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GMing Dos and Don'ts: Ours Go to Eleven

Welcome to **GMing Dos and Don'ts: Ours Go to Eleven**, the third free PDF from Treasure Tables! Thanks to Zachary Houghton for suggesting the topic for this PDF.

If you're new to GMing, this list will get you started off right, give you plenty to think about and help you avoid some common pitfalls. For veteran GMs, these dos and don'ts make a great refresher course. And if you're running a game in a new way for the first time, such as at a convention, or for an in-store demo, we've got you covered.

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This list is meant to be a quick read, and everything on it is intended to be as universal as possible. You can apply this GMing advice in almost any situation, regardless of your personal GMing style, what RPG you're running or whether the game takes place at home, at a convention or at an in-store demo.

Do...

Here's an overview of the topics covered below.

ELEVEN GMING DOS

- Have Fun
- Give Every PC a Chance to Shine
- Listen to Your Players
- Be Confident
- Discuss the Game Beforehand
- Be Prepared
- Learn from Every Session
- Experiment
- Change Things on the Fly
- Be Consistent
- Add an Extra Layer of Cool

HAVE FUN

If your group is having fun (yourself included), that's the only thing that matters. Making sure the whole group has fun is the main goal of GMing, and one you should never lose sight of.

Every other decision you make at the table should come back to this question: *Will it be fun?* And if things start going badly, this is the reference point you should always come back to.

GIVE EVERY PC A CHANCE TO SHINE

The game is about the player characters, and by extension, the players themselves. It's not about powerful NPCs, carefully scripted storylines that leave no room for player creativity or things going according to plan. And it's not just about one PC, either – it's about all of them. So give each character at least one chance to stand out and do something cool in every session, and never let anyone stay on the sidelines for too long.

Chances to shine can include challenges that require specific skills, opportunities to use abilities that none of the other PCs have, dramatic conflicts centered on one PC's character background – anything that gives that PC a memorable, exciting moment in the sun.

LISTEN TO YOUR PLAYERS

During the game, you should be listening to what your players are saying – and what they're not saying, too. If they're excited and having a great time, you'll be able to tell. The opposite is also true: It's not hard to pick up on boredom, if you're listening (and watching) for it. In ongoing campaigns, getting feedback from your players is a great way to keep the game fun over the long haul.

BE CONFIDENT

Confidence is the key to good GMing. It's impossible to be prepared for everything that your players will throw at you (that's half the fun!), but if you can improvise, make rules calls and step in to keep things moving with *confidence*, everything will go more smoothly.

It's not about being bossy, it's about being self-assured and comfortable in what you're doing. If you're nervous, remember that it's just a game – and then get down to having fun.

DISCUSS THE GAME BEFOREHAND

If you're running a long-term game (like a home campaign), this is a critical step. This is how you make sure everyone's on the same page about what to expect, and what kinds of play they enjoy.

In convention games, one-shots and demo events, it's less important – but still very handy. You won't know the skill level of the folks who sign up, so it's best to ask them about that beforehand. At the same time, you can give them an idea of what the game is about, and what sets it apart from other RPGs. (Just don't go on too long – your group is there to play, after all!)

BE PREPARED

How much prep you need to do depends on your strengths and weaknesses as a GM. If you're great at improvisation, you can get away with doing less of it. But making sure you've read the adventure, considered ways the PCs might surprise you, thought about ways to portray your NPCs effectively, drawn maps ahead of time and done everything you can to make sure you want have to break momentum during the game is *always* a good idea.

If you're running a convention or demo game, it's vital that you're prepared. Convention players have paid to play your event, and you owe them a good time. Demo players are going to get what might be their first impression of your RPG – and the brand as a whole – from the event you run, and you want that impression to be a good one.

LEARN FROM EVERY SESSION

Every gaming session, whether it goes well or poorly, can teach you something – usually, several things. Keep tabs on what got everyone excited, and what didn't get much of a reaction (take notes if you need to, without breaking the momentum). Next session, you can use that information to avoid more of the boring stuff and pack in more of the good stuff.

EXPERIMENT

At the end of the day, it's just a game – so don't be afraid to try new things. This is especially true in home games, where you'll be able to get feedback from your players on what went well (and what didn't).

You won't usually get the same kind of feedback after a convention or demo game, so it can be a good idea to try your experiment at least once before-

hand. That way, you'll get a sense of how it might fly in a different setting.

CHANGE THINGS ON THE FLY

Was that last encounter waaaaay too tough for the PCs? Tone the next one down a bit. Were they disappointed at how easy that dragon was to defeat? Have the dragon's mate show up to continue the fight. Nothing is written in stone, and with the exception of tournament events (where each session must include the same elements), sometimes changing things during play is exactly the right thing to do.

After all, that's one big thing that separates playing tabletop RPGs from playing video games – you, the GM, who can customize the experience to make it more fun for everyone involved.

BE CONSISTENT

When you make judgment calls, don't favor one player over another, or one character over another. If a rules question arises and you need to make a decision on the spot, take a moment to think about how you've made similar decisions in the past. If in the last session you said that inns in this country never serve wine, stick to that decision.

Taking notes during the game (unobtrusively, and without making your players wait while you write) is a great way to keep track of things like this, and ensure that you remain consistent.

ADD AN EXTRA LAYER OF COOL

Before the game, take some time to review the upcoming adventure. Is there an encounter that seems a bit dull? Jazz it up by adding a new element, like a rival adventuring party that arrives on the scene at the same time as the PCs. Does the chase scene feel like every other chase scene? Change the location, and have it take place on winding road in the rain. In other words, think of ways to make everything that happens that little bit better – your players will notice the difference.

DON'T...

First, a quick overview of the don'ts that are discussed below.

ELEVEN GMING DON'TS

- Get Personal
- Say No When You Could Say Maybe
- Play Favorites
- Outshine the PCs
- Hoard Your Best Ideas
- Let Loopholes Ruin Your Game
- Be a Slave to the Adventure
- Break the Momentum
- Prep Too Much
- Sweat It

GET PERSONAL

Never bring personal conflicts into the game. There's no quicker way to make sure that no one has a good time (yourself included), and no surer path to having your group fall apart.

If a player does something during the game that bothers you, don't call them out on it right then unless it crosses an obvious line (hitting another player, for example). Instead, wait until after the game and discuss it with them in private.

SAY NO WHEN YOU COULD SAY MAYBE

When a player wants to try something – even something so crazy that's it's almost certainly impossible – there's nothing that'll kill the game's momentum quite like saying “No.” Instead, say “Maybe” and give them an outside chance of success.

Let them know up front that what they want to do is dangerous and probably won't work – but there's a million to one chance that it might work. If they fail, they'll still be glad you let them try. And if they succeed, your whole group will probably be talking about it for years.

PLAY FAVORITES

Singling out one PC for special treatment – whether good (the monsters never seem to attack them, or they always miss) or bad (the orc decides to hit them again while they're unconscious, killing them instead of moving on to attack someone else) – is a surefire way to frustrate and disappoint your players.

If you have a bad day and wind up doing this once during a game, make sure to apologize – and don't let it happen again. If it happens more than once, that's when you'll start losing players.

OUTSHINE THE PCs

If your NPCs always save the day, have the coolest gear or otherwise outshine the PCs, that's a recipe for disaster. Remember, the game is all about the PCs – not the NPCs.

There's nothing wrong with introducing cool NPCs, but you need to do it in a way that supports, rather than distracts from, the nifty stuff the PCs are doing. When you're considering what an NPC should do in a particular situation, ask yourself this: *Will it steal the PCs' thunder?* If the answer is “Yes,” don't do it!

HOARD YOUR BEST IDEAS

Have you ever had a really great idea for a game, and wanted to wait for just the right time to use it? The right time is usually *now*.

Often, sitting on that idea just means that you'll never use it at all, and where's the fun in that? It's not as though you can't use the idea again in a future game – ideas don't expire, but the spark that makes a good idea a great one can go out very easily.

Watch out for delaying tactics, too. If the coolest thing in the adventure is learning that the party's trusted NPC confidante is really an evil wizard, don't make your players wait four hours to find out. Instead, make that the first thing that happens in the session, and go from there.

LET LOOPHOLES RUIN YOUR GAME

No adventure can account for everything the players might do. Every RPG has rules problems that clever players can take advantage of. Even you will make mistakes from time to time – and all of these things are okay. But when you find a loophole in the rules, catch a mistake in the adventure you're running or screw something up, fix it.

Loopholes that let one player's character outshine the rest aren't much fun for the other players, and flaws in the adventure can bring the whole group down. You can't always catch these loopholes before they get used, but make sure you correct the problems as soon as you do catch them.

BE A SLAVE TO THE ADVENTURE

Just because the adventure says something should happen a certain way, that doesn't mean it's right for your group, your game or the session you're running at that moment.

Unless you're GMing a tournament scenario (where changing the adventure is against the rules), you can and should treat everything in the adventure as being subject to change. If you think of something better, change it. If you find an encounter you know your group just won't enjoy, take it out.

BREAK THE MOMENTUM

Whether you're at home, running a demo or at a convention, when a game is rocketing along at a mile a minute and everyone is having a blast, nothing kills the mood like stopping to draw a map. Or pausing to take extensive notes. Or looking up an obscure rule. Or waiting several minutes for one player to decide what to do in combat.

Maintaining forward momentum is the key to a fun and exciting gaming session, and breaking that momentum – or letting a player break it for you, even if they mean well – is never a good idea. Find a way to move on, and get back to the action.

OVERCOMPLICATE THINGS

As the GM, you see the big picture. You know what motivates the NPCs, who's behind all the plots and subplots, what's in the next dungeon room. That's part of what makes GMing fun, but it can sometimes make it difficult to remember that the players don't see that same big picture. Instead, they see their slice of that big picture – usually, however much you choose to show them.

Clues that seem obvious to you may not be obvious to your players. Multiple plot threads that you can keep track of with ease may look like a tangled – and uninteresting – mess from your players' perspective. When in doubt, particularly in convention or demo settings, make things more obvious than you think they need to be – even just a little bit.

PREP TOO MUCH

Being prepared is a good thing, but it's easy to waste time prepping for things that aren't likely to happen, or trying to cover every possible contingency. Try to focus on prepping what you know you'll need, and only prep other stuff – like side encounters, stats for NPCs that

aren't likely to be involved in combat, elaborate histories for magic items the party may never find – if you have extra time.

SWEAT IT

If you've read this far, you've got a lot of things on your mind – twenty-one of them, to be exact! At the end of the day, though, *it's just a game*.

You're there to have fun, and so are your players. If you screw something up, you're not going to get lynched. If the session doesn't go so well, you're not going to lose friends over it. So have fun, don't fret over every little detail and most importantly, don't sweat it!



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