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Hey +[D.j. Chadwick](#)

I was just writing this post about Prepping to Improvise but Blogger ate everything that I had written today, leaving me with just the stuff I had written on Saturday or whenever.

Instead of reconstructing what I wrote earlier (and I was in the process of hitting "Post" when the thing disappeared), I thought it might be more constructive to do pretty much the same thing as a dialog.

And so, I want to talk to you about your particular stumbling blocks when it comes to improvisation in a gaming environment. What can you tell me about it?



46



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Harley Stroh
/sub

Apr 6,
2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Doug Kovacs

..

Apr 6,
2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Frank Turfler

...

Apr 6,
2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Ron +2

I have so many good random tables that now it seems I spend as much time flipping through looking for the best table as I used to looking up rules... Good ways to cull tables/organize them to support sandbox play.

Apr 6,
2015

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DM by contemplating their navels are wrong.

Second, underprep, from my stand point, is better than overprep. When you say "[I don't] prepare any ideas of what to do when my players... run off the opposite direction" my question becomes "where are they going?" Not in a "Hey, D.J., you need to fucking know what's over there" but that if they're not enticed by the direction you were hoping they would go, what's attracting them to the direction they decided to go? Do they have some agenda they're pursuing over there? If you can't say yes or no to that last question, you probably need to ask them directly. Once you know that they have an agenda they're pursuing, it's time to introduce consequences for them pursuing it.

(You'll notice a recurring theme of "consequences for the shit they've done or have decided to do" in almost all of my DMing advice. It's not from a "make them pay" sort of standpoint but from a "make them work for it" one. No one wants to be handed an easy victory. Well, no one worth gaming with, that is.)

REPLY +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +1

+[Ron Yonts](#) I wouldn't make this topic public if it weren't open to the public.

Apr 6,
2015

On table overload; THIS IS TOTALLY A THING! There are times at the table that I wish I had brought my *Tome of Adventure Design*, but that thing is a beast. And best used for what it says on its cover. The thing is, though, most of the stuff that's in there is stuff I can probably come up with on my own *in situ*.

Rather than carrying around a stunning array of OMG ALL TEH TABLEZ, I try to only carry around the tables that I needed last time (or the time before that or the time before that or you get it). When I discover that there was a table I needed that I didn't have, rather than look for *someone else's version of it*, I come up with my own, if only to practice at coming up with that sort of information.

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Sometimes its okay just to say to the players "Look I haven't planned for this , can we do this other thing now and I'll be better prepped next session.."

REPLY +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +2

Back to +D.j. Chadwick:

Apr 6,
2015

We're getting into the minefield of the "balanced encounter" here, so I'm going to be careful. First, there's nothing wrong with your players meeting up with an under- or over-powered encounter. They -- and you! -- should learn from either. As with nearly all of my advice, I encourage you to think about the consequences of these "balance deviations."

In the case of the under-powered encounter, it can make sense for there to be a reason the encounter was so easy. Maybe these monsters were fleeing another, tougher monster that was chasing them. Maybe they were a decoy for an ambush. Look at how your PCs react to the encounter. If they're getting off on the badassery of the fact that their fighter just killed 14 kobolds in one round, give them a consequence to deal with that doesn't negate their badassery, but gives them something else to deal with. Maybe the kobolds had contracted a disease and now the challenge is whether the PCs survive that or, worse yet, bring it back to town with them. This can reward the players for having taken care of a threat that was bigger than they knew, but now creates a new problem for them to deal with.

On the other hand, if the players approach an under-powered encounter's resolution, you can complicate and reward that behavior while not negating their choices as well. If PCs are exhibiting caution, reward it by giving them something to be cautious of. In short, the answer to an under-powered encounter is pretty much always "complicate it."

At the same time, over-powered encounters should teach players a valuable lesson about biting off more than they can chew. Players should probably learn that the best fighting is no fighting



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REPLY +1



Doug Kovacs +1

Got it. Makes sense. My experiences are vastly different than yours.

Apr 6,
2015

REPLY +1



Frank Turfler

I may be out of line here, it wouldn't be the first time, but has anyone looked at the way Dungeon World handles adventures? Since its a primarily story driven system that places a good amount of emphasis on player agency and often stresses that even the GM may not know what's around the next corner, I find there is a lot to be gleaned from it.

Apr 6,
2015

Most of the adventure prep relies on short descriptions and tags with some notes for more concrete aspects.

REPLY +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +1

Possible outcomes: Nope. I am not exaggerating when I say that most of what I do comes directly from what my players tell me, interpreting that and making them deal with the outcomes of their decisions.

Apr 6,
2015

I agree with you on Yoon-Suin. It makes far more sense to me to say "this place is like this" than to detail every bit of it. Understanding your "like this" aesthetic is really important, though. I don't think you need to know every fact about a place if you know what things are like, because when you're left with the question "what's next?" you already know what sort of idiom you're working in.

Here's an example. My Iron Coast game has been focusing on an area called the Orphaned Baronies, which are the remnants of different colonies from different lands. When they pass through one of these baronies, I may not know the names of any NPCs there, the name of any settlements or even the name of the Barony, but I'll have an idea of what the place is like. Once, it was



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...especially relevant to consider the team running in the background of the campaign (DW's Fronts). Further, it encourages DMs to ask their players for input, which is ALWAYS a good idea.

REPLY +1



Harley Stroh +2

Apr 6,
2015

Re: Pathfinder.

For context, we should recognize that running a PF or 3.x game "fairly" does require a lot of prep. Yes, improv can be done (I did for years, probably a lot of us did) but the benchmark is pretty high.

Telling someone running DCC to just make it up and telling someone running Pathfinder to just make it up are two very different statements.

Making up an effective DCC monster on the fly is a hell of a lot easier than making up an effective PF monster on the fly. Etc, etc etc.

REPLY +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +1

Apr 6,
2015

+[Harley Stroh](#) I think it's that one word, "fairly," that makes things difficult for 3.xe/PF, since it implies that the by the book way is the best or right way. This is not a flaw of your logic, but rather of the way these games are designed: to imprint upon your brain that there is a right way to do these things.

There is not.

The actual probability math behind 3.xe/PF and DCC is actually pretty much the same. I would argue that the real limitation is one of perspective here, and argue so as someone who, like you, used those systems for years as well. I think the liberation of DCC is the admonition to make it your own rather than slavishly follow the book.

Then again, you were writing to be published, so your work



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systems support more complex than chess board, but we could run an entire campaign only using a chess board, but we've also been doing this since we were eight.

Short version: Running PF for hardcore PF players demands a whole TON of prep. That's due to the system, not the judge.

[REPLY](#) +1



Adam Muszkiewicz

+[D.j. Chadwick](#) I don't understand your last statement, I need clarification. "Box names?"

Apr 6, 2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +2

+[Harley Stroh](#) has the right of stuff. I mean, really, what is a chess board but an excellent planar representation of a d64?

Apr 6, 2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Adam Muszkiewicz

I also want to thank you gents for participating in this conversation. This is so good!

Apr 6, 2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Harley Stroh +3

Fundamentally, we're just playing a game of Let's Pretend. It doesn't need to be anything more sophisticated than five kids sitting around in a circle asking and answering questions. We only use a game system we need to resolve questions that don't have immediate answers.

Apr 6, 2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +2

Keep a list of NPC names around. And personality quirks. Cross them off when you use them. Make sure you write the list yourself, so you get used to coming up with names when there's no pressure on, eventually you'll be able to do it when the pressure *is* on.

Apr 6, 2015

I think that a HUGE part of DMing is practice. The problem is you



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Don't forget to pay attention to what's working, too! When you do something that folks enjoy, write that down as well! Something that worked well once can work well again!

[REPLY](#) +1



Frank Turfler +1

Apr 6,
2015

+[Harley Stroh](#) That last bit about let's pretend reminds me of Tracy Hickman's XDM book. In it he reduced the character down to a single stat—"my stat." very tongue and cheek and very funny but true.

[REPLY](#) +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +1

Apr 6,
2015

+[D.j. Chadwick](#) Good! That's the part that's most useful for me to remember (and it's not always easy to remember), too! It's also one of the most useful things you can start doing. I have all these notes about shit I need to make for myself. I don't always even make it, but at least it gets me thinking about the sorts of things I needed but wasn't prepared for. Also, *actually write the stuff down*, don't just promise yourself you'll remember. You won't. I know I don't.

[REPLY](#) +1



Harley Stroh +1

Apr 6,
2015

These are good call outs. Each one could be a zine article.

The best games, IMO, are player driven. Let them poke their noses wherever they want, and then bite them off.

[REPLY](#) +1



Harley Stroh +1

Apr 6,
2015

But Re: Lord of the Rings. Just because the world needs to be saved, doesn't mean a judge should force the PCs to do so. Maybe they screw around in the bar instead. But then they have to deal with the repercussions of not saving the world. So we don't force them to do anything, and in a lot of ways the epic becomes more real.

Ala: Oh, shit, we could have stopped Sauron / Hitler / Vader when



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Frank Turfler +1
...or die in a TPK. 😊

Apr 6,
2015

[Translate](#)

[REPLY](#) +1



Frank Turfler +1
But hey it doesn't take very long to roll up a few dozen level zeros to try to clean up the mess. 😊

Apr 6,
2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Doug Kovacs +3
Good conversation.

Apr 6,
2015

The authority of the DM was mentioned somewhere before I got back to this.

[+D.j. Chadwick](#)

It might be helpful to remember the Dm is also the authority of the things he wants to decide... you can deputize and delegate. If you ask a player (I did this last night) what town all the villagers are from, and let the players pick the name the players become engaged in the story. No one forgets the name or feels like they are just studying your story.... and you really gave up nothing, the name of village doesn't matter. You didn't know it, now you all know it. You can use that for all kinds of things. Peoples heads are often as good as random charts. I've seen both Adam and Harley do this at table repeatedly.

[REPLY](#) +1



Harley Stroh +1
[+Adam Muszkiewicz](#) , Re: Pathfinder, "fairness."

Apr 6,
2015

Totally. There is a spectrum (which you understand) of games that support improv:

-Yes, I can improv Monopoly. But at that point it's not really Monopoly anymore.

TO

-Yes, I can improv PF, and sure, it's PF, preeeeetttty much.



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=====

Certain games make certain styles easier than others.

[REPLY](#) +1



Doug Kovacs

Apr 6,
2015

If you have Lord of the Rings Syndrome it sounds like you just need to read more. That's only the beginning of what's good. Jack Vance, Fritz Lieber for starters.

[REPLY](#) +1



Harley Stroh +2

Apr 6,
2015

Another helpful thing is really loving your genre of game. While I can run a Cyberpunk / Punjar game just with a list of names, I couldn't run a Star Wars game to save my life. I don't know the universe well enough. My names would come out weird, the races would be weird, it wouldn't feel right. Same too with Victoriana, etc.

By running a genre that you are saturated in, you alleviate a lot of the difficulties of improv. You know the tropes so well that you know all the answers already. (And when to break genre and reverse the script.)

[REPLY](#) +1



Terry Olson
/sub

Apr 6,
2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +2

Apr 6,
2015

Damnit, I just lost another awesome post. Here goes again.

+[Doug Kovacs](#) I don't think he's got LOTR syndrome but rather is trying to overcome "MY CAMPAIGN MUST BE EPIC!" syndrome. The problem with "the epic campaign" is about who it's epic *for*, because most DMs design a campaign that's going to epic for themselves, rather than for their players, and they might have built the best rollercoaster in the world, but it's still on rails, man.



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REPLY +1



Harley Stroh +2

Apr 6,
2015

Have to run to transform into my even less cool self, so a pithy exit:

Whereas Dungeon Masters are expected to know all, Judges only have to decide all.

+[Adam Muszkiewicz](#) should make it a mission to deconstruct the myth of the all-knowing GM.

REPLY +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +2

Apr 6,
2015

I'd also say that another useful tool is to ask your players questions about what they *intend*. "What are you trying to accomplish?" is one I ask a lot. I have a player (cough +[Mark Donkers](#) cough) who will ask me very detailed questions as if their meaning should be transparent but aren't always. I don't think it's that Mark is trying to trick me into saying more than I intend, I just want to understand what the *intent* of his question or planned action is. More often than not, I'm happy to oblige so long as I actually understand what it is he's trying to accomplish.

REPLY +1



Harley Stroh +2

Apr 6,
2015

No shame in finding Conan, "late." I envy you for all the cool reading you have ahead.

REPLY +1



Adam Muszkiewicz +3
+[Harley Stroh](#) FTW again!

Apr 6,
2015

However, I will not deconstruct that myth, but rather explain why you don't want it to be true.

To know all is to state that there can be nothing new, that the universe is an encapsulated whole that is finite and predictable, of perfect order and harmony.



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**Ron** +2Apr 6,
2015

I think one thing that has changed the game for me is when I realized I could play it along with the group and not just "run" it. To +[Harley Stroh](#)'s point, when I stopped trying to be what I thought a Dungeon Master should be and instead put on the Referee hat, the games became much more enjoyable and interactive for all.

[REPLY](#) +1**Tim Mulry**
SubApr 6,
2015[REPLY](#) +1**Harley Stroh** +3Apr 6,
2015

Earlier this week +[Doug Kovacs](#) ran a game for "new" DCC judges looking to improve their game. I wonder if the inverse couldn't work: 4 experienced judges playing in a new judge's game. Essentially, to steal the metaphor from +[Adam Muszkiewicz](#) , stacking the show with a friendly audience.

The grogs could afford to be patient, and wouldn't be relying on the new judge to explain rules to them or hold their hands. And the new judge could likely get a taste of what proactive players can do when they are off the rails.

To the point, I bet +[Doug Kovacs](#) and +[Adam Muszkiewicz](#) would totally play in a +[D.j. Chadwick](#) game, making a safe venue for a judge to wing it.

[REPLY](#) +1**Adam Muszkiewicz** +1Apr 6,
2015

I would totally be down with that.

[REPLY](#) +1**Jim Skach** +2Apr 7,
2015

+[D.j. Chadwick](#)...thou art a fool if thou doth miss this opportunity. People, including myself, would kill for such a chance. Forget about the rules knowledge and forget whatever you learned



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Joe Kimball
/subbing

Apr 2, 2015

[REPLY](#) +1



Larry Hamilton +1

Apr 8, 2015

Awesome discussion! I just now had a chance to read through all the comments.

Having played in two sessions of [+Adam](#)

[Muszkiewicz](#)'s Kickassistan at Marmalade Dog and having him play in my first effort at running a game at the same convention was a very powerful experience for me.

After we got done, I asked for input from all those who had ran games at cons before and got a lot of very helpful advice.

For me, I put so much time into prep to run an off the shelf module, that I wish I had put in some work on fleshing out a new area of my campaign.

If I develop something, I know it inside and out and can wing it all day long. For a pre-existing module or campaign, I have to spend a lot of time to digest it and get the feel for it, so that I am comfortable running it.

I may do a good job of running it, but my comfort level with doing so is not the same as something I brewed myself. I may be the only one aware of my discomfort. There is always discomfort with new experiences and figuring things out. As long as the discomfort of the DM does not become a distraction to the players it isn't a problem.

In my own campaign, only something that takes advanced preparation can stop me. Even some things that would be smoother with advanced preparation, I find that I can wing it and my players have fun and come back for more.

My players have plans that have nothing to do with any plots or background. They know there is something going on that connects a lot of the humanoids and undead they have run across, but their main goal is money and power for its own sake. They are doing the good deeds to get in good with the powers that be, not for the sake of doing good. The result is somewhat the same, but the motivation for action is different. I have been totally surprised by players' choices and actions, as I would not do what they did knowing what they know (but I have been playing for 37 years).

However, my fun as DM is watching how the players interact with



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**Jen Brinkman**

Okay, +[Adam Muszkiewicz](#), you should know that after reading through all of this (and the subsequent blog post), my preparation for tomorrow's sandbox game is summed up in 6 paltry lines of notes to myself. I'm least comfortable without a script, but screw it -- I'll let them dig their own holes and have a few things on deck depending on the direction they take.

Apr
11,
2015

Bob's response to this: "Well, we're fucked."

[REPLY](#) +1**Doug Kovacs** +1

Let the players fuck them selves. When you have a ringer like Bob in the group it could be even better.....

Apr
11,
2015[REPLY](#) +1

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