

# **GROUP DYNAMICS**

**For Tabletop Roleplayers**

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Dancing Lights Press

<http://dancinglightspress.com>

Revised text version 1.01

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# INTRODUCTION

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You have a game. You have people willing to play that game. Now what? There are several good resources on how to plan and run an adventure. Finding other players is as easy as conducting an internet search or dropping in at your friendly local game store. What's missing is a comprehensive guide to organizing a group, dealing with disparate personalities, and handling the various issues that are likely to arise.

Over the years I have run and played in dozens of games with all sorts of people. I've played with groups with as many as 17 players, in a weekly group that held together for years. Every group that succeeded had certain things in common; all that failed shared the same set of flaws. What if we put the same level of rigor around group dynamics that we put into learning the mechanics and balancing adventures? What if our expectation that other players behave courteously and responsibly were as high as our requirement that they know their character's abilities and understand the system — or are at least willing to learn?

Most of you don't need to be told how to play well with others. Unfortunately, you'll run into people who do. For whatever reason, they never learned this particular set of social skills. Sitting down to play a game with them can be like herding cats — occasionally entertaining, but mostly frustrating. You'll wonder if you're wasting your time, and begin to think about other things you could be doing that involve less hassle. I have seen people leave groups, and quit the hobby entirely not because they didn't enjoy roleplaying or love the campaign they were in, but because no one knew how to coordinate a group or deal with difficult players.

Rather than hoping that your group comes together organically, with people magically self-organizing and good things happening by accident, you can plan. Prepping for the success of your group is as essential as knowing the rules of the game and having everything you need ready to run an adventure. With a little bit of forethought you can build a game group that runs smoothly. Then you can focus on the serious business of having fun, week after week, for months and years to come.

**Berin Kinsman**

*June 2016*

# USING THIS BOOK

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This is not Robert's Rules of Order. You don't have to run your group using parliamentary procedure. It's possible for your game sessions to be casual and informal and still have a little bit of structure. Some basic guidelines benefit everyone by establishing and then maintaining a semblance of order. Don't overthink it — but do think.

The assumption is that you, the reader, are either the gamemaster or the host. The gamemaster, of course, runs the game, and the host provides the venue. Those roles are often combined, but they are the default, unofficial leadership positions in most groups.

If you're a player, you can still benefit from the advice offered in this book. For a start, you can back up the group leaders and help them keep everything on track. You can step up and help to enforce courtesy and responsibility among your fellow players. If nothing else, you can take some of things in this book to heart so that you never become that person — the one that makes things awkward and the leaders have to figure out how to deal with.

This book is divided into sections by topic. You should read it through from beginning to end, because there are several interconnected concepts. Then as you need them, you can refer to individual sections as issues arise in your group that you have to address. The sections are:

## **FOUR PRINCIPLES**

These are the fundamental principles that should guide your group. Everything else will be built upon this foundation.

## **PLAYER NEEDS**

How to identify and address what the players require, from the game and from the group. The goal is to keep them engaged and happy.

## **GROUP LOGISTICS**

These are elements and action items that absolutely need to be determined and agreed upon in order for your group to run smoothly.

## **TABLE TALK**

Getting everyone on the same page is essential. This section deals with making sure that all members of the group are heard, and each issue gets addressed.

## **HOUSE RULES**

Every group approaches problems differently. In this section, you'll learn how to customize rules to create the best experience for everyone.

## **DIFFICULT PEOPLE**

Dealing with difficult people is part of belonging to a group. This section identifies common problem behaviors, and offers strategies to deal with them.

# FOUR PRINCIPLES

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There are four fundamental principles that must govern your group. It's not a checklist, a collection of suggestions, or a selection of options. All of these principles have equal importance. They need to be applied together to achieve the best results.

**Remember Your Purpose** - Stay focused on the notion that you're all here for the same reason, to have fun playing a game.

**Encourage Participation** - Allow everyone contribute ideas, express concerns, and offer up possible solutions to problems.

**Let Democracy Rule** - Do things that the majority of the group wants to do, in a way that all members of the group are comfortable with.

**Allow Leaders to Lead** - When in doubt, allow the host, the gamemaster, or the party leader to make a decision so you can all move forward.

The needs of your group, and the personalities of individual people, may shift the emphasis more heavily toward one principle or another. That's natural, and over time the focus will shift on occasion to accommodate changes in the group dynamic. You may not recognize the need for a particular principle within your group right now. There will be a temptation to gloss over some of them. Don't do it. You will always, to some degree, require them all.

By following the four basic principles, you'll be able to run an ongoing game with less stress and minimal disruption. When you encounter problems, you'll have a clear process that you can use to resolve them. The object is to minimize conflict and distractions as much as is humanly possible.

## REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE

The group is together for one specific reason - to play a game. That's the common interest that brought the members of the group together, and the thing you all agreed to do. It's not "complain about work" time. It's not "compare notes on the movie" time. It's not "talk about sportsball" time. It's game time.

This doesn't mean that the group can't do other things at other times. You can certainly be social during a game session. There can be food shared, and you can chat about things beyond the scope of the game. But that sort of table talk is secondary. It's not the focus your time together.

There are ways to hang out as friends, enjoy one another's company, and do other things without disrupting the game session. The mood doesn't have to be so strict that

you can't go off on tangents once in a while. Just keep them short, and know how to reign it back in. Always remember your purpose.

## **ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION**

If someone has something to say, they need to know that they'll be heard and taken seriously. Shy people will need to be asked, and bold extroverts will need to be prompted to yield the floor to others. Everyone has to get a chance to speak, and they need to feel safe in doing so.

In the heat of the moment it's easy to talk over other people. There's a level of self-awareness required to know that you're doing it. It can be equally hard to speak up if you're not a naturally assertive person. Most games have some sort of turn process so all characters get to do their thing; most groups could benefit from a similar process to allow the players to do the same.

Giving people a chance to talk, even if they don't have anything to say, does a few things. It acknowledges that they're there, to start. They know that if they do have something to contribute, they can. A democratic tone is established and reinforced. Exuberant and talkative people are gently reminded that they need to share the time with others. You will get more from people when the environment encourages participation.

## **LET DEMOCRACY RULE**

If a problem arises, everyone needs to know that it will be dealt with fairly and in a timely manner. This principle has to be embedded in everything the group does, as well as the way they do it. When in doubt everyone gets to vote on it, and in return everyone has to agree to respect the group's decision.

The gamemaster is not a capital- or small-"g" god. They're just another member of the group with a different role. The host is not a dictator; they have rights and get to say how their home or business space is used, but they also have responsibilities toward their guests. The party leader is not a general; they can take input from the other party members prior to making decisions that affect everyone.

No one will get their way every time, but hopefully the group will agree on more things than they disagree about. With luck, the points of contention will be minor ones that dissenters can live with. Everyone's input needs to be taken into consideration, though. Let democracy rule.



## **ALLOW LEADERS TO LEAD**

There's some reason why this person is the gamemaster; they probably know the rules better, have the skill sets needed to run a game, or have more time to prep adventures. There's a reason why that person is a host; they like entertaining, they're willing to let people meet at their place, or they're just in the best location. There's a reason why the other person is the party leader; they think tactically, are better at doing the talking for the group, or are just playing the most appropriate character. Trust these people to do the thing that you've put them in charge of doing.

Not everything needs to be a discussion. Sometimes you don't have to hear what every person in the group thinks. You don't need to vote on every single issue that arises. If a leader pitches an idea, and no one objects, go with it. If there's an issue, then fall back on democracy and resolve it. Just don't let everything become a point of contention. If you don't trust the leader, then there are larger issues that need to be resolved.

The power of leaders is expedience. The pros and cons of whether to hunker down until an enemy patrol passes or to jump out and attack them is probably worthy of discussion. Whether to go left or right, with no idea what lies in either direction, isn't discussion-worthy; let the leader choose. A leader needs to keep things moving, and the wheels of democracy can saved for the things that really need that process to resolve.

# PLAYER NEEDS

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All human beings have the same basic needs. When those needs are met, people are relaxed, focused, and able to function at a higher level. They feel secure, and their relationships with other group members are much more positive. Further, their level of participation in the game is far more fruitful. If any of their needs aren't being met, people are unable to function as well, and tend to concentrate on that unmet need and its effects ahead of anything else.

Not acknowledging and addressing your group members' needs is the quickest path to dissatisfaction and strife. It might not always manifest as a direct response to the need that hasn't been met; a negative behavior could pop up as an expression of frustration, or leak out under other stressful or emotional situations. By insuring that everyone's needs are met to the best of your ability, you'll eliminate a lot of potential problems.

## KNOW YOUR ROLE

The members of a roleplaying group may be close friends at best, and at least represent a group of acquaintances with a shared interest. You're not their parent. You're not their therapist. Your only true duty to them is to ensure that everyone has the ability to have a good time. Period.

Obviously, you're not responsible for their personal problems outside of the group. If you provide them with a comfortable place to escape from their other issues, they'll appreciate it and will hopefully want to protect it. The very best you can do is provide them with a safe haven for a few hours every week or two.

If you understand who you are in relation to the other members of the group, it's a lot easier to make decisions. If you do choose to help someone beyond the scope of the group, that's great. Be sure you're not getting in over your head, and recognize that you're outside the realm of the first principle. This is about your personal relationship with another member of the group, and not about the group anymore.

## SEPARATE NEEDS AND WANTS

A need is something that your group has to have — a place to play, for example, something to eat and drink. A want is something that would be nice to have, but isn't a necessity — a game room designed to look like a medieval tavern, with roast duck and ale for refreshments. Sometimes, a player will insist that something is an absolute need, when in fact it's just something they badly want.

Distinguishing between wants and needs might seem simple, but it can get complicated. We all tend to be dismissive when something sounds ridiculous. Everyone else can stay out past 10, why do you need to be home so early? No one else complains about the pizza toppings, why do you have to be so fussy? There may be a valid reason, so to them, it's a need.

When you can separate wants and needs, you can focus on what is absolutely required for the minimum satisfaction the groups. You'll know how to allocate resources, what problems you need to prioritize, and how to resolve disputes. The basic needs of the entire group always trump one member's personal desires.

## **PHYSICAL COMFORT**

Are the basic physical needs of the players being met? You need a place to sit. The temperature in the room has to be reasonable for the season. There have to be bathroom facilities, preferably clean, and access to food and drink. Everyone has to be comfortable.

Being uncomfortable, hungry, thirsty, too hot or too cold, makes it difficult to concentrate. People will be thinking about whatever unpleasant sensation they're experiencing, and how to end it. They may become irritable and less social. What they contribute to the game is not going to fulfill the first principle of having fun together by playing a game.

When the basic requirements of physical comfort are met, no one is distracted by them. They can focus on what's going on in the game. They're going to be in a better mood, and behave in a far more civilized manner. This is why, if no other needs are met, you have to guarantee a minimal degree of physical comfort for the members of your group.

## **SAFETY**

People need to feel safe. This includes both physical and emotional safety. They need to know that the meeting place is in a neighborhood where they won't be robbed or assaulted. There has to be assurance that the other players aren't going to hurt them in any way. The physical environment shouldn't pose any sort of health hazards.

There are aspects of geek culture that find trash talk and teasing to be acceptable expressions of camaraderie. Some people aren't particularly fond of that, and it makes them uneasy. The tone of the group's jokes and banter needs to be established up front. Expressions of physical prowess are off-putting to most people. Outright bullying is always a no-go.

If people feel safe, they'll show up and participate. Don't question whether their need for safety is valid, just accept that it is to them. Never compare your threshold of tolerance for physical and emotional threats to anyone else's; you haven't lived their life, and may not know what they've gone through. The purpose of the group isn't to debate who might be tougher, or who might be a whiner, it's to insure everyone has fun playing a game.

## **BELONGING**

Everyone likes to feel like they're a part of something bigger than themselves. All members of the group need to feel that they're an important part of the group. They need to feel included, which means being involved in decisions and invited to all of the group's functions.

The downside to a sense of belonging is that some people can get clingy. The importance of the group, and of playing the game, can become overinflated. The closeness of the relationship with another player might not align with how that other player feels. Boundaries will need to be set. Just make sure that things are addressed as a group problem, not some sort of personal intervention.

When a group really gels, friendships are formed and you rarely have to worry about things like attendance or participation. That begins with making people feel welcome, valued, and essential to the group.

## **SELF-ESTEEM**

We all need to feel good about ourselves. Self-esteem is the feeling that we have worth, and that we make some valuable contribution to the world around us. When a member of a group has a need for self-esteem, the need to feel that they're participating, and that their level of participation makes a difference to the other members.

It might seem strange that people get a sense of self-esteem from playing a game. You might not know what the rest of their life is like, though. Roleplaying is called an escapist pastime for a reason. This might be their only outlet, the only place where they feel their actions matter; the only "win" they get that lets them feel a little more confident, so they can be okay with themselves the rest of the week. Don't judge.

Everyone needs to have something to do that plays to their strengths. Not just what they're characters are good at, what they're good at. Don't heap tasks on them that set them up to struggle or fail. Set them up for success, and then give them praise for that success. Building self-esteem in your players means building stability and contentment into the whole group.

## **SELF EXPRESSION**

Many people approach roleplaying as a means of creative expression. It's performance art. For some, it's a chance to write, to draw, to act, and to tell stories. For others, creativity comes in learning to navigate the rules and develop tactics.

Some people will say they're not there for self-expression. Smile, agree with them, and then watch them. See what they do that really lights them up. Watch what gets them excited and participating. Play to the strengths they express. If they like to write, encourage that. If they draw, get them to illustrate things. If they act or tell stories, open up every possible avenue to allow them to do that.

Allowing people to express themselves will give you far more interesting games. They'll come out specifically to get this need met, because tabletop roleplaying games are one of the few outlets that play directly to this need. Understand what each player's outlet for creative expression is, and you'll strengthen their ties to the group.

# PLAYER NEEDS AND THE FOUR PRINCIPLES

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Let's review the four principles and see how they fit in with player needs.

## REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE

Meeting player needs feeds directly into fulfilling your group's purpose of having fun by playing a game. This is why it is important to distinguish needs from wants; an individual's desires might not jibe with the purpose. Physical comfort and a sense of safety will allow people to focus on the game. A sense of belonging and self-esteem will allow them to be more engaged and less distracted. When a player can fully exercise their need for self-expression within the game, you will end up with fantastic characters, creative actions, and a game that's highly entertaining for everyone.

## ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

Players aren't going to participate as fully, or at all, if their needs aren't being met. Things like a lack of physical comfort or serious concerns for their own safety will cause them to not commit to the game or drop out of the group entirely. If they feel a sense of belonging and their need for self-esteem is being met, they'll take ownership; they're participating because it's their group and the members are their friends. Obviously, there are few opportunities for self-expression without participation.

## LET DEMOCRACY RULE

This principle is essentially about communication, so without it members of the group won't be able to tell you their needs aren't being met. They can be comfortable asking if they're the only one who isn't physically comfort, or feels unsafe. That they can call for a vote shows that they belong, and that they will be heard and taken serious positively impacts their self-esteem. Healthy self-expression means that they will be allowed to take risk, and allow others to engage their creativity as well.

## ALLOW LEADERS TO LEAD

Knowing that someone is in charge will help players understand that their needs are important. They have someone who can help them address issues of physical comfort and safety. Having people in charge reinforces the sense that the group is a cohesive unit, which in turn builds a sense of belonging. When leaders listen, it creates self-esteem. Having someone to enforce a sense of order and fairness means members will be free to engage in self-expression without interruption or hassle.

# GROUP LOGISTICS

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There are things that need to be established before starting a game group. These include how the group is organized, details of the group's meetups, and even the way communication is carried out. It's not as detailed or complex as the logistics used in business or by the military, but it's important.

Assumption is not communication. When you don't spell things out, people will fill in the blanks with their own assumptions. Those assumptions might be wrong, or they might not work for the rest of the group. When multiple people have different assumptions, you end up with confusion and conflict. You also end up answering the same questions over and over.

Even if you think that everything is clear and that everyone in the group understands, say it again for clarification. Don't worry that you're treating people like children. What you're doing being certain that the details of the group are clear, so everyone knows what's going on and can have a good time.

## MEETING PLACE

Where will the group meet? Is it in the same place every session, or will it move around from session to session? Is there a pattern to when you meet in one place versus another, or does it just change as needed?

It can sometimes be difficult to find the perfect location for a game. There has to be somewhere for everyone to sit, preferable with a table. The place shouldn't require excessive travel time for any of the group members, either. Rather than waiting for the ultimate meeting place, you might find a temporary location to use while you continue the search.

Ideally, you'll meet in the same place every time. It will meet all of the players' physical comfort and safety needs. Having a regular, recurring meeting place will create stability and eliminate confusion.

## SESSION TIME

What day will the group meet, and at what time? How often will the group meet? Will it be on the same day and time every time, or will it move around?

Finding a day and time that works for everyone is often a bigger challenge than finding a location. Not everyone's school or job schedule is 9-to-5 normative. Not everyone gets weekends off, and if they do they often have family time or other social events. You might have to settle for something that isn't ideal, but works for most of the

people involved. If not... it can be a hard decision to go with what works for the majority, when it means someone is left out.

Try to keep the session time consistent. Exceptions can be made occasionally, for holidays, illnesses, or significant life events, but don't let it become a habit. That way lead to confusion, and a disruption of peoples' other plans and habits, and the group may begin to unravel.

## **SESSION LENGTH**

How long will your game sessions last? Do they have a defined ending time, or will they go on until the players get tired or the gamemaster runs out of material? Are there limitations on the availability of the venue, like the game store closing, your mom setting a limit, or a curfew going into effect? Knowing the expected length of a game session lets people figure out how it fits in with the rest of their lives.

If a session is too short, you won't get much done. It might be the only window available for the entire group, but if you can't accomplish anything it will be unsatisfying and probably not worth the effort. If it goes on too long, people may become fatigued and bored. Marathon sessions might fly if you're in school and have nowhere to be, but as you get older and have jobs, family, and other responsibilities, it gets harder to stay awake and alert for extended periods.

Knowing the session length allows people to plan. The gamemaster will know how much material needs to be prepped. Players will know when to tell their loved ones to expect them home. People using public transportation will be able to figure out which bus or train to take.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES**

Who is responsible for providing certain things? Does the host provide food and drink, or do people need to bring their own? Will the gamemaster provide character sheets, pencils, and rule books, or are the players expected to acquire those things themselves? Are there any other materials or amenities that have to be accounted for?

If no one is responsible for something, the default should be that individuals are responsible for themselves. This has to be spelled out, so that there are no false assumptions or miscommunications. There are few things more frustrating than having gamers raid your refrigeration when you're on a fixed budget, or players showing up with no paper, no dice, and nothing to write with.

When people know what they're responsible for, they can prepare. They can budget to buy the things that they need. If they know someone else will provide things,



they won't worry about them. What you'll really cut down on are simmering resentments and open hostilities created by mismatched expectations.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

How will people get to the session? Are the directions to the meeting place clear? Can players carpool with one another? Does public transportation run nearby, at times compatible with the group's planned start and stop times.

If players don't have reliable transportation, they should say so up front. Other players may be able to help them out. It beats having people make a commitment that they're not able to fulfill, and ending up with too few players to make the group viable. It's incredibly frustrating when people can't arrive on time because of transportation issues, or when they have to leave early to catch their ride.

Having a transportation plan avoids disruption of the game. The onus to get to and from the meeting place on time is entirely on the individual, but without all of those individuals, there is no group. Be sure people can get there before you get in too deep.

## **COMMUNICATION**

How can people get in touch with one another between game sessions? Is there a Facebook group, an email list, or does everyone just exchange numbers and text each other? What is the preferred method of communication for the group as a whole, and its individual members?

In a best-case scenario, everyone shows up on time every week and other than hanging out and chatting as friends, no one will need to contact anyone else. What happens if someone needs to borrow a book? What do they do if they have questions for the gamemaster? Who do they talk to if they need a ride? If people don't know how to contact each other, the group could be sitting around waiting for, even worrying about, someone who isn't going to show that day.

There are so many ways remain in contact with people these days, there's no reason to not have a communication plan. Rather than doing things scattershot, find out what people look at. Everyone has email, but some people never check it. Some people are connected to Facebook all day, every day, but other people only look at it occasionally. Figure out how the group can communicate between sessions, and you can resolve a lot of problems without disrupting the game.

## **CANCELLATION**

Sometimes things happen, and a scheduled game session needs to be cancelled on short notice. How far in advance should a player tell the group, if they know they

have a conflict? Who should they call or text if there's a last minute emergency? How many players can the group function without, and how many people can be missing before the session is no longer worthwhile?

It's important to understand that life happens and people sometimes legitimately have to bail. Showing up should be taken as a commitment and a responsibility, though. "It's just a game" isn't a reason to keep friends hanging. Not feeling like is isn't a valid reason to stay home, or go off and do something else. That's just rude.

If key players or the gamemaster can't make it to a game, there should be a backup plan. Perhaps the group plays a board game or video game instead. Maybe they create characters for a side games. They can watch a movie, or just sit and make it a table talk session. Knowing what you're going to do in case of cancellation makes people feel as if their time isn't being wasted, and mitigates their disappointment.

# GROUP LOGISTICS AND THE FOUR PRINCIPLES

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Let's review the four principles and see how they fit in with group logistics.

## REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE

All of the group logistics are in service to fulfilling the group's purpose. Everyone knows where they need to be, when they need to be there, and how they're going to get there, so the fun begins. They're clear on who is responsible for what. They're able to make plans so that the game sessions fit in with the rest of their life, and know how they can communicate with other group members when conflicts arise.

## ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

It's hard to participate when you don't know what's going on. When things are unclear, people will make assumptions and act on inaccurate inferences. If they don't know how to reach people to ask for clarifications, they'll cling to personal theories. When they think there's going to be a conflict, whether one exists or not, they might decline an invitation or drop out. Not knowing what they're responsible for makes people uncomfortable, because they can't meet an expectation that hasn't been clearly set.

## LET DEMOCRACY RULE

Logistics rely on the ability of all group members to fulfill them. You need to know that a time and location of your game session is something that works for everyone. People need to have a say over the length of the session, so they can work it into their lives. They need to be able to accept or decline responsibilities, rather than having things thrust upon them that can't or aren't willing to do. There are few things more democratic than being able to contact one another and discuss issues as they arise.

## ALLOW LEADERS TO LEAD

The buck has to stop somewhere. Leaders need to propose meeting places and times, in order for members to vote on them. They need to make the call if it comes down to picking what works for most people, if an issue can't be agreed upon or doesn't work for all. A leader needs to be able to delegate responsibilities, and follow up to make sure that things get done. Leadership, most of the time, is simply facilitating clear communication between the other group members.

# TABLE TALK

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Table talk is any conversation that occurs during a game session that has nothing to do with the game itself. This includes necessary communication between players, friendly chatter, and out-of-character jokes. How your group chooses to handle table talk can affect the tone and focus of the game.

The problem with excess table talk is that it's distracting. It's often a side conversation between two or three members of the group often when their characters aren't doing anything. Table talk can be disruptive to people who are active in the game. While some people don't care and consider it part of the social aspect of roleplaying games, others consider it to be extremely rude.

You need table talk, though. It's how members of the group get to know one another. It's a way for players to bond. People have to be allowed to meet their need to be social, in a way that doesn't bring the game to a grinding halt.

## OPENING TABLE TALK

There should be a period of table talk allowed at the start of the game session. Let people say hello and make small talk for a while. If they can get some of it out of their system, and let out the thoughts bouncing around in their heads, they'll hopefully be able to focus when actual play begins.

The potential problem with an opening table talk session is that it can go on, and on, and on, cutting into game time. If people haven't seen each other for a while, or someone has news, or some huge event just went down, people will want to chat. There need to be some boundaries established, so that a balance between social time and game time can be struck.

A good way to handle this is to set both a meet-up time and a starting time. Instead of kicking off at 7:00, say that you're meeting at 6:30 and the game will begin at 7. Then people have a chance to gab, catch up, and get settled in before diving directly into the game. This also allows people who are running late some wiggle room.

## INTERMISSION TABLE TALK

Unless your game session is incredibly short, you should have scheduled breaks. From personal experience, about 15 minutes every two hours is a good guideline. If you're playing for more than four hours, plan 30 to 45 minutes for a meal break. Then people can chat about things other than the game.

The biggest potential problem with an intermission is rounding everyone back up and getting them focused again. If you're playing in a public venue like a game store, they might go shopping or get into conversations with people outside the group. If people leave to go get food or snacks, they might get sidetracked. Once they step outside the sphere of the group, it becomes more difficult to pull them back in.

An intermission in the game means players don't have to wait until the end of the session to finish telling a story. They can share their news, ask their questions, and get in some more social time. Players can talk about what happened, and discuss strategy and tactics for what they think is coming up next. When done right, the advantages outweigh the possible drawbacks.

## **ENDING TABLE TALK**

Allow room at the end of the session to talk. Players will want to discuss what happened, plan for next time, and finish any previous social interactions. It's a great, low-key way to wind down following the game.

Some people will need to get going right away. Others might have to wait for rides, or just want to hang out a bit. The host might have other things to do, or the store might be closing up. Respect the needs of the venue, as well as other players' time. Let people be as social as they want to be, for as long as they want to be, but understand that not everyone can, and they you might need to continue your conversation somewhere else.

Again, the best thing to do is to set a time limit. The host should establish what time everyone needs to be out. The gamemaster should plan to end at least 20 to 30 minutes prior to that, in order to give people a chance to debrief and shoot the breeze.

## **ADDRESSING TABLE TALK ISSUES**

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Whenever you put multiple people together in a room, differences of opinion will arise. It doesn't matter whether the issue is important or trivial. In many cases, it won't have anything to do with the game or the group. You need to have a process in place to address issues that arise as a result of table talk.

Ignoring problems rarely results in them going away. They usually get worse. Banning table talk entirely, in my experience, rarely works because then people just stew. Not addressing problems only puts difficult conversations off until later, when they've grown bigger and become even harder to deal with.

When you have a process to deal with table talk issues as they arise, you can resolve them quickly and move on. Tear the adhesive bandage off and get it over with. Below are a number of strategies for handling these awkward problems.

### **ONE SUBJECT AT A TIME**

Sometimes problems are simple. Often they're complex. It's best to break things down into component parts and get to the heart of the matter. When everyone I clear about what they're discussing or disagreeing about, then you can address one subject at a time.

Trying to deal with multiple issues leads to confusion and cross-talk. You think I'm upset about one thing, but I'm upset about something else. That means you're trying to solve the wrong problem, and I'm feeling like you're not hearing or understanding me. Things will continue to break down.

When you get clarity about what the actual issue is, and resolve issues one at a time, you build confidence in the process. People feel more comfortable about bringing things up, knowing that they'll be addressed calmly and rationally. You won't have minor, trivial things festering until they become a massive, deadly infection that can kill the group.

### **WHO HAS THE BRAIN?**

I used to have a foam rubber brain that I brought with me to corporate meetings and training sessions. The only person who was allowed to talk was the person who had the brain. It was an apt metaphor, but I've seen groups use other objects for the same purpose. Everyone got a turn to hold the brain and speak, and everyone without a brain had to sit quietly and listen.

While it seems juvenile and little bit patronizing, it works. It means that when it's someone's turn, they're not competing with side conversations. Other players can coerce them into changing their intended actions.

Most people seem to enjoy creating order out of chaos. If you make the "permission object" something thematically appropriate to your game, it might even be fun. You don't even have to use it forever; fall back on this technique as needed, and set it aside when everyone is getting along and being respectful.

## **DEAL WITH IT**

Sometimes it's best to stop what you're doing and deal with an issue right away. The types of issues this approach works best for reside on the extremes. They may be small and trivial, and therefore easily dealt with, so get it over with. They might be significant, and will only escalate the stakes if you put them off.

Interrupting the game isn't what you want to do, but sometimes there are issues more important than play. Be careful, because some members of the group will be more upset over a delay of game than the issue you're pausing to address. It can become personal, with anger and resentment aimed at the people whose table talk has to be addressed. Tread lightly, and make it about the behaviors and issues, not the people. It's not personal; it's about maintaining the first principle of having fun.

Dealing with table talk issues will allow the group to get back on track faster. It will hopefully put an end to the problem and prevent recurrences. This approach will also let difficult players know that certain things won't be tolerated, and install the good players with confidence that things will be handled swiftly and definitively.

## **SCHEDULE IT**

There are issues that are important, but not urgent. You can plan to deal with them at the end of the game session, rather than interrupting play. If people need to cool off before tackling a problem, or it requires a little thought or research, it can be scheduled for another time.

Putting this off might irritate some people, but you need to keep the first principle in mind. You're there to have fun. You're there to play a game. A relatively trivial table talk issue doesn't take precedent over that. The fourth principle, respect the leaders, also comes into it. No one is violating the principles of fostering participation and acting democratically, it's just deferring those activities to a more appropriate time.

Set up a time to talk about it. You can discuss it face to face, or exchange ideas by text, email, or social media if you choose. The table talk issue shouldn't be ignored or

blown off, but make it clear that the middle of the game session isn't the right time for that conversation.

## **DISMISS IT**

You will encounter issues that aren't issues. Either they've already been resolved, or they're outside the scope of the group to deal with. When this sort of table talk issue comes up, just say no and tell the players engaged in it to knock it off.

Don't be dismissive of peoples' feelings and concerns, though. Make sure that the issue they're bringing up is the real issue. Assuming that it's not appropriate to the game, the group, or the four principles might be wrong. Be clear about what the table talk issue is before dismissing it as inappropriate conversation.

When in doubt, a quick show of hands will indicate whether the majority of the group wants to deal with it or not. If the group says, in essence, to shut up, then everyone should shut up. If it needs to be dealt with, the group can also vote on whether to deal with it now or schedule it for later. The goal, as always, is to get back to having fun playing a game as soon as humanly possible.



# TABLE TALK AND THE FOUR PRINCIPLES

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Let's review the four principles and see how they fit in with table talk.

## REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE

Controlling table talk is all about staying focused on the game. If conversation isn't part of the game, it should be about the game; if it's not about the game, it needs to be limited, or confined to certain times before and after the session. Discussing group issues is a valid use of table talk, but the timing of those conversations has to serve, rather than disrupt, the goal of having fun playing a game.

## ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

When people are engaged in side conversations, they're not participating. When they're talking about group dynamics, they're participating in the group but not in the game. Tackling issues as they arise, at the right time, allows group members to focus on the game while still knowing that they'll have a chance to chat, socialize, and deal with other things that are on their mind.

## LET DEMOCRACY RULE

Conversations should gravitate toward the topics that the group wants to talk about. Providing time for the game, discussion of in-game issues, and socializing allows the group to work out anything they decide needs to be resolved. Having a process to guide the timing of discussions lets everyone know that they will be heard and things will be addressed, cutting down on inappropriate and distracting conversations during game time.

## ALLOW LEADERS TO LEAD

The gamemaster needs to be able to shut down inappropriate table talk, but he or she also has a duty to set up a time for issues to be addressed. They can rule on it, schedule it, or dismiss it if most members think it's trivial. A leader has to be there to facilitate conversation, so that everyone is heard and discussions remain constructive and on track.

# HOUSE RULES

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Every group will come across established rules that just don't work. There may be no rules to cover a particular situation, and the group decides there should be. The rules-as-written might not accommodate the story being told or the group's style of play. How house rules are decided upon and documented can be a source of strength or strife within your group.

House rules, if allowed to get out of hand, can lead to concept drift. You don't need to rewrite every single rule in the manual; if you feel you do, then you're probably playing the wrong game system. It also helps if you're certain you understand the rules-as-written, because a simple clarification will save you the time and effort of devising a house rule.

Agreeing on house rules has the benefit of uniting the group. What you're doing becomes unique among all the players of the game system around the world. It means that everyone is on the same page. Documenting the rules means you can look them up the same way you're reference the manual, so you don't have to remember what you agreed upon every time it comes up.

## TYPES OF RULES

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House rules fall under three broad categories: story rules, system rules, and venue rules.

### STORY RULES

Most of the rules of the genre and setting aren't codified in the game system rules. If your science fiction setting has no robots or aliens, that's a story rule. If the group doesn't want plots that involve certain subject matter, those are story rules. Even the way character death is handled can be a story rule.

Not having some story rules means people will operate on assumptions. If the setting is fantasy, why wouldn't there be elves? Why shouldn't a crime story involve elements of drugs and prostitution? Levels of interest, and comfort, with various aspects of a genre and setting will vary among players. Not being on the same page can create conflict.

When you establish story rules, it provides players with a creative framework. They know where the boundaries are, and how hard they can press against those boundaries. Everyone is working with each other, not against each other, because they have a shared understanding, if not a shared vision, of what the story is.

### SYSTEM RULES

These are the actual rules of the game you're playing. They are the rules-as-written for the system, playtested and refined by many other players. It's likely, though, that those players weren't you and your group. Just because the system rules all work for everyone else doesn't mean they'll automatically work perfectly for you.

House rules for established game systems can be a tricky thing. Some people are very heavily invested in certain game mechanics, and treat them as immutable law. Players might have joined the group because they want to play with the system, and they find amateur rules hacks to be dubious at best. Members of the group might not be able to agree on what the house rule should be.

When you create house rules for the system, you get a game that better supports your needs. It reinforces your group's particular style of play. It facilitates the types of stories that you want to tell. You don't have to be a professional game designer. It doesn't have to work for anyone outside of your group. It is a unique, creative personalization of the mechanics

## **VENUE RULES**

A venue rule is a decree set forth by the host or the management of the place you're gathering at. Take your shoes off before entering the house. Don't feed chips to the dog. No outside food in the coffee shop. These aren't things within the control of the group, although some things might be negotiable. They're things that the group has to respect and abide by, though, if they want to be able to use that meeting place. These aren't so much house rules as the rules of the house.

Other aspects of the venue might be up for a vote, though. Does playing music add to the mood, or create a distraction? Does opening a window or turning up the air conditioning bother anyone? Is the cat jumping on the table okay, or does it need to be kept out of the room? These are areas where the group can sort out what works best for them collectively, and abide by those rules.

## SCOPE OF RULES

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Not all house rules are created equal. Some are designed to cover small things, like the way a specific ability works, or how a certain type of story element should be resolved. Others are large and have broader effects, like altering a major setting element or changing a key game mechanic. You need to understand the scope of the rules you are changing, and all of the implications of that change, before you set anything in stone.

Creating a house rule and expecting it to be the last word on the subject for all time is unrealistic, though. After all, you're already making changes to tried-and-true and presumably well-playtested rules yourself. If the creators of the game didn't make something that was perfect and inalterable, why do you expect that your group can? Leave the option open to change your mind, and to refine a house rule further as you use it a bit, see how it works, and discover any unintended consequences.

By allowing flexibility for the scope of your house rules, and leaving the door open for further changes, you'll find them more useful and less restricting. Over time, you'll find what fits your group's overall personality, the stories you tell, and the style of play you all prefer.

## TEMPORARY RULES

When you create a temporary house rule, you only expect that it will be in force for a limited period of time. It might be a stopgap, until you can do some research and figure out what the official rule is and how it works. A temporary rule could be something you want to test out, to see if you want to keep it. It may be a rough concept, until the group fleshes out exactly how they want a permanent house rule to work.

The danger of temporary rules is that they might not be consistent with either the rules as written or the way the group decides to handle things later. If they're created on the fly, they won't have any testing or rigor behind them. The results they yield might create results that alter your original intentions, and have serious ramifications for your characters and stories.

The key to successfully using a temporary house rule is to fail fast and fail forward. It's only meant to get you through the present situation, so you don't have to bring the whole game to a grinding halt. You can change it later. Do what needs to be done, learn from the results, and figure out a better, enduring solution after the game session ends.

## **SITUATIONAL RULES**

The rules-as-written may work most of the time, but there may be a particular situation where they just don't fit. It might be something particular to your setting that was never anticipated by the original designers, or a quirk resulting from the group's preferred style of play. A different approach has to be used that makes better sense to the group.

The problem with situational rules is that nearly anything can be spun as an exception in need of special treatment. The way combat scenes are handled is identical for every weapon except one, because somehow it feels different enough to warrant its own rules. The way character abilities work is uniform, but you think this one ability is unusual and should work another way. Before you know it, there are more exceptions than rules, and the game system is a chaos-fueled nightmare to keep track of.

Situational rules work best for things that happen often. If the rules-as-written don't cover something that occurs a lot because of the unique nature of your setting, the type of story you're telling, and the sorts of characters that are involved, it's worth creating a house rule to handle that recurring situation.

## **PERMANENT RULES**

A permanent rule is one that you think you're changing forever, period. The particular rule-as-written does not work, and the group agrees that going forward it will be ignored or handled in a different way. It's not something you need to fudge to get through a scene or a session. It's not a problem that only comes up under certain circumstances. It is broad in scope and deep in its impact, and will be part of the bedrock upon which your game is built.

The most common issue that arises when you implement a permanent change is that new players may be confused. They might think the rules-as-written work fine, and resist the change. You may also end up with a ripple effect, where this change impacts things you didn't anticipate; to course-correct, you'll end up having to create other house rules, which will create other issues that require more house rules, and so on.

Permanent rules changes make the game your own. It is the ultimate customization. If the effects it creates make the game more enjoyable and easier to run, this sort of house rule is absolutely worth spending time developing.

# HOUSE RULES AND THE FOUR PRINCIPLES

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Let's review the four principles and see how they fit in with house rules.

## REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE

Any house rules, regardless of their scope, have to make your game better somehow. They need to make it easier for you to tell a story, or to utilize the rules as written. New rules have to fill a void, either permanently or temporarily. If it doesn't support the game or the organization of the group, what purpose does the rule serve?

## ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

House rules should remove obstacles, and make it easier for players to do things. Not understanding how mechanics work can make people hold back. Implementing ways for players to do the things they want to do, when those things are not explicitly covered by the rules as written, will open up the ways players are able to participate.

## LET DEMOCRACY RULE

When members of the group don't like the way things work, they have the ability to change them. House rules, when designed and agreed upon by the group, are an expression of democracy. The story and the system are made to conform to their needs. New rules are voted in to customize the overall experience and deliver the best possible game for everyone involved.

## ALLOW LEADERS TO LEAD

If something's not work, the leader needs to acknowledge it and facilitate a solution. It's the role of the gamemaster to interpret the rules, and tweak them when necessary to keep the game moving. In most cases, it's better to make something up and preserve momentum than to bring the game to a halt while obscure rules are looked up or unclear rules are debated.

# DIFFICULT PEOPLE

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In an ideal world, everyone will behave themselves, get along, never act like a jerk, and contribute to the group in meaningful and entertaining ways. If we lived in an ideal world, we might not be as inclined to spend time with roleplaying games. Even cool, level-headed people will have their moments once in a while. You need to learn to deal with difficult people.

Of course, no one ever thinks they're being difficult. They're the hero of their own story. They feel they have a legitimate grievance. There's some justification or rationalization for their behavior. It might even be that they're genuinely unaware that they're annoying, offending, or angering other people. Getting them to recognize and acknowledge that a problem exists is usually the hardest part.

If you're willing to deal with difficult people, most of your work is done for you. The self-aware know that they're being difficult, and they use the discomfort with confrontation that most people possess to their advantage. Simply speaking up, stating the problem, and asking them to knock it off resolves things the majority of the time. It's also easier if you address issues as soon as possible; the longer things are allowed to go on, the harder it becomes to try to fix things.

There are three components to effectively dealing with difficult people. None of them involve shouting or violence. You get far better results when you're calm, kind, and straight with them.

## BASIC RESPECT

Every person, no matter how outrageously they're behaving, is deserving of respect. This is where I backpedal a bit and say that this section shouldn't really be talking about difficult people, but people exhibiting difficult behaviors. Acknowledge that they make contributions to the group, and that there are things about them that you like. If that weren't the case, you'd be ejecting them from the group rather than taking the time and effort to work things out. They're a friend; treat them the way you're supposed to treat a friend.

If you don't treat a difficult person with respect, you can't expect them to give it in return. You've also yielded the moral high ground. That's going to be really important if they really are a difficult person to deal with. Yes, I'm switching back again; if they're knowingly doing things to get a rise out of people, or doing antisocial things to get their own way, it's not the behavior, it is them. It's essential that you don't sink to their level if you want to try to fix things. You need to treat them better than they're treating you.



The fact that you're willing to be straight with someone and allow them their dignity will help to resolve the issue. Listen to what they have to say, try to get to the root of their problem, determine what unmet needs they might have, and let them know that you're willing to work with them to straighten things out.

## **HONESTY**

Rather than beating around the bush, tell the person what you need to say. Be direct. Don't sugar coat it, don't try to spare their feelings, and don't look for ways to avoid creating a scene. You can't fix a problem if you're not willing and able to clearly articulate what that problem is.

No reasonable person wants to offend other people or make them feel bad. Not being honest will do exactly that. You'll end up with muddled miscommunication. They'll have to assume what the point you're trying to make is, possibly incorrectly. You'll give them the means to actively avoid the issue you want to address.

Honesty, like respect, can go a long way. Maybe they weren't aware, but you were candid enough to let them know so they'll try to change. Perhaps they thought they were getting away with something, but now that you've called them on it they won't try to pull the same crap anymore. It could be that just showing that you're willing to have an open and honest conversation means that you care, and that they can be honest with you. Then you can get to the root causes of their behavior, and begin to work things out.

## **DISCIPLINARY MEASURES**

Sometimes, you need to lay down the law. You need to establish consequences. If the person doesn't straighten up, change their bad habits, or stop doing whatever it is that's disrupting the group, something will happen.

This can be the hardest thing of all. You really don't have any authority, and the other person certainly won't recognize your authority. Finding leverage that they'll respond to can be a challenge. Hopefully, they'll want to work things out once you establish that you're serious.

You can try in-game consequences, if you think that will work. Their character won't get something cool, or you won't run the adventure or subplot they wanted. Those things can serve to remove the incentive to behave, though. Bribery doesn't work; you should never reward their bad behavior that way. If a difficult person is interfering with peoples' ability to have a good time, they need to straighten up or get out. That's the bottom line — they either want to be a member of the group, willing to play well with others, or they don't.

## TYPES OF DIFFICULT PEOPLE

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Difficult people can be summed up into neat categories, according to the negative behaviors they display. Some are common in the tabletop roleplaying games hobby, and others are just the sorts of people who come out in any sort of group situation. By identifying the type of difficult person you're dealing with, you can formulate a strategy to address their issues.

The danger with these sorts of categories is that some issues are complex, and can't be boiled down to one of the clever titles I've devised here. People aren't labels. Never forget the concepts extending basic respect. Always try to identify what sorts of needs they may have that are going unmet.

Here are 16 archetypal difficult people that you can work with. Their behavior will be explained, along with ways it will manifest in your game. Strategies for dealing with them are presented, to give you some tips on how to begin working things out with them.

### THE AVOIDER

When confrontation happens, the Avoider runs away. They will give in and let bullies have their way, rather than making waves. The Avoider believes in the transitive property of being a jerk — that is, if you point out that someone else is acting like a jerk, somehow you become the jerk because you pointed it out and made it an issue.

In a game, the Avoider will let other players tell them how to run their character. They will walk back their statements and change their votes to align with what other people say. They'll only do what they want to do if it won't lead to any sort of conflict.

This person isn't going to have a good time, and they're going to allow others to negatively impact the ability of the group to have fun. The Avoider will allow the group to deteriorate, and eventually drop out. You need to address the player directly during the game, and ask them what they want to do. Shut down people who try to answer for them or talk over them. Talking to them privately about issues you might see, and backing them up when they do speak out, will encourage them to participate and help you to resolve group issues.

### THE BELIEVER

The Believer has rock-solid opinion that they bring up whenever they see an opportunity. They're not tolerant of people who disagree with their view, and will seize

every opportunity to demonstrate how they're right and you're wrong. The absolute truth of their position is the most important things in the universe.

During the game, they will stop everything to argue a point. They will justify all sorts of bad behavior, including disrupting the game and hurting other peoples' feelings, on the grounds that establishing their version of reality is a higher priority. They will not yield until everyone agreed with them.

If the issue is outside the scope of the game, ask them to save it for table talk time. If it's a game issue that hasn't been handled, deal with it then so it can be resolved; one controlled interruption is better than their continued outbursts. If the issue has been resolved, remind them of the group decision. If they refuse to ease up for the sake of group unity, you might need to ask them to leave.

## **THE BULLDOZER**

The Bulldozer talks over people. They don't stop talking when their turn is over. When someone else is in the middle of a sentence, they'll interrupt. The Bulldozer keeps talking until they either run out of breath, which can take quite a while, or someone managed to get a word in edgewise and interrupt them.

Obviously, the Bulldozer is disruptive. They might not be intentionally rude, but they don't know when to shut up and they can't seem to take the hint. If they're engaged in the game, they'll cause delays by nattering on about what's happening. If they're not focused on the game, they'll be off on a tangent and telling a story that doesn't relate to anything.

The best way to deal with the Bulldozer is to talk to them between sessions. Let them know that you admire their enthusiasm and enjoy their participation, but they're not leaving space for other people. You might need to work out a signal, if they're sincerely not aware that they're doing it. During the session, remind that that you've got a certain amount of material to get through before you run out of time. Point out that someone else has something to say, or that it's another player's turn. Eventually, their own awareness of their chattiness will kick in, and they'll settle down.

## **THE CLOWN**

The Clown turns everything into a joke. They will zoom in on every pun, every popular culture reference, and every link to current events that they can leverage for a laugh. It feels like the entire game session is nothing but a big improv performance to them.

While an occasional wisecrack or good one-liner is a lot of fun, the continual barrage of jokes is disruptive. If they're getting a laugh and the scene or story isn't

supposed to be humorous, the Clown destroys the tone and atmosphere of the game. When the jokes aren't funny or aren't landing with the rest of the group, it might push them to try harder and interrupt people even more.

Try talking to them offline. Let them know that humor is appreciated and a necessary element, but they should pick their moment. One good laugh is worth twenty mediocre attempts. During the game, if the Clown's antics become excessive, don't laugh. Get quiet and stare at them. When things get awkward, ask them to please not cut other people off when they're speaking, or taking their turn. If none of that works take everything they say as in-character, and impose consequences inside the game for inappropriate behavior.

## **THE EYORE**

Nothing makes the Eeyore happy. Nothing. They will find the dark cloud that surrounds every silver lining. They'll locate the flaw in every plan, the drawback to every reward, and the worst possible outcome to every event. All is doom and gloom.

What makes the Eeyore difficult isn't that they're hard to please. It's that they bring everyone else down. They suck the joy out of every success, and steal the fun from every lighthearted conversation. An Eeyore will destroy suspension of disbelief and ruin your sense of escapism by dragging the horrors of the real world and problems that exist outside of the game into the group.

To deal with the Eeyore, start by asking them what they want. Be clear about the steps they need to take to get it. Remind them they're working toward a goal and overcoming obstacles is a key component of good storytelling. If they complain about the rewards, remind them that's what they want. Focus on positive things going on. If they continue to be down, be sure you're dealing with an Eeyore and not a Patient.

## **THE FRAUD**

The Fraud is a pathological liar. They claim to know everyone and everything. During the session they will boast, brag, and claim expertise in all sorts of esoteric areas. All conversation will come back around to how awesome they are.

What makes the Fraud difficult to deal with is their interruptions and their stories. They will stop people to correct them, when they know a fact that the other person obviously doesn't. They'll jump in to tell a story not because it's relevant to the situation, but because it somehow demonstrates that they know things and are important.

To deal with a Fraud, start by acknowledging them. Praise them for real things they actually know and have really done. Give them credit where it's due. Then ignore

their obvious BS. If they say things that clearly aren't true or can be proven wrong, don't delay the game by dragging them into an argument; divert and tell them you'll talk about it later. Redirect them away from tangents. Then during table talk time, or in between sessions, talk to them about the interruptions. Don't even go after their facts, just the way they delay the game and cut people off. They might still lie constantly, but they won't impact the flow of the game.

## **THE ISLAND**

The Island doesn't seem to be aware of anything or anyone beyond themselves. They will sit and wait their turn, oblivious to what other people are doing. Rather than listen, they bide their time until they have an opening to speak.

Where the Island causes problems is in their lack of teamwork. Their character might have information or abilities that other people could benefit from, but they keep it to themselves. They sabotage the success of the story, and the other players, by acting as an individual rather than a member of the group.

Try teaming them up with other players, and their team characters with other characters, to get them interacting. Put them in situations where they need help from others. Rain consequences down on their heads for not working with other people. Try to engage them in table talk, and find out what their needs are, to see if there are reasons for their behavior. They may be shy, or just interested in the tactical aspects of the game rather than socializing and storytelling.

## **THE KNIFE**

The Knife wants to cut you, verbally and emotionally, to show that they can. It's as if they have a superpower that allows them to see your insecurities. They will verbally undermine you, make you feel bad, and dismiss your ideas as silly and without merit. They draw power from being mean, especially when they can be subtle and pretend they're being helpful.

What the Knife really does is make people doubt themselves. They get people to hold back, and ultimately, to follow them. This ends up discouraging participation in the group, up to and including people quitting. It certainly sucks the joy out of playing the game.

Sometimes the Knife behaves this way because they don't feel they have anything else to offer. Try praising their legitimate contributions, and steer them toward positive behaviors. Don't put up with their abuse, though, even if they deny that they're doing. Tell them why you want them in the group, and what you like about them, but let them know that their meanness won't be tolerated. If you have to interrupt play to call them

out, do it; delaying the game and getting everyone staring at them for the wrong reasons might be what it takes to shut them down.

## **THE LEAK**

The Leak can't hold anything in. Every thought that comes into their head must be expressed. Any secret they become privy to must be shared. They have issues with being appropriate, and seem to crave the attention that comes from gossip and drama.

What makes the Leak difficult to deal with is the conflict that they sew. People get made when they share stories that aren't theirs to tell. They get people talking about matters that aren't relevant to the game. In talking about other people, the Leak drives wedges between them and creates doubt and hard feelings in previously strong and happy relationships.

Usually the Leak doesn't have malicious intent. Spreading information, even inappropriately, is their way of trying to participate. Point out the damage they're doing, and try to make sure they understand the problems they're causing.

## **THE PARASITE**

The Parasite sticks around as long as they're getting something they need. The moment you need something from them, they vanish. They take, and take, and take, but give little or nothing back in return.

Where the Parasite creates difficulty is in the resentment and anger they foster in others. They borrow things and don't return them. They eat more than their share of the pizza but don't throw in any cash to pay for it. The Parasite will never be available to help, even after you've done something for them. People rightfully start getting ticked off.

This type of person is tricky, because they might be in a bad situation. They might be embarrassed about their lack of means, and calling them out might humiliate them. If you suspect this might be the case, try to preserve their dignity and speak to them privately. Dealing with a true Parasite is usually as simple as telling them no. Point out that they're not contributing. Remind them of the things they've gotten from the group. Then don't let them have anything unless they start pitching in. They'll either change, or they'll self-select and leave the group.

## **THE PATIENT**

The Patient likely has serious mental health issues that you are in no way, shape, or form qualified to deal with. They display changes in mood, attitude, and a general

ability to function in life. They not only disrupt the game, but give you cause for concern about their wellbeing.

What makes the Patient hard to deal with isn't just their behavior, but the difficulty that comes from wanting to help and not knowing how. They might not be your responsibility, but you don't want them to harm themselves or anyone else, either. It stops being just a group problem and turns into a human problem.

Talk to them between session and express concern. Do not endanger yourself to do so. If possible, contact their other friends and see if there's something going on. It may be that the best you can do is to address their behavior within the group, and enforce the first principle. In the worst-case scenario, you might need to contact the authorities if you sincerely believe they pose risk to themselves or other people.

## **THE SNAKE**

The Snake says one thing to your face, and then says something else behind your back. You'll hear what they're saying, usually about what they think of you or other members of the group, through third parties. They might even be spreading rumors and gossip that aren't remotely true.

Where the Snake makes things difficult is in their rampant destruction of trust. They aren't the friend you thought they were. They may be trying to turn other people against you, or against other members of the group. When people start questioning what the truth is and what's a pack of lies, relationships begin to unravel quickly.

When dealing with a snake, stay calm. Let them know that what they've said has gotten back to you. Even if they deny it, tell them about the harm it's done, and how it's affecting you. Ask them if there are issues that the two of you need to work out. If they're truly bent on being disruptive, cut them off; often, they'll disappear on their own once they know they've been found out.

## **THE TERRORIST**

The terrorist will use any means at their disposal to get their way. Unfortunately, this includes verbal and physical intimidation. They'll make veiled threats, engage in dominant posturing, and display general bullying behaviors.

Why this type of person is difficult to deal with is obvious; they cut straight to everyone's need for safety. The assumption is that challenging them in any way will set them off. Letting them get away with their bad behavior only makes it worse, as they build up more confidence every time it works for them.

Start by figuring out what they want, and what they're getting from these exchanges. You may be able to convince them that there's a greater benefit to playing

nice and getting along with others than in yelling, name calling, and making people afraid of them. If they continue, kick them out of the group. Don't put yourself in danger, though. Call the authorities as needed.

## **THE VICTIM**

Every time something doesn't go their way, the Victim will take it personally. They will be certain that random things were directed at them. The victim will believe that accidents were intentional attacks against them. For some reason, they are convinced that no one likes them and everyone is out to do them harm.

The Victim will blame others for things that go wrong, even if no one was to blame or, somehow, they caused it themselves. They will be quick to accuse people of things. Sometimes they see problems where no one else does, and when you don't see it or agree with them, that will just validate their feelings and suspicions.

When dealing with the Victim, show empathy but challenge them. Ask them to explain why they feel the way they do. Find out how they'd like these perceived slights against them handled. Explain why that may or may not be possible. Let them know that you want to take them seriously and want to work things out. Along the way, be sure you're not really dealing with a Patient.

## **THE VOLCANO**

They sit there quietly, not communicating. It's obvious that something is wrong, but they refuse to share. Suddenly, they explode. The Volcano is a ticking time bomb, holding in their feelings rather than saying something or dealing with things until they're so frustrated or angry that they can't hold back any longer.

The Volcano is difficult because they can't admit there's a problem when it's small and probably manageable. They make other people uncomfortable, because it's clear what's going to happen. If they've gone off before, that only makes the awkwardness and fear among the other members of the group worse.

First, before you deal with the Volcano, make sure everyone is safe. If they tend to shout, throw things, or get violent, get people clear. Don't get emotional in return, but deal calmly with whatever they seem to be angry about. Tell them offline, when they're calm, that it's not acceptable and how it makes people feel. Figure out what need is not being met, what behaviors other people are exhibiting that bother them, or what might be going on that makes them not feel safe to express themselves or bring up an issue until they boil over and act out inappropriately.



## THE WINNER

The Winner needs to succeed at any cost. They need to be the first, the best, the strongest, and the one with the greatest reward. A roleplaying game is a game, which means it's a competition, so they need to win. Everything is a competition, actually, so they need to achieve victory in all areas of life! They will leverage the rules, cheat, and mess over other players even when they're supposed to be cooperating.

Where this competitive spirit goes horribly awry is when other players get stepped on, shoved aside, and screwed over. Team work goes out the window, players stop trusting one another, and people interested in the roleplaying part more than the game part can feel marginalized when the Winner changes the tone of the session.

Figure out what the Winner's actual needs are. Show them that there's more than one definition of success, and make sure they understand that roleplaying isn't that kind of game. Make sure they're aware of other peoples' needs and feelings. Teach them that they can win without forcing everyone else to lose. Fall back on the first principle, and remind them that the point is for everyone to have fun playing the game.

## **STRATEGIES**

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There are a few strategies that can be employed when dealing with difficult people. Most of them will work in any situation. It's up to you to decide which approach will work best for the person you're dealing with.

### **CHANGE THE SITUATION**

If something is broken, fix it. When something is causing strife, remove it. If the problem stems from a lack of something, get it and add it in. There are times when changing the situation will resolve the problem without having to address the difficult person's behavior.

There are disadvantages to this approach, though. While it resolves the issue and eliminates the unwanted behavior, it doesn't hold the person accountable. It could be interpreted as rewarding the person for being difficult, which could result in a repeat of that behavior the next time they want something.

The assumption in this approach is that the situation was the legitimate source of the problem. Something wasn't meeting the needs of a member of the group, or the group as a whole. When used correctly, changing the situation can be the best way to deal with a difficult person.

### **CHANGE YOUR REACTION**

It may be that the difficult person is trying to get a rise out of you. That gives them power, a thrill, or maybe a little of both. If you change your reaction and don't allow them to make you angry, frustrated, or upset, they may stop the behavior. Deprive them of what they want and take that control away from them.

The problem with changing your reaction is that it isn't easy. When they're pushing your buttons, you don't want to keep your motion in check. If they're cracking jokes or trying to intimidate you, the response you show may be involuntary.

Yet when it comes down to it, the only thing you really are in control of is yourself. You may not be able to alter the situation. Other people may not agree to change. In every situation, though, you can decide what you are willing to do about it.

### **CHANGE THE OTHER PERSON**

The best case scenario is always that the person will stop doing what you don't want them to do. You want them to step up, take responsibility, and make positive

contributions to the group. When they recognize that they're being inappropriate, and that they have the power to make things better, the changes will be longer lasting.

You can't actually change other people. What you can do is convince them that it's to their benefit to do things differently. They need to see that their needs will be better met, and the rewards will be greater, if they make the effort.

If the person is willing to change, you need to support them. It means, after all, that they care about what other people think. They want the group to be successful, so they don't want to be the source of any problems.

## **BREATHE**

Before you do anything, take a deep breath. Don't react emotionally. Think about what's happening, and why it's happening, before you jump into trying address a difficult person.

When we don't breathe and respond immediately, we risk misunderstanding the situation. We aren't looking at the issue, but at the individual. We take it personally and make our reaction personal as well. It has the potential to make things worse.

If you pause and take a breath, you can begin to see the truth of the problem. You'll know what the difficult person is upset about, and what their need is. That will allow you to make the correct response, keep things moving forward, and resolve the real problem with less drama and in less time.

## **CARE**

Kill them with kindness. Acknowledge that they're upset, that they have an unmet need, or that the point they're trying to make is valid. Let them know that they matter to you, and that you want to work things out.

The risk here is that certain types of people will see this as weakness. They'll see your care and concern as something they can use to manipulate you. They may try to take advantage of your good nature.

Most people will respond well to kindness. Treat them the way you want to be treated, and they'll be kind to you in return. By respecting their feelings and addressing their needs, they'll be more inclined to reciprocate.

## **CHALLENGE**

Be direct. Ask them why they think or feel the way they do. Make them provide the source of their information. Have them explain why they're being difficult. Put the responsibility for the situation back on them.

If they're not able to articulate their needs or their feelings, this could backfire. They might not know why they're doing what they're doing. It's possible that they're in denial, or just don't want to admit it. Forcing the issue could result in them reacting badly, escalating the issue. Use this approach cautiously.

Challenging them can also force them into admitting what's really going on. They will have to face the problem. They'll know that you're going to hold them accountable for what they're doing, and that the way they're choosing to address a problem is not acceptable.

## **EVICT**

You might decide that the difficult person has crossed a line. Their behavior might be a complete deal breaker. You don't have to deal with anything that you don't want to. When negative behavior is extreme, throw them out.

The risk here is that other members of the group might disagree with you, or feel that you're the one that's overreacting. You'll have to explain your logic to them, and justify your decision. It may cause some ripple effects, and you'll have new issues within the group that you'll need to address as a result of the eviction.

There are times when the group should probably vote on how to handle a difficult person's behavior, and whether or not to kick them out. That's the democratic process. If you're the gamemaster, however, you don't have to run a game for people you're not comfortable with. If you're the host, you have the right to pick and choose who you allow into your space. If you can't see a way to work with a difficult individual, you shouldn't worry about giving them the boot.

## **HOWL**

There are situations where throwing a fit is the right call. Make your emotions clear. If they're hurting you, scream. If they're making you angry, roar. If they're not getting it, and seem oblivious to the problems they're causing, demonstrate how you feel.

Be careful that you're not becoming the problem, though. Don't allow your outburst to eclipse their difficult behavior. Be sure that you're not making things worse, or upsetting other players more than the other person was.

It can be hard to get people to recognize the impact of the words and deeds sometimes, though. Howling can be cathartic, letting you get it out of your system so you can go back to responding rationally. If you can shock the difficult person into realizing that they are the cause of your emotional outburst, and that they have caused you stress and pain, it might make them straighten up.

## **LAUGH**

The best medicine is laughter, they say. Sometimes the best way to diffuse a tense situation is to not take it seriously. Pretend the difficult person was joking, and maybe tease them about it a little bit. Act like you're both just horsing around.

This approach could provoke a negative reaction. The difficult person might not like being made fun of. They could double down to make you realize that they're serious. You could also be using it as a way to avoid dealing with the issue.

When this approach works best is when you have a reasonably good relationship with the other person. They could realize that they're embarrassing themselves, and they what you're really doing is giving them a chance to save face. If they laugh with you and stop, you know that the situation has been diffused for now, and you can have a serious talk with them about their behavior later.

## **LISTEN**

Their delivery may be inappropriate, but the issue they're concerned about may be real. Don't lose the message in the messy delivery. They may just need to be heard, and have their needs and concerns recognized.

Listening gives them power, and while that could be what they need, it could also be what they want. If their goal is to be the center of attention, or to leverage bad behavior to get what they want, listening might not be the right approach.

If you listen, though, you'll get to their motivation. You can discover what's really going on, and treat the cause rather than the symptoms. All efforts will be directed toward solving the actual problem, rather than what you think the problem is.

## **REDIRECT**

Give the difficult person something else to focus on. Put them to work solving a problem. Redirect their energy into a task that's useful and positive. They may just need something to do, and their behavior is a result of boredom, frustration, or a short attention span.

The flaw with this approach is it's only a temporary fix. It can help you to defer the issue and keep things moving forward, but you will likely need to address their behavior again later. Know that you're going to have to have a conversation later.

When you redirect, you're recognizing the person, giving them attention, and allowing them to make a contribution. You're actively pulling them into the group and forcing them to participate in the game. They'll see that they belong, and that will make the discussion of how their negative behavior hurts the group go smoothly.

# **DIFFICULT PEOPLE AND THE FOUR PRINCIPLES**

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Let's review the four principles and see how they fit in with difficult people.

## **REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE**

Having fun while playing a game means getting along with different types of people. You need to employ strategies not only to find a way to work with them, but to make it easier for them to get along with you. If you can manage to not take anything personally, you can help insure that everyone has a good time.

## **ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION**

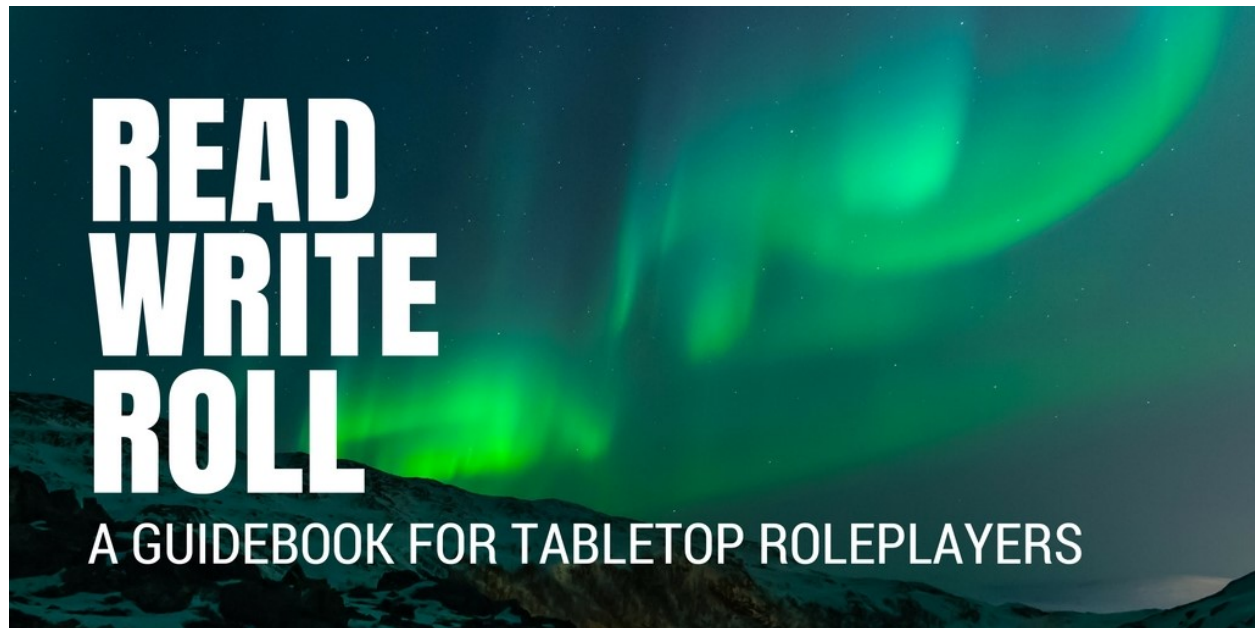
Everyone needs to have the opportunity to participate. That means no one can be overlooked, marginalized, or made to feel unwelcome. Getting all of the players to a comfort level with the rest of the group means they'll speak up and contribute.

## **LET DEMOCRACY RULE**

The opinions and ideas of every player have to be valued. The group needs to agree to abide by what is decided. In the worst case scenario, the group can decide to censure or even eject anyone who is creating problems and not exhibiting a willingness to work together for the best interests of everyone.

## **ALLOW LEADERS TO LEAD**

The role of dealing with difficult people falls to the leader. They need to be sure that the needs of the group are being handled, but in a way that preserves the dignity of the person exhibiting problem behavior. Leadership means being fair to everyone, while remembering the purpose of the group.



Reading, writing, and roleplaying are all part of continuum for me. You read the books, you write characters, settings, and adventures, and you roll dice and tell stories together with friends. Then you read some more, to fill in the knowledge gaps or find fresh inspiration. You write some new things for the game or based on it, and you head back to the table to share and conspire with your group. Read, write, roll, repeat.

Most roleplaying games aren't designed around the way stories are created and told. A lot of people will argue that that's not the job of a game rulebook, even though the game is based on acting out characters and telling stories. They like the tactical aspects, the bits that stem from the hobby's wargaming roots. Their point of view and preferred style of play is absolutely valid, and more power to them; that I want something different from my roleplaying experience doesn't make them wrong. Some will point out various indie game that do put story firmly at the center of the experience, and a lot of those games are awesome; I play and enjoy a few of them myself, every opportunity that I get. Just as there are books published for every taste and interest, and just as there are many methods of telling stories, there are wide varieties of roleplaying games. This is just one of them. It's intended to fill a specific niche. It's not the last word on any topic by any means, but will hopefully become part of the ongoing conversation.

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# BUILDING CHARACTERS

FOR WRITERS AND ROLEPLAYERS

At the heart of all great stories are strong characters. It doesn't matter whether you're reading a short story, writing a novel, or watching a play. The characters found in TV series, comic books, and games are more alike on a creative level than they are different. The symbiotic relationship between character and story is universal across media.

In this book, we'll explore what goes into crafting memorable and enjoyable characters. While the focus is on tabletop roleplaying games, I'll be using writing terms rather than RPG jargon. It's not going to be about crunching numbers or picking abilities. I'll talk about writing your character, rather than just playing them. Because while there are other hats that we wear around the table, including those of performer and tactician, we're all writers. Even if we never put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, it's the writer's craft that we're dabbling in.

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The term worldbuilding gets thrown around a lot by both writers and roleplayers. It's most frequently used in reference to the construction of a fantasy realm or an entire fictional universe. There are maps, and histories, and complex back stories, and all sorts of engaging little details. While these worlds are allegedly being created as the grand stage for a work of fiction, which includes novels, films, television shows, and games, worldbuilding is often an end unto itself. It's an intellectual exercise, a creative outlet, and just a whole lot of fun.

This isn't a book about worldbuilding. This is a book about telling stories.

What I mean to say is, this book isn't about worldbuilding for its own sake. You're not going to learn how to create an encyclopedia for an alternate universe. I'm not going to show you how to write the ultimate travel guide for an imaginary place. It's not a book full of checklists and random tables. This is about assembling the critical details that you will need in order to tell a story.

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***Tell better stories using your favorite tabletop roleplaying game!***

We all know that stories need a beginning, a middle, and an end. Hero goes on quest, hero faces obstacles, hero completes quest. Lovers fall in love, antagonist keeps lovers apart, lovers end up together. Things beyond the protagonist's control change, the protagonist faces adversity, the protagonist learns to adapt and achieves greatness. On that basic structure writers and storytellers throughout the ages have woven variations and created masterpieces. We keep coming back to the same foundations today for one very good reason: those structures are versatile and continue to work.

This book will help you to leverage basic story structure and use it to your advantage. You'll be able to say what you want while keeping your audience engaged. The three-act structure and its variations will be discussed in detail, along ways this structure can be expanded beyond a single story and into a series or campaign. In the end, you'll have new tools in your storytelling toolbox, along with the knowledge of how and when to use them in your own creative works.

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