GM Tips

Many Isles

GM Tips

Hey there, master of worlds, and welcome to this treasure trove of Game Master wisdom. The knowledge and experience of many masters of D&D has been listed here, for the single purpose of showing other GMs the beauty of their knowledge.

This is a free compilation of useful advice for any game master. Feel free to use what you want from this list, and learn whatever you need to learn!

Mini-Index

Here's a short list of the articles you'll find below.

Combat

By u/shostakofish

Combat is one of the main pillars of D&D. Sometimes, it can be a bit hard to run. These tips can help you out!

- If you don't have stats for an encounter that surprised you lined up, use a different creatures block that you do have and re-flavor the numbers to match. In almost every circumstance it will be unnoticeable by your players and it will keep you from doing the #1 momentum killing sin: Opening the GM book and searching.
- Make sure your players are keeping up with their character sheets, you're preparing the whole world, they can know what their options on their turn are. If you have new players that are struggling make them (or have them make themselves) a cheat sheet. If they're really struggling doing something like just having them take the same actions every round isn't the end of the world either.
- Make sure you know the rules going in. There's no super tip here, it's honestly just good old fashioned studying. I know we all love writing our lore, but sometimes you need to take a break from the creation of new worlds and re-read your DM's guide. Some of the best time saving rules are the ones about how far a character can jump/climb without needing a roll, prone rulings, and stealth rulings.
- If you don't know a rule (it is inevitable and does not make you a bad GM) your magical phrase to give your players is "I dont know that ruling by heart yet! For today I'm going to say that _ happens, I promise I will look it up between sessions and get back to you, if I was wrong we'll figure out if we need to change anything!"

- Let your players know the AC of who they're fighting, and know their AC yourself. I know the idea of a secret GM journal with secrets unfathomable is an enticing one but remember AC is an abstract number assigned to how hard it is to hit a certain enemy. Your players may not be able to see the NPCs but their character's should be able to see if a character is wearing heavy armor or back flipping out of the way. You don't have to follow this one if you prefer mysterious encounters, but I'd highly recommend it unless the enemy's AC is specifically part of the challenge. It's really not that immersion breaking (and at least for me is less immersion breaking then say, my bard not being able to see with his eyeballs that the person he's trying to hit is wearing full plate.)
- Let enemies flee. Self explanatory! If your players have clearly won and all that's left is clearing out some stragglers have them run! it's a rare creature that will not flee if it's truly outmatched and about to die. *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* is some great reading, btw.
- Do not harshly punish less than stellar tactics. I know it's fun to look at the crazy and seemingly suicidal schemes our players make but listen, if players feel like they are going to die for a single mistake they are going to start taking forever on their turns. A very good tip for keeping combat dangerous while still giving this to players is to always have at least one turn of warning before a devastating attack. If your payers feel they can make less than perfect decisions they will also be able to make faster decisions.

Make Combat More Interesting

- Add environment hazards! Lava, strong winds, cliffs, freezing blizzards, bubbling swaps, magical planes that shift under your feet, all of these things can add additional excitement and variation to combat. My recommendation is to write down a couple of hazards, their DC and effects in your notes for the whole area the PCs are in before the session. Take those hazards and mix and match as appropriate as combat comes up to keep thing spicy.
- Have "rolling encounters". Combat does not have to be initiative-fight to the death-end every time. When your players enter an area that has a bunch of enemies have them roll initiative for themselves at the start of the area and keep that for the whole time they're there. You can have ghosts, sprites, fae, blink dogs, pretty much anything with the capacity to vanish or teleport can ambush attack and flee from your party only to come back later. This can also be a way to have a section with many smaller encounters, slowly grinding down on your party 1CR at a time.= and forcing them to use different tactics then they may be used to.
- Know your player's weaknesses and use them (sometimes). Do you know why all those magic classes start with a spellcasting focus? (you should, go study that one if you don't) Take it from them! force them to think in different ways! You don't need enemies to be deadly to have them be interesting. Make sure not to overuse this one so it's not bullying!

- A "miss" is not a miss! AC is an abstraction of how hard a person is to hit, your fighter is not missing their attacks against the goblin within five feet of them, the goblin is deflecting the attacks with their shield. Adding even basic descriptions beyond "miss" or "fail" are the main way to keep combat exciting.

Mission Timers

By u/jjwerner

Gary Gygax, one of the founders of the hobby, was very adamant that the DM track in-game time. Of the many wise words that Gygax passed down to us, I believe that these are among the wisest. However, I think that there is sometimes uncertainty about how best to apply this advice and what it adds to a game. Some DMs may be dutifully tracking the passing of time, not recognizing that is not simply an exercise for its own sake. What makes this advice really game changing is the additional provision that time doesn't just need to be tracked, it needs to be made consequential by the DM. There is already lot of good advice out there for tracking time, so this post will focus on the second half of the equation: making time meaningful.

Why track time?

Let's start with some of the benefits of tracking time. Firstly, tracking time contributes to a more dynamic and life-like environment. A major part of what makes a setting feel video-gamey and artificial is that it is effectively static – nothing happens unless it is directly acted on by the PCs. I still remember being informed that I had failed a mission in Deus Ex: Human Revolution because I was too busy poking around in people's bathrooms instead of going to the mission start location. I was shocked! I had assumed that, like in every other video game, the world progressed according to my schedule. I didn't even realize how deeply this behavior had been ingrained in me until I was slapped in the face with it. Making time meaningful can help prevent this mindset from bleeding into your tabletop rpgs.

Secondly, tracking time adds another interesting dimension to the resource management game at the mechanical core of D&D. Resources take many different forms in D&D including hit points, spell slots, potions, etc., and the game includes detailed rules for managing and refreshing them. While not tracked explicitly on the character sheet, time should be considered an essential resource on the same level. And the only way to promote the management of a resource is to make it finite. If your wizard had an infinite number of spell slots per day, would you ever hesitate to cast a spell? You wouldn't. So, if players have all the time in the world, what's to discourage them from wasting it?

Thirdly, tracking time helps to smooth-out some of the issues introduced by the encounters per day math. Something that I've observed in all my past and ongoing 5e games is that the short rest mechanics are severely underutilized. I think the crux of it is that there is rarely a circumstance in which it makes more sense to rest for one hour and receive a portion of your resources instead of resting for eight hours to receive all your resources back.

How to get the most out of timers

So, how do DMs make the most of Gygax's advice? Tracking time is a good start, but it's only half the story. The second, and equally crucial piece, is to make time matter by adding consequences to the passing of time. There are a few ways that this can be done.

At low levels, the expenditure of mundane resources such as food, water and torches may be sufficient to make the choice to rest interesting. In this case, rations serve as a proxy for time. Does the party rest and thereby risk running out of rations or do they push forward in order to save those resources? At higher levels, most characters gain access to abilities that allow them to largely transcend these bodily concerns. And once your PCs begin to reach these levels, your approach needs to change.

Fortunately, a solution that remains relevant at all levels is putting the mission on a timer. I've been watching old episodes of Star Trek which made me realize how often the threat of a ticking clock was used to increase the tension or to make a common affair perilous. Most situations faced by the crew were not in and of themselves dangerous, they only became dangerous once the luxury of time was removed. The same lesson can be easily applied to your sessions.

With a little creativity it is possible to add a timer to most scenarios. To get you thinking, here are a few examples:

- There is a competing group racing the party to their goal
- There is a political deadline that must be met
- A dangerous natural or magical phenomenon is closing the window of opportunity
- There is finite logistical support for the mission
- The situation naturally worsens without intervention
- The dungeon inhabitants grow increasingly aware of the intrusion
- The dungeon defenders become better prepared and fortified

I also want to include few pieces of advice on implementing timers. The first of these is that the expiration of the timer doesn't have to result in mission failure. In some instances, it might make fictional sense, but I would shy away from these sorts of all or nothing timers, especially if failure would majorly derail your campaign. For most adventures, the clock running out should introduce interesting complications that up the stakes but not leave success completely out of reach.

My next points have to do with the length and complexity of the timer. It is possible for the timer to be a simple binary: is time expired or isn't it? These sorts of timers can be very effective. But once you become more comfortable using timers you can begin creating multi-stage timers that unspool throughout the adventure. At each interval the situation should change in a significant way, usually to the detriment of the PCs. Using a multi-stage timer can allow you to model a situation that becomes progressively worse, as opposed to worse all at once.

You also need to consider the length of the timer and, depending on the length of the adventure, build in time for resting. It might be tempting to construct a timeline that does not allow for resting at all, but I would caution against it in most cases. After all, the rest mechanics are central to the game. And the decision of whether to rest adds an interesting "push your luck" dimension.

Creating a timeline with resting in mind is also one way that you can organically reinforce the recommended six encounters per adventuring day. To do so, you should estimate how long you expect your encounters to take and add an additional 8 to 10 hours to your timer for every six encounters. This approach puts resting and time management in the hands of the players. If they want to long rest after every encounter they can, but the situation will worsen in meaningful ways if they do.

Lastly, for something to alter or inform player behavior it needs to be known to the players. In other words, people can't act on information that they don't have. This means that at a minimum you need to make players aware that time is ticking. Visibly tracking time using oversized dice or a whiteboard visible to the players also helps to focus people's attention. You might also find it helpful to inform them of what's at stake and what will happen when the clock runs out (provided that the PCs would have some way of knowing). That said, you don't need to fully tip your hand, especially if precise knowledge of what and when would spoil the drama.

Conclusion

Keeping time is an important habit to get into as a DM. But, just as importantly, DMs need to make the passing of time meaningful. Doing so helps to reinforce the illusion that your fictional world is a living dynamic place. It also adds an additional resource management dimension to the game and smooths out some of the rules regarding resting in 5e.

To gain the greatest benefits from keeping time, it is useful to create a timeline and hang important events on it. These events will mostly be to the disadvantage of the PCs, encouraging them to carefully manage their use of time. DMs can also calibrate the length and complexity of the timer to suit their needs by asking how many events need to be on the timer? When the timer expires is the mission failed? How long is the timer? How much time does the timer leave for resting?

Keep these questions in mind, and before long the practice of keeping time will become second nature, and your games will be all the better for it!

Online Play

By u/Zweefer

Online play comes with many advantages and disadvantages, as you will surely have noted/note. These balance out, and in the end it is up to you whether you want to host a game online or irl. This chapter focuses on what to do once you have opted for playing online.

Preparing for Online Play

So what can be done to best prepare for the transition to online play?

As the DM, please keep in mind that the game will slow down, and there will be hiccups in the running of the game. Embrace this concept early. Do not let it take away from the overall experience of the game. It will get better every time you and your party meet.

Take some extra time to prepare. Focus on things like visuals, descriptions, battle maps etc. Moving online is much more a theater of the mind than meeting in person even if you utilize the same materials, just because there are no body cues to play off of.

Find more ways to engage your players and keep them in the game. Playing remotely increases the distractions the players have, so keep their attention on the story you are all creating together.

Set a schedule or specific time to play in advance AND STICK WITH IT! There is a temptation to play fast and loose with times, as you aren't meeting in person. Remember that others are still counting on you to be in a specific place at a set time, even if the location has changed from the normal meeting place to your desk at home. Be sure to pass this attitude on to your players as well. Respect for time is just as important now as it ever was. Threat it like a normal session, and (hopefully) your players will too.

Apps That I Use

These are the apps/programs that have worked best for me. Use your own judgement, and find what works best for your table.

Discord: We use Discord to distribute any handouts the party may want to print. We have a channel for scheduling games. We also have one for general posting during the game where players can post anything they want, from concept art to general memes, to strategy. We also use Discord to call in for our voice. Never had a problem with this aspect of it, and I highly recommend it.

Fantasy Grounds is utilized for all other visual components of the game. I have an ultimate license, so the others did not have to spend any money when transitioning. As Unity has been released in Beta, Fantasy Grounds Classic as they are calling it now is on sale at a deep discount. I love this program and its capabilities for rpg is astounding. The party still prefers to roll real math rocks, but occasionally I ask for open rolls and that is also done in the system. We have also within the last three weeks moved our character sheets to the program as it is easier for me as DM to keep track of it all, and to hand out special item

Aurora Character Builder: The last tool I would suggest is the Aurora Character Builder. If you do not plan on using a program like Fantasy Grounds, this robust and free program will help create characters, and keep track of them as the campaign rolls along. Very neat program.

Closing Thoughts

Role playing is unique in that it can happen completely through the mind - no cards, or layouts required. This means even if you have nothing invested, a game can still flourish over long distances Online play lends itself perfectly to this concept..

I would recommend everyone give it a try, even if you are not going to DM, check out a game via r/lfg or somewhere else. If you can get past the shortcomings, it will improve your game narrative at the least. And it is another tool to have in your toolbox for when events change in the future (player moves away, have kids, can't find a ride, etc) allowing the fun to continue when a traditional game would not.

Skill Checks

By u/Randomd0g

All DMs know this situation: the barbarian wants to knock down that door, but fails the roll. "Can I try again?" This moment immediately breaks immersion: trying over and over again is boring, and forbidden by the rules. So, how to solve this common problem? The answer is that you always succeed: your roll just shows how long you take, not whether you succeed or not.

Here's an example:

- 15 or higher: You smash through the door immediately, it crumbles into little bits as your swole shoulders absolutely eviscerate it.
- 10-14: You take a couple of attempts to break the door down, the top part bursts open but it leaves the bottom intact and everyone needs to step over it.
- 5-9: It takes a minute, and it's slightly embarrassing, but the door must be tougher than it looks. You're able to kick a hole out of the bottom so that you can tiger crawl through one at a time.
- 4 or lower: The door is much tougher than it looks, you feel like you'll be able to break it down but it might take a few minutes of effort and you might hurt yourself. Sure you want to continue? (If they say yes they can roll 1d6 damage, and then modify the result to one of the above)

Other things to consider when using this method:

- Does the thing you're doing make noise? If you're in hostile territory would that amount of noise for a long time be investigated?
- Is there any time pressure in getting through this obstacle? (Sure, you can definitely pick this lock, but can you pick this lock in time to escape the knockout gas filling the room?)
- Does the thing you're doing require tools? If yes I sometimes like to have a low roll mean "the tools are damaged and you have disadvantage on using them until you take the time to repair them (short rest)"

Obviously this sort of logic can't apply to all skill checks in all situations - sometimes failure is actually failure, but I find that it's a useful tool to have in my arsenal.

One last note to end on: I like using this in combination with how successful you are when investigating a room for clues or loot - if there's a story hook in the room then you'll always find it if you bother to look, but a high roll means you find it quickly AND find a bonus, a low roll means it takes you a while and you don't get the bonus gold/item.

TPK – What to Do

By u/shostakofish

Sometimes, through some sort of bad luck, the party will come accross the BBEG - with no hope of survival. How to handle such a TPK situation? Some advice.

- 0 HP =/= dead. Never doubt how fun a "you wake up in a prison with no gear" run can be. (especially for spellcasters, remind them why their spell foci are so important). It gives players a real chance to bond and rely on each other as well as focusing on a very different game feel that your standard travel-town-fight session.
- The worf effect! Ah Worf. The big burly Klingon who was knocked out at the beginning of almost every fight in startrek TNG to show how tough this new bad guy is. Do your players have any allies nearby? Are there any NPCs even kind of in the area? ok! have your BBEG throw an attack at them and let your players see just how many damage dice they're up against. This will give them a chance to...

- Flee! While there are chase mechanics in 5e you can also ignore them and just allow your players to flee with a couple of rolls (lower DC if you're feeling nice). Be very careful about running battles that are impossible to flee from, those can be exciting or they can be the things that horror stories are made of.
- Mess with the numbers. Ok so your players found a way into the castle and now they're fighting the evil king 5 levels lower than you expected them to and his original stat block will vaporize them. What can you do? Are you ok with them defeating him this game from a narrative flow standpoint? OK, give him the stats of those lower level monsters you were originally planning. Maybe buff him up with a higher AC or HP if you need to (don't be afraid to call for a bathroom/snack break to re-write some session notes, despite what you may think you players know you're not a D&D machine. You can tell them you need 10 to re do some prep).