

The Session Checklist: Ingredients To A Successful Game Session



When I'm bored, going to sleep, commuting, standing in line, or walking around, my thoughts often drive straight to some roleplaying topic. Frequently, I ponder "the perfect game session." I try to envisage in great detail just exactly what a perfect GMing performance would be. As I can't control the players, their behaviour, or their PCs' actions, I focus only on the GMing aspect of my imaginary game session.

It's a tough task, in many ways. Try it yourself. I often catch myself thinking about the effects of a good GMing performance, such as cheering players and mutilated PCs (just kidding!), and not what I'd be doing to achieve those effects. I'm getting better at it though, and some day I'll have it all figured out.

One thing that has spawned from all this pondering, and from watching too many Mastercard commercials, is a checklist of game session elements that I feel would lead to a priceless game session. Part one of my list is below. Feel free to send me yours!

1. A Quick Start

I feel quick session starts are critical to a good campaign. They're like a bucket of cold water dumped over your head-- everybody is immediately brought to focus on the game at hand. A quick start carves out more game-play time as well, which is important if you have a lot planned for a session.

Personally, I'm bad with slow session starts. I often wait till the players arrive before pulling out my books and notes, clearing the game table off, setting up the battlemat and figs, chit chatting for a bit, and so on. However, I have managed to create many, many quick session starts over the years and I'm convinced it's a key ingredient to a perfect game session.

There's something thrilling about drawing a clear line between the real world and entering game play. Slowly gearing up, with some conversations about the day at work mingled with in-character parleys between eager players muddled with some GM questions and comments, creates a blurry experience that just isn't as satisfying.

For example, imagine you're at the movie theatre and the flick starts. Only, the curtain is still down, the lights are bright, and people are still talking. A couple of minutes later, the curtain opens halfway. Then it gets quieter, though the people behind you are still making jokes and dribbling pop out their noses. Then half the lights dim and employees walk down the aisles yelling about peanuts for sale. Meanwhile, the movie is still playing.

I feel a slow session start, while not as extreme as this example, has the same effect of diluting the game experience.

2. Here are a few ways you can start sessions crisply, for full effect and GMing benefits:

1. Start with a conflict

Depending on your game style, this can mean a battle, a parley with NPCs, a chase scene, or an intra-party clash. There are lots of conflict possibilities, and the key is to get the players immersed right away in some kind of struggle or competition that their PCs are taking part in.

2. Involve all the PCs

Avoid the urge to start a session with side-room conversations, split parties, or one-on-ones. Try to begin with an encounter or event that all the PCs can participate in. Ending sessions with a united party and handling individual PC and player issues between games are good ways to enable a united group session start.

3. Have the players arrive early

You probably have a good feel for how long it takes your group to settle down, order food, and get ready for play. Start your session early by this amount of time so you can begin on cue. This might be a good time to have those one-on-ones as well, but it starts to blur the line about session starts, so beware. Maybe do them away from the game table.

If you can't have players arriving early, then resist the urge to start game play before everyone is ready. For example, if you know your group needs 30 minutes to set-up and get idle chit chat out of the way, and if your game starts at 7, then mentally mark 7:30 as the session start time and don't try to force the players into beginning when they're not set yet.

4. Slam a book on the table

Mind you, don't do this out of anger. It also doesn't have to require the hardest slam you can make. A simple slap of book cover to pine will get attention and alert the players you're officially beginning the session. If you do this every session, then it also becomes symbolic to session starts and a fun ritual. However, do not expect every player to

catch on and read your mind that the book slam means "please be quiet and attentive, we're starting." Some people will catch on immediately while others might need some explanation. Be flexible.

5. Roll dice

Accompanied with an evil chuckle, a visible wince, or a "holy crap!", a dice roll often gets player attention. A good variant of this session starter is dumping all your dice on the table resulting in a pleasant cacophony and signifying you're ready and primed to play.

6. Dim the lights, start the music

Borrowing from the movie theatre experience, change the game environment as a sign that things are about to begin.

7. Make an announcement

Often, the direct approach works best. Avoid the "shut-up, we're starting" type of announcement though. :)

Keep in mind that people come in all shapes and sizes. Some might be less organized than others and can't suddenly enter game mode. Others, who've come for the social aspect, might get offended if they're expected to stop all conversation for the sake of game play. You know your players best, so do whatever you can to provide a solid game start without upsetting anyone.

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3. **One Shining Moment For Every Player And PC**

It's important that you try to provide each player and their character a great gaming instant every session. Regardless of whether a player is the silent type, there to be with friends, new or a veteran, young or old, a spotlight of success is always thrilling and immensely satisfying.

Note for the sadistic GMs, the shining moment should be one of

player and PC success, not horrible failure. :)

In addition, my feeling is that critical dice rolls do not qualify as shining moments. A dice roll is something that would happen whether the player was there or not. A player can't control what a dice rolls either, so a wonderful dice roll is too indiscriminate and impersonal a celebration to qualify.

You want to send a message that says thanks for attending, I'm really glad you're here, good game play, great idea! You want players to be glad they showed up and to enjoy the game. You also want to thank and reward them for choosing roleplaying over other forms of entertainment. If everybody showed up wanting to play board games or video games then you'd be quite disappointed.

Roleplaying allows for a unique form of shining moment. Firstly, you can reward the player and their character as a team. Other forms of entertainment usually don't allow such a tangible form of personal expression and manifestation of imagination as running a PC does. Second, you reward a player in front of their peers. Definitely a good feeling. Third, you have a position of authority, being GM, and your praise or approval has just that extra bit of impact. You demonstrate your praise and approval by letting a character have a shining moment.

Ways to create shining moments:

1. Fudge
If a player puts extra effort into a performance, plan, or series of actions, then disregard your dice rolls and let them succeed. Let them succeed well.
2. Celebrate the moment
Keep an eye out for a good success during the game and pause to celebrate. Often, successes last only as long as a player can keep your attention or until the next round of combat starts.
3. Add detail
Learn to recognize when the seed of a shining instant has been planted and start injecting detail into it until it blooms

into a full-fledged gaming moment.

For example, if a player tries to trip his foe and succeeds, you could supply extra details about the foe falling down and being humiliated in front of his fellow combatants. You could describe the hatred mixed with a new glint of fear in the foe's eyes. And you could allow the player to hurl down insults and challenges even though their turn might technically be over. You could also describe how the rest of the combatants fighting the other PCs start to guard themselves against the humiliating trip attack (even though no rules-related effect might result--the description is enough).

4. Consider consequences

Another way to create a shining moment is to enhance the consequences of a good action. For example, if a player does a good acting job during a chat with an investigation suspect, then you might have other NPCs come over and congratulate the PC on his cleverness, or let him know they now think the NPC is a suspect as well. "I was so swayed by your words that I will avail to tell my lord to watch out for that scoundrel." Or you might divulge an extra clue, reveal some more of the plot, or grant some kind of group-wide boon directly because of the player's good play.

5. Recap

After the dice rolling and game effects have been calculated, you can turn a situation into a shining moment by recapping the whole scene in a brief narrative, focusing the point of view on the PC. This is a wonderful technique because it rewards the player, adds the story element back into a session that might be getting technical, and lets you reinforce any information you feel the group might have missed or glossed over.

6. Player recap

This is similar to a GM recap, but the player summarizes the whole scene or recent events. This definitely puts the spotlight on the player during his narrative; lets him pick his own words, point of view, and take on what just happened; and gives him a taste of GM control, which, of course, is

always pleasurable. ;)

"Great work George. Take a moment to describe what just happened from your character's point of view."

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4. One Shining Moment For The GM

Just as the players will feel well rewarded after their shining instant, you should allow yourself to bask in the occasional glory as well. This is a moment where you say to yourself, "Yeah, that was some damn good GMing. All those dreadful hours reading that windbag's weekly ezine has finally paid off!"

This should be a private moment, though there are some occasions when strutting around the table doing the chicken dance and yelling out your virtues are appropriate. I'll let you be the judge of just what those occasions might be.

Some GMs, especially new ones, beat themselves up over misperceived poor game play. While we will all make mistakes, by learning to recognize and celebrate your own successes you'll feel better about your GMing (and rightly so!). This also helps you learn faster because duplicating things that are done well is just as important as avoiding repeat mistakes.

GMing moments of success to keep an eye out for and acknowledge:

- Every player is attentive and engrossed in game play.
- There's great emotion at the game table (i.e. cheering when a villain's lieutenant is defeated, celebration of figuring out a puzzle, laughter during an NPC parley).
- A combat goes quickly and smoothly.

- You catch your players and their PCs by surprise.
- As the session nears its end, the players ask to keep going.

Can you think of other examples that we GMs should celebrate as shining moments? Send them to me and I'll assemble a big list. Thanks!

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5. One Cool Reward For Each PC

It's important for each character sheet to be updated in at least one cool way each session. This is guaranteed to appeal to gamer types and wargamer types, but I feel every player appreciates an upgrade, new magic item, reduced flaw, enhanced ability, additional personality trait, secret revealed, or raised stat score.

Behind the scenes though, this is a great technique for keeping your campaigns fresh, exciting, and entertaining. If you have five players, for example, and each receives one cool reward each session, then that would amount to fifty rewards after just ten sessions! And if you follow previous issues' tips about linking plot hooks, character development, and world and campaign development to your rewards, then you suddenly have a powerful game engine and GMing tool.

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6. One Plot Thread Measurably Advanced

It doesn't matter if your GMing style puts the story at the forefront or whether you let the story get told in initiative order, it's important that it advances every game session.

Imagine a campaign that takes places in a 20' x 20' room. Food

magically appears in the form of random monsters that the PCs get to fight. The monsters leave behind magic items and other loot, and the PCs use it all to fight bigger and tougher foes as they appear. Finally, the campaign ends when the GM rolls up a tarrasque, the monster-of-all-monsters, on his random chart.

If that kind of campaign appeals to you and satisfies your players, then no problem, skip to the next tip. Otherwise, even if you're not a plot oriented GM, some story must get told to provide a pleasurable gaming experience. It's plot that links together NPCs, treasure, quests, and PC advancement. It's story that provides meaning to the dice rolls. It's plot that explains why the PCs struggle against the odds each game session.

Unless you play every day and can thus let stories get told very slowly, you'll need to ensure that at least one of your plot threads advances each session. The advancement must be measurable (i.e. noticed) by the players as well. It doesn't do any good if a plot is advancing in secret because your players will be bored or frustrated at the lack of perceived progress.

6. **One Surprise**

Another good item to include on our session checklist is at least one twist, unexpected turn of events, or surprise. Players love being hit with the unexpected.

By including at least one surprise each session, you also ensure that your games do not become predictable or stagnant. You'll also find that players will be on their toes and more attentive.

Players also enjoy beating the GM to the punch. They are greatly pleased when they guess a surprise before it happens. So, it doesn't even matter if the twist comes as a curveball or is guessed ahead of time--you'll have achieved some level of entertainment value just by including it.

Here are some plot twist tips:

<http://www.roleplayingtips.com/issue75.asp>

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7. One Seed Planted

Next on our checklist is plot hooks, side-plots, and multi-threading. Player choice is an important factor in sessions. If the group feels like it's being forced along a specific path, it'll rebel, get frustrated, and retaliate with ye ol' hack 'n slash.

A good technique for ensuring choice and opportunity is to plant at least one new seed for a plot, quest, or adventure each session. The full benefits of this will take a few sessions to build because the players might follow the first few seeds right away. But, as time goes on and progress slows a bit on one or more threads, the unused seeds will soon start to stack. As the stack grows, the players will feel excited, and possibly even giddy :), that they have so many untapped choices!

I used the word seed with purpose here, because any seed left unrooted by the party should be allowed to sprout, bloom, and bear fruit.

1. Sprout: Between sessions, do an update on what's happening with each seed's thread. Ensure that it progresses to match the PCs' pace, or at least, the campaign's time line. Ensure the characters learn about or experience any effects or consequences of the seed's growth.
2. Bloom: If still left alone, the seed becomes a full background event, world or campaign changing development, or a current adventure incident. The exact time when a seed comes to flower is at your discretion. Busy GMs will want to keep as many threads in a seed state as possible to take advantage of any planning done, because once a seed blooms, its nature changes and you'll need to modify your plans.

However, it's thrilling for players to have a thread that they've been tracking or getting periodic updates about suddenly burst into a bunch of campaign activity. Because they've watched the thread transform over time, they'll feel

like your campaign is alive, vibrant, changing, and exciting.

In addition, there's often a reason why players don't follow a particular seed. Sometimes the party is simply too busy. Many times though, the seed hasn't appealed to them as an adventure opportunity. Allowing the seed to bloom gives you a chance to change it and try again to see if the players will pursue it.

3. Bear fruit: Here's where the big benefits of regularly planting seeds lie. When a plot thread matures to a certain point, it should start spawning its own seeds. Without a lot of effort, you should be able to get many new background event, adventure hooks, and plot ideas from a thread that has been allowed to mature without direct PC involvement.

The benefit to you is a natural, easy, self-generating plot machine. You will also find your campaign world becomes an exciting land where adventure or story opportunities abound. Campaign details and information will spawn in a logical, seamless way as opposed to forced effort done on a blank sheet of paper.

It's at your discretion when a background plot thread comes to maturity and bears fruit. When this happens, you have to change your plans, repurpose NPCs and maps, re-stock some dungeons, modify plot lines, tweak unused encounters, and so on. However, for the threads you do transform, you'll be paid back with a more complex campaign environment that came together in a natural and simple way that you and your players watched grow and so have come to know like a dear friend.

Ok, enough with the plant talk. The point of this checklist item is to keep your campaign growing and your players happy by offering a steady stream of new choices over a long period of time.

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8. One Background Event

This directly relates to our seed planting tip. Unless the PCs are deep in a dungeon or isolated from the world during their adventure, have at least one background event come into play each session. This will remind the players that there's a campaign world out there.

Background events are perfect problem solving fodder as well. Imagine that the PCs face a wide chasm that has no bridge. They have a long rope, spikes, a bag of sardines, and a levitation scroll. The players should have fun concocting a plan to get them to the other side using a successful combination of their resources. Background events supply resource opportunities in the same way as rope, sardines, spikes, and a scroll do.

For example, the PCs must break into the jail and rescue a fellow PC. They decide they need a good distraction that will clear all the guards out of the jail. In the city, there's currently a guild strike, a visiting Prince, a sardine market glut, and a heat wave. Perhaps the characters can use and interact with these events to solve their problem? The paladin could suggest to the Mayor a parade be held in the Prince's honour. The rogue could recommend to the leader of the striking guild that he stage a strategically located protest along the parade route. And the mage and cleric could buy several sacks of sardines, hide them in and around the jail, and let the heat wave do its work.

It will be obvious to some readers the idea and benefits of using background events. The key here is to add the category to the session checklist so that at least one event occurs or progresses every session.

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9. One Way The PCs Have Changed The World

Some players measure progress through experience points, others through character development. Either way, victories eventually become shallow if the characters never get to witness

how their actions impact the game world--at least at the regional level.

For example, the PCs are hired to defeat a monster that's been plaguing a village and they emerge from its lair victorious. They return, make their grand announcement, and get great pleasure at seeing the stress, worry, and fear dissipate from the villagers' faces.

That's an example of short term change. You can create ripple effects that range from short to medium to long term, and the PCs should get to learn about or experience the effects their stories and adventures have as the campaign goes on.

For example, it's been a year since the PCs released the village from the monstrous terror. The group is now in another part of the kingdom helping a Baron with a small owlbear problem. At the Baron's table, as an agreement over payment for services rendered is being reached, the Baron serves the PCs some tasty wine. The Baron comments that the wine hails from a southern village that has, until recently, been strangely absent from the wine market for some years. Aha! The PCs can proudly claim their important involvement, or perhaps just derive some quiet, personal satisfaction. (Keep in mind that, if a year in game time has passed, chances are several sessions have been played and news of the village would have even more impact on the players--a great benefit of long-term ripple effects coming into play.)

Before each session ends, be sure to include a reference, circumstance, or event based on the PCs' past adventures that lets them know they're having an effect on the world around them--no matter how small.

Example methods:

- Rumour, news, gossip
- Rivals taking credit for the PCs' efforts
- Unexpected presents delivered to PCs, possibly on the anniversary date of the event, if applicable
- Random encounter with an involved NPC
- Related or affected products or services encountered
- Descendants encountered (long term)

- Correspondence (messenger, letter delivered)

Example effects:

- Economic (imports, exports, growth, slump)
- Political (area becomes more or less important)
- Personal (new friendships or enemies, PCs attract attention)
- Social (fashion changes, event is popular topic of discussion)
- Adventure (new job or quest opportunities)

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10. **An Entertaining Conclusion**

A strong session end leaves a lasting impact on players and GMs alike. Frequent benefits include:

- Creating anticipation for the next session (that hopefully motivates a quick start).
- Creating a higher level of satisfaction (it's important for everyone to feel the time they invested into the session was well spent).
- Lowering player absenteeism.
- Generating positive player feedback that motivates GMs to continue working hard on the campaign.
- Increasing player participation for between session activities, such as homework tasks.

The classic ending is a cliffhanger. The session concludes mid-

combat where it appears the villain or foes will be victorious; or the game pauses with the life of a PC in the balance; or a great revelation is about to be revealed.

Not every session can end this way though, due to the circumstance of the PCs, story line, or current location. Here are some additional session-ender ideas:

- Celebration of a group victory
- Division of a big treasure pile
- The PCs solve the puzzle, they hear a click, and...
- The appearance of an important NPC wearing a strange, interesting, or bemused expression (soap opera style)
- The appearance of the wrong NPC at the wrong place at the wrong (or right) time (again, like in a strategic soap opera scene cut)
- The trigger of a plot hook
- Large experience or story point reward (enough to impact the characters and cause player joy :)
- While player energy is still high
- Arrival at an important destination
- End of a big combat
- A mystery solved
- A story element finally exposed or explained
- A return to a safe harbour

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11. Checklist Summarized

Many of these checklist items will be familiar to you. However, it's easy to forget including them each session, especially as your head gets filled with numbers, NPCs, and session development information. The purpose of putting these very important game elements into checklist format is to provide you with an easy quality assurance tool.

It's just like a pre-flight check. Before the game, run through your

checklist quickly and determine if you have ideas or a plan for each point. Midway through a session, check your list again and note what things still remain untended to. And an hour before the session ends, look at what still needs to be included and fit it in if possible, before it's too late and the game is over.

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