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How to End a Campaign: Six Approaches

Welcome to the fifth free PDF from Treasure Tables, *How to End a Campaign: Six Approaches!* The different options for ending your campaign presented here were originally published as a series of posts on Treasure Tables, and it made sense to collect them for easy offline reading.

I hope your current game, if you're running one, is going strong, and that you really don't have any use for this PDF right now! But when you do, it'll be here to help you plan for the best ending possible.

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IT WON'T BE EASY, BUT...

Most GMs don't like to think about it, but at some point *every* campaign has to end. This PDF was written to help you answer an important question: exactly how you're going to end your campaign.

Ending a campaign is rarely going to be easy, and it's something a lot of GMs struggle with. In fact, it was one of the two most common answers to the question "What's the hardest thing you've ever had to do as a GM?" which was asked on the Treasure Tables Forums earlier this year.

Six approaches are presented in this PDF, all of them with pros and cons. There are benefits to considering how your game will end beforehand, but even if you're reading this at the last minute, you'll find some good tips here.

The six approaches to ending your campaign are:

- With a Bang**
- With A Whimper**
- A Sudden Stop**
- On Indefinite Hold**
- Fast Forward**
- According to Plan**

WITH A BANG

A "bang" is a dramatic resolution of some or all of the open threads in your campaign, often a story- or world-shattering event. Think of the series (not season) finale of a TV show.

It could be a world-ending apocalypse, the PCs' long-awaited ascension to godhood, an alien attack that changes the world forever — the possibilities are endless, and will vary according to the specifics of your campaign.

Ending your campaign with a bang is very different than putting it on hold (which is also covered in this PDF). The bang — whatever it may be — fundamentally alters the game, and may fundamentally alter the PCs as well.

Implicit in this approach is the understanding that this *will* end the campaign. Bangs are planned to do just that, and your players are aware that when the finale is over, so is the game.

PROS

A well-crafted bang offers a change of pace, and a chance to do things on a grand scale — something that, depending on your game, you might not do on a regular basis. A good bang should make the whole group go "Wow!"

Knowing that the finale *is* the finale gives your players the opportunity to really cut loose. If they're normally cautious, they can throw caution to the wind — they have nothing to lose.

It also provides a definitive endpoint for your campaign. With no major loose ends left up in the air, it's easier to move on to your group's next game.

CONS

Have you ever watched the finale of a TV show and thought, “What the hell was that? They did *what* to my favorite character?!” This can be a problem with bangs, too — the tendency to go overboard.

A good bang will often close the door on the game, and you might want to start up the campaign again in the future. That could mean you have to retcon the bang to get the campaign started up again, which isn't likely to be too satisfying for your group.

The temptation to alter the PCs directly is also a problem. A bad bang is one that removes the players' control over their characters in a ham-handed way, and leaves them with a bad taste in their mouths. You never want to end a campaign on that kind of sour note.

WITH A WHIMPER

There are lots of ways to end your game with a whimper. Any time a game just sort of . . . stops, that was a whimper.

Sometimes it comes down to logistics: Jenna doesn't have Saturdays free anymore, and George has to skip every other week. No one planned it that way, but the game can't go on.

Other times, you or one (or more) of your players just loses interest, and the group lets the game die without trying to bring it to an actual close.

The key difference between this approach and the others is that when you end things with a whimper, it's more of a non-decision than a decision. It happens, or the group lets it happen, and you move on.

PROS

Over the years, I've ended more than my fair share of games this way, and it sucks. I've also played in quite a few games that ended like this, and it sucked as a player, too.

There are no pros to just letting your game die a quiet, useless death, except on the most basic level: At least it's over.

Good games deserve better than this. Even so-so games that the group has lost interest in deserve more closure than a whimper provides.

CONS

There are two main downsides to this approach. Firstly, it's not satisfying. The players don't get any resolution for the plot thread their PCs were involved in, and they don't even get one last chance to do something cool.

Secondly, nobody learns anything when a game ends with a whimper. As the GM, you'll wonder which of your players lost interest, and which ones might have stuck with it. Or what you could have done better. Your players will likely have similar concerns.

It's not the end of the world when a game ends like this — chances are, you'll pick up a new game and be back in the thick of it before too long. But even bad games deserve a conclusion of some sort, a definite act that ends them so you can move on with no weird, unresolved feelings about the previous game.

A SUDDEN STOP

A sudden stop is just that: You announce that the campaign is over — no wrap-up, no resolving loose ends, no closure. Just over.

Most often, this is because Real Life™ rears its ugly head. Your hours change at work. That one class turns out to be tougher than you expected. Your campaign notes get wiped out in a flood.

Sometimes, though, campaigns are ended with a sudden stop for in-game reasons. The whole party got wiped out in a TPK and no one has the energy to keep going. The last five sessions sucked, and you're not sure how to fix them.

This approach is a very mixed bag.

PROS

On the plus side, much like ending a relationship abruptly, at least it's over. And unlike ending things with a whimper, at least it's decisive.

No one is wondering whether or not the game might start up again, and as the GM you can put everything aside and focus on other things. Perhaps someone else can run a game for a little while.

When real-life factors intervene and I suspect my game is going to suffer for it, this is the method I generally use. You have to explain to your group why you're putting on the brakes, but in my experience most groups are pretty understanding.

CONS

On the minus side, much like ending a relationship abruptly, it's over so fast you don't get any closure. Because it comes as a surprise, it can be a bit disorienting.

For the players, all of their cool plans get cut off mid-stream. The plotline you had lovingly crafted — and that they were devouring with gusto every week — just ends. Not happily or unhappily, just done.

As a player, this approach gnaws at me — particularly if I was really excited about the game. On an intellectual level, I know that if the GM can't keep going, that's totally understandable. But on an emotional level, I wonder about the possibilities, the might-have-beens and the nifty things I was planning to do.

ON INDEFINITE HOLD

Putting your game on indefinite hold is a bit different from ending it with a whimper. Going the whimper route is more of a non-approach: the campaign just sort of peters out.

When you put your game on hold, however, there's planning involved — and you make an active decision to leave the campaign at a good stopping point. (If you just put on the brakes, that's a sudden stop, not indefinite hold.) Common reasons to put a campaign on hold include: real life concerns, GM burnout, an absent player or simply needing a change of pace.

You and your players know that you might or might not pick up the game again, but the option remains open, and that's the element that really sets this approach apart from the others.

PROS

As long as it's not just an excuse for avoiding saying "I don't want to run this game anymore," putting your campaign on indefinite hold is an excellent approach. Unlike a sudden stop, you have a bit of advance notice — and that lets you plan for the "final" session.

You can wind up loose plot threads, give your players a chance to accomplish some of their short-term goals, work up a really kickass climactic battle and leave the party at a good stopping point — either a stable down-time situation (between adventures) or a cliffhanger.

Even if you don't ever start the game up again (which, based on my own experience, is pretty common), it's somehow nice to know that you could, if you wanted to. And you never know what will happen — a few months or a year down the line, everyone might be in exactly the right mood to revisit the game.

CONS

The only real downside to this approach is that some players (and GMs) prefer closure — solid, definitive closure, not the semi-closure you get when you put your campaign on hold. Those folks might be better served by ending the game with a world-altering bang, or planning out an actual ending (which is covered below).

As I mentioned above, if you have no desire to play the game again, putting it on hold — instead of actually ending it — is unfair to your players. You're dangling a tantalizing possibility in front of them, but have no plans to deliver on it. If you want to end the game and never speak of it again, don't take this approach!

There's a reason that putting your game on indefinite hold appears in the middle of the list (see below): It's a solid, middle-of-the-road approach. It lacks some of the advantages of fast forwarding or planning to end the game for good, but it has none of the disadvantages of letting your game die or calling a halt. It's also a lot less drastic than ending things with a bang, and is likely to ruffle fewer feathers.

FAST FORWARD

The fast forward approach is pretty simple. You know your campaign needs to end, but you either don't have time to finish everything you had planned, or you want to reach a very cool climax — so you skip to the Big Dramatic Ending. Depending on your game, this could mean jumping ahead weeks, months or even years.

The key is being able to plan ahead, which allows you to avoid the downsides associated with some of the other approaches to ending games — especially ending your campaign with a whimper.

PROS

This approach lets you make sure that the party gets a chance to shine. You know your campaign needs to come to a close in advance (perhaps because you picked up more hours at work, or your course load next semester is much heavier), and that makes all the difference.

Since you've got plenty of ideas for nifty stuff that could happen later on in your campaign, why not just skip ahead? If this sounds a lot like ending your campaign with a bang, you're on the right track — there are a lot of similarities between the two approaches.

The big difference, though, is that using the fast forward approach means skipping ahead to something you already had planned, or something your players were really looking forward to, rather than dropping a world-altering climax into the game mid-stream.

Fast forwarding can also give your players a chance to try out some high-powered abilities that they wouldn't see if you just ended the game. In D&D, for example, fast forwarding your game could involve the PCs jumping ahead 10 levels — a dramatic change that gives them a chance to flex their muscles.

CONS

In character-driven games, you have the potential to lose out on a lot of character development. A PC who had been courting an NPC, for example, might be married after the jump — but without any of the pleasure of playing out the rest of the courtship.

If you decide to start your campaign up again, you're committed to picking up at the new endpoint you created using this approach. Depending on how far you skip ahead, or exactly how you end the game, this might be jarring to your players.

At worst, it could even be unsatisfying. After being used to earning XP for so long, suddenly having a lot more power without having to work for it might frustrate some players.

ACCORDING TO PLAN

Given the semi-mythical default model for campaigns — the decade-long odyssey that never really ends — this one, ending your campaign according to plan, is fairly uncommon.

In my experience, most gamers don't like to think about ending campaigns. If you're in a good game, and you're playing with your friends, chances are you don't really want it to end.

In a way, it's a lot like books and movies: When you're watching a great movie, or reading an amazing book, you know it's going to end . . . but you really wish it didn't have to.

And just like that book or movie, your campaign is going to come to a close at some point — and that's where planning the ending comes in.

PROS

The biggest advantage to this approach is pretty simple: You have a plan. Having a plan means that you can easily avoid the not-so-hot ways to end a campaign, like ending it with a whimper.

When you know from the beginning how your campaign is going to end, you can write your adventures accordingly. You can also foreshadow the ending, and build up to it in exactly the way you'd like (and if you make sure your players know in advance how long the game will be, they can do the same).

Aiming for a pre-planned ending can also lead to tighter pacing, because you (and your players) know that every moment around the gaming table counts.

CONS

Part of the enjoyment of roleplaying is the lack of constraints — within reason, you can pretty much do whatever you want. Because it adds a constraint, having a definite ending changes that dynamic in a way that not all players will enjoy.

Plotting your campaign out in advance removes some of the flexibility that you usually enjoy as a GM. Once you've made your plan and started implementing it, you might not want to fiddle with the details for fear of breaking something — even if doing so might make the game more enjoyable.

You also run the risk of railroading, which is rarely desirable in a long-term campaign. What if something unexpected happens in the second session, and it completely invalidates the ending you were shooting for? Do you change the ending, or remove some of your players' freedom to choose their destiny?



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