

How to Run Games



By Mark O'Bannon

Running *Interactive Storytelling Games*

are not really too difficult, as long as you approach every situation with common sense. These types of games are one part acting, one part interaction and one part wargame.

Don't worry too much. The players will do a lot of the work for you. Just place them in the setting and let them go. They will start role playing it and this will make it easier for you. Then throw something at them and see what they do with it. What you mainly need to do as a *Storyteller* is to provide the story goal.

Three Silent Questions

Players will all ask three silent questions during a game, which every story has to answer:

1. So what?

[Motivation]

The players have to care about the story. This is best accomplished by motivating them properly.

2. Oh Yeah?

[Believability]

The players have to believe in the story. It has to make sense. So your presentation must be logical.

3. Huh?

[Clarity]

The story must be clear. If the players don't understand what to do, then nothing will happen.

Telling a Story

As a *Storyteller*, your job is to immerse the players into the world of the adventure. This is done with a combination of techniques.

Research

Knowing the setting where your story takes place will help tremendously. So an understanding of the world and the characters involved in the story is essential in running the game.

Knowing what makes the characters tick will help you keep them motivated, while an understanding of the setting will allow you to come up with spontaneous events and characters that will be consistent with the time and locations in the story.

Presentation

People assimilate information differently. Some are visual, others are kinesthetic, and still others are primarily auditory. So when you run games, you need to use all three of these modes of communication.

Stories need to be designed with the presentation method in mind. If a writer is creating a play, then audio methods should be focused on. If it is a written work, you can concentrate on the kinesthetic

aspects of the story since you will be able to get into the character's feelings more because you can communicate his thoughts. If the story is for a movie, then visual techniques are the main focus.

In an *Interactive Storytelling Game*, the primary method of presentation will be auditory like in a play or radio drama. However, the other methods of presentation can still be used, such as visual aids like maps and miniatures, and kinesthetic aids like intense role playing.

Acting

You will need to become an actor, performing every character that is encountered in the story (the players will perform their characters of course).

Try to avoid summarizing the events of the story, because the players will tend to lose focus.

Point of View

Point of View refers to how the story is perceived by the audience.

Players should use **first person** point of view in scenes (ie: I go). This will bring an immediacy to the scene that is more difficult when using third person.

Third person (ie: he goes, she goes) should be



used less often in a game because it places a barrier between the player and the story.

Some *Storytellers* refer to this by telling the players, “Everything you say, your characters say.”

The idea of this is to keep the players thinking in first person because it will bring them into the scene. When the player wants to switch out of the first person, they should raise their hand and say, “Out of character.” This is normally done to ask a question.

The *Storyteller* will use a combination of the **second person** (ie: you go) when describing a scene and the **first person** when he is performing a character in the scene.

POV also refers to how the story is being told. Typically in a novel, a writer using first person will stick to a single character throughout the entire story. Everything will be immediate and more dramatic.

Writers will often use third person in order to tell more complex storyline and will often switch the POV between several characters.

In most games, you will need to switch the viewpoint between the different players, but you should stick to acting out the scenes in first person, instead of dropping into third person.

Often a *Storyteller* will use the technique of

switching the POV to tell several stories at the same time, integrating them all into a larger story.

The *Storyteller* should decide how many parallel stories to tell at once, whether it is one story for every player or one story for several groups of players.

However, try to keep everyone centered on a single story goal, with a few other minor goals told in parallel storylines if desired.

Scene vs. Summary Narrative

When the *Storyteller* is running a game, he will present what happens in the scene by describing what happens and then performing the characters in the scene. While the *scene* is the basic building block of a story, there is another technique called a *summary narrative*.

Summary Narrative is used to quickly move between scenes and is told in the third person. It can be used to give the characters a break in the action, allowing everyone to catch their breath and can also be used to cover lots of ground quickly.

Choosing which to use in any given situation will depend on what the *Storyteller* is trying to accomplish. While a summary narrative is less dramatic, it is faster.



Transitions, Cuts & Exposition

Transitions between scenes can be done in several ways, but one good technique is to *cut* right in the middle of action or when the tension is at its highest.

Exposition is the necessary background information that is needed in order to tell a story. Be careful when presenting exposition, as it has a tendency to put the audience to sleep. The best way to handle exposition is to give it to the players in small bites when it is needed, integrating it into the story action.

Allowing Characters to Live

Never try to restrain the players too much. Allow them to play out their characters somewhat so they can “get into character.”

Always give the players the feeling that they have a complete freedom of action, but keep them motivated by making the goal of the story personal.

Character Needs & Flaws

Good characters will have an inner need and a main character flaw that interferes with them achieving their need. This will create internal conflict.

Make a list of all the character’s needs and flaws and try to integrate moments in the story where

they need to make a decision. This will allow the character to overcome a character flaw and achieve an inner need. *This change in a character is what makes a story interesting to an audience.*

Running Combat

The best way to run combat is to keep it moving, not spending too much time on one player. Go around the table, or let the players take their actions in the initiative order rolled for at the start of each round.

Never forget that this is a role playing game and not just a wargame. Run the villains like they are real people, and spend a few seconds role playing what their actions are. Never have them behave in the most efficient manner, because in real life, people get scared, are nervous, and make mistakes. So run the villains this way. This will allow you to run combats with a larger number of opponents where the players still win.

Learn to pull your punches, substituting interesting or humorous performances of the combatants.

One of your goals while running combat is to scare the players. They need to feel the conflict that the situation has created.

Ten Rules for Running Games

1. Tell a Story.

Use storytelling techniques. You will have heroes, a main villain, an adventure goal, a list of scenes, and a list of settings with maps. Finish the story in one to four game sessions.

2. Be fair.

If a player doesn't agree with you, perhaps you are wrong. Listen to the player's comments and then make a decision. If the player is still unhappy, then give them a roll off. Whoever wins a die roll will get his way.

3. Apply common sense to the situation & encourage the players to think this way.

For instance, people don't walk around town in their armour. How many people in the military walk around the city with their helmets and weapons?

Be prepared to run an encounter when the players are not "ready" (that is, when they have no armour, weapons, etc.). Never punish them for it, and always give them a fair chance to win.

Have the characters do normal things like going shopping, etc. Each scene doesn't have to take place in a combat situation.

4. Give every player a chance to play.

Don't encourage shouting matches where the only players that get to participate are the ones that shout for the most attention. Go around the table and spend 5 minutes on each player. Point at a player and say, "What do you do?" Don't allow anyone else to interrupt while you're interacting with a single person.

5. If they want to split up, let them!

You can run several different scenes at once, each with a separate player in a separate place. There is no reason to keep them from separating. If they are all in one place (scene) like a castle, and if they split up and cause trouble, then it may affect the other people in different areas. Allowing players to split up encourages storytelling. If the characters stick together all the time, it isn't too realistic.

However, this has to be handled carefully because you could easily spend large amounts of time on only a few players, while the rest have to wait around for something to happen.



6. Always use miniatures and maps drawn out on a playing surface.

Do this with each scene. This will avoid arguments and will help ground the scene in reality. Also, because of the complexities of combat, you will need to mark things on the map next to the miniatures, such as initiative rolls and wounds sustained.

7. Never limit yourself to only one scene or encounter during one game session.

You should try to run one plot point in a separate scene every hour or two. Try not to allow combat to take up the entire game session. To tell a good story, you will need to have at least three scenes, but it is preferable to have more. Concentrate on running at least three scenes every game session. On the other hand, do not drag out a story by writing too many scenes. A dozen scenes is a good limit.

8. Use minor characters to keep players grounded.

Minor characters can make comments to the players when they are doing something stupid or out of the ordinary. For example; “Why are you arguing with the sheriff?” Try to think how their actions would

look like in real life if they did this.

9. Only kill characters when they are in pursuit of a main goal.

Random deaths with no point leave a bad taste in a player's mouth. If a character is going to die, it is better if it occurs while he is doing something heroic, such as defeating the main villain. Ideally, every death should be in the pursuit of furthering the story goal.

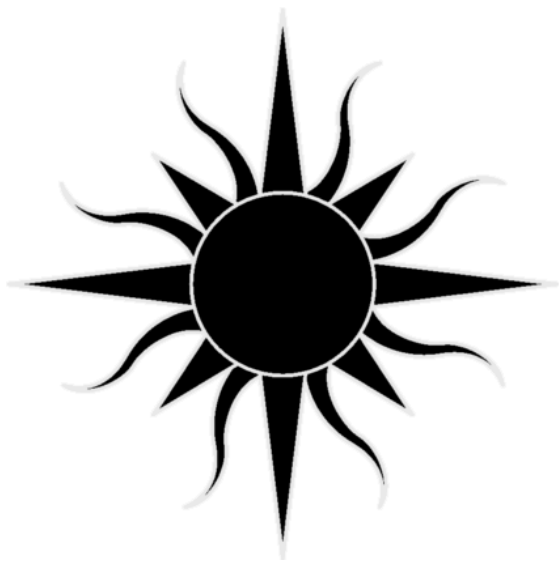
10. Keep the number of players down to six or less.

When there are more players, each of them will have less time to play. For instance, if there are 6 players and the *Storyteller* spends 5 minutes with each one in turn, then every player will have to wait around for 25 minutes before he can play.

With a large number of players, you will have to have more action (combat) to keep all of them interested. This is because you don't have to spend much time on each player when running combat.

Smaller numbers allow you to concentrate more on role playing. If you have too many people that want to play, start a separate game.

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