



Notes from the Bunker

Keeping the Game Moving

by Rich Redman

Welcome to my bunker. As one of the designers of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, and a veteran of real-world modern combat (having served as a tank platoon leader in Operation: Desert Storm), I'm in a unique position to offer insights into the game.

Keeping the Game Moving

In the thirteenth installment of this column, let's talk about how to keep your game -- especially the combat portion -- moving along smoothly.

Going for Pizza

Does the following gaming table interchange sound familiar?

GM: . . . shoots at you and misses. What do you do?

Player 1: Biff Hardslab dives onto the cart, rolls across the room shooting both pistols, and ends the round behind that truck with full cover.

Player 2: I. . . .

GM: Wait. Does Biff have Shot on the Run?

Player 1: No, but. . . .

Player 3: Can I. . . .

GM: Look, you can't move, shoot, and move unless you have Shot on the Run.

Player 1: Biff's just moving to the cart, which isn't even a full move for him, so it shouldn't take up a whole move action. After that, it's the cart that's moving. Biff's just riding.

Player 4: But I want to. . . .

GM: That's a good point. Tell you what. I'll let Biff dive onto the cart and shoot. I'll have to look up some modifiers, but I'll let him do it. But he can't go more than a single move and attack unless he has Heroic Surge, and maybe not then. I'll have to think about it.

Player 1: But that will leave Biff out in the open! Let me think about what he wants to do.

GM: Hey, where are you guys going?

Players 2, 3, and 4: For pizza!

Sometimes combats that take only a few seconds of game time can take hours of real time to resolve. This month's column offers a few tips for speeding up play.

Preparation

There's no substitute for good preparation. A few minutes of looking ahead can save a lot of time in every game session.

For players, preparing for a game means knowing what the heroes can do, thinking in character, and knowing the current storyline in the campaign world. So before every session, take a few minutes to read over your character sheet. Make sure your FX abilities are up to date, and keep good notes about what they do and how they work. Know your hero's usual role in combat -- whether he's the long-range shooter, the melee fighter, the aid to others, or the close-range gunslinger -- then stick to it.

For GMs, preparation means reading the adventure carefully and in detail, or making good notes when creating one. If you like to run adventures off the top of your head, obviously you can skip that step. However, you should still make sure you know what just happened in the last session, what's supposed to happen this session, and where the story needs to go to reach the end you have in mind. Finally, make sure your NPCs are ready to go and keep your maps handy.

References

As a player, make sure you own a personal copy of the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game** and mark pertinent sections of the book for reference during play. Whether you use sticky notes, stick-on markers, scraps of paper, or even dog-eared pages, you need to be able to find information on your character's combat bonuses, feats, and FX abilities quickly. Very few things slow down games more than players who have to look up the range, target, or duration of an FX ability every round of combat. (You know who you are.)

Ready references are even more important for GMs. If you're running a campaign, you should mark not only your own copy of the **d20 Modern** game, but also your adventures. You are responsible for more information than any player is, so your ability to find what you need quickly is critical to keeping games moving.

Whether you're the GM or a player, it doesn't pay to waste time looking things up. If you can't find the information you want in 1 minute by checking your reference marks, the table of contents, and the index, then the GM should go ahead and make a ruling. You can always look it up later.

Cheat Sheets

I use cheat sheets all the time when running or playing games. Some companies even make them for you (check the link in my bio at the end of the column). The most common kinds of cheat sheets include the following.

3x5 cards: If you're the GM, make out one index card for each character involved in the session -- whether hero or GM character. Write that character's Initiative, Defense (normal, touch, and flat-footed), ability scores, hit points, level or Hit Dice, skill modifiers for any skill checks you might want to make secretly, attacks and damage, and anything else you think you'll need during combat on the card.

During play, you can arrange the cards in initiative order, then move each card to the bottom of the stack after that hero or character has acted. You can also use notes or tick marks on these cards to track durations of FX abilities, tear gas, and other multiround effects.

Combat Tracking: Sheets such as these are particularly useful when you're GMing vehicle combat. On the tracking sheet, you can list each vehicle with the Drive modifier for the driver (modified by the vehicle's Maneuver rating), plus the vehicle's Defense, cover bonus to crew and passengers, hardness, and hit points. This technique makes it easier to keep track of vehicle damage and Drive checks.

Computers: Plenty of player- and GM-aid software is available out there. But no matter how complete or accurate the program is, don't use it if you don't know how, or if the computer itself absorbs too much time with maintenance, power supply issues, crashing, or any other problems. For quite a while, I played in a **d20 Modern** game with my character sheet on my laptop, and that worked well for me. Just be cautious before you invest a lot of time or money in high-tech organizational solutions.

GM Screens: Preprinted cardstock screens are great for GMs. A screen has useful tables and rules on one side, and it serves to hide notes, die rolls, and maps from players' eyes. Because the tables and rules are right in front of you, screens can help you find rules information quickly while you're GMing -- and we've already talked about how useful that can be. There's at least one GM screen in print for **d20 Modern** and another coming in **Dragon** magazine.

Maps and Miniatures

Maps and miniatures have a great many uses. They make it very clear where everyone is and what the terrain is like in that area. But maps take time to draw (or build, if you like 3D components), so look for ways to use them more efficiently.

I know one GM who draws his maps on big presentation flip-pads. He never has to draw a map during a session; he just flips the pad to the map he needs. In modern games, the heroes are rarely in dungeons, they can often examine building interiors through windows, and they can sometimes get plans for structures from the local Hall of Records. Thus, there's less need to keep the general outline of encounter areas secret than there is in fantasy games. Just leave the specifics off your maps until heroes actually look.

On the other hand, maps don't always help much. Personally, I find it very difficult to use maps when conducting vehicle combat. What I really need to know is the relative position of each vehicle at any given moment in a round, and any intervening terrain or obstacles. Toy cars and a big play mat with a 1-inch grid serve my purposes much better than a carefully drawn map that all the vehicles will leave in the first round of combat.

Maps can really aid in understanding where everyone is, and miniatures help in this regard as well. Mapping and miniatures, however, involve fundamental assumptions about gaming, so make sure you talk

about how you intend to use them before your campaign begins.

Notes

Always take notes during play! Even a single player taking notes can be a huge time-saver during games. If you're like most **d20 Modern** players, you game about once a week, and you have a very busy life in between sessions. So you're bound to forget key information, names, calendars, or timelines in the campaign world. Notes help everyone keep track of who the various GM characters are and whether the heroes should trust them or shoot them. So make sure the notes are available at each game session, even if the note-taker has to miss it.

As GM, you need notes to remind you what the heroes told your GM characters in previous sessions, where the heroes have already been (and what traces they left behind), and the tactics your GM characters tend to use. For instance, I often write down a round-by-round summary of FX powers my GM characters generally use so that I know what they intend to do and when they'll do it. By planning out their tactics ahead of time, I know which buffs my characters can have in effect based on how long they have to prepare.

It's also worth noting the DCs for the skill checks that are most likely to come up during your session. Doing so requires only 5-10 minutes and can be done any time before the game starts. Then when a hero wants to make a Computer Use check to bypass network security, you already know the DC and don't have to look it up.

Respect and Courtesy

These are the two most important words for speeding up play and increasing enjoyment for everyone. No, you don't have to say "please" and "thank you" just because you want some nacho cheese snacks. I'm talking about important issues, such as the following.

Present and on Time: Don't make your friends wait for you. You know when and where the game is, so be there and don't waste their time.

New Players: Experienced players should help the new ones -- just not all at once. Everyone talking simultaneously slows things down, so let one person help the newbie. If the rookie still looks confused, or looks confused later, then offer to help.

Die Rolls: If you know you have trouble keeping your dice on the table, use a plastic cup to shake them and then pour them out into the top of a board game or puzzle box that you've brought along.

Book Use: Don't make people wait while you look things up. If you can't find the information you want in less than a minute, ask your GM for a ruling. If someone else at the table is flipping pages frantically, help out if you know the chapter or page number.

Table Talk: Everyone does it. We game together because we like each other and want to spend time together. For some of us creaky older gamers, a game session might be the only time we see our friends during any given week. So it's no surprise that we chat it up at the table. The trick is to stop when the GM is trying to describe something. Listen to the GM and let her voice have priority. And try not to talk off-topic

during combat.

Get Up: If you're not sitting at the table on which the map is spread, get up to look at it. Get up and move your own miniature. Don't make people wait while you figure out what's going on.

Pay Attention and Think Ahead: I was a tanker, and the U.S. Army calls Armor "the combat arm of decision." So it should come as no surprise that I'm a decisive guy. I was trained to believe that a decent plan now is better than a perfect plan too late. So during a game, I watch combat, I pay attention, and when it's my hero's turn, I'm ready with his action. When I make mistakes (and I do), I chalk them up to confusion in the heat of battle.

You need to be ready with a plan when your turn comes or play will inevitably bog down while you figure out what to do. Yes, events can derail your plans, but that doesn't happen as often if you've been watching the action as it does if you've spent half the combat gabbing. So pay attention, if at no other time than during combat.

Ask, Don't Tell: I don't want to suggest that you get all passive-aggressive about your gaming. Do consider, however, that it's often easier for someone to accept a question than an order. For example, saying, "Wouldn't it be better if. . . ." is a lot less confrontational than bellowing, "You idiot! We came to save the princess! Stop running off after bad guys!"

Bring Your Gear: You're only human, and humans forget things sometimes. Since I know I have that tendency, I take steps to eliminate the memory tasks wherever possible. For example, I keep a bag with my D&D books, my dice, my pencils, and my character sheet in it. When it's time to play D&D, I pick up that bag and go to the game. Probably every group has one person who's lucky to remember to show up with clothes on, but don't you be that person. Have your dice, your pencils (or pens), your notepaper, your character sheet, and your books with you when you arrive.

Egg Timers

Some people are indecisive. There's nothing wrong with that; in fact, the world is a better and more interesting place because we're all different. When you're running a game, however, you may want to set a time limit for decision-making. Such a tactic should be used only as a last resort, since people often resent that sort of pressure. But if you do feel that a time limit is necessary, apply it fairly and to everyone, not just the player you perceive to have the worst problem in that regard.

Rolling the Bones

You've done your planning, you've refreshed your memory during preparation, you've made your cheat sheets, and you have your maps. Now it's time to throw down! You can speed up the actual combat with any or all of the following tips (most of which appear on page 136 of the **d20 Modern** rulebook, courtesy of our thoughtful and thorough designers).

Dice: Keep an appropriate number of d6s ready to roll for action points, and have your d20 and your damage dice out so you don't have to look for them. Don't make your friends wait while you look for your dice.

Attack and Damage: Roll your attack die and your damage dice simultaneously. If you miss, you can ignore the damage roll. If you hit, your friends don't have to wait for you to make another die roll. Similarly, if your target has concealment, you can roll your miss chance at the same time.

Multiple Attacks: If your hero can attack more than once in a round, roll several different-colored d20s all at once. Designate which color goes with which attack modifier before making the roll. You can combine this tip with the previous one if your hands are big enough and you also have different-colored damage dice.

Dice as Counters: It seems as though everyone knows this tip, but it's a very useful one, so it bears repeating. If your character generates an effect that has a duration (such as an acid splash, a tear gas grenade, or any of several FX abilities), set out a die with the number corresponding to that duration facing up. Each round, turn the die so that the next lower number appears. When you can't turn it to a lower number, the effect is over. For example, the effect of a tear gas grenade lasts for 10 rounds. When your character throws one, set out a d10 with the 10 facing up. The next round, turn the die so it shows 9. Then continue in the same vein until you reach 1. The gas disperses on the following round.

Roll Ahead: With the GM's permission, you can roll your attacks (and the damage for each) ahead of time and write down the results on scratch paper. As you go through the session, use the results in the order you rolled them, crossing off each one as you use it.

You can expand this technique to cover other kinds of die rolls as well. For example, at the beginning of a session, roll a d20 a dozen times and write down each result. You might use the first for an initiative check, the next for an attack roll, and the next for a save. Just apply the appropriate modifiers each time. Just make sure you all agree to play that way and your GM says okay before you try out the technique.

Talk to Each Other

Sometimes it seems as though it's faster to just do something than to talk about it. But don't forget the old craftsman's saying: "Measure twice, cut once." As a group, you can save time by communicating with each other.

Talk about plans, set priorities, and make sure your group has an agenda. For example, you don't want to start arguing about whether to save the civilians or stop the escaping villain in the middle of combat. You need to know your objective up front and focus all your efforts on attaining it.

In both modern and fantasy games, combat involves a lot of rules and details, some of which we forget because we're only human. So help each other remember what the group needs to know. Ask the other players whether they declared the use of Dodge when they announce their actions. Remind your fellow player that if his hero moves just *there*, another hero would get a bonus for flanking. Suggest that a hero could get cover or concealment just by taking a 5-foot step and declaring it to the GM. If combat isn't moving fast enough to keep your attention, try helping the other players.

I've already touched on another good reason to talk to each other, and that's to help each other out. If someone else doesn't remember a rule and you do, you can save that person the time and trouble of looking it up. If you can look something up while another other player rolls dice (for example, checking the damage from an FX ability while the other player makes a Concentration check), you'll save time for everyone.

One Last Visit with Biff

GM: . . . shoots at you and misses. What do you do?

Player 1: Biff Hardslab shoots a guard and dives onto that cart. I'm not sure how far he can move, but I rolled a natural 20 to hit, then rolled a 1, so I don't confirm the crit. I deal 9 points of damage.

Player 2: I shoot the same guard. I got a 15. Do I hit?

GM: Okay, the guard groans, bleeding from a pretty nasty shoulder wound. Biff, make a Jump check to get on the cart. Before I answer about the second shot, do you want to spend an action point?

Player 2: No.

GM: Well, a 15 still hits. I see you rolled damage already. The guard is now bleeding from a gut wound as well. He looks pale and a little shaky, but he's still up.

Player 1: Biff doesn't have any ranks in Jump, but it's usable untrained. He has a 14 Strength and I rolled a 14, so that's a 16 total. I don't spend an action point.

GM: Okay, Biff jumps onto the cart and it rolls about 25 feet across the room. If he stays on the cart, it will roll behind cover on his next action.

Player 3: Hey, does Biff have Dodge?

Player 1: No, but thanks.

Player 3: Okay, I want to cover Biff, so I fire on automatic into this 10-by-10-foot area here. I roll a 9, but I don't spend an action point because I only need a 10 to hit the space. Everyone who fails a Reflex save takes 10 points of damage.

GM (crossing off two d20 rolls she made before the session): The wounded guard is hit and collapses. Bullets thud into the drums the other guard is using for cover, but he's unhurt.

Player 4: Hey, next turn Biff can jump in the van! I toss the unconscious scientist over my shoulder. That'll be a heavy load for me. I'll look up the penalties in a second.

Player 3: Page 121.

Player 4: Thanks. I move behind the van so next round we can start getting out of here.

GM: Okay, so that last guard. . . .

About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to the RPG R&D department at Wizards of the Coast, Inc., he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast, Inc.'s Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer who has worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the ***d20 Modern Roleplaying Game***, the ***Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game***, and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.

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