



GM ADVICE #1

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What is this?

GM Advice #1 explores conflicts between player characters in *KULT: Divinity Lost*, offering guidance on how the rules can be applied to allow for such scenes to unfold, as well as what issues to watch out for when the conversation gets fuzzy. This article is written by Kraetyz, a devoted fan, awesome friend, and one hell of a GM.



Characters, locations and incidents are portrayed from the metaphorical viewpoint of the *KULT: Divinity Lost* setting.



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DISCLAIMER

This article is not intended to be a thorough guide on maneuvering social dynamics. It is only advice from one GM to others. Players and friends respond in unique ways to new situations, especially when the situations are intense or heated as they sometimes are in roleplaying games. If you expect or want conflict between PCs in your game, it is wise to revisit the Horror Contract to explore possibilities and draw limits. To get the conversation started, here are some suggestions for questions you might ask your group while setting up the game.

- ◆ Do we want to play a story that features Player vs Player conflict?
- ◆ Do we want to play a story that features conflict between player characters?
- ◆ Is everyone at the table comfortable with sharing narrative spotlights and agency over conflicts when necessary?
- ◆ Is it okay for PCs to disagree and possibly argue over something?
- ◆ Is it okay for PCs to shove, hit, kill, or otherwise physically hurt each other?
- ◆ Is it okay for PCs to insult, humiliate, betray, or otherwise emotionally hurt each other?
- ◆ Is it okay for players to hold secrets from one another and the gamemaster?
- ◆ Are there hard limits on any of the above? Are some kinds of violence not okay? Specific words to avoid?
- ◆ Should we strive to keep the group exploring the story together or is it okay for PCs to go their own ways?
- ◆ Who has a final say if things get out of hand? What happens if a player dislikes what is happening to their character?

CONFLICT BETWEEN PLAYER CHARACTERS

I love when player characters argue, struggle, and fight in my game sessions. Whether in KULT: Divinity Lost, Monsterhearts 2, Eon IV, or Tales from the Loop, seeing the outcome of grievance and disagreement within a story can be immensely satisfying for everyone involved and has the potential to lead a story to some powerful places. Selfishly abandoning your friends in their time of need, giving someone a solid punch to the face for acting out of order, stealing your coworker's gun from them to prevent disaster, there are endless ways for characters to have conflicting motivations and interests. When we allow our game sessions to make use of these kinds of narratives, the experience is richer and more multifaceted than what could be achieved when the GM is the only one providing narratively meaningful conflict.

If the table can pull it off. As game masters, we already juggle many responsibilities and requirements to ensure that characters and their stories can be managed and woven together, both with each other and with overarching narratives and the world we present. When the table erupts with clashing interests and direct opposition, we must face head-on challenges which, if unaddressed, may weaken or disrupt the game experience.

When player characters take actions against one another, the rules of the game may come into play in ways we are not used to. When one character is *Acting Under Pressure* to oppose another character, who decides the stakes and why? When does an argument turn from fiction to *Influence Other*? Is it fair that the GM determines whether partial Harm is inflicted? These questions have answers, but they are not clear cut and may change from table to table. If the game participants don't agree on how fictional conflict and mechanical conflict intersect, it can sour the experience.

No matter the reason, there is always a risk that the conflict escalates and becomes a more intense thing than anyone at the table meant or expected. An errant roll result, ambient one-upping, a hasty decision which felt right at the time but drove nuance out of the conversation. Left unchecked, conflicts between player characters can distort our sense of the fiction and its internal logic with overwrought squabbles unfit for interesting storytelling.

If our focus is given to interpersonal disputes between characters, how can we hope to maintain a primary narrative or even guarantee the spotlight falls on others at the table? What happens when the characters simply cannot get along? A conflict may be interesting, but its participants have a unique power to shape a narrative which may be larger than their own stories. Their fight bleeds over into other interactions, with cascading impact on the established narrative. The disruptive effect this could have is immense.

As players, we are only human. If others around the table oppose the genuine efforts of not just a character but the player behind them, the conflict can feel personal in ways that aren't constructive for telling a story together. At the end of the day, that is the goal of everyone at the table. The game master is the facilitator for the roleplaying experience, but they are neither a therapist nor a babysitter, and when character conflict becomes personal the entire game can collapse.

These are significant challenges, but they can be addressed. The recurring theme you'll find is that these problems are most often table issues. I say this to emphasize that the tools and solutions presented here are ultimately the responsibility of the people playing the game, around the table. Your table. There really is only a single solution to a roleplaying game not working, and it is communication. It is counterproductive to rely on what I say here, or other things said on the topics of table etiquette and safety, as a prescriptive checklist. These are tools to open conversations, not end them. If these issues come up in your game, I hope the following will help you address them honestly and successfully.

Applying rules

The application of rules in KULT: Divinity Lost is in essence very simple, with player moves and dice rolls triggered and informed by the conversation around the table and the shared fiction. Players describe their characters' actions, and the rules give them moves which inform and affect the fiction. The game master is the moderator and final arbiter for stakes and outcomes of many (but not all) rolls, and together with the players the GM guides the conversation based on interest and the player move results. In practice, there is infinite nuance and variety to this concept, and as game masters we must remain aware of the effect that rules can have on the characters and wider fiction.

When players oppose each other, whether through direct or indirect action, be ready to open the conversation to how the rules can determine the outcome of the conflict. Propose an idea, such as a roll to **Influence Other** to stop another character from leaving, or that a threatened character could **Observe a Situation** to ready themselves for a confrontation. Listen to the players and what they want to see out of their moves, let them help answer questions about the results, and be ready to make compromises to accommodate them. When a character **Acts Under Pressure**, demand details about their goals and allow opposing players to react to and judge the character's actions. Mediate rolls and their outcomes so that interesting and impactful events are allowed to play out and escalate if needed. In especially tense situations, a clash of wills can be condensed into an opposed roll by one character **Hindering** the actions of another before their dice roll. Let the players express their ideas about the scene, and as GM mediate the conflict results with drama and consequence in mind. The rules do not change, but the conversation around them will.

The rules of KULT: Divinity Lost do not care much whether opposition comes from player characters or NPCs. As a game master, you will still be guiding and interpreting these rolls as you normally would. What needs to be remembered, though, is that when players have different ideas of what a roll result should entail or when it is appropriate to employ the rules, your job is to come to an agreement on how to proceed before anything happens. Everyone in the conversation must be on the same page before the rules application can emerge from it. This means listening to the players' ideas, providing constructive feedback on them when necessary, and integrating them into a narratively satisfying whole. You are the moderator, but you do not rule the table. On the flip side, your players are not the final arbiters of the fiction, and they too must recognize your role as narrator of the game.

Managing outcomes and expectations

An important aspect of communicating the fiction is to establish a clear or at least narratively appropriate sense of action and consequence. When we build scenes, we rely on the players' expectations and understanding of the fiction to present conflict, exposition, challenge, and more. If you speak to the strike leader, others will see you and make assumptions. When you fire your gun, someone gets hurt or worse. Whatever you do, will affect the story. This is a complex yet mostly intuitive process by which the game master sets the bounds of the fiction. If and

when the players challenge those bounds, the GM has moves to respond with in order to continue, ground, or transform the experience.

When player characters are in conflict, this storytelling duty is transferred in part onto them. One player character opposed by another gets the power to decide what the consequence is to the opposition, whether that is a social conflict, a physical one, a change in relationship, or nothing. Despite this, the game master should be involved in shaping these actions and responses, and temper them with consideration to the wider fiction and surrounding scene. Ask questions, inject additional information and nuance into the conversation, and be sure to Give The Possible Consequences And Ask. As you involve yourself in the PC conflict, you can provide an outside perspective on the player characters' disagreements, speak up for or interrogate either of them, and through this shine a light both on the inner life of the story's characters and on the world they occupy.

By doing this, and encouraging the players' participation in those discussions, we can manage expectations and guide the conversation away from irreparable mistakes or disruptive behavior, while balancing on the edge of tense drama. Perhaps the character doesn't immediately draw their knife when their new friend says the wrong thing, because they already see the fear in their eyes. It may be safer to break into the house later rather than during the day. If an insult isn't quite enough, a shove could really set off the drama. When the table is mindful of the scope of a conflict - its intensity, how long it lasts, what they're willing to lose for the cause - it becomes a natural part of the conversation, rather than a disruption of it. The game master should always investigate this scope and use it to ask questions, challenge the players, and make moves of their own.

Maintaining a narrative core

It is rare for KULT: Divinity Lost to have just one storyline. The game's prompts, published scenarios, and approach to character creation, tell us that each player character has their own problems, lurking horrors, and dark secrets. Even when these characters all gravitate towards the same point in a story, the stories remain personal. We each find a balance for this. So long as everyone at the table is happy with the scenes they play and how they play out, the game works as it should. The game master holds a central role in maintaining this balance, being the person with the most knowledge of the narrative and most control over the fiction.

GIVE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES AND ASK

The GM simply informs the player of what consequences their character's actions are likely to have, giving the player an opportunity to change their mind. This ensures there's no miscommunication and the player is fully aware of the situation before committing, or allows the player to double-down on a risky course of action.

Conflict between player characters complicates this balance, but provides its juiciest equilibriums. It is important as a game master to be able to step back and refuse control of the narrative, and trust that if the players want conflict then they have reason for it. You can re-assert central themes and lingering plot threads in other scenes, as delayed responses to the conflict, and other imaginative ways. Through this, you remind the players of the shared circumstances which bring them together. As discussed above, you are involved in the conflict as it happens, taking care to provide perspectives not just on the immediate fiction but the game's very story. You are the one with the most knowledge of it, after all. If you want the players to take part in the story, guide them towards it even as their characters scheme and butt heads.

It may be that the players miss your hints, disregard something vital, or dominate the narrative with their decisions. This is common in conflict, as the interaction across the table can be much more intense and desirable than that with the game master. There are interesting comments to be made on social dynamics here, but I will leave it as an exercise to the reader. Suffice to say, the game might turn adversarial, and you are fine. Adversarial stories can be perfectly intense and horrific, but your expectation as game master must shift if you are to succeed. If the players' conflict becomes their core motivation, then that is the central narrative. That is where you must devote the most of your attention, your horror, and your care. If there are reasons not to do that, perhaps because there are more players at the table or you aren't comfortable narrating that story, then you must take clear action.

"But that's what my character would do!"

The ever-present desire for character immersion is central to roleplaying games. The players have a personal understanding of the characters they create, and so should feel empowered to make bold and drastic decisions on their behalf when necessary. Immersing oneself in a character and seeing the fiction through their eyes is a powerful experience, and the basis for much conflict between player characters. If a character feels disrespected and lunges into conflict, that is the player's truth. It is what their character would do. This can cause problems to the wider fiction, sabotaging the game master or another player, often without anyone meaning to.

The argument that any decision made by the player on behalf of their character must be respected because it is in-character is, unfortunately, problematic to the communal nature of tabletop storytelling. There is always a desire to allow self-expression, but when that expression runs counter to the established fiction or the expectations of the game's participants, the game ceases to be about the shared narrative. A player who decides for themselves that their character will act disruptively - knowingly or not - coerces the table's attention and fiction to center on themselves, rather than the table. This is not exclusive to conflict between player characters, but when a conflict between players becomes a vehicle for one player's desire for immersion at the cost of another's, hurt feelings are common. As a game master, it is important to recognize when this happens and respond accordingly.

The previous segments give advice on dealing with these decisions: be involved in the conversation, interrogate the characters, provide clear and interesting stakes, utilize the rules, and be ready to respond when the bounds of the fiction are tested. By

tempering and providing nuance to the players' sense of the fiction, obviously disruptive action is mitigated and everyone at the table can enjoy the story together rather than watch in frustration as it is destroyed. This is not always enough. Game masters should familiarize themselves with ways to address players' actions not only through responses in the fiction, but across the table as well. You are allowed to explain why an action shouldn't be taken. You can ask your players if they would be okay with the story that would develop from certain decisions. You can suggest alternatives, not under the guise of the fiction but as an honest narrator looking to provide an interesting story for several people. If none of this works, play cannot proceed and the game is over. A player who cannot participate and collaborate with others, cannot play.

Conclusion

It can be difficult to maintain a conflict between player characters without distorting narratives or disrupting gameplay. Don't see that as a reason to avoid it! Face the challenge, and reap the rewards of intense stories with betrayal, anger, and resolution. This article focuses on the control and continuation of conflict between player characters, but just as important is the ability for players and game master to author an end to conflict. The characters at your table have narrative arcs which can include forgiveness and regret. Explore the nuances of the conflict and how it changes the people involved. The impact of having multiple people at the table involved in these kinds of stories is incredible. I will always recommend it.

With that said, the theme of talking to your players is consistent throughout this article, and that begins with session zero. If you feel ready to tackle new subjects at your table, float the idea to your players. Perhaps they aren't comfortable with the complexities of conflict with the other main characters. Perhaps they will leap at the opportunity and discuss details! A business rivalry may feel different from a toxic love triangle, and gaslighting is a much different tactic for conflict than a physical fight. Either way, if and when conflict erupts while playing, remember to check in on your players during and afterwards, to see that this really is what they want. If the fight is exciting and leads to new depraved depths, they probably do. Be mindful and open, stay involved, and get excited when the gun is pointed not at the slobbering raziide, but at the so-called friend who brought the group to that nightmare.

Good luck,

Kratz

