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 describe the game table as any group that gets together in some fashion, whether it be an actual table, a virtual table like Roll20.net, voice chat, video chat, or a good old fashion message board, to play 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 will 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 will 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 might have done so out of ignorance. So I say, just stay away from those topics, and you won't have to worry about it. Now there are times in Call of Cthulhu when race, gender, or other such issues will come into play because of the era. 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 prepare themselves. It is like watching a movie. We may not like everything that happens, but it portrays something real, and we shouldn't hide it away as if it does not exist. If everyone at the table is comfortable with the content, then, by all means, go ahead with it. If, however, someone is expressing that they feel uncomfortable with the content, we should address it. 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 things 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 character's 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 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 number of table manners can put an end to in short order. The first is 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 finish. It is not that hard. You will get a chance to speak, just wait your turn. Hell, the Keeper or other 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 voice is incredible, I know, but give the others a chance to hear their impressive voices as well. As a Keeper, this drives me up the wall. I have a young child, who is learning not to interrupt, so don't make me have to be mean daddy during the 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 an excellent indication that you should not be. If you must always be moving your mouth, bring some snacks, which should keep you busy while another player has something to say. Who knows, you might remember their characters name if you listen now and again. Finally, and most importantly, and I am joking about it, but it is necessary, never, absolutely never, interrupt your Keeper. There is nothing worse than 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 its butt with it."

Seriously don't interrupt the Keeper.

Another table manner that is closely related to interruptions is character upkeep. Understandably, players want to upkeep their character from the last game or even from a previous encounter. There are moments in the game where this would be appropriate and some that are not. For example, if you wanted to be researching a book so that you can learn that spell your group needs to defeat Mr. I’m going to destroy the world, a good time would be when your back at the hotel or in the morning before making plans for the day. An awful time would be, during a car chase or while you are investigating the spooky house. The game provides time for the routine upkeep to occur, so 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 hospital," "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 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, let's just deal with this creepy noise in the attic first. When you're interrupting the narrative to ask about character upkeep, it is pretty obvious that your focus is your character and not the story. That is counter to the way Call of Cthulhu is structured. The story should be king here; your character as much as you may love them may not make it past the next hour, so let's not obsess. I would venture to say that a Call of Cthulhu game could be played starting only with character names, and then adding stats as needed. I have a scenario in the works that will test that theory.

OK, we are kind to each other. We are not interrupting one another, and we are not obsessing about our character's stats as we play. Great, what else, well how about naysaying? As a Keeper, I try to look things up and have accurate representations of the era, but when you are making something up on the fly because of some unexpected twists in the game, it is not always easy to be on the mark. For example, I am not going to say, "you see a man on his cellphone" if we are playing in the 1920s, but if you are using a fire extinguisher to weigh something down, I have no idea what the weight of a 1920s fire extinguisher would be. I have looked them up, and they seem heavy, so I am just going to make a judgment call on what I assume is reasonable. Please don't begin to argue the weight of the thing is more or less than I am guessing. It takes away from the game if we are arguing over the details and not progressing the game in a meaningful way. I could certainly be wrong, and if you protest slightly with a bit of factual information on the subject, I would generally just say OK, that's fine. Now let's say, however, that there is something story-driven that needs to happen and this extinguisher should not be able to stop it from happening, I may go ahead with my narrative and progress the story. At this point, it is not the time to begin arguing about all the fantastic details you know about the historical advancements in extinguishing technology through the ages. It is generally apparent when a Keeper has something important that they need to have happened. Usually, they would just let something like that go, but if not, just make it happen and let the story continue. Constant naysaying and fact-checking can bog down a good game.

The flip side of the manner, as mentioned earlier, is that the Keeper must be mindful of the details before presenting them to the players. You may have to make something up on the fly, which can be hard, but try to be as accurate as possible. It is hard to get a sense of atmosphere when the elements in the environment don't make sense. As a Keeper, it is simpler in this day and age because you have the Internet at your disposal. If you need to know if a particular college existed in 1923, you can just look it up. You want to know if a specific type of medical field existed at the time, look it up. You want to know what kind of six-passenger vehicles existed at the time, you guessed it, look it up. There will always be things that slip through the cracks, but if you are doing a decent job, no one will notice. Also, in the same token of players not arguing about the details, a Keeper should be able to just change something on the fly if a player brings up a good point about some aspect. Be reasonable and keep the story going.

Another useful manner is allowing for the failure of others. If a player wants to do something that you don't agree with, suck it up; they should be able to do as they wish. As in life, we cannot control others. We can only give some advice or constructive criticism. Don't get upset with other players for their actions; simply react to them by helping or getting out of the way. Most times, the oddball action makes the game memorable and, in some cases, even wins the day. Trying to stifle other player's creativity is a sure way to cause tension at the table and a sure way to make a game turn sour. Live and let live, sometimes your character's reaction to another's becomes a big piece of role-playing gold as you begin to react off each other's ques. Who knows, you could have the buddy cop movie of the year happening. Enjoy the diversity of play. You don't always have to be doing the right thing. There are no winners in Call of Cthulhu. There is only the eaten and those who ran away screaming.

Another item that goes without saying is to pay attention. Your Keeper spent time putting this together and has a lot to juggle. They are trying hard to create tension, keep track of game time and real-time, keep players engaged, keep facts straight, create personalities for NPCs, and a host of other things that go on during a game. As a player, you are there to figure out the mystery, so pay attention to what is going on. Don't be on your phone or searching the Internet, working on your character sheet, reading some other book, or other various distractions that take you out of the game. There is nothing more frustrating than doing a long explanation and building some creepy tension only to have someone chiming in with "Wait what, we are in the house, I thought we were at the hospital." "Yeah, we were at the hospital twenty minutes ago, and now we are at the house, I think you should go in first." I understand that sometimes we miss things or can't remember something, but to not even know where the party is at seems like a pretty good indication that you are not listening. It makes it hard for the whole group, going back and explaining what everyone else already knows because you missed it. It ruins the tension and the vibe. It is easy to remedy. You are here to play the game, so pay attention. If it is difficult for you to remain engaged in the game, you might want to talk with the Keeper at the break to see what can change to get your character involved. Don't always expect the Keeper to notice and solve it for you, speak up and get the most out of your game.

There are many tables and many gamers out there, and things will be different for each. These are just some basic rules of thumb that will help a player or Keeper be a positive force at the game table. These simple things will help the game progress better, improve the atmosphere and tension, and help all those at the table get along. We may not all have the best manners, but with a bit of thought and observation, we can begin to see when we are part of the problem and not part of the solution. I am sure that we can all think of many more table manners that we would like to see out there, but for now, I will play some games rather than write about them. Enjoy your investigations, my friends, may the Hunting Horrors fly too high to require a SAN roll, the Deep Ones stay deep and the Old Ones from Outside stay, well, outside.