Learning To Let Go

As a keeper, I am constantly molding the plot clay while the game is going. I tend to want the players to succeed, which I don’t believe is an uncommon keeping style, but I also don’t want them to walk through as if nothing can touch them. I enjoy the frailty of the Call of Cthulhu investigator. It gives a real sense of danger and excitement that I think lacks in other systems. At the same time, it can piss the players off when they are killed one turn into the first real action in the game. Success does not always mean death though, it can also mean stopping the big bad or saving the sacrificial victim or a whole host of other outcomes. Success to me also means moving the plot forward, finding the clues that get the investigators to the next scene. Nothing kills the mood more than the players sitting around trying to come up with a plan when they are not sure what the hell they should be doing. Incoming idea rolls… boring.

I have also mistakenly tried to guide the players in the right direction, sometimes by force and sometimes with a gentle hand. Dropping hints, in NPC dialog is always a good way to go however sometimes if the jokes are flying the players will miss a clue that is too subtle. A simple slip of the NPC's tongue can be great if everyone is engaged but if you drop important clues that way it can end up being lost. Wait, Mr. Collins said what? Now no one understands this clue path that is so obvious in your mind that you begin getting frustrated. Your big reveal is going to get lost on everyone. Having an NPC offer help or push the players in a direction is a way to go as well, but this is fraught with danger. You can end up getting someone killed and now your fabulous NPC who the investigators are supposed to form tight bonds with is just, that asshole who’s plan got Carl Cant-sneak killed. Anyone who has attempted to endear Jackson Elias to his or her investigators as poorly as I did will understand the pain I’m talking about. Sometimes trying to get the players on track can be the worst thing for them. Sometimes you just have to let go and let the game take you where it wants to go.

Learning to let go is not easy but it can be the best experience you will ever have at the gaming table. I still find myself unable to take my advice but when I eventually step back and just let things happen, the game begins to flow again. The first important thing to understand is time. If you are doing a one-shot or a tournament style game you don't have the time to let the players talk about the wallpaper or how wonderful the wine is. You can't just say, "hey get back on topic we only have an hour left" because that would spoil the mood, at the same time you can't let the investigators run off to some other town on a misguided hunch. I good tool here is game time or some jarring event. With game time you can set a perceived cut off time, it doesn't even have to be legitimate but if you have the players thinking they only have till midnight to solve the case, they won't be driving out to visit the grandma of the butler of the friend of the NPC who matters. This also gives you an exit strategy if the game goes long. If there are five minutes left to play and the investigators have not made any headway, you can have that clock strike midnight and the malevolent horror devour the world. The other technique is a jarring event, nothing gets things back on track like a horrifying monster showing up to eat some tasty investigators. Nothing brings the investigators together like the threat of certain death. Dropping a few clues into the event will get the player's laser-focused on the task at hand, now that they've had a little mortality gut check. This should give them the feeling that they need to solve this thing before anything else comes back hungry.

These are fine ways to get players back on track but we are here to go off the rails as it were. Sometimes the only solution is the let go. Forget about the plot at hand and just let them head in whichever direction blows their hair back. If they are not following the plot, that's fine, they will either solve the case or die horribly, either way, everyone will have a good time because you will not be forcing them into situations they had not come up with organically. Let them sit and have an hour-long conversation between themselves. That's fine as long as they are having fun with the role-playing. Let them slog off to god knows were in search of some distant relative that has nothing to do with the plot. It's fine; you may even come up with a completely different plot in the process. It is more about having fun than it is about sticking to the letter of the scenario. So let go, and chances are the players will reign themselves in.

Try not to railroad your players into doing the investigation you think they should do. Let them sink or swim. I have railroaded players enough to know that it generally doesn't turn out the way you thought it would anyhow. Inevitably your players will hate the NPC you want them to love, love the NPC you want them to hate, go left when they should go right and use dynamite where a simple conversation could suffice. Remember it is their story too, you are not the only storyteller and you should let your players enjoy creating a vibrant world in which to play.

Now for the disclaimer, it is not always appropriate to let the players go off and create their own story in the middle of the scenario. There are limits to what the players should be able to dictate and what you as a keeper must keep consistent. If a player wants to do something that completely derails the game and ruins the fun for everyone else then you as the keeper need to put a quick end to it. If there is something feasible but would end up burning the time you have to play, it could be a good idea to tell the player you will address that during the next session. Try to handle character either at the end or before you start the game, or even better between sessions. Nothing bogs things down more than twenty minutes of characters doing their skill upgrades and figuring out which book has which spells and who is researching what. There are ways to make this interesting but it is a large investment of time, if your game is limited on time you might not want to deal with that at game time. You should give yourself twenty or so minutes before or after the game to handle upkeep.

It is not easy letting go of the story you are trying to tell. Maybe you have written the story yourself, so you want the climaxes to have an impact. You have to remember the players are not inside your head. They will not understand certain pieces, they may misinterpret clues, they may put more weight on certain paths of investigation than others, and in a nutshell, they just won't behave. Don't expect them to, expect the unexpected and be ready to change accordingly. Let the players take on some of the storytelling, let them explore, and don't be upset when they head in the wrong direction. Sometimes the best moments of the game have nothing to do with the plot, and they are remembered for days to come. Finally, and most importantly, have fun.