



# Treasure Tables

GMing advice, tips, ideas and resources • Dedicated to helping GMs

## Player Tips: Everyone Likes a Three-Way

Thanks for downloading the first-ever Treasure Tables PDF, *Player Tips: Everyone Likes a Three-Way*! This PDF collects three popular posts from Treasure Tables, my website for GMs.

This PDF's theme is *players*. The first two articles, *GMing for a Large Group* and *Splitting the Party*, both tackle situations that nearly every GM will run into at some point, while the third, *Getting Player Feedback*, covers a topic that can be challenging for many GMs. *Player Tips: Everyone Likes a Three-Way* is 100% free, and I hope you enjoy it.

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### GMING FOR A LARGE GROUP

Somehow, you find yourself about to run a game for waaaaay too many players. Maybe you're just a softy, and can't say no when too many people are interested in your game – or maybe you've never tried GMing for a large group before, and you just want to give it a shot.

Whatever the reason, chances are you've got at least a few worries about how things will go. Don't sweat it – here are six steps you can take to make things go smoothly with a large group.

What's a "large" group, though? Most GMs I've known consider seven or more players a large group, although it all depends on what you're used to. The bottom line is that if the group is bigger than you're accustomed to, it counts as a large group for you.

These tips are based on my two experiences running an RPG for a bigger group. The first time, it went very badly; the second time, it went pretty well – largely because I figured these things out as I went! Hopefully you can benefit from my mistakes as well as my successes. (It's also worth noting that my large-group experience is all with *Dungeons & Dragons*. No matter what RPG you're running, though, these tips should translate over well.)

#### TIPS FOR GMING FOR A LARGE GROUP

- Ask for help from your players
- Plan ahead – even more than usual
- Don't split the party!
- Streamline combat
- Handle some things outside the game
- Take shortcuts

Sound good? Let's get into the details.

### ASK FOR HELP FROM YOUR PLAYERS

With most RPGs, as the GM you're already doing most of the heavy lifting – coming up with adventures, drawing maps, arranging sessions, keeping everyone on track, etc. Some of those things won't take you any longer with a bigger group (a map's a map, whether it's for four players or ten), but others will.

With more people to manage, you'll have less time for things like taking notes during the game, keeping track of which items were found where and other side tasks. Some players enjoy doing these things (I rarely have trouble finding a quartermaster for *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns, for example), while others might be interested in helping out in exchange for in-game rewards, like bonus XP.

Some players don't like doing anything but playing their characters, which is just fine – don't take it personally if not everyone leaps at the chance to take on a side task.

### PLAN AHEAD MORE THAN USUAL

If you have to take 15 minutes to draw up a map during the game, a larger group is likely to get distracted (or worse, bored) more quickly than a small one. Spend a little more time on prep than you would with a smaller group of players, and your sessions will go more smoothly.

And if you can't avoid stopping the game to tackle something, call a short break and let everyone stretch their legs and get snacks. When they sit back down, you'll be ready to rumble.

### DON'T SPLIT THE PARTY!

Splitting the party always slows down the game, but with a larger group there are more people left out of

the action – and as with the tip above, more people get bored and distracted more easily. You can't always avoid splitting up the PCs, but try to come up with a different solution as often as possible. (When you do have to split the party, see the next section of this PDF, [Splitting the Party](#), for some advice on making things go smoothly.)

Sometimes the best way to accomplish this is with an informal social contract, which you can cover before the game. For example: The players agree to avoid splitting up the party (even when it would be more logical to do so), and you agree not to include adventure situations that require them to split up.

### STREAMLINE COMBAT

In a lot of games, larger groups means longer battles. Things you can do to cut down on this time include:

- Use initiative cards, an initiative sheet or a whiteboard – and announce who's "on deck." This lets everyone see the turn order, and know when they need to make a decision about what to do.
- Set a time limit for each player's turn. It's best to discuss this one with your group, but having a time limit always makes combat go faster.
- If someone isn't ready, move on to the next player. The person you skipped can jump in later.
- Roll attack and damage dice simultaneously. If the PC misses, you just ignore the damage dice; if they hit, you've saved a bit of time.

### HANDLE SOME THINGS OUTSIDE THE GAME

Some activities always seem to take a long time, no matter what you try to do to speed them. Levelling up, spending skill points, sorting out treasure – these are all things that can be done before or after each session, over email, on your group's messageboard, etc.

### TAKE SHORTCUTS

With a large group, some problems are magnified – for example, the downsides to having the PCs map dungeons as they go. I don't like this approach even with a smaller group, but with more people involved you wind up wasting a lot of time when the map isn't accurate, or you have to describe room every room twice.

The solution is to take a few shortcuts – and

you might need to run a session or two to identify areas where shortcuts can be taken. Here are a few examples.

- Do the mapping yourself. This sounds like it contradicts the first tip (asking for help from your players), but it doesn't – trust me, it's worth it in the long run.
- Keep battles small (most of the time). The fewer enemies and NPCs you have to worry about, the better.
- Re-use NPC stats. When the PCs break into the terrorist compound, use the same stats for all of the terrorists, or vary them only a little bit.
- Avoid side treks. If one player wants to do something on their own, just say, "Okay, it's done," or handle it at another time (in a side session, via email, etc.).



## SPLITTING THE PARTY

Splitting the party is a situation that every GM will have to deal with at some point. Sometimes it's a pain in the butt, sometimes it goes smoothly – and there are five principle approaches that you can take to handling it. Two of them are lousy, one is neutral and two are excellent. We'll start with the bad approaches, so you know what to avoid.

### SPLITTING THE PLAYERS: LOUSY APPROACH #1

When half of the party heads down one fork in the road, and the rest of the PCs take the other path, you physically split up the group: Half the players leave the room, the others stay at the gaming table.

This is a terrible way to handle splitting the party. In my experience, it always takes longer than you think it will, and boy does it kill the game's momentum – especially for the players that aren't actually playing.

Sometimes it seems like the only thing to do, though – like in games with a lot of intra-party conflict and intrigue. In those kinds of games, splitting the players can be a great way to build tension and sustain a sense of mystery ("What were they doing in there?") – but only in small doses. Use this approach with caution.

For me, part of the pleasure of gaming is in separating player knowledge from character knowledge, and I trust my players to do this. I've learned that even when splitting the players up sounds reasonable, it's generally not the way to go.

### **CUT BACK AND FORTH OCCASIONALLY: LOUSY APPROACH #2**

I've seen this happen so often in different games that I think of it as the default approach (and it's very easy to fall into – I've done more than my share of it!): Keep everyone at the table, and cut back and forth between the two groups of players periodically.

And that's really the problem with this method – the “periodically” part. Understandably, many players get bored when they're not involved in the action, and even if everyone stays interested this approach can still be a big momentum-killer. (The trick is to cut back and forth much more often, a tactic that's described below.)

### **JUST DON'T DO IT: THE NEUTRAL APPROACH**

One way to handle splitting the party is to never split the party. I view this as a neutral approach because you're really just sidestepping the issue – but at the same time, it does work quite well.

The best way I've found to handle this is to make it a social contract issue: Before the campaign begins, discuss it with your players. Explain that splitting the party is often frustrating for everyone, and that you won't put the PCs in situations where it's the most advantageous thing to do. In return, ask them to avoid splitting the party unless it's absolutely necessary. In my experience, this works like a charm.

You could also just make this agreement a hard-and-fast rule, which is a good idea if you're under a time constraint (running a convention game, for example).

### **CUT, CUT, CUT: GOOD APPROACH #1**

No matter how hard you try to avoid splitting the party, it's going to happen – so what do you do? Cut early, and cut often.

With all of the players at the table, handle a minute or two of what one sub-group is doing, and then cut away to the other group. A couple of minutes later, cut back. Repeat until the party is back together. Think of this as the two minute rule – when in doubt, cut every two minutes.

This keeps everyone engaged, you won't lose

momentum, each sub-group gets time to think about what to do next (and enjoy watching the other players) and no one will be tempted to go get snacks or start watching TV.

Whenever possible, try to cut on mini-cliffhangers. This works wonders for keeping things moving.

### **GET A SIDEKICK: GOOD APPROACH #2**

The fifth approach is to bring in a co-GM – someone who can take over GMing the other half of the party. That way no one gets bored, and as long as the two GMs communicate regularly the game should stay on track nicely.



## **GETTING PLAYER FEEDBACK**

I don't know about you, but most of the time when I ask my players for feedback it's like squeezing blood from a stone. Even when they're clearly jazzed about the game, and they mention having had fun, “I had fun” is often about the extent of the feedback that I get.

Lots of other GMs have this problem, too – although it's not a problem for everyone. Assuming that like me, you think that getting detailed player feedback rocks, what are some of the best ways to go about soliciting it?

Let's start with “Is it a problem?” and go from there. To be clear, I'm not saying that players who don't jump at the chance to provide feedback are “bad” players – giving feedback isn't for everyone. And at the same time, if you wind up a session by asking everyone what they thought of that night's game, and everyone says that they had a good time (we'll assume they're telling the truth), what else do you need? You set out to make sure everyone had fun, and everyone had fun. For some GMs, that's enough – and there's nothing wrong with that.

It's not enough for all GMs, though. I find that meaningful feedback is one of the best ways for me to make my current game more fun in the short term, and to improve my GMing in the long term. If you're in the same camp, here are some suggestions – things you might consider if you're looking for a bit more detail than, “I had fun,” or “That sucked.”

## ASK DETAILED QUESTIONS

For starters, don't just ask how the game was – ask about specific aspects of the game, things you thought went particularly well or poorly. As the GM, you've probably got a pretty good idea of which bits went well and which didn't (and you can always jot down notes about this during the game), and by asking detailed questions you're much more likely to get detailed – and useful – answers.

## FOLLOW THROUGH

If you're going to ask for feedback, you should use it. This is especially true when a player tells you what they didn't like about the game, but it also applies to positive feedback. Once your players have seen that you not only want to hear what they have to say, but will actually act on it, they're likely to be inclined to give you more and better feedback.

Most of us have had crappy gaming experiences somewhere along the line, and the more recent or frequent those were, the less likely a player is to think you'll care about their opinion without a bit of proof.

## GIVE FEEDBACK TO YOUR PLAYERS

Some RPGs are set up to involve a constant, collaborative dialogue between the GM and the players, but most aren't structured that way. In other words, a lot of players aren't used to giving feedback – which is where providing them with feedback comes in. The idea is to make back-and-forth feedback a regular feature in your game, and getting the ball rolling can go a long way.

This can be a delicate topic, so even when you're responding to something a player did that you'd rather they not do again, try to keep your feedback constructive. Think about what you'd like to hear about the game you just ran, and try to give feedback to your players in the same way.

## IN-GAME REWARDS

Offering XP, action points and the like in exchange for robust feedback can be a good form of encouragement. Make it clear at the outset what you're looking for, and what players who provide it will receive for their efforts.

## FEEDBACK FORMS

If asking your players whether or not they enjoyed the game is zero, this is sixty: Handing out (or emailing out) actual paperwork for them to fill out. And as you might

expect, it's not everyone's cup of tea.

If you come to game night to blow off some steam and have fun with your friends, often the last thing that you want to do is fill out forms – that sounds a lot like work. For some groups, though, this might be the perfect solution – it all depends on what your players are like.

Like so many things about gaming, soliciting useful feedback from your players isn't one size fits all – but with any luck, even if none of these approaches tickle your fancy, they'll have sparked some ideas that will work for you.



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