



# Treasure Tables

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

## Problem Players: A Guide

Welcome to *Problem Players: A Guide*, the eighth free PDF from Treasure Tables, and the second PDF produced by our Wiki-to-PDF Project. This article was created on TT's GMing Wiki over the course of two weeks in 2007, with all four authors contributing material, as well as collaborating on editing and formatting.

If you GM for long enough, and in enough different situations, you're going to run into problem players at some point. When you do, we hope this PDF will help you spot them, and then deal with the situation in the best way possible.

Credits: Authors - Scott Martin, Martin Ralya, Kurt "Telas" Schneider, Scott Turnbull, Layout - Don Mappin, Logo - Darren Hardy

"Problem player" is a very general term, and it covers a lot of different issues that you might be having with someone in your group. In a nutshell, though, a problem player is one whose behavior makes the game less enjoyable for one or more other players (or for you as the GM). You might be great friends but clash over gaming, or there might be deeper personal conflicts at work — whatever the reason, the end result is generally the same: less fun for everyone.

At the end of the day, trust your instincts: if something doesn't feel right, or if it seems like the game is less enjoyable with a particular player at the table, there's a problem.

### SIGNS OF PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

These red flags point to issues of varying severity, and a problem player may display more than one of them.

- Spends a lot of time bickering about rules.
- Consistently hogs the spotlight.
- Thwarts the plans of the other PCs (by going off alone, stealing from the party, playing both sides, etc.).
- Antagonizes other players.
- Brings personal issues to the gaming table.
- When they're around, everyone else is quieter or less into the game.
- Being only "half-there" (always reading a book at the table, watching TV, etc.).

### GENERAL PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

Problem behavior at the gaming table often falls into one of these broad categories.

#### PERSONAL ISSUES

Poor hygiene, self-centeredness, freeloading, a rude or abrasive personality...the list is endless, and it's usually pretty obvious when this is a problem.

#### CLASHING PLAY STYLE

In some cases, the conflict between the player and the rest of the group may look like a problem, but sometimes it works itself out as they find common ground. Other times this conflict will take all the fun out of a game.

#### DISRUPTIVE PLAY

Traditional problems include a character who steals from the group, continually thwarts the plans of other characters or cuts their plans off with his own. If the rest of the players are fine with the disruptions, then this really isn't a problem (some groups thrive on inter-party conflict). When this behavior becomes an irritant for the rest of the group, then it is a problem.

#### SELFISH PLAY

Some players love making the game "all about their character," and will disrupt the game to cater to their narrow interests. You'll often notice selfish gamers disengaging from the game completely when their character isn't in the spotlight. Combine that with a relentless effort to spin off "solo time" — where the player can monopolize the GM's attention by separating their PC to talk with NPCs that matter only to them, try out

convoluted strategies that emphasize their character, or just seizing the spotlight with off topic suggestions — and you have a problem.

### **METAGAMING ISSUES**

Some players act as if character knowledge is equal to player knowledge, while others make a definite distinction between the two. Sometimes this resolves itself as the group finds a new dynamic, but at other times it may be more of a problem.

### **OUT-OF-GAME PROBLEMS**

Tardiness, absences, personality conflicts and any number of other issues unrelated to gaming can negatively impact the overall enjoyment of the game. At times, these are easy to deal with, but often a gaming group is also a circle of friends, and the two may collide.

## **WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

Before trying to identify what the exact problem is, first decide if it's really a problem. Talk about it with the rest of your players. Don't let them answer your question ("What should I do?") with any variation of "Whatever you want to do." Get a definite opinion on whether they are seeing the same thing you are, and what (if any) solutions they may have.

It's worth noting that this isn't a solution by itself. Forming a clique that criticizes a fellow player can relieve some of the tension, and it can be very rewarding to hear your opinion validated. But stalling at this stage — just complaining to fellow players regularly — can divide a group and increase the bad feelings that result.

If there is a problem, identify it and talk to the person(s) responsible. Clear communication is critical. Don't allude to a situation or imply anything; be direct and say what you see. Sometimes pointing out disruptive behavior is all it takes to resolve a problem.

Take some time to ensure the group agrees on a social contract for the game. "Social contract" is just a shorter way of saying "your group's agreement about what you're trying to achieve with the game, how you intend to play and interact with one another." Talking this out and reaching an agreement with the entire group can sometimes bring a problem player back into the fold or refocus them on the overall goals of the game.

When the group comes to a general consensus each member will feel like they have a personal investment in the game, they have a clearer focus on what might be considered unacceptable behavior and they also know that this isn't just a GM/player problem but an important issue for the whole group. (Treasure Tables has two resources related to social contracts: [Social Contracts for RPG Groups](#) and the [Social Contract](#) section of our [GMing Wiki](#).)

If you need to take more drastic action, do so, but be polite and professional. Make sure that everyone involved recognizes that some things just don't work out. Gaming is incredibly subjective, and not everything is for everyone. If you need to remove a player, do it privately; never reprimand or punish someone in front of their peers.

When they're gone, don't let yourself or the group speak badly of them — you wouldn't want the same done to you. Move on and play the game you got together to play. (For more help on kicking out a problem player, see the [Treasure Tables](#) post [How to Kick Out a Player and Respect Yourself in the Morning](#).)



## **COPYRIGHT AND CREATIVE COMMONS INFO**

[Problem Players: A Guide](#) is copyright © 2007 by [Treasure Tables](#). Portions of this material were originally published on the [Treasure Tables GMing Wiki](#) ([www.treasuretables.org/wiki](http://www.treasuretables.org/wiki)). Permission is granted to share this PDF freely, provided you don't sell it or alter it in any way. Spread the word, and help out a GM today!

This PDF, like the original wiki page it came from, is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 License](#), with the exception of the [Treasure Tables](#) name and logo, which are copyright © [Martin Ralya](#).

If you would like to publish this material in any other form, for attribution you must include the above sentence beginning with "Portions," and you must credit each of the contributors as shown in the [Credits](#) section on the first page.