

Rev's Keeper Tips

for running a great
Monster of the Week
mystery



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We were introduced to Monster of the Week at C2E2 in March of 2018 and started playing it shortly after. We loved it so much that we reformatted our podcast about six weeks before launch to make it a MotW actual play.

At the time of this writing we are about 18 months in, and I've learned so much about how to be a strong Keeper and run a great game. Listening back to our first few episodes I'm reminded of our early mistakes and misunderstandings with the rules, things we struggled with, things that ended up on the cutting room floor. These were elements that took us time and experience to fully understand, and as a result we've assembled a list of a few of the most common pitfalls we see and lessons we've learned.

1. Be a fan of the hunters

This is of course discussed at length in the MotW book as well, but it's so important we wanted to give it our own emphasis here. Rule number one is to be a fan of the hunters. Powered by the Apocalypse games don't really work with the mindset of *us versus the GM*, because it's a shared narrative. We're passing it back and forth to tell a great story.

If you've got it out for your hunters, you're going to have no problem killing them, because there aren't a lot of hit points in this game. That's because such a big part of MotW is the lead up, the investigation, the figuring things out. You want to make it dangerous, yes. You want to make it difficult. But you want to be rooting for the

hunters as you do, putting them in dangerous, interesting situations, with the goal of seeing what kind of brilliant ideas they come up with to get *out* of those situations.

2. A mixed success is still a success

When I first started running MotW, one of the hardest things for me to keep in mind was that a mixed success is *still a success*. The best way to honor this is to make sure you really understand what the player's intention is with any move.

For example, let's say I'm on the first floor of a building and I see a creature in the window and want to shoot at it. You think that's a difficult shot, so instead of Kick Some Ass you have me roll Act Under Pressure, and I get a mixed success. The outcome of that mixed success is going to be different depending on what I'm trying to do. Am I trying to damage it? Then a mixed success means that no matter what other ramifications come from it, I still hit it. Am I trying to distract it? Then maybe I don't hit it, I hit the wall or shatter the glass instead and the creature is distracted.

If your player isn't clear, question them about their intention. Let's say you ask what they want to do, and they say, "I want to drive around this tight corner and catch up to this other car." In my early days as Keeper I might have responded with something like, "Okay, you make it around the corner, but you don't catch up." *But the thing they were trying to do is catch the other car*, so you need to make sure that's still part of what happens, because that's the *success* part of mixed success.

You could say that they catch the car but then blow a tire so it's going to be hard to stay with them, or they catch the car but someone in the other car is going to fire shots at them because they know they're

there. But no matter what else, the primary objective is still accomplished in a mixed success.

3. The moves work

One of the most challenging things as Keeper in this game is that sometimes your players will have moves that will result in a question or piece of information that will have you thinking, “How in the world could they possibly know this? How can I justify telling them this?” Once again, I think the best way to explain how to work with this is through an example.

Early on when learning the game, we played a group of hunters traveling through time. I was playing The Flake and had the move that lets you know where the next critical event is going to occur. The Keeper said, “I have no idea how you could possibly know that. You’re literally in a new time, in a town you’ve never been to. How could you know where the next thing will occur?”

We talked through that and realized sometimes the Keeper just has to get creative to build that narrative in and justify the move working. So, what they described was my character standing there and trying to get a sense from her Weird where the next thing would happen. As she turned to look down the street, something glinted on the ground – an arcade token. She bent to pick it up, and a chill washed over her as down the street she saw the arcade it came from and knew that was where they need to go next.

One of the fun things about this game is that the hunters get to be pretty spectacular when the Keeper remembers and honors that the moves work. If they’ve got the move, if they’ve got the question, it’s up to you as the Keeper to answer honestly.

4. Keep track of your hard moves

The concept of hard moves can be one of the most challenging aspects of MotW for GMs coming from other RPG systems, because in MotW a creature never just attacks in the middle of combat – it always attacks *back* as a response to something that a hunter has done. The usual place for this is as a direct response to a Kick Some Ass move. But in reality, a Keeper can store up a hard move and use it as an attack that can seem to come out of nowhere.

As Keeper, it's important to know that you don't need to use your hard moves immediately, as long as you keep track of them and know when you have and haven't used them yet. Early on, I was stuck in the habitual pattern of failed roll, immediate hard move, failed roll, immediate hard move. *They failed, I'd think, I have a hard move, I have to use it right now.*

But the more we played, the more I realized *no, I can sit on that*. I can know what it's going to be and maybe even where it's going to come in, but I don't have to spend that hard move right then. I can wait for a moment where it's more engaging for the players, or more exciting, or where it will make things more dramatic.

5. Make sure your hard moves are *hard* moves

We've talked about the challenge of feeling like you're giving away the farm with information the hunters have earned with their rolls and moves. The flip side of that coin, the mechanic that balances everything out, is those hard moves you use as Keeper. No matter how or when you use them, make sure your hard moves are truly *hard* moves; that there's some real danger there.

I played in a game recently with a new Keeper. In it there was an NPC, a witch who had some powers, and one of the other players had tried to manipulate her. She failed the roll, and the ramification was just that the witch noticed, she said something like, “Hey, I wouldn’t poke around in my head, there’s some dangerous stuff in there.”

I told the Keeper after the fact that that was a place where he could have used a true hard move, something like, “The witch has some strong psychic defenses and you get kind of a psychic backlash from her, you’re going to be at a minus one ongoing to Sharp until you can figure out how to clear your head.” Or as another option, “Something this woman knows gets into your mind and you are overcome with terror and you kind of shut down for a minute or two.” Or, “She gets a peek inside *your* head and you can tell she knows that thing you don’t want people to know about.”

Make sure your fails are heavy and hard hitting, because that’s what’s going to balance how much you’re giving on the positive side when it comes to a mixed or full success.

6. Don’t make your hunters dependent on an NPC

I’ll use our show as an example again here. For a long time early on, none of our players were magic users, and in-game Rev was their main source of help in terms of understanding or performing magic. But eventually I needed to find ways around that because I don’t want them to have to always call Rev – or worse, to be in a position where if something should happen to Rev, the team would be screwed.

Someone asked me once why I’ve never put the official Critshow mascot, my dog Harvey, into the show. The answer is that I won’t put anyone into my game that I’m not willing to kill. Everyone should be in danger.

With that in mind, I don't want to have an NPC that is sacred because that takes them out of that danger zone, which lowers the stakes and weakens the narrative.

Wrapping it all up

We hope you find these tips helpful! If you have your own tips to share, or want to ask questions or further discuss anything we've shared here, feel free to do so over on our subreddit at [r/thecritshow](https://www.reddit.com/r/thecritshow).

Want to go even deeper? Don't have a group to play MotW with? Then you might be interested in checking out our Patreon-exclusive Discord server, where an ever-growing community of players and GMs has created The Organization. Many Keepers, as the heads of various departments of the shadowy monster-hunting Organization, run regular games for dozens of hunters within a shared universe. To learn more, check out patreon.com/TheCritshow. Joining at any tier will get you access to The Organization and our vibrant community of awesome folks who hang out, support each other, and generally have an awesome time together.

And if you've somehow stumbled across this document but you're not already a listener of The Critshow, we hope you'll come take a listen on Apple, Spotify, Google, or wherever you get your podcasts! Our main story is set in a world using the Powered by the Apocalypse system (Monster of the Week, Dungeon World, and more). If you love the mix of horror, mystery, and comedy in shows like Buddy, Ash vs The Evil Dead, or Supernatural, you'll feel right at home on The Critshow!