, Greyhawk and TORC.)

What games have that makes me want to game master them are the behind the scenes stories and the sensation one gets from coming up with cool adventure ideas that stem from those stories. It's the same kick that you get from designing your own world. As a game master your greatest assets are your players. Make them help you. By asking them what kind of game they like to play in you can get some ideas to work on. If it runs for a long time interest seems to stay high.

The third and greatest danger on the road to success is other games. The role playing games in my gaming club's collection has a sort of ranking order which are as follows; Greyhawk, Aliens, Drakar och Demoner, Star Wars, White Star, Forgotten Realms, everything else. Pretty much that order anyway. So if Drakar and Demoner was playing the same weekend as I game mastered Castle Falkenstein I would probably be facing an empty sofa. Luckily our gaming schedules collide very seldom. I think my colleagues have taken players away from me four or five times. (Our club total twelve players and of those five are regular game masters.) The rivalry between us is pretty low. Thus far we haven't had a battle between the big games. The more different the game the less popular it is. Magic, spaceships and cyberpunk are all great genres but don't dare to mix them like TORG. Stick to standard fantasy and you're halfway there (Which seem to reflect in the settings a certain rpg company's had success with).

Once you get a campaign going here's what can be done to keep it alive. First and foremost, play often. The more often the better. If you can play three times on a weekend, do it. The longer you can keep the pace up, the better. Key is to be able to play whenever your players want to.

If you can't play often, play well. In the beginning of a campaign this means providing leads and entice the players with new experiences and areas never seen and envisioned before. If they can find the same experience someplace else there's no reason to really play in your campaign. Keeping the feel of the campaign is important. Don't let them start talking about non-play things until the session is over or have some time set aside before you even start.

Once the campaign has started, keep the story going and put in small sidestories. Once the middle stage has passed and the campaign matured it's important to be watchful of players wishes and actions and acting on them. Never let a long time pass between sessions. No more than half a year, at most, should be allowed to pass unless you can sustain interest through a homepage or a club fanzine.

Always give more. Even if you play each weekend and deliver the most pioneering of works you can still give more. If there's a good map available make a copy and hand it to the players. Make your own parchments with texts containing leads, images and such. Props of this kind enhance the sense of realism. Pictures help too. These can be photocopied and distributed to the players at key moments.

Limit the number of players. Some people play just for the social bit and some play to be part of an exciting story. It's up to you as a game master what and who you accept in your games. One thing that's really annoying are players that for some reason can't show up. During these session the character isn't used to its full potential and the game master can't remember all the characters details unless there's a copy of the character sheet. As a player it's annoying to miss out on what happened and some of the illusion of realism disappears. My only advice to you is; Fewer players are better. Limit the number beforehand and have a contingency plan ready. Three is my preferred amount of players and six my maximum. More than that makes combat drag on forever in most systems.

Make short adventures. If you can't, divide them into shorter scenarios that can be finished in 2-4 session (one weekend's worth of gaming in our club). If you play more seldom make the scenario short enough to finish in one game session. Sometimes this is undesirable and if you have the time or ability, make short chronicles so that the players won't forget the clues and vital details of the game.

If you follow the advice above you're on your way. Good luck with your new, serious, campaign.

STREAM OF CONSCIENCE ABOUT RULES

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As both a player and a game master I'm of the same opinion when it comes to rules; the easier and faster they are the better. Realism or the lack thereof is less important than the number of rules. It is important in relation to the setting though, to convey the right type of tone. In Greyhawk for example, I feel that the standard AD&D rules works fine while Dark Sun could use some gory hit tables (like those in Player's Options: Skills & Powers) to further convey the feeling of dread and desperation. Drakar och Demoner's (a Swedish game based on the Chaosium system) combat rules are one of the best sets of rules in relation to it's setting even if the number of hit points could be higher. (Just a small wish from one that has died a lot of times in that game.) It just doesn't feel as epic when it's the players' fifth set of characters that complete the quest and not the ones that set out to do it in the beginning of the adventure. This should not be interpreted as if I think that player characters shouldn't be able to die. I just have a problem with characters dying from unnecessary happenstances, like player infighting or unavoidable deathtraps.

One of the bad rules systems is the 2:nd edition Star Wars system. I have no idea what they thought was wrong with the first one but the new one is harder without adding anything but more time to interpret dice rolls. Other bad rules sets are Gamma World 3:rd edition and TORG whose rule books are so badly organized that you're bound to throw a fit every time you go looking for the most basic of concepts.

Why am I bringing all of this up? Because I want to tell you how I feel about the mechanics of roleplaying games. That part where the character, through rules, try to express what they want to do by way of dice or cards.

This is most usually done in battles. If you read an exciting book or watch a movie with lots of fights you're dazzled by the quick feints, the masterful slashes and the sarcastic banter of the combatants. How is this translated to role playing games? You roll to hit and if you hit, roll for damage. Or in worst case; Roll to hit, add beneficial circumstances and subtract negative circumstances, find out where you hit, roll damage, add or subtract according to how well you rolled to hit, subtract eventual armor rating and finally a result. Repeat until death. Whatever the system it's a lot less exciting than the real thing don't you think? And how long does that second example take? After some practice maybe half a minute per player.

Another example; Non combat skills. It's nervewracking trying to bluff ones' way out of a delicate situation. It's very un-nervewracking rolling a dice to see if your character manages to bluff his or her way out of the situation. Personally, when it comes to this type of skills, I think that one should not choose the skill if one can't play it. I'm not sure I even want them in the rules at all.

How one uses the rules goes together with where your priorities lie. Is the story more important than the rules? Is realism more important than the story? During my fourteen years as a game master I've looked upon it differently from time to time; Everything from the dice never lie to the Player Characters shall never die. Nowadays I let the tone of the campaign decide the mortality rating but the story plays a real big part in it too. The fact that I write and create some campaigns myself but only play pre made adventures in some others is also a factor. The final factor that weighs in is if I play it because I think it's fun and I want a certain direction with it or if I play it just because my players want to because they think it's fun.

Back to interaction. How to solve it and make it both quick and exciting? The first thing you can do is to think about which tone and feel you want your campaign to have. Have a look at the

rules that come with your chosen setting. Do they fit in with what you envision or should you choose another system? An important consideration is how much you as a game master is supposed to do and how much the players need to know. Try to find one that puts an equal burden on both players and game master.

A final thought. Are rules really necessary? Amber's creators certainly don't think so and White Wolf's storytelling games show what they think. I personally am a big fan of the no rules philosophy.

When you're happy with your choice it's time to talk with your players. In our gaming club people usually play regardless of rules as long as they get to play at all. From discussions it's quite clear that they want some level of realism in their games.