Table Manners

The subject of table manners is probably something that comes up often and I would assume there is a large degree of difference between one individual and another in regards to this topic. First of all, I am not talking bout keeping your elbows off the table or eating with your mouth closed, although those may be valid table manners in the context of what this article is about, I am talking about the role-playing game table. Let me define that though because in the digital age the game table can mean many things. I define the game table as any group that gets together in some fashion, weather it be an actual table, a virtual table like Roll20.net, voice chat, video chat or a good old fashion message board, with the intention of playing a game.

Now that we know what we are talking bout here, we can start to lay down some ground rules. First of all, I am only stating opinions and you what opinions are like right? Yeah, opinions are like assholes, everybody has one, and they all stink. So please don’t think less of me if my table rules offend your delicate sensibilities. First of all, they are mine and if you don’t like them you don’t have to play in my games, and second I don’t care. I would say that I am probably more tolerant of many things than others but those things that I do not tolerate get a person kicked faster than you can say Mi-Go. I write this as a Keeper, who expects certain things from his players, but this article is for players. If you feel like you identify with any of the bad table manners I am putting forth you may want to see what your group thinks before you continue, you may be on somebody’s naughty list.

OK let’s start with the easy ones, these are things that I think, or I hope, are no brainers for most people. If you can’t see why these would cause problems and your group does not mind, well you should probably just stay with the group your in because you may not be excepted elsewhere. We are talking about abusive behavior. Racism, sexism, homophobia and any other ism that is going to make others at the table feel attacked or uncomfortable. You may not understand how a comment you made can make someone feel, even if your intention was not to alienate or hurt someone, you may have done so out of ignorance. So I say, just stay away from those topics and you wont have to worry about it. Now there are times in Call of Cthulhu when race, gender or other such topics will come into play because of the time period. As a keeper I try to bring this up early and let players know that there may be some charged language or that they are going to run into an NPC who is pretty abrasive and they should be prepared. It is like watching a movie, we may not like everything that happens but it portrays something that is real and shouldn’t just be hidden away as if it does not exist. If everyone at the table is confortable with the content, then by all means, go ahead with it. If however someone is expressing that they feel uncomfortable with the content, it should be addressed. We can change things in game to provide a fun and enjoyable experience for all the players. In this case good table manners would be for the Keeper to let everyone know if any provocative content is going to be presented and change accordingly if anyone takes issue. For the players good manners would be to respect the social differences of those at the table, off color jokes at a player or characters expense should not be tolerated in my opinion. Acting like an ass because you think it is funny is a quick way to have your own ass escorted to the alley where a hunting horror will come to eat your face off. I would assume this is an easy thing to understand but I hear about a lot of uncomfortable situations at the game table so I guess it bears repeating.

Now that that is out of the way we can get to the other less hurtful but abundantly annoying actions that a small amount of table manners can put an end to in short order. Knowing when to speak. Seriously, it is much worse when you are playing over voice or video chat but it can be an issue face to face as well. Don’t talk over others. If someone is speaking just wait until they are done. It is really not that hard, you will get a chance to speak, just wait your turn. Hell the Keeper or another players may even ask you what you think or what you want to do and try to force you to speak. There will be a chance, trust me, take it easy, the sound of your own voice is awesome I know, but give the others a chance to hear their awesome voices as well. As a Keeper this really drives me up the wall. I have a young child, who is learning to not interrupt, so don’t make me have to be mean daddy during game time too. Now, Brighton the Magnificent, I know you want to tell us about your magic trick that can help us steal the artifact, but Wendell the Whisperer is trying to tell us there is a Ghoul about to attack, please wait your turn. Give everyone a chance to speak, if someone is already talking that is a wonderful indication that you should not be. If you must constantly be moving your mouth, bring some snacks, which should keep you busy while another player has something to say. Who knows you might actually remember their characters name if you listen now and again. Finally and most importantly, and I am joking about it but it is important, never, absolutely never, interrupt your Keeper. There is nothing worse then trying to build suspense and some creep factor and then being interrupted in the middle.

Keeper: “You enter the room and it is pitch black, you can hear shuffling from the far corner, you can almost make out something in the corner that…”

Brighton the Magnificent: “Hey did I learn Create Gate or Elder Sign from the one book, I was going to tell you I was researching that before but I forgot…”

Keeper: “Fuck it, that thing in the corner pulls Brighton’s face off and wipes it’s butt with it.”

Seriously don’t interrupt the keeper.

Another table manner that is closely related to interruptions is character upkeep. It is understandable that a player wants to upkeep their character from the last game or even from a previous encounter, but there are moments in the game where this would be appropriate and some that are not. For example if you wanted to be doing research on a book so that you can learn that spell your group needs to defeat mr. I’m gonna destroy the world, a good time would be when your back at the hotel, or in the morning before making plans for the day. A bad time would be, during a car chase or while you are investigating the spooky house. The game provides time for the mundane upkeep to occur, but wait, and pick your moments. Nothing bogs a game down more than a twenty-minute session of how does this spell work in the middle of a tense or action situation. Questions of sanity gains, hit point gains or skill increases should be handled in downtime as well, but if you do not get the chance it would be appropriate to mention it if your character takes some damage. “Hey I never rolled my hit points for that stay at the doctors” “OK, roll that, great now take 6 points of damage”. It comes and goes so quickly. The point is that it should be obvious when you can do some upkeep and when it will take the wind out of the sails. It’s ok, we know you really need to feel the security of those extra three hit points on your sheet, and trust me we will add them, but at the moment lets just deal with this creepy noise in the attic first.