



THEATRE STYLE LIVE ROLEPLAYING EVENTS

Gordon Olmstead-Dean

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*Please understand that all of this information is provided with the clear understanding that it may or may not be useful to you. Theatre Style LARP is a field too new to have "grand old men" or even real "experts." We are all learning and growing and what is true at this point may not be true a year from now. The information here is my opinion - you may or may not choose to make use of it. **No-one** but you can decide how to run your event!*

I. Explanation and Introduction

What this is about

This text is a "how to" guide for writing theatre-style live roleplaying events. If you aren't sure if you run that kind of live roleplaying event, you may want to read ahead anyway. "Theatre style" is a seldom used "meta term" which embraces most



live roleplaying that doesn't focus primarily on combat with padded weapons. And even if your events do focus on combat with padded weapons, you may find some useful tips here - many facts about facilities, food, and decision making are the same for all types of live roleplay.

There is a default assumption at some points in this guide that we are dealing primarily with overnight events. The fact is most theatre-style events aren't overnight - most run for 4-6 hours, and many occur at venues where the event producers aren't responsible for anything except delivering and running the event.

But full length standalone events are the most complex live roleplaying events. One could consider them the "Mount Everest" of the genre. And because they are the most complicated, we'll focus on them. If the event you end up running has a simpler structure, you'll find that all the basic rules still apply.

Introduction

Since 1986, I have been producing various types of Theatre-Style Live Roleplaying games. In late 1998, I began to realize that an awful lot of local GMs starting their own writing projects were asking me for advice or suggestions. I also became painfully aware that what I could tell them over a two hour dinner was not going to be of much help to them. There was no "secret" to running games that people enjoyed, and any attempt to condense one resulted in a set of platitudes that were transparent to the rawest of writers.

I also became aware of a big discrepancy in Theatre Style production. Experienced Theatre Style GMs - writers with several successful events under their belts - would make the same critical mistakes in runtime again and again. Mistakes I could see my way around.

Rather than pat myself on the back for being a smart guy, I decided to try to figure out why. Most of these people were as bright as I was, and some were smarter and more talented. I looked at the producers who weren't making mistakes, and I found a common denominator.

Experience.

By 1996, I had spent over 800 hours actually on the floor running Theatre Style games. While that's just a couple of years of work in the Live Combat world, it is almost unheard of in Theatre Style gaming. The reason is simple - writing and pre-



production consume a very large amount of time in comparison to actual runtime in Theatre Style games.

Thus the problem. When it came to actually running games, nobody was an expert, but I was at least a journeyman. Talented and experienced people who were excellent writers were consistently botching elements of production and floor work, because they didn't have adequate experience. Because the only way to get experience was to spend months writing a game, and you could spend enough time writing to be an expert before you had spent your first hundred hours actually running events.

That's the focus of this *how to* work. Most work in the past has focused on "how to write, how to create plots, etc." The fact is, you probably have at least a fair idea of that, or you wouldn't be reading this. What you want to know are all the other things - the things that you *don't* want to learn the hard way in the last two weeks of production, or as you try to spin control your event onsite.

II. Pre-Planning

Overall Planning

Decide what the driving factors of your decision to run are. Maybe you have found out you have a site, and you just want to put on a event there. Maybe you have a concept to run a event for a certain group of people "I'm going to bid a event for the Cthulhu campaign run by George." Maybe you have an establish author group, and you know the *group* is going to run something, but you don't know what. Usually one or two items are set in stone, and all the others start out mutable. This may seem elementary, but it is a good thing not to be confused about. Determine if there is a hurdle to your basic plans. For example - does running the event depend on Joe not going to school, or on the Days Hotel Bayonne being available on the 22nd of August. Check any basic assumptions.

These are some common driving factors:

Group: Joe and I are going to run a event

Site: We found a great bed and breakfast, and we're going to run a event there

Audience: We are going to run a event for the Call of Cthulhu group



Event: We are re-running "The Milquetoast Event"

Time: We need an event for the weekend of the 31st of October

Evaluate the Basic Idea

Get an idea. Determine if it is feasible. Here's a hint. It has been proven that just about any concept "would work." Basically, what you have to determine is whether or not it is within your capacity to do the concept justice, and whether it would be fun, and whether you could sell it to people. This is an extremely subjective state, and there are no hard and fast rules. Here are some useful questions to ask yourself though:

Is it a fun idea - what type of people will enjoy this concept, and why?

Are there male and female roles?

Can it be done with the number of players we could get?

How many players have we had previously?

How many players have similar sized groups, with similar resources and contacts gotten?

Does it require properties or elements we can't afford? - could we substitute?

Is it a popular subject - will it be easy to sell - are we prepared to work hard to sell it if not?

Do we know anything about it (you'd be amazed at how many groups miss this one)?

Do we need to do research - if so do we have the time and facilities (this may not mean looking up history or biography - for a media based event it might mean watching movies or reading fiction)?

If you're an established group - Are all of our writing group interested?

Is there a limited time to produce the event? (You may want to look at some of the various sources for "ready to run" events - take a look under "Re-Runs" below).



Refine the Concept

Decide on the basic parameters of the event. This is important to do early on. More staff contention comes from misunderstanding on this point than on any other. While this is a little less subjective than evaluating the idea, it is still somewhat subjective. You also need to be aware that this sort of thing will change. Here are some good things to consider

What genre is it - do we feel the same way about the genre?

What flavor of rules and mechanics do we want - simple, complex?

What systems do we see the event needing?

How GM intensive will it be?

How long will our characters be (or will there be character sheets)?

How much background material are we going to supply

Are we modeling this on the work of another group?

Has a similar event been run before - what will be the same and what will be different about ours?

Re-runs

Sit down and do a thorough re-read of the product. I've always found I'm either amazed or appalled at what I find. Sometimes you are surprised that a event that seems like it was ages ago still has fairly high quality writing that seems respectable now. Other times, you are amazed that the thing actually ran. In one case, I talked to another GM about a rather old property, and arranged to borrow a copy - reading it I found that it was only barely a event - there was less material than most four-hour events have today - yet the event was run full weekend at the time.

There are three areas where you need to examine older properties:

Writing - standards of writing have changed over the years. The oldest Theatre-Style LRPs were run sixteen years ago, and there are LRPs still being run which were written ten or twelve years ago. You need to critically evaluate the writing. What was a good full weekend character when events ran at science fiction



conventions might not keep a player busy for four hours today. Then again it might. The only real check on this is to hand some of the characters around, and see if people think they look fun to play, or would be satisfied to get them. If the answer is "no" you need to decide how to expand the event, or perhaps you need to consider if it should have a shorter run. Perhaps it might be entertaining as a four-hour event now.

Mechanics - are the rules and mechanics still usable. Many older events have combat systems or mechanics that would seem childish or out of place today. Others embody timeless elegance. Consider if the mechanical system for the event will stay the same. Consider *every system*. For example, don't write the "forged currency" system out, but leave in the forger character who depends on it for a plot. Were there problems when the event originally ran. If so, can they be fixed - what problem will the fixes cause. Would a combat or simulation system playtest be a good idea? Did some system in the event depend on something that is no longer available (a conference room with a big table, a huge ballroom, a particular type of land at a campsite). A common problem with four hour events is that the event revolved around some property (a battle map, a deck of cards) which was difficult to produce, or is irreproducible, and the event needs to be dramatically restructured to work without the property.

Staging - how was the event originally staged. In particular, were any of the more impressive elements of the staging a function of the site, and are they reproducible - for example was a big scene in the event staged at a swimming pool which is now unavailable. Was cast used, and should cast be added? What level of special effects are required? Take a good overall look at how the event was put on before. Currently, nothing is changing faster than the level of staging considered appropriate for a live event.

Talk to others - if you're a novice, or even if you're not, talk over your basic plan with someone you respect. Don't intentionally pick a "devil's advocate" who enjoys tearing ideas apart - pick someone experienced who you can trust to tell you what problems or difficulties they see. But encourage honesty - if there is a big problem, this is the time to find out about it - not once production has started.

Standard Properties - often times you will be in the position of having been asked to run "something....anything" at a specific time and place. Don't despair, even on short notice. Instead make use of resources like the [ILF GameBank](#) and the [Shakespeare Eclectic Science Fiction Interactive Theatre Scenario Archives](#)



III. Planning

Scale and Scope of Event

The Scale and Scope of your event will determine a lot about your planning process. In general, what you are determining here is how big you want your event to be, in several dimensions:

How many roles need to be played

What kind of site is needed (indoor, outdoor, private, hotel, Intercon)

How long will the event be (4 hours, a half day, a day, two days, full weekend)

What level of props and staging will be used (minimal, very realistic)

Staff

The other big stumbling block is the staffing decision. When people work together there is the potential for problems. Some questions need to be settled early

Who is in charge? - is there a boss, who runs the group as an autocrat. Is there a "core team" that runs the event, with assistants, democratic among themselves, but autocratic regarding the assistants?

At this point, I'll offer some advice. I think the best model for running a event is a business. The core group responsible for the backbone of production should function as a committee, making recommendations, with one person as the chosen boss. Don't choose the weak willed guy because he won't argue with anyone, but don't choose the strongest willed guy, unless you agree he's the best choice, and everyone agrees to that. I've seen events run very well as a democratic committee, but that requires a certain kind of trust and chemistry that is uncommon. Beware of "false democracy" where one person controls a majority of what is theoretically a committee, and thus effectively acts as boss, without having to take the responsibility. The boss should be the boss.

In bigger events, divide up responsibilities, and work under the assumption that while the leader has the ability to make final decisions, GMs are considered to be competent in their specialty, and won't be overridden - the tabletop GM makes final

decisions concerning the wargame, the bank GM makes final decisions concerning money...and so on.

Who's writing - assuming some elements of the event are written, who are the writers. Will they also be the lead GMs? In some cases, the writers may be 2000 miles away. It is important to establish who is a writer, and what their function will be at runtime. It is less and less the case that writers are automatically the lead GMs.

Who is the runtime staff - You need to determine how many staff you need for the event, and see to it that you have enough. A good basic rule at this time appears to be to have one staff for every 5-9 players, and one staff person for every major system. Also, if you have cast, then by all means have a staff person in charge of cast. Remember staff are not only GMs - do you need a properties manager? Or a cook with kitchen staff? Do you need a musician? A dedicated special effects person?

Cast/Technical staff - Most events can benefit from "Cast." In concept cast differs from NPCs. The concept of an NPC is that he or she is a GM driven character. Cast are more than this. They are a pool of players to serve as extras, not only playing every type of person that the GMs wouldn't want to hand out as full characters, but also filling in as stagehands to move props, food service staff to work refreshments and handle food, cleanup crew to tidy up the event space between and during playing sessions.

For marketing purposes I often make a distinction between "Cast" and "technical staff." Cast play NPC roles, and while they might not have as much time as a player, they generally enjoy themselves. Technical crew gets the ugly jobs - they dress in uncomfortable suits to play monsters, run special effects behind the scenes, go to the store for ice, help in the kitchen, and any other job I dream up. In some events it is not practical to make this distinction, in others it is all important.

Venue

The Venue is the "where" of the event...many people use the term "site" instead. The site should fit the event if possible. In some cases, you won't have a choice about the site - at Intercon for example, you'll be running in space assigned by the Convention. If you can't get a venue to fit the event, you'd best write an event to fit the venue.

There are many different types of venue. Venues for four, or eight hour events do not need to have lodging space - venues for overnight events do. We'll break the two categories apart:

General Questions - Is the space:

Configured well for the event - a horror event meant to be run in a big multi-room lodge may fall flat in a hotel function room, where monsters can't "jump out."

Close to food if you aren't feeding the players

Allows food if you're feeding the players. As a hint - most hotels firmly say "no food" that they don't cater. In practice, what they mean is "no outside catering" - cheap snacks like punch and cookies aren't a problem. They also don't want food trash. You may need to be especially careful. You can also serve food out of a "con suite" that is a private room.

Noise level acceptable - is a private site in a place where you will make too much noise?

Can you afford the site?

Campgrounds

Is there parking close to the campsites - if not are your players prepared and able to hike in?

Are there acceptable toilet facilities. Portable toilets can be rented, but they are expensive. A small toilet can be set up using a dome tent, and a portable camping toilet, with a chemical flush system - these run under a hundred dollars at camping stores. However, someone is going to have to empty it...

Is there potable water...are you *sure!*

Are the players prepared to be outdoors - make up a checklist of all the necessities. If you aren't sure, consult someone who was a Boy or Girl Scout, and has camping experience - sunscreen, insect repellent in summer, warm clothing in winter, and rain gear are all basics. If your group camps regularly, you probably already have a list of this sort.

Is there a plan for getting emergency help - do you know where the nearest phone is - does someone know first aid?

Lodges

Fundamentally a "Lodge" is a house, or a camp building which has been modified for use. In many cases it's an older building. These come with their own set of problems.

Is the building air conditioned? Remember when planning a event in February that August is a *hot* month. You don't have to have air conditioning, but you do need a plan around it that involves large airy spaces, shade, water and fans.

Is the building heated - some resorts have their cheapest rates in fall or spring, but don't have a heating system, or don't have it turned on. Often they close for the winter and their last or first few weeks can be uncomfortable. Know and warn players to dress and sleep warm.

What is the plan for facilities. Some player groups share co-ed facilities no problem, others are horrified.

Is the site dusty, moldy or mildewy. Many players may have allergies, and there will be complaints. Forewarned is forearmed. Some rooms may be worse than others, and sensitive players may need special care

Is the site accessible to all your players. Some people have limited mobility. This shouldn't be a reason not to use a site, but special arrangements may need to be made, or a player may need to pass.

Is there dormitory style sleeping - this can lead to snoring complaints - players want to know in advance, and if possible arrange rooms with an eye towards compatibility.

Hotels

Approaching a hotel is a tricky business. I have found that the best policy is to be honest, but not scary. The worst approach is to dress in a three piece suit, quote optimistic figures, and lie about what it is you are doing. The second worst approach is to mention every nightmare problem in events.



We always use the term "interactive theatre" when describing what we do. We give a pretty accurate description of what that entails, however if asked for a comparison, for God's sake compare it to "murder mysteries that run at some hotels" not to "Live D&D." Most hotel managers have heard of murder mysteries and know that they draw some money without having caused massive problems for the venues that hosted them. This is what they care about.

If a hotel has a spastic problem with events (this has happened, where the hotel staff is under the influence of a religious group that is actively antagonistic towards roleplaying events), just move on to the next. Likewise if they are too worried or too suspicious, you probably don't want to use that site.

In the U.S., Hampton Inn and Days Inn have proved good chains for events. You want to pick a hotel in the range where you can run a small event and be a reasonable part of their business.

Here's the math. In a 140 room Days Hotel, where you have reserved three out of five function rooms and have forty hotel rooms, you are 28% of their weekend business and you are their major weekend function. They will tolerate some shennanigans - they probably have a very small bar, or none at all, so they aren't upset that you aren't drinking their liquor.

In a 300 room Hilton, you are only 13% of the weekend business, and you probably have less than half the function space. The Hotel also probably relies on an attached nightclub or bar for its revenue - destructive Fraternal Organizations may hurt the hotel more than you do physically, but they run up \$1000 bar tabs that compensate. You don't.

In a 600 or 1200 room hotel, they barely care that you exist...the problem gets bigger.

The lesson here is to aim for a hotel where you can book out most of the available space, and where you make an impact on their business. This doesn't insure good treatment, but it may help. Also aim for a chain that offers midrange prices. Costlier sites are more worried about whether or not you may be bringing down the tone of the place by existing, and they're more suspicious of things they don't understand. They also may have a security staff. A typical Hampton or Days Inn has one night porter, and one or two night clerks. The clerks don't care about anything but the desk, and the porter/maintenance man has plenty to do on his own. They won't spend a lot of energy trying to see if you are doing something wrong. Only if you cause trouble will it come to their attention. A typical high-end hotel



has a security person on duty. They are being paid to be nosy and neutralize threats. They'd rather annoy you, and have you be unhappy, than have something happen they didn't expect, and have their boss be happy. The secret to job success for them is to neutralize a threat before it starts, and that means you. Paradoxically, I've noted that Northern hotels that employ a uniformed security officer give less trouble than hotels that employ a plainclothes security manager. A uniformed guy is usually a "grunt" who is often a tired cop, moonlighting and anxious to go off shift. A security manager is a man looking for a better job in the company, and out to prove himself. You figure out which one is more of a threat.

Hotels near airports are often very sensitive about noise and their lobbies. A lot of their repeat business isn't organizations - it's airline staff and business travelers, who are sensitive about noise complaints. Keeping a jet pilot awake at night is a bad problem. Airport hotels also tend to have bars, even if they are a chain that normally wouldn't.

There is no universal guide to a hotel contract. There are a few pointers.

Don't try to write your own contract. The hotel has a standard contract. Sign it. The hotel can probably screw you even if they sign your own contract, and that makes them nervous. Many hotels won't even consider a contract other than their standard.

Most hotels seem to try to "get away" with something early on. It's my opinion they are sizing you up to see how attentive you are. Be gentle but firm. Needless to say, always keep photocopies of everything. On the flip side, most hotels aren't out to "screw you."

Hotels cannot build room blocks for you. Front desk and Sales staff are never that well coordinated. Invariably, even if you have an ironclad contract saying all of your rooms are together on the same floor, they won't be. Accept this. If it is really important, you might get the rooms you want by actually booking the floor in advance with a credit card. Even this sometimes fails. Sales managers have been known to promise this - if you believe they'll deliver, you're naïve.

There are three systems to hotel pricing:

- Pay for space - you can have as few or as many hotel rooms as you like, but you pay for the function space
- Rooms buy space - as you get various numbers of "room nights" your space costs get cheaper and cheaper
- Catering buys space - as you buy catering, your function space gets cheaper.



Friday Saturday Sunday

In hotel parlance, these are three days for function space. If you are in your room from 2 Friday to 2 Sunday, you are charged for two nights. However, from the hotel perspective, you owe three days on the function room for the same time period. Understand this, and if you can't handle it, make it clear you need an exception. Some hotels will do it the other way, but you have to ask.

Function Rooms

The big pitched battle is almost always over food. If you want to serve your own food and refreshments, sign with a hotel that doesn't have its own restaurant. If the hotel owns the restaurant, then they make revenue off its catering. The better the hotel, and the restaurant, the more of a stink they are likely to make and the closer they'll watch if snacks "wander" into the function space.

Make sure the function rooms are big enough and try to check the air conditioning - rooms get hot with sixty people in them. Try and envision your event in the space. We'll talk more about function rooms under *space allocation*.

Food

More and more events are expected to serve some food. In the early nineties, a event wasn't expected to serve any real food or drink. A cocktail party might well not have any cocktails. Over five years food and drink began to creep into events. First, there were drinks served at "bars" - then as time went on snacks came out to supplement the drinks. Then some more substantial items began to supplement the snacks. Even four-hour events are often expected to serve drinks and snacks.

One really big influence was the Intercon "Con-Suite." Intercon established that players did better and maintained higher energy levels if they were able to eat and drink a fair amount at the actual event site.

Food service is expensive. It tacks a fair chunk onto the price of a event. If you are doing snacks and drinks for a full weekend event, your cost for 50 players will be about \$250*. Double that for 100 players.

Given this, why should you do food service?

Expectations - whether you like it or not, other events are doing it. If you are charging \$55 for a full weekend, and other similarly-priced events are serving food,

you better either server food, or have some other dramatic advantage that makes the players feel you are giving them their money's worth

Player attitude and energy level - the single most important factor in how well your event will be received and how well it will go is the attitude the players come into it with. Food and drink are a *big* way to give the players a good attitude. More than that, players in dry hotel space (all hotels are dry) or out in the sun, tend to become dehydrated very quickly. If they can get their fluids replaced, and keep stoked on carbohydrates, their energy level stays up. If not, they may become irritable and lethargic - and an irritable and lethargic player is someone who can do damage to your event.

Pacing - a dinner break will stop your event dead for two hours. The time may be shorter if there are restaurants nearby, but remember that some players, possibly critical ones, are finicky, and might well be unwilling to eat in a nearby food court, driving some distance to another type of restaurant instead.

The only worse thing than no dinner break is an unscheduled dinner break. When everyone knows that the event shuts down at 5pm for dinner, the majority of your players will take about an hour and a half to gather their friends, change clothes, go to dinner, change clothes again, and come back. While some players will blithely go out to dinner costumed as Superman, some feel the need to change into "street clothes" even when what they are wearing is almost indistinguishable from normal clothing, or is formal wear that would appear eccentric, but perfectly acceptable, at any restaurant. Players will take time to gather into groups, and the bigger the group, the longer it will take for them to get served. Don't count on having critical event events within two hours of a scheduled "meal break"

If you don't schedule a meal break, then at about 5pm, your players will start to wander off to dinner. At about 6pm, some others players will notice that there is "almost nobody" left playing, and will decide this must be dinnertime. By the time they get out, your first wave of players will be back.

This could possibly work well in some scenarios where you want a constant low level of activity, but more likely it will result in three hours of frustration and delay. About the only good reason to have an "unscheduled" meal break is if you don't think the event you're running is particularly good, or has enough plot in it, and you want to slow down the event so the players don't burn plot too quickly.

Most players don't get up and get gaming until 10am, and many events don't even start until 10am. If no breaks are scheduled, players will be out to lunch from 12-2, and at dinner from 6-9. This means that a "day" of gaming is only about 9 hours.

What Meals to Serve

Some events need to serve all their players meals, some need only to serve snacks. A event at a hunting lodge might serve six meals, while a event run in a hotel adjoining a food court might only serve snacks.

Probably the most critical meal for players in a full weekend scenario is Breakfast Saturday morning, followed by Dinner Saturday night. Many events neglect Breakfast. A good deal is to run your event in a hotel that serves breakfast, like the Hampton Chain, or some Days Hotels. If you can't do that, at least put coffee and donuts (or some other appropriate food) out. Players will often neglect breakfast, and the fact is that will make most players lethargic and cranky all day.

Dinner is also critical. A handful of players never realize they need to eat, and find themselves tired, and worn out early Saturday evening. Some may keep going, but they become irritable, and a likely source of trouble. They may also remember the event less fondly.

If you have a choice of meals to cater, make it dinner Saturday night.

The Way to Players Hearts is through their Stomach

Good food can cover for a lame or dull event. This is especially true at evening events where catering and party atmosphere may be almost as much the focus of the evening as the event itself. "At least they fed us well" is not the worst thing someone could say about your event. In the best of circumstances organized and catered meals allow play to continue with minimum disruption, and enhance the mood and atmosphere.

What to Serve

There is no solid guide to what to serve at events. The Intercon conventions have established a few truths in their con suite:

Have some food that can make a meal. Even if you aren't officially serving lunch, a player may be either too busy to go out, or too poor to afford food. A big jar of



peanut butter and jelly doesn't break any event's budget, and will keep a player going.

You can save *huge* amounts of money by shopping for your events at one of the major warehouse chains- Costco, BJ's, Sam's, etc. These clubs charge about \$25 for a one year membership, which you will make back the first time you run an event. One of the biggest savings is on cups. Players go through cups like Sherman went through Georgia - even a small event needs 150 or more at a minimum. Plates, napkins, and plastic knives and forks all cost a fraction of supermarket prices - and one purchase may last through several events. Other supplies and food are also more economical purchased in bulk quantities.

Soda is the one thing I never skimp on. If you put out 8 ounce cups (or God forbid four ounce cups), and generic soda, do not fool yourself into thinking people don't notice that you are a cheap bastard. About 90% of Americans drink Coca-Cola or Pepsi products by choice. If you don't have their brand - they notice.

Many organizers use small cups and grocery store brands to cut back on consumption. This is just plain stupid. Serving people something that they don't like is worse than serving them nothing at all. It may be true that "if they're desperate enough they'll drink it," but they will notice, and it will leave them with the feeling that the event was "cheap." In most cities, the major grocery chains discount both Coke and Pepsi products on a regular basis, frequently to rates as low as 77cents (against 69 as an average for store brands). Chains like Wal-Mart carry Coke and Pepsi for 99 cents. Eight dollars of savings on twenty bottles is not worth annoying eight in ten players. The breakdown is about 70 Coke/Pepsi 40 Diet 40 Other (Mostly Sprite or 7up with a few bottles of Root Beer, Orange, or Ginger Ale) - Make sure to have a few diet sodas that do not have caffeine - some players can't have either.

Intercon stocks about 150 two liter bottles of name brand soda for 150 attendees for two days. Thirsty players will easily consume that much. For a 50-60 player event, I would usually purchase 40-60 bottles of soda, using a similar breakdown to that above. If the majority of players are under 25, decrease the amount of diet soda. If the majority are over 25, increase the amount of diet soda.

Have something non-carbonated - this can be tricky since non-carbonated drinks tend to be luxury items that are sold at a real premium. Icewater may be the best bet, and if you really want to cut down on soda consumption, serve good sodas and icewater. Players will drink icewater to quench thirst, and switch to soda only for taste, and to recaffeinate.



It is possible that drinking non-carbonated beverages - primarily fruit juices, is an emerging trend among college students graduating after 1996. This corresponds to marketing information gathered by the major retailers who have introduced lines such as Fruitopia, and by the targeting of advertising by the Snapple company.

Use 12 or preferably 16 ounce cups. Since the major reason for waste is players forgetting which cup belonged to them, get a "Sharpie" brand indelible marker, and secure it (meaning tie a string to it) where cups are distributed. Most players will be amused enough at writing character names, or symbols on their cup that they will label it. The big advantage to 16 ounce cups (other than not having people snicker and call you a "tightwad" when you put them out) is that they hold enough soda that players can take it with them. This cuts down on traffic in your food service area.

We'll get to space allocation later, but here's a tip not to forget. **Serve drinks where everyone can reach them.** I've been in a situation where GMs served drinks out of a bathroom that could only be accessed by going around the line for another food service area, squeezing by a corner where people congregated to talk, and going down a narrow hallway, where two people had to turn to pass each other. They told me I'd overestimated the amount of soda the people in their event would drink. I hadn't. The fact that their consumption was so low was because no one could get to the sodas to pour them.

Alcohol

Discussion of Alcohol at events always elicits an amazing amount of unwarranted chaff. Four years ago the Internet FAQ for Live Action events said that "alcohol was never served." The influence of the "just say no" generation seems to be a clump of folks who honestly believe that "drinking and [name your hobby here]" don't mix.

On the other hand, we have the British, who whether playing live-combat or theatre style events are capable of putting away quantities of alcohol that most of us would term "prodigious" without batting an eye.

Alcohol at events certainly isn't a problem. I've served some alcohol at at least twenty events, and never had a problem. The few problems with alcohol at Intercon have sprung from after-hours drinking at private parties, not from drinking at events.



Obviously there are a few considerations. If you have minors playing, you need to have control over your alcohol service, so that minors don't get served. On the entirely pragmatic level this usually isn't an issue - minors are usually either nineteen year olds who can easily get a friend to get them a drink if they want it, or twelve year olds with parents accompanying who aren't going to try to get a drink. If you have a very large number of minors, that might well be a good reason not to serve alcohol at all.

I've never seen a player drink themselves sick, or behave particularly badly because of alcohol. For most people it's an inhibition reducer, and that's a fine thing to have when you are playing a event. As anyone who has ever roleplayed knows, the problem is not that people might "get too into their roles and become their character" or any other such tripe. The problem is that most people aren't actors, and that conveying *any* sense of their character is hard work.

The flip side is that alcohol is a dehydrant and a depressant. The first means you better have plenty of water and other beverages available. The second means it may take the edge off a tired player's energy level. In general, in all the circumstances I've seen, players drink lightly and responsibly.

Obviously it's safer to serve alcohol to people you know than strangers. If you're running an open event with alcohol, then designate someone as bouncer. I've never had to bounce anyone from a party, but when running the "Second Circle of Hell" open events, we have had to lean on players (though usually just because they were rude and stupid, not because they were drunk.) Still, it's best not to be caught unprepared - make sure you have someone tough enough to handle trouble quickly and efficiently should it arise.

Caffeine

The final thing to remember when you are thinking about beverage service is caffeine. The fact is that a good number of LRPers are caffeine addicts, whether they think of themselves that way or not. Not getting their regular afternoon soda may be the source of a sudden crash in energy level that a player doesn't understand. Make sure you have caffeine available, or you may watch some of your most experienced players suddenly fizzle for no readily apparent reason.

Staff

In the old days, there were GMs (who sometimes called themselves "Gods" in order to make it clear who was important and who was not), and there were Players.

With only a handful of GMs running events, players took what they could get and were grateful. LRP was really not much more than tabletop, done standing up.

Slowly things began to change. Competition forced GM groups to behave more like professionals, and less like prima donnas. Players demanded better service, and less attitude. In order to meet these demands, GMs took on "assistants"

Today, there is a bewildering variety of potential ways someone can be involved in a LRP event. My favorite breakdown is into GMs, Cast, and Technical Staff. In describing staff roles, I'm trying to get away from the concept that the "GM" is the important figure, and everyone else is just an assistant. It may be true that the GM calls the shots, much in the way a Director calls the shots in a theatre production. But without makeup artists, production managers, and stage managers, the Director would be doomed.

GMs - are responsible for running the event. GMs are either "specialized," or "floor" GMs. Specialized GMs run a specific mechanic or event. One typical example is that in an event where there is a "wargame" being played out on a map to symbolize combat happening somewhere away from the event location, one GM might be tolled off to run that mechanic full time.

I favor a mixture of one GM for 7-10 players, plus one GM for every specialized mechanic. Some groups will tell you that is "GM heavy" but I disagree. On the other hand it may be better to have less GMs than to take on GMs that you don't trust, or don't think are competent, or don't have time to train.

Cast - are players who take their orders from a GM. These are also called "Non player characters," but I don't care much for the term. It derives from tabletop events, where these characters were run by the GM. In modern theatre style LRP, the characters certainly are *played*, and the designation doesn't make as much sense.

Cast are a wonderful pacing control - possibly the best ever invented. I'll talk more about cast in discussing runtime procedures.

What kind of roles you have for cast may differ from event to event. Sometimes cast are used to portray a string of minor, unimportant, characters, sometimes to make a guest appearance as some important character, sometimes they are seeded into the regular player mix as a "GM Shill" in order to drive a specific event.

Cast are good people to assign to play characters that *must* die, or make some tragic mistake, in order to drive the event.

Technical Staff

Technical staff covers a myriad of duties. In some events, where there are some strong cast characters who play the entire event, and others that appear only to play "monsters" or "visitors" I tend to consider these "short term" cast members "Technical Staff." Likewise cast roles that aren't much fun and involve a lot of work - such as being a working butler, or maid.

People who are definitely technical staff are dedicated food-service and preparation staff, makeup artists, or props, sound, and special effects staff.

These are the unglamorous roles that lie at the heart of an event, and can make it come to life.

If I have one word of advice - pamper your technical staff. Make sure they know they're important, and make sure they have the tools to do what they need. Then stay out of their way and let them do it. Always be ready with a word of guidance, but never try to micromanage. The sound systems guy needs to know where the sound needs to go - but he doesn't need you to stand and supervise his setting the sound system up.

Figuring costs

Before you start to put your event together, you need to calculate some costs. It helps to have run previous events, but here's a basic guide as to what you need to include - these things may not all apply to every event, but likely some of them will:

- Venue costs
- Sleeping rooms for GMs
- Any staff or cast salary
- Sleeping rooms for cast
- Paper costs Photocopying
- Printer supplies (including color cartridges)
- Paper
- Binding
- Folders or envelopes
- Any stickers or buttons
- Badges (and badgeholders)
- Properties (props can get expensive - try to borrow, or retread old props before buying new ones)



- Beverages
- Snack food
- Catering

Setting the Price

There are different philosophies on what to charge players for an event. In general, I charge about 25% above what my calculated costs are - that's enough to comfortably cover some overruns. I've also lost a lot of money on events, so I'd advise going a bit higher.

Some groups and individuals run to make a profit. There's nothing wrong with this, but generally I don't bother. The fact is that putting a event together is a herculean task, taking hundreds of hours. No sane price is going to pay for that time.

A thousand dollars worth of revenue would be a huge profit on an event. Yet among five GMs, it would only be \$200 apiece. Running for profit encourages keeping staff size small to maximize profits, and this trend is contrary to the trend towards a larger staff to serve the players better

If you openly declare that you are running for profit, many players and other GMs won't go out of their way to help you. After all, you're basically asking them to help you make money for yourself. I've seen several groups in the terrible position of being "for profit" and having to explain that since they never had actually made any money or were likely to, they really did need help. It's easier not to be in this position. Unless you have a strong business plan, and some real chance of making a decent sum of money, declare that your group runs at cost, and spare yourself the grief.

If you mean for your group to be formal, you should consider yourself to be a "non-profit" group. People have a lot of misunderstandings as to what this means. Most groups, by default, are "non-profit" organizations. They don't have shareholders, and any money they make gets rolled back into the organization, rather than paid out to stockholders. It is fine for a non-profit group to reimburse members, or others for expenses, or even pay them for services, or pay them a salary (so long as it's reasonably fair).

A non-profit group that isn't going to be making more than a few thousand dollars a year doesn't need to incorporate. This type of group is legally defined in most states as an "unincorporated association." Many small clubs, fellowship



organizations, and what-have-you operate for years as unincorporated associations. If you feel it's important, you may want to file for incorporation in your state. This is generally a fairly simple process that will cost you around \$120, and a couple of afternoons.

The real nightmare of non-profit organizations is trying to get status as an IRS 501(c)(3) charity. However, there probably isn't any overwhelming reason for your group to do this unless you are expecting a lot of donations (admission to your events, by and large, could not be counted as donations under current tax-law).

Neither running at cost, or being "non-profit" means that your income and outgo have to be exactly the same. It's fine to carry over money at the end of the year, and it's fine to reimburse yourself, or others for travel. If you did have a \$100 per person profit, it would be perfectly fine to reimburse your staff for their time - two ten hour days of work makes \$100 well below minimum wage.

Nobody begrudges the GMs a small return on the event. I've occasionally made a hundred bucks or so back...however since my food and gas for the weekend cost more than a hundred bucks, that hardly constituted a profit.

There are a lot of advantages to running "not for profit." The biggest advantage is that your players readily perceive that you are trying to build an entertainment *with* them, instead of *put on a show* for them. Nothing wrong with putting on a show, and you'll end up doing it anyway. But if your players feel they're part of the experience, they're more likely to give it their all.

On a GM level, it can help with staff, cast, and properties. People are a lot more willing to reach out and go the extra mile for a group that is running at break-even. Favors in the way of props, equipment, and help are more likely to be forthcoming

Player vs. Cast rate

There are a million different plans on how to divide up payment for an event. The bottom line is that income has to cover the cost of the event. The true cost. One big question is whether or not to charge cast:

Pro: cast often get almost as full an event experience as the players. Players resent cast, especially if they play powerful or important people, getting in for free. Since they tend to be friends of the GM, they may see free cast as no more than subsidizing the event so the GMs cronies can play for free.



Con: if your cast are paying, they expect to be given an experience worth the money. If a cast role fizzles, or you need them to suddenly change horses and do something else (including play a different character) they'll likely be offended. If cast are getting in for free, they generally understand they are part of the team, working for *you* and there to do what *you* ask of them. This doesn't mean they want to be abused or treated poorly - they're still donating their time after all. But you have more leeway in what constitutes "fun" and in what kind of work assignments you would give them. I think it's important to show your cast that you don't ask them to do anything you are too proud to do. Take a stint once in a while at cleaning dishes, picking up cups, and if you're idle, throw your shoulder in to help your cast out. They're doing these things because you can't be everywhere at once, not because you're better than they are.

When considering whether to charge cast, you need to decide what cast roles will be like - are they just player characters with some GM guidance, or are they butlers, lackeys, and dust boys. For this reason, I often use the "Technical Staff" division - Technical Staff are free, and cast get a minor discount.

Split Rate

It's getting increasingly difficult to run an event for under \$70-80. Players expect food, a good venue, and other amenities, but their pocketbooks aren't getting deeper as fast as their expectations are rising. This is especially true with couples. A event that is \$80 to an individual is \$160 to a couple. This can lead to last minute registrations, which make life hard on you.

A solution is to offer a split rate. Register your players for an advance fee of half or even a quarter of the full price, with the remainder due at the door. From a marketing point of view it's great. You get the commitment, they don't have to shell out the cash ten months in advance. It makes some events possible for people who couldn't make them otherwise. I've done well with a split of \$35/45 on an \$80 event.

Getting some of the money at the last minute may also make things easier on *you*. You know the hotel is covered (just make sure you deposit the checks first thing Monday morning). You know that you won't foolishly spend all the receipts on *really cool props*.



Setting the date

Setting a date for your event can be tricky - and even the best-laid plans gang aft agley.

For starters, determine how much lead time you need to promote and produce the event. It's fine to be an adherent of the school of "have it in the box before you advertise it," but don't think that means you can run with a shorter lead time. If the roleplaying community is used to a six month lead on events, you'll have a hard time filling in three weeks. And even if you do, you may have caused more inconvenience than your players decide your event was worth.

How far in advance is far enough depends on your social circles and geographic area. For a small event, in an area where few events are run, six to eight weeks is probably enough time to schedule an event. On the other hand, for a major full length event, a date should be solid at least twelve months in advance, preferably eighteen. Eighteen months is the "look ahead" for Intercons, incidentally.

Find out what else is scheduled before you decide on a date. Often it is good to pick two dates - a "primary" date, and a back up date that you can switch to if something comes up. It isn't unheard of for two full length events to announce for the same date - with no intention of "walking" on each other. If that happens, and you're already in a position to offer to change, there is very little harm done.

If I seem to be mentioning the ILF a lot in this section, I am. The ILF exists as a networking organization for GMs - what better source to use when trying to schedule an event with minimum competition. Start by consulting the ILF calendar - it's a little known fact that if you're an ILF member, and you e-mail a question about a particular date to calendar@ilfinfo.org, the calendar editor will usually let you know if anything is going on that date that hasn't been published yet [Ed. *Note: Troupes in Taiwan will find the Taipei Interactive Theatre Society pages to be more useful for this sort of thing - just email the thewebmaster for your event to be listed in the calendar here.*]. It isn't foolproof of course - a group might not have sent the information in yet, or it might not have been processed - but in general the calendar editor works hard to be helpful, and it's one way to head off a potential conflict.

Talk to other GMs in your area too. Usually, you will know at least some of the GMs. Think about informally announcing your event at some social event where a lot of roleplayers will be gathered - they're likely to be able to advise you if you've hit a bad date.



I "preannounce" dates, using the ILF and other private mailing lists, before printing flyers. If you've committed a horrific blunder, you're likely to find it out that way, before you've officially announced a date.

What you should try to avoid scheduling opposite is up to you. Some GMs try to avoid social events like parties, others feel that it's a buyer's market and everyone can make their own decisions. Basic Marketing suggests that you first decide who is likely to play your event. If many of these individuals come from one or two social groups, then *try to avoid social events linked with those groups!* If many of your prospective players are college students, then *don't schedule a run during finals*. Use logic and common sense, but don't assume what's important to you is important to everyone else.

Weddings are probably the number-one pain the ass to schedule around (and I include my own, which ran a week off one of my events!) They tend to be like submarines - silent, deadly, lurking beneath the surface. Then there is a "fwoosh" and suddenly you are missing five or ten players. They are the one social obligation that can take precedence over a previous obligation - normally someone who had already paid for your event wouldn't decide to drop to go to a party, but they might drop on short notice at a wedding invitation. They also have a damnable habit of involving someone who doesn't even play, but happens to be best friends with eighteen people who do.

Until humans stop the ridiculous conduct of mating (I'm joking here, people) weddings are something you have to live with. I've had to move an event because of a wedding more than once. Fortunately, people are usually understanding about reshuffling dates - by the same token that they'll drop your event to attend, they understand if the obligation to this most powerful social event in our society makes you reshuffle your schedule. Remember that late May and early June are common wedding months, and plan accordingly.

I advocate doing a lot of research on scheduling and setting up a date, but I'm reluctant to change it once it's set. Someone is always running a party somewhere, and often players do have to decide. A event can take quite a beating from a variety of social events, none of which, in themselves, warrant changing the date of your event.

Other events are a different matter. Once a date has been set, and fairly advertised, it's up to other GMs to avoid your event. If they feel like running opposite, then you have to decide whether to stand or fold. The decision depends on how much of a similar market the event opposite you draws on - in some cases only a few



players may overlap, and you can continue with apologies to them that you couldn't change your date. In other cases, you may find yourself in a head-to-head battle for registrants. Such a competition is seldom won. If you must compete, be a gentleman. Don't put players on the spot about which event they are playing and don't say unpleasant things about the other group that is producing opposite you. The first will leave a bad feeling with a player who might be a potential customer at some unopposed event in the future. The second makes you look small, and is just as likely to make your potential customers avoid your event as the other one.

As events become more common, conflict will be unavoidable, and it will be more important to be fair and decent when opposing another event. Unfortunately players are often more militant than GMs, but don't encourage bad behavior, and set a good example.

Holidays

If you are running on a holiday weekend, think very carefully about the effects. Needless to say, it isn't brilliant to expect a big turnout when opposing Thanksgiving, or some other Holiday where many people are expected to travel and meet with family. Remember if your players are college aged or younger that the fact that they are militant atheists may not alter the fact that they are financially tied to mom and dad, and must pack up for a Christmas visit like everyone else. Even older players often have family obligations focusing on the "big" travel holidays. In addition, you place your players in extra risk of life and limb if you put them on the highway over a holiday weekend.

Finally, remember that Canada and Great Britain have different holidays from the United States.

Some holidays are better than others. Recent experience has taught me that more people than you might think have planned activities on Memorial Day Weekend. However Intercon has done quite well running on the Columbus Day long-weekend. A long weekend can make for an interesting event, allowing more time, and a full Sunday of play. There's a backlash to this as well. Don't assume that most of your players will have a "long weekend" off. A disproportionate number of younger players work retail positions where "President's Day" is one of the biggest days of the year, and time off is impossible.

In general, unless you have a clear idea of *why* you are running on a holiday - avoid it.



Potential Traps

Get a good calendar before you schedule, and check for Jewish Holidays as well as Christian ones. Even if only a handful of your potential players are Jewish, they'll resent your scheduling an event over Passover, and their friends won't think much of you either. It's only a courtesy to check dates that could cause trouble for other players. Use some sensibility, and if you aren't sure how important a holiday is to a certain religion or social group, ask. Remember too that some social groups have inflexible traditions, or obligations to social events on days like St. Patrick's Day, or Memorial Day, or Fourth of July.

As the community enlarges, it may be important to take other holidays into account as well - there are not many Islamic players in the local community I am familiar with, but that may be different in different areas of the country, or may be subject to change as the community becomes more ecumenical.

The Dreaded Wedding

In an ideal world people wouldn't get married...at least not opposite your event. In the real world, it is a fact that even longtime members of the roleplaying community will blithely smack a wedding down without the slightest regard to other events, even if they are a year or more into the planning cycle. Weddings are suddenly "real life" and everything else - no matter how much money may be riding on the line, or how many man hours of labor may be involved - is just "gaming" after all.

Even without the blissful ignorance that goes along with matrimonial planning, you may run afoul of one of these dreaded beasts. Stand aside or get out of the way. Do not fight them. When it comes to events, the wedding is the nine-hundred-pound gorilla. It does not brook touching, it will destroy or smash any obstacle in its path and those who would fight any other event tooth and nail will leap to its defense. Weddings involve the drafting of a number of individuals into the "wedding party," and these individuals are lost to you. Flexibility is not an option.

Weddings have a "shotgun" effect too. They not only tend to blast a powerful hole in the weekend for which they are planned, but may have a scattershot impact throughout the month - a bewildering variety of showers, bachelor parties, etc. accompanies the wedding, and while these may be slightly more flexible than the wedding, often they are not.

Remember as well, that the wedding need not pertain to the local community from which you are drawing your player base. A wedding involving two non-players can still suck away a huge chunk of one or more of the local social groups. This is in many ways worse, because the happy couple very truly have no obligation to your schedule whatsoever, and have an excellent claim on the attentions of your audience.

The only thing to do with a wedding is "put up or move." If the wedding is peripheral, you may lose a half-dozen players you would have liked to have, but be otherwise unscathed. If the wedding is central to your community, you may have to consider moving your date - even if that means bad feelings, losses in terms of cancellation fees, refunds, and lost advertising costs. The bigger your event the more likely you will be able to bull ahead - but you can't compete.

Announce before you sign

Announce your date before you sign a hotel, or related contract. First announcement is almost always the time when unexpected trouble surfaces, and it is drastically easier to issue a retraction, and change the date before you've signed with a hotel. As a side note, I don't tend to discuss site arrangements until they are made - in the distant past someone who didn't much care for me talked to a hotel I was negotiating with, and convinced them *not* to close a deal with me. Such spoilsports are unlikely in today's more civilized atmosphere, but it's still probably a good idea to play your planning close to your shirt. On the converse, I encourage you to share the details of your contract once it's signed. It helps other GMs get the same contract, and if you are seen as the source of repeat business for the hotel, your rates might go down.

IV. Production

Production Schedule

At this point, you know what your event is about, and have some idea how big it will be. You're looking for a venue, and you've decided what kind of staff you might have, and decided what to charge. Now you need to set up a schedule to produce your event.

Some writers like the luxury of having the written product in the box before they advertise an event. I've seldom had that luxury. It is riskier to advertise an

unfinished product, but it needn't be a turkey shoot with many things left unfinished at the last minute. Follow some simple procedures, and you'll find you have your event ready with a little time to spare. Don't worry though, secondary tasks will expand to fill the time available.

There are several tracks of work that must move forward at the same time if the event is to be prepared on time.

Primary Writing Track

- Character Ideas
- Background Ideas
- Character Drafts
- Background Drafts
- Character Finals
- Background Finals

Graphics and Production Track

- Templates for cards, badges, etc.
- Finals for cards, badges, etc.
- Presentation elements - booklet covers, folder labels

Promotions Track

- Pre Announce
- Announce
- Advertise

Physical Track

- List of properties
- Ask for loans
- Determine costuming specifications for cast
- Determine what needs to be purchased
- Make purchases
- Do any construction, painting, assembly

Staffing Track

- Recruit GMs

- Recruit Cast
- Recruit Tech Staff

Here is a sample schedule for a large full length game

2000 January

- Initial Ideas meetings

2000 February

- Hotel Contract for June 2001
- Produce Flyer with information

2000 March

- Announce Event at Intercon XV
- Plan advertising campaign

2000 April

- Hold preliminary writer's meetings
- Begin writing background and character drafts

2000 May

- Begin to recruit core GM staff to supplement writing team

2000 August

- Commit to basic rules system, character list, bluesheet lists
- Plan playtests (Oct, Nov) for any rules systems that need testing
- Lock down core GM duties
- Preliminary list of properties

2000 September

- Swing advertising into high gear. Ads in Calendar and Metagame.
- Major promotional effort at Intercon 15.5



2000 October

- Check progress on character and background writing.
- Set meeting dates for revision meetings in January

2000 November

- Check registration levels. Agree to cancellation policies, minimums, and recovery plans if the event is not showing good registration by January 1. Pull advertising if event is full, push advertising if event registration is flagging

2000 December

- Begin cast and technical staff recruiting, provided registration is good.

2001 January

- Draft copy of the event should be complete
- Begin revision, crossreferencing, spellchecking, grammarchecking
- Draw up list of Cast characters
- Planned events have been decided on
- Draw up list of properties

2001 February

- Call to borrow properties
- Make acquisition plans for properties that cannot be located
- Contract out for any costuming that needs to be made

2001 March

- Final advertising push at Intercon XVI

2001 April

- Final revision of all printed materials
- Art and Graphics ready to go
- Plan to finalize cast and technical staff

2001 May

- Go/No Go decision based on registration
- Distribute full materials to registered players, or post materials on Web/E-mail

2001 June

- Final cast briefings, and training session if needed
- Print Badges, folder labels, stuff materials
- Complete all prop building
- Quality Control Check

15 June - run date

Planning for the Event

In the old days, we passed out character sheets, and then "ran the event." Which meant that the event actually ran itself, while we panted along trying to keep up. Sometimes there were events that were supposed to happen. We didn't really know how to *make* them happen, and we often relied on players to be savvy enough to try and gather everyone together.

Today, we know that "planned events" are the foundations that an event revolves around. These are all of the "staged bits" that take place between opening and closing. Weddings, funerals, coronations, councils, terrorist attacks, G-man raids...all "planned runtime events."

Planned runtime events fall into two major categories, *Set Pieces*, and *Contingency Events*.

Set Pieces are things that *will* happen, no matter what the players do. This may be because of deus ex machina (we *will* ensure that there is a terrorist bombing), or because of planning and tradition (ofcourse the cotillion Saturday night will go off as planned).

Contingency Events are things that might or might not happen, but which the GMs need to be prepared for. For example, a funeral service. The person who you plan the service for might not die after all. Or someone else may die instead. Weddings, court-martials, etc. are all contingency events.

The GMs can dictate the set pieces in the event, but the event itself will dictate contingencies. Do you have a plot to restore the King, which you expect to be successful. Then you need to plan on having a coronation as a contingency event.

Planning for all runtime events, involves the following elements:

- **Properties** - any special items needed. A crown for a coronation. A gavel for a trial
- **Cast** - any special staff. A baliff for a trial, an Archbishop for a coronation,
- **Effects** - smoke for a bombing. Music for a dance.
- **Food and drink** - tea for an afternoon tea, champagne for an evening party and so on

You'll want to figure out your planned runtime events early, so that you can include them in your inventory of properties. You'll also want to make sure you know which cast members are responsible for taking what roles at what planned events - or at least make sure your cast director knows what parts are needed.

Remember a few basic rules about planned runtime events. First, don't schedule trivial events at a point where they are no longer viable. Except in a humorous game, scheduling the judging for the garden club contest *after* the alien invasion is probably a bit ludicrous. There is nothing like the sight of thirty players standing around nervously at some event that they are attending only because the GM said the "have to." Put your less significant events forward, ahead of any events that tend to change the basic nature of the world, or of the players' lives.

Planned runtime events are the framework that your entire event revolves around. Don't shirk, and don't expect runtime events to "plan themselves" or be "player driven." The characters might have years of experience planning certain types of events - but the players will need to be shepherded through them, because they lack that experience.

Pre Opening

Many event producers assume that their responsibility begins and ends with the moment that the "curtain goes up," usually at a rules briefing. Don't deceive yourself. Your responsibility begins the moment that your players walk through the doors of your venue. Even if they're early. If you are ready for them, you can create a favorable impression.



The most organized event in the world will not be ready at noon on Friday. There are matters of setup, and they take a finite amount of time no matter *how* organized the production team is. And while it is sometimes true that "more hands are better," it is sometimes more the case that players distract the technical staff and runtime team from setting up the event.

The goal then becomes to entertain the players who arrive early until it is time to start. We've found that a wonderful device is video. Set a VCR up, and play something that is vaguely thematic. This distracts the players while the staff gets set up.

You may also wish to have refreshments out, or even have a "pre game" scenario where players can begin interacting. It all depends on the nature of your event, particularly on whether time is critical or not.

Opening

Some events open with a major planned runtime event. Others open with a dramatic event - *Tabula Rasa* opens with an emergency evacuation. *The Four Aces* opens with a gangland killing. Some events open with a rules briefing. No matter what, remember this. In general this is your first real point of contact with your players. Make a good impression. Do not assume that things will "pick up" after the "boring rules briefing" is gotten out of the way. Make sure your lead-in builds confidence and interest in the event, and you will quickly be rewarded.

Downtime

Schedule downtime in your event. Above we discussed the importance of scheduling dinner breaks. Move your event along in chunks that your players can manage. Make sure you allow time for your staff to rest, and eat, and sleep.

Teardown

Remember that you cannot get off of your site instantaneously. Plan to have your crew ready for teardown. This may require sending a GM who is a good "host" along to your Dead Dog Party, while the technical staff and other GMs do teardown. Figure out where everything is going, and have a plan for breaking down the game. If possible begin packing Saturday night.



Testing

During the production phase, you may come up with new rules systems or elements that you aren't certain will work. Test them extensively, either privately, or by holding a "playtest" of the mechanical system.

Quality Control

The mark of a really well produced event is having had time to do a quality control check on it. If you are planning on taking a printed game to a site where you won't have access, this is critical. You must at least have done enough QC to make sure that you have all the components. Quality control should ideally check for the following things:

- All materials are printed correctly (no overruns, missing pages, etc.)
- Every player has what the packing list says they should have.
- All written materials have been checked for continuity and consistency

IV. Promotion and Arrangements

Pre-Announce

Pre-announcing serves two functions. First, it allows you to court prospective players, by making them feel they are getting privileged information. Second, it allows you to check your date, before you've printed materials.

I pre-announce in three phases. First I tell close friends about the upcoming event. This can be as much as two or three months in advance. This also helps my friends know what my schedule and availability for other projects is.

Second, I send an e-mail announcement on several private lists I'm a member of, mostly related to some ongoing Live-Action campaigns. I sometimes offer a discounted registration rate, good only until the official announcement. The idea is to let groups that you're involved with know you're cutting them a special deal

Finally, I pre-announce on the ILF list. This is really almost the same as announcing, and I usually do it 48 hours before the formal announcement - say on the Wednesday before announcing at Friday night of a event. What this means is that if I'm about to print flyers for a conflicted date, I have 24 hours to fix them, and change my plans, or at least flounder ahead forearmed.



Put your event in the ILF Calendar [T.I.T.S. Calendar if in Taiwan]

Send the information on your event to the ILF

Calendar calendar@ilfinfo.org or director@interactivedramas.info in Taiwan - just in case you don't know what to send, here's the format. The Calendar listing is *free*, and Metagame is now distributing about 1500 copies per issue. Calendars are handed out free at many major events.

- **Date** - Give the full range of dates if it is a multi-day event
- **Event Name** - The title
- **Genre** - Use Theatre Style, or the name of a system/Genre like WOD, Star Wars, or VtM
- **Convention/Geographical Location/Site** - If the event is at a convention, give the name - if not, give the city and state (or province or UK County) where the event is taking place. Usually you give the place if it is a hotel, but don't list the full address if it is a private home - presumably you don't want strange people walking in who you haven't talked to in advance. Your listing might be "Days Hotel, Timonium, MD" - If you are listing a hotel, make sure to include the name of the town that the phone book lists the hotel as being in. That way people will get the right hotel, if they call late for reservations.
- **Price** - Give your full rate scheme in this format: \$65/60 ILF 01/02/99, \$75/70 ILF, 01/05/99, \$80/85 after \$90/95 door. The first number is the regular price, the second is the ILF discount price. If you extend the discount to other organizations, list them at the end (remember, this is for the ILF's Calendar - the readers want to know about *their* discount first. If you have any special price deal, list it at the end as well. The calendar will shorten and abbreviate for you if you are not terse enough, so think "classified ad" here. In June 1988, the ILF extends its discount to members of: NERO, IFGS, ALRPA, XPI, and The Realms, and encourages its members to do the same. In all probability, the discount will include members of the Camarilla and OWBN. If you want to save space, you could say "all ILF discounted groups."
- **Event Info:** If you are running standalone, give the information under this heading. This would be your snail mail address - the calendar currently won't list a event without a snail mail address.
- **Con Info:** If your event is at a convention, give the information here. Note that you don't need to do this for Intercon - the listing will appear automatically.



- **Con and Event Info:** If the event and the convention have the same registration address, give the information here.
- **Phone:** You don't have to list a phone number, but if you're desperate for last minute registrations, and you didn't, don't expect the phone to ring...A number also allows players who have last minute questions, or who sent a check which never got through to catch up with you.
- **E-mail:** Have an e-mail address and check it. Many players don't even want to bother with a event that has no e-mail. You can get a computer that will run Pine and a 2400 baud modem for free from one of your friends - I have three 386's rotting in the attic - and your local Freenet will give you mail for some ridiculously low price or free. Juno mail is also free. There really isn't an excuse these days. If a event has no-one on it's staff that can get e-mail, that raises real questions as to what the event is being printed on.
- **Web Site:** if you have a web site, list it here.

When and where to announce

I generally make a formal announcement at some event or major social event that involves the community I expect to play. "Announce" is a little misleading, because often what this really means is setting out fliers. But I also start talking the event up, asking people if they've seen the fliers or have heard about it.

Here's the deal - word of mouth still sells a event more than anything else. The object of advertising is to get your event's name out there, so people talk about it a lot. *People gossip at events more than at any other time.* Imagine you announce your event over the Internet. At the next event, most of the players have heard about it. John happens to be really excited about the concept, so he goes up to George:

"Say have you heard about this new event Gordon's running?"

"Oh yeah...that's old news. I heard about it weeks ago."

End of conversation. Not only will John not talk the event up to George, he may actively refrain from mentioning it - once burned twice shy. On the other hand, if the event is new, and just announced, even if George has already heard about it, he's *just* heard about it. He's more interested in hearing new news about it than in showing John up for being behind on his news.



This is where pre-announcement comes in. Ideally, you have a small circle of friends and other members of your writing group to talk the event up. You will only get the impetus of announcing your event once - don't blow it, or you'll have a much harder battle in filling the event.

Possibly the best time to announce an event is at Intercon, particularly the fall Intercon. As a general advisory, I'd say the Fall Intercon is a great time to announce an event for the next summer, and the February Intercon is absolutely the latest date to announce an event for the coming summer. It's more or less your call - announcing early means people plan around you - announcing late means you plan around other events.

Intercon is also good because it is "plug friendly." While most theatre-style events allow "Shameless plugs" for upcoming events at the end, not all are particularly friendly about it, or very well organized. Intercon has some regulations, but they help to make sure your plug isn't overwhelmed, as well as making sure you don't overwhelm others.

Announcing a one-day event isn't quite so dramatic or important. For one thing, it is less of a financial and scheduling decision to make your players decide to play, so less marketing is needed. If you already have an organized group, your event may "sell itself" with little needed other than an initial announcement and available forms. On the other hand, if your event has a high price-tag, or a distant location, you may need to do almost as much marketing as you would to sell a full weekend event.

Interest Building

Interest building is like pre-announcing, only you do it after you announce. The idea is talking to people who might be interested, and chatting up the concept.

Be careful about this. It's easier to say what to avoid than what to do. Here are a few killers:

Don't tell people that they are going to play, and must play a particular character. This is a little subjective. Sometimes it works well to say "I have a character that would be perfect for you..." but some people resent being sent on the guilt trip of "you have to play my event, because I'm writing a character for you."

Don't *gush*. If someone desperately wants to review your entire combat system, and you're willing to let them, *fine*. Ditto on hearing their entire character sheet.



But don't go on at extreme length unless your audience is really interested. If you want to test interest, try this. Stop talking about your event. See if they change the subject. If they do, you've talked enough, and you're in danger of building *disinterest*. Remember this is about selling the event you are going to run, not meeting your psychological need to be stroked about the work you are doing.

Pre-Sales

One good way to sell a event is to do "pre sales" where you give a discount to people who register before the event has announced (or announced a site). This will give you a small core of "dedicated" followers - often these folks do as much promotional work as you do. After all, they want someone to play with!

Politeness

Be polite. When you are trying to sell a event is not a good time to "set someone straight" about the flaws in their theories of gaming. Identifying yourself as a contentious bastard does not make people want to play your event. Likewise, be pleasant to *everyone* who asks about your event. Never brush someone off because you've never heard of them, or don't like them.

In the rare circumstance of someone you actively want to discourage from playing, be polite anyway. You can change the subject, or even do the equivalent of "whoa look at the time..." but never insult them. Believe it or not, everyone has friends. You may feel you've finally told off that horrible buffoon who wrecks every event he or she is in. But even someone who doesn't care much for them might feel you've only humiliated someone who was already pathetic. Be *nice*.

Being out advertising a event makes you a public persona to some small extent. Remember that your fellow GMs may be judged by your behavior. Always have something pleasant to say.

Also, *never* be rude about offers of help, even if you don't want them. The person you snubbed ten months ago when they offered to GM for you may be the up and coming guy around when you desperately need a Wargame GM. The person you gave a rude brush off when she offered to help may be the person who turns out to own the \$2000 prop you *absolutely need*. A lot of GMs make the mistake of being brusque about offers of help "well I don't think we'll need anything but we'll call if we do." They may find no response. I try to always say something like "I'm sure I'll need your help - I'm not quite that far along in my planning yet, but I promise I'll stay in contact with you and tell you as soon as I know." If I end up needing help,



then at least I won't be fighting a negative first impression. I try to keep a list, and contact people who asked me early on before others. Even if they're new or people I haven't worked with before, it's worth seeing how someone works out.

Pricebreaks

Offer the ILF discount. As someone wise once said "look at it as getting an extra \$5.00 from everyone who isn't an ILF member."

Most groups are more than happy to work with the ILF - but they don't really understand what the ILF can do for them, and what they can do for the ILF.

Offering the ILF discount is a way to identify yourself with an organization that produces the only national magazine exclusively dedicated to all types of LRP. The organization which runs Intercon, and is building the most effective marketing mechanism around for LRP.

It's true that you don't have to offer the discount to be listed in the ILF Calendar. But consider this - the ILF lists your event as a courtesy. Offering the discount is the clearest way to return the courtesy. And a calendar listing .

The ILF exists to help you sell your event. Take shameless advantage of the ILF mailer, and ILF contacts. Return the favor by offering the discount. It's a win-win relationship. Fundamentally, the only goal of the ILF is to get more warm bodies willing to play your events, and to make more resources available to you, so you can spend more time on the fun parts of your event, and less time on logistics and arrangements.

There are still a few people around who are hostile to the ILF, mostly because they were personally involved in the admittedly thankless task of trying to steer the organization through the rough waters of the early 1990's. Usually they're the folks who got the short end of the stick, or at least firmly believe they were. Respect them for their age and what they've been through, but realize their sight is fogged.

Targeting the market

A very basic lesson in marketing is selecting a target market. You probably already know who is likely to play your event. Decide how to reach them. If you expect 90% of your players to be people from some campaign group you are in, then you don't need to spend much money on advertising or fliers. If you expect to appeal to a broader segment, you'll need to advertise accordingly. If you want to reach the



East Coast theatre-style community, you can do plugs at Intercon, use the ILF mailer, and advertise in the Calendar and Metagame. If you want to reach the West Coast community, you'll need to advertise in the Calendar and Metagame, but you can't stop there. There isn't a cohesive community, so you'll need to scatter your advertising wide in order to net a few people here and there. Look for gaming stores with notice boards, and existing Vampire or Live Combat groups. Take out an ad in the local IFGS newsletter, or some local fanzines. Go to gaming and sci-fi/fantasy conventions, and put fliers out on the flier table. In short, look for people who might already be interested. Become an ILF Producer, and have the ILF send you the mailing list of people in your state or region - a sure way to reach people who are already interested in LRP.

Keep the list of people who played your last event. This is your lifeblood - this is your mailing list. Keep it - cherish it. I don't personally hold with selling mailing lists, but I think it's fair to trade your list to other small groups with similar interests. You might ask your players in advance if they'd like to learn about other LRP events.

What to put in ads

In a basic ad, include all the ILF Calendar information. Another good reason to list in the Calendar - if you have a complete calendar listing, you have a complete set of information for your event.

What to put on the flyer

- Date
- Event Name
- Genre
- Convention/Geographical Location/Site
- Price
- Discount Info
- Event Info - Snail mail
- Con Info
- Con and Event Info
- Phone
- E-mail - much more important than phone, probably more important than snail mail
- Web Site - optional but increasingly vital
- Name of Writers/Production Team, or Name of Group - optional but some people won't sign up for an event unless they know who is running it.



- Contact information for venue - the number for the hotel, along with any name that needs to be mentioned
- Transportation information - if the site is close to Amtrak, or served by public transportation, give the name of the stop. "Near Amtrak's Back Bay station, connects to MTA" Public transportation can be important even to local travellers. If you expect long distance travelers, give the nearest airport "Hotel operates a shuttle to Logan International" If you have a deal with an airline or rental car company (the ILF has agreements with Avis and United, and can add you to its contract - contact outreach@ilfinfo.org) include the information here. Travelers from out of town will be more grateful than you may realize for this elementary information.

What to put on your Web Site

It's a good idea to have a website. With services like Tripod or Geocities out there, there's really no excuse not to. Tripod now offers 10Mb of free web space. You aren't supposed to sell things, but in fact, you can get away with quietly mentioning the prices for your event - thousands of sites do. Just make sure it's mostly content about the event. For some examples of event pages, tap my site <http://www.rpg.net/via> [see also [Taipei Interactive Theatre Society](#)] - while we're on the topic, if you can afford a very tiny trickle of cash, consider putting your site up on rpg.net. There's also talk that the ILF will be offering web space and e-mail services to events soon.

- **All the information from your flyer**
- **Registration** - your registration form, preferably as a Web form, also optionally as an Adobe Acrobat PDF file. If you make a PDF available, always link to the "[Get Acrobat](#)" Adobe Page. You might want to link to my Adobe Acrobat Help page as well - <http://www.rpg.net/via/special/acrobat.htm>. You may need to specify strongly (but politely!) that you will only process registrations once you've received a check. But accept them e-mail just the same.
- **Venue Page** - link to the hotel's web page. If the hotel page gives the hotel's 1-800 number, and they have to call the local hotel number to get your discount rate, mention it here.
- Also link to local transportation information here:
 - *Airport Limo Services or Cab Company* (DC Flyer in the Washington area)
 - *Local Mass Transit* (for local travelers and those from out of town, connecting at an airport or railway station - Metro in DC, MTA in Boston)



- *Local Light Rail* - MARC in Maryland, Metro North throughout much of the Eastern Seaboard
- *Amtrak* - if there's an Amtrak station within reasonable distance
- *Trailways or Peter Pan* - if bus service is a viable option. Note that in the north buses are a decent way to get around, used by many students, but in the south they are not so widely used, and are characterized by a more impoverished class of patrons.
- *Airport*- most airports have a web page: Reagan National, Dulles, BWI, Newark, Logan, etc. Link to it - it will usually have information about public transportation.
- *Link to a Map of the area* - I generally link to the Yahoo map, with a reminder that Yahoo maps may be inaccurate. It will at least generally get them close enough to ask at a gas station, and it's better than nothing. Some hotel chains have good maps of the area they are in.
- **Links Page** - link to other pages that might be useful to your players. I keep all the sites I visit in researching the event, and post the best ones. Remember to include some costuming resources. Anything you think might help your players be ready.
- **Event Information** - more and more, instead of a flier, players want detailed information on the Web about an event. I'd go so far as to include pictures and even references from previous runs for a re-run. Give a background, and other "teaser" information. After casting, post a list of players and their e-mail addresses.

Casting

Casting is a golden promotional opportunity. Often casting is the "final push" that takes a event from three quarters full to full. Shortly before casting, send out a notice saying that casting is coming up, and this is the last chance to register. This will produce a few registrations, and possibly a few more "promises" which you'll need to use your discretion about. I've been badly burned by longtime players who *swore* they would show up to play a part they hadn't paid for, then ditched at the last moment. On the other hand, some folks, I trust implicitly. But you're the best judge of who you can trust. When in doubt, follow the advice of Fox Mulder and "Trust no-one."

Casting should generate some additional interest as well. Again, the deal with sales is "word of mouth." People like to talk about their casting and costuming plans. This means people talk about your event, which leads to people registering for your event.

Pre-mailing

Whether and how much material to pre-mail is highly subjective. Pre-mailing nowadays usually means "e-mailing." Try to accommodate players that have no e-mail as best you can, but this is the communications age, and the Devil will take the hindmost. Still, putting 32 cents on an envelope and mailing information to one or two players is no great burden.

The Web page can relieve the need to e-mail most background material. Most players have web access, or can get a friend to print documents from the web more easily than you could mail them. Again, stand ready to e-mail text files to a few players who don't have *any* web access. I usually make the offer, and seldom get taken up on it.

The real question is whether or not to mail full character sheets. Many events are revising character sheets in the last days before the event, and simply can't. Others find it is best to send a synopsis, but not a full character. I don't think it's a smart idea to send full characters months in advance, unless there is some special reason to do so. Most players want a solid hint, that tells them enough to know who they are playing.

These days, it's considered a bad sign if a event doesn't pre-mail anything. The fact is, it's an indicator that production is running late, and it undermines player confidence. One hates to do something "just to keep up with the Joneses," but not keeping up with the Joneses can mean you have a harder time selling your event *at the event*.

Desperation Sales

The time will come when you have to make desperation sales of your event. You are not full, and you need players. I'm reluctant to go too much into detail for two reasons. First I don't like to give up tricks I may use myself. Second, many of these tactics would prove *extremely enervating* if everyone did them.

I can make a few suggestions though:

First, never whine. A event fills based on player confidence. We'd all like to think that our friends are swell folks, who, hearing that we are in a pinch will rush to fill the gap and join our event. However the fact is that these people are probably the folks you already have registered. Most players on the other hand, will flee in



terror from a event that seems likely to be a flop, or an underegistered mediocre success. Whining virtually ensures that this will be the perception of your event. You may pick up one or two sympathy players, but you could be losing half a dozen indecisive players who were waiting til the last minute to sign up. Don't whine and don't beg.

Saying that the event "still has roles left" is a way of saying "we aren't full - sign up now" without coming across as too pathetic. Saying "a few roles left" implies you are at least better than half full - remember lying could make you look bad later - be somewhat honest. You could also focus on one need "Need a female player, and still have a few male roles" when in reality you have five female roles - just quietly take all comers. "Need a player" tends to indicate a event is nearly full, and also indicates an important role might have come open due to a drop.

Express confidence that the event will run with the number of players you are likely to get. Then see to it that it will. If you can't run a decent event, cancel. It is less of a shame to cancel than to run a disaster. All GMs who have run a long time have had to cancel once or twice, and few will think less of you for doing the smart thing. If you can't afford to cancel (nonrefundable deposit, already spent most of the event money on props) see if you could postpone. Even the most hard-assed site will generally work some kind of deal. If you postpone, some of the players will roll their money forward to the new date, and you can try and refund the ones that don't.

Consider throwing some PC roles to cast, and then advertising free cast roles. It gives you better control, and some impoverished players may sign up who wouldn't have otherwise.

Talk to your friends, and ask them to help you. Quietly. Even in person, don't whine or beg. People can smell fear and it drives them away.

Ask your friends who are playing to talk up their costuming

Ask your friends who are playing to organize a "pre event" event - an outing to some movie, or restaurant, or activity that is appropriate to your event. This is another "topper" event that can help fill a event that is wavering at the 2/3 mark, but won't quite fill up.



Summary

Selling an event is as much convincing the people who are already signed up that they are going to have a good time as it is getting new people to play. New tools, especially the Web, make this easier. How excited and certain of having a good time the players are has a lot to do with how the event will go.

VI. Runtime

Everything is printed, and hopefully, ready to go. It is four thirty on Friday evening. Your first players are wandering in. It is no longer production time. It is runtime. You are no longer an event producer. You are a GM, or storyteller, or director...whatever your group feels most comfortable with. In the next paragraphs I am going to use GM - remember a producer might not be a GM (choosing to be cast or support staff instead) and a GM might not have been a producer.

Player Relations

No matter what you do, remember the players come first. These days, saying that is generally preaching to the converted. But I'll hit this once, just for anyone who hasn't thought it through. Because it wasn't always this way.

In the early days of theater style events, it was common for GMs to call themselves "Gods." They believed that the GM was the center of the event, and that a good GM was powerful and capricious. I rolled into full length GMing in 1987 with a group of folks who thought this was a bad practice, and wanted to establish good, solid, professional GM skills. Sure, sometimes GMs need to play powerful villains, or characters that have great power over players. In a good event this is solidly integrated with the plot.

If you are a GM, remember that you aren't there to be entertained. You are not there for yourself! You have taken up GMing because you want to give a live roleplaying experience to a group of players, and that is what you are doing. If you like GMing, and it entertains you, that's great. But you need to make sure the players have a good time. This means that everything you do, every action you take, should in some way benefit the players. Whether it is playing a super-powered villain, or just wandering around in street clothes.

What do you do?



Most GMs think that the most important thing you can do during an event is make critical, exciting, decisions about the course of the event, and wield the weighty responsibilities of the GM to make decisions affecting everyone. That's the glamorous part...but you don't actually do much of that. And old adages about the "GMs not knowing what to expect" aside, most of the critical decision making should be well past at this point. If there is a hydrogen bomb in your plots, you should already know when, how, and if you are willing to let it actually detonate, and who dies or not as a result. That's contingency planning.

The most important thing you will do during a event is what I call "pounding the pavement," which means moving around on the floor constantly getting a feel for what is going on, and helping your players. Unless of course you are have a special assignment of some sort - Computer GM, Wargame GM, or so on.

Being a Lead GM

A Lead GM is one of the core group of people who are taking "the lead" in producing the event. I use the term "lead" GM, because often the leads are not bosses, or senior, or anything else special. Sometimes they aren't writers. It's a term I use to distinguish the "core" GM staff from the people they have brought in from "outside" to run an event.

Don't hide behind egalitarianism as an excuse to shrug off the responsibility of being lead GM. If you are one of the people who has been driving the project, and the other GMs are looking to you as a leader, you have a responsibility to act that way. There is nothing worse than seeing an experienced GM with 200 hours of floor time laying blame on a green GM with 10 hours of experience because they didn't perform up to standards.

If you wrote most of the characters, you are probably a lead GM. If you are the most experienced GM on staff, you are probably a lead GM. But you may not be.

There can be more than one lead GM, and probably are. Within the core group, one or two people may be "boss." But the lead GMs will be the people that everyone else looks to for help, and guidance.

You have a vested interest in using your Auxiliary staff to its full capacity. If you are doing something, consider if it is something that your Auxiliary staff could do better. Or just as well.



Many groups make a big deal of the fact that their AGMs are "fully empowered" to make decisions, but then either don't really give them the authority, or don't give them the knowledge. Authority without knowledge is worthless. A good GM may have permission to make major decisions, but be unwilling to do so without basic knowledge.

You have a responsibility to use your AGM staff to best possible effect.

Brief the GMs fully. I like a briefing on two separate occasions, before the game, and after the AGM has read the characters. At one briefing, run through every character, and say what they are doing. At the next, run through every major plotline. For a full length game, four hours is not too long for each session. These are good refreshers for Lead GMs as well.

Sometimes, characters aren't done. Have the AGMs read the drafts. In fact, if you are really far behind, you may try writing drafts and having AGMs put them into final. Some things don't get produced until the last moment.

Talk through "likely scenarios" with the AGMs. The GM who finds that the players "never do what the GM expects" is doing something wrong.. Players will occasionally launch off on a tangent, but if four or five bright people sit down, and talk through every possible way they see a situation working out, there is about an 80% chance that the players will take one of the options they foresaw. This leaves GM time free to deal with the 20% of time the players don't do what the GMs expected

Trust AGMs with everything, unless they are being used for a specialty. Knowing half the picture leads to half baked solutions. Never try to be "cute" by keeping surprises from the AGM staff.

Don't be afraid to limit the scope of an AGM (or a Lead GM for that matter!). Sometimes you don't need a fifth person trying to make plot decisions. Sometimes you need someone to go around all weekend running a specific system. Get someone who enjoys that sort of thing, and make it their provenance. Every GM doesn't have to have full powers to arbitrate everything on the floor. Some obvious ideas for specialization: Combat, Special Locations, Items, Special Systems.

Don't lie to the AGM staff about what isn't done. They are going to be taking abuse for it all weekend. You owe it to them to tell them up front what hasn't been finished, and what is being done to compensate. If you are honest, they'll



appreciate it and go to bat for you - if you try to pull the wool over their eyes, they'll soon see through it, and your game will suffer for it.

Supervise. The AGM staff isn't going to know what to do and when to do it. AGMs tend (worse even than lead GMs) to glom up in a knot and tell war stories. Remind them that there is work to be done, firmly but politely. If they can accomplish nothing more, send them to bed.

Assign the grunt work to the AGM staff. Don't be "too considerate" of your AGM staff to assign them dull, boring, tasks like cutting and stacking cards. You need your time for other things, and they volunteered to help. If you spend your time doing the work your AGMs could do, and then don't have the time to do the work only you can do (because it requires more intimate knowledge of the writing), you won't have done anyone any favors.

Remember to tell them thank you. A little (a lot of) praise goes a long way!

Auxiliaries: Being an AGM or Floor GM.

Some groups use the term "Assistant (or Associate) GM," some don't. I generally don't use it. I like to have other GMs be "full staff" or be designated by a specialty "Combat GM," etc. I use "Floor GM" for those members of the staff who did not take part in the writing, and are only working before and during runtime. You can use any term you want. There are numerous shades of distinction, but what it boils down to is "auxiliaries." People who are not, specifically, critical to production. Though you couldn't do without them come runtime.

Notice I haven't said anything about "green" or inexperienced GMs. The fact is many inexperienced GMs start feet first, as Lead GMs, and there are plenty of occasions when oldtimer GMs will pitch in to help out as "Floor GM" on a friend's production. I think doing some "Floor GM" work is vital to being a well-rounded GM. Nobody should be "in charge" all the time.

There is nothing second class about being an Auxiliary. You may be an assistant because you are learning, or because you are doing a favor. But you do have a different role to play.

Your job is support. Depending on your experience, you may end up taking some "lead" responsibilities, and you may not. But you need to look to the lead GMs for signals, and take your pace from them. Don't get carried away with your own

brilliance, and carry someone else's production off someplace that it isn't supposed to go. Watch for signals, and take them, and don't try to take over.

Try to help. If you were called in because you are the best combat ref around, don't be arrogant and sit around idle while other GMs work. Pitch in, and ask what you can do to help. Whether they say so or not, most GM crews expect their assistants to help with load in, and clean up. Even if they don't it is polite to offer.

If you are turned down, keep out of the way. You may be the most brilliant computer programmer around, but the lead GM may not want you to tinker with the hypercard stack on Thursday night. Offer to help, and let your lead know what you are capable of, but don't badger. Often a lead is too swamped to figure out how to delegate, and its best to let them go at their own pace. Part of your job will probably be to "hurry up and wait." Do it smilingly. If you see an opportunity to help, offer. If you are refused, then keep out of the way! You are there to help, and driving your lead crazy isn't helping. This isn't about your ego. It is about making your players have a good time.

Becoming an AGM on short notice

Occasionally, you may become an Auxiliary GM on short notice. Novice GMs suddenly realize they need more help, or another GM falls sick (or worse, leaves the team) and you are asked to work as a replacement.

You will need to cram, and you will need to ask for help.

See if it would work for you to be a specialty GM, even if the game wasn't broken down that way before. If there is some system that soaks a lot of the GMs time, you could try to learn that one system, and run it to the exclusion of all else.

Read the characters. If necessary, read them aloud in the car on the way to the site. My weakness. I get carsick while reading. One event I had characters such a short time before the game that I had my wife read them aloud in the car on the way. She was also running, and she can manage reading while driving better than I can.

Write a list of questions. The Lead GM doesn't have time to have a long bull session with you - if they did, then you wouldn't be working on short notice. Figure out everything you can, then ask the questions at once.



Watch for signals. Discuss ahead of time that you are going to need to ask extra questions, and will need some patience. Let the GMs you are working with know what they can expect. Try to hit them at good times, and not waste their time.

The "One Man (or Woman) Show"

Mostly, I've been going into details on full weekend runs here, but fairly frequently, mini-games are a "One person show" with a single writer and producer, and perhaps a couple of runtime assistants. It is less common for full lengths to be a one man show, but it happens.

Sometimes, even a large group is so focused on one creative personality that the answer to every question is "Ask so-and-so." This can be a real problem. It can come from an overly tyrannical lead writer, or an insecure runtime staff. It can also come from poor communication where the writers simply didn't get their game concept across to the floor staff.

It is best not to operate this way, but for better or worse such games reach the floor. In any case, the same conditions apply as apply to coming in on short notice. Try and figure out everything for yourself, and let the person in charge know you have to watch them for signals.

If you are at the center of a one man (or woman) show, remember that nobody around you is a mindreader. Don't lose patience with people who you have assisting you. Remaining calm won't always save a game, but it is about 80% of the battle.

Getting Prepared and Dealing with other GMs

Take Care of Yourself and the Other GMs

Don't forget about real life. If you have medications, take them. Be militant about eating and drinking on a relatively normal schedule. You aren't doing your players any favors if you are a wreck, and can't make good valid decisions, or keep your temper. Some teams have a "Game Mommy (or Daddy?) who helps with such things, but a responsible adult should be able to feed him or herself and still run a complex event.



Yes, I'm the GM who wrote about breaking out amphetamines after being awake for sixty hours at *Covention I*. But that was more than ten years ago. The lining of my stomach was in better shape then. One ideal of the IL Community is that GMs should live to be old GMs, and that means *not* having waking hallucinations from sleep-dep on the way to the event. Obviously this applies more to full-weekend events than minigames, but events are events

Let me put it on a less moralistic level. If you are drop-dead exhausted on Friday night at 5:00pm, you are *not* going to run well. You will miss obvious solutions to problems, and you will have a hard time having the patience to deal with players. You certainly won't have energy and enthusiasm to drive your event.

There used to be a saying "No food, no sleep, only the game." We found that the rule actually was "Food or Sleep." You can do without one or the other, but usually not both. Few GMs have the luxury of a long peaceful slumber the night before the game. Even if the writing is 100% complete and in the box, there is usually packing to be done, and often travelling as well.

Know how much sleep your minimum is, and get it. I have found my minimum is four hours. On four hours of sleep, I may be a little tired, but I am basically still a functional human being. I couldn't go on forever on four hours a night, but two or three nights of four hour sleep won't kill me. I sleep at least four hours before running. Even if I don't think I have time. I'll save four hours on Friday by being more alert and awake, and not making time-costly mistakes.

Care and Feeding of GMs

Eat. Forget your damn diet. Just eat. If you survive on junk food, eat that. If you need carbs and protein, get them. Back when I was writing, running and not sleeping, I used to live on Sustacal and Breakfast Bars. I wouldn't recommend that, but it did keep me alive.

Remember that if you stay up all night, you will probably want a meal in the wee hours of the morning. Your body will need extra energy to fight off sleep dep. Consider keeping around some foods like Breakfast Bars, or Instant Breakfast. If possible eat a balanced healthy meal. If not, at least try to eat plenty, and don't try any radical diet changes.

Make sure to drink too. Juices or something like Gatorade is the best - Coke is not as good, but probably what you'll drink. Try to balance it with some water. If you need the kick, remember that coffee has more caffiene than Coke.



You aren't going to start eating a healthy diet the day before a game. But eat something, and eat plenty of it. And keep around snack foods that have some carbohydrates, if you possibly can. If your group is impoverished, peanut butter and jelly. Cheap too. If you have the money, order Pizza or Chinese, and have a real dinner. If you can, actually eat a decent meal at home or at a restaurant.

If you are not doing anything else, feed the other GMs. If you are a new AGM, and you want to stay up late to prove yourself but don't have anything to do, consider going to 7-11 for drinks and food.

Breakfast is the most important meal you'll eat Friday, mostly because it is usually the last. You may get lunch, but often you'll be at a strange location, with a choice of the golden arches, or a very slow hotel restaurant. Eat something for breakfast. Cold Pizza, an Egg McMuffin. But for God sakes, eat!

Responsibility to Cast

If you want to burn yourself ragged, that's okay. But remember that your cast did not sign on for the "no food no sleep," experience. No matter how much esprit de corps you've tried to build they are *not* your core team. You have a responsibility to give them work assignments that allow for food and sleep.

The 24 Hours Beforehand

In an ideal world, the GM team has completed work early in the week. A final meeting is held midweek, and everything is assembled and ready to go. Thursday night the lead GM makes phone calls (not e-mail, unless he or she is *sure* it will get checked) to the entire staff. This phone call:

- Verifies that any outstanding work (prop construction, etc.) is done and ready
- Verifies transportation arrangements for each staff member. If a staff member is supposed to pick someone, up this call verifies that as well. This may include staff who are picking up "out of towners" at an airport or train station.
- Verifies transportation arrangements for each staff member.
- Mentions what time each staff member is expected to be onsite, and what their job will be once they arrive.
- Checks to make sure that each staff member has directions



- If parking is a problem (pay parking, loading zones, etc.) makes sure each staff member is aware of it.
- Sometimes, you'll be having a crisis. The Printer died on Wednesday, and the new cartridge didn't arrive until 10:15pm on Thursday night. Fifteen characters aren't done.

When you have a crisis, the first thing to do is Stop! I've wasted more time than I would care to think about by plunging blindly ahead to try to Get it all done!

- First, consider whether or not what you are still doing is absolutely invaluable. We'll talk more about "cutting things loose" in a moment.
- Second, consider whether or not it can be delegated. If everyone writes five characters, can we all still get to sleep on Thursday night.
- Third, consider who needs to be involved, and figure out if they are the most efficient person. For example, John needs to write seven characters. However there is only one PC, and John types twenty words per minute. Bill types fifty words per minute. Maybe its time to assign John's work to Bill.

There comes a time when you will establish that one or more of your staff is going to need to pull a "near all nighter" to get your event online. Now comes the time when you must use some discipline. Decide who is going to pull the all-night shift, and why. Maybe its the person who did most of the writing, maybe its the person who owns the computer, maybe its the guy who is printing the combat rules.

Send the rest of your group to bed. There is nothing more wasteful than having two GMs up at 5:30am, "keeping company" with a GM who can't go to bed because they're tied to a computer. The worst part of it is that the poor GM who they're keeping company with might have been finished in time to sleep - if he hadn't had the distraction of two bored fellow GMs for "company." If you aren't doing anything the night before a game, you should be sleeping. If you can't sleep, lie down and rest. Too many GMs pull useless all nighters because they stayed up late on Thursday "keeping company," unable to sleep out of nervousness.

It's hard to make yourself sleep, especially if you are an AGM who isn't needed, but is new and a little nervous. Do whatever works for you. Lie down in a dark room. Put a pillow under your neck Japanese style. Listen to music. Drink a bottle of beer or a glass of port. Have sex with your Significant Other, or any other reasonably cooperative party. You'll have enough tension in the next 48 hours.

If you are a lead GM, it is your job to send your AGM staff to bed. They probably won't go on their own. They aspire to be like you, and they will try to pull the long shift, even if they have nothing useful to do. You'll need them awake and alert when you are not. Send them to bed.

This situation isn't as bad nowadays, because there is less tendency of GMs to cluster at one house or another before the event. But it still happens, and it is still worth trying to combat.

Well before Thursday night, your group should have decided who is going to be taking the public "lead" at the opening of the game. This is the person who introduces the game, and acts as "master of ceremonies" for rule briefing etc. If your game doesn't have a formal opening, this will be the person who is running your registration desk. This person or these people need to have some energy, and not have a short fuse when your game goes up. Make sure they get some sleep, even if it is just in the car on the way to the site.

The basic message: *don't be a bunch of kids*. It's easy to get carried away in the camaraderie of putting a game on, and not sleep or take proper care, the two days before a game goes up. Force yourself to think ahead. Otherwise, your body is going to be giving out just as your players get revved up to go. And that can be anywhere between disappointing and disastrous.

Alarms, Transportation Arrangements, and Checklists

Get your act organized before you get onsite. **Time becomes increasingly valuable as runtime approaches.** An hour of time to run out and buy supplies on Monday is no big problem. An hour of wasted time Friday afternoon can mean a delayed opening, and fractious players.

Make out a list of all the supplies you will need onsite. Don't forget the actual components of the game - character sheets, envelopes, etc. Include office supplies.

Make a mental, or written timetable of your schedule for Friday. Allow time for breakfast and lunch, and consider how you'll get dinner (or if you need to eat an extra big lunch). I usually buy two burgers at McDonalds, and stash the second one onsite to eat just before opening.

Get up an hour earlier than you think you need. I always build an hour of "slack" into my carefully planned Friday, and I *always* use it. You'll probably remember

some minor purchase or last minute errand, or have someone call and dump something on you.

I have a "game box" which is a big wooden chest of the kind that is sold at Wal-Mart for college students. It seems clumsy at first, but it is better than a suitcase or boxes for several reasons. First it can ride on a little foldable metal baggage cart I have, and actually have a great deal of other stuff piled on top of it. It is actually sometimes easier to get onsite than a bunch of unwieldy cardboard boxes. Second it doesn't allow game materials to get mutilated in a tightly packed car. Finally, it can serve as furniture or a table wherever I end up running.

What I keep in the "game box"

- Staple gun
- Spare staples
- Box of pencils
- Box of pens
- Scotch Tape
- Masking Tape
- Duct Tape
- Thick black magic marker
- Scissors
- Johnson and Johnson First Aid Kit
- Black Electrical tape
- Blank "Hello my name is" badges
- Colored cardstock
- Colored paper
- Various magic markers, arts and crafts material, Elmer's Glue
- 3.5 Inch floppy disk
- Extension Cord
- Spare "Appliance power cord" of the type used by printers and PCs
- Parallel Printer Cable
- Random collection of spare parts from old games - blank item cards, money, etc.
- Folder
- Phone cord
- Three prong adapter

Computers

Computers made theatre style writing as we know it possible. There were theatre style games written before computers were available, and there have been a few

games written without a computer. But the ability to quickly revise a stored document allowed for consistent cross referencing, which is a keystone of theatre style live roleplaying.

That said, computers are always a nuisance. They are sophisticated pieces of equipment which have a habit of glomming up when you least expect it.

Here are a few tips to keep your game from being an electronic nightmare:

1) By Thursday, no single computer should be indispensable. Everything should be backed up in at least one location *on a media that can be read by the other machines*. If any printing is to be done onsite, the backups are onsite.

2) There is at least a plan to get an alternate printer if the printer fails. Ideally, a printer is onsite

Checklist of Computer Components

- CPU
- Keyboard
- Mouse
- All connecting cables!
- Monitor
- Any necessary adapters
- Printer
- Printer Cable
- Modem (if needed - remember you need to know if the hotel or site phones have modem ports)
- Modem Cable
- Telephone line

If the Printer and the Computer haven't worked together before, make sure you have the correct software to use the printer. I spent a nightmarish afternoon hand coding PCL codes from memory, and using the control panel of an HP Laserjet to control printing, because we forgot to bring a Printer Driver for the Laptop Computer.

I mention this because I've seen it happen - twice! If you are in the Mac/Apple world, be aware that the rest of the world *doesn't know* about your hardware's peculiar needs. Don't borrow a printer from someone, and presume it will have a place to plug in your unique printer cable. Check ahead of time for hardware and software compatibility.



I don't use Mac/Apple, and I honestly have noticed this as a unique failing of Mac/Apple based teams. *All* Mac equipment is supposed to be standardized and work together. PC users are trained to *assumethat* nothing will work together until tried. Mac/Apple users tend to forget this, and I've seen several teams be devastated when they borrowed equipment and found that it didn't have the correct connectors or capabilities. **Know your equipment's particular needs.**

No Computer Onsite

Occasionally I've run into teams who said "well if you have to take your computer onsite, then you aren't prepared anyway." This is not necessarily the case.

First, there are occasionally game mechanics, or pieces such as reports of results that need to be produced by computer during the game. For example in "The Four Aces," results of gang warfare are produced on in Excel during runtime, from turn to turn.

Secondly, a wise team brings their raw material onsite in some form, just in case. *There may always be something missing.* Even if you've had time to print, stuff, and do a quality control check, that thing fluttering across the parking lot could be a character sheet.

It is possible to have enough backups that this isn't an issue. If every character has been printed out *and quality control checked* in every GM notebook, then probably you are safe. Still, it can be better in many cases to have the option of producing materials onsite in emergencies. Distance makes some difference as well. Running in Baltimore I always have the ultimate fallback that it is *only* a two and a half hour round trip to my house. Running in New Jersey, a trip home is completely out of the question.

Just remember. If you don't have a computer and a printer ***Anything you don't have with you, you just don't have!***

The ten minute hour - When to lock another GM up!

Eventually, it happens. You are onsite, and *something is not finished.* Some card, some sheet. Even the most careful group can lose a sheet in transport, or need to accommodate a sudden walk-on. Whatever the situation, you are onsite, and you have a GM on staff doing office work.



I learned at my first game how not to get the work done. Put your PC up just as you planned to for consultation, on a table in your public access control center. After all, you have four other Staff on the floor. You figure Bill can just sit back there and type. He can't.

With four Staff in the same room, an astonishing percentage of players will walk up to the person behind the desk and interrupt their work to ask a question. There are reasons for this, so don't assume your players are idiots. First, staff who are surrounded by players aren't visible. Second, in the last issue we discussed the slew of questions right after the event starts. Usually any last minute work takes place during this time. Staff that would normally be more than adequate may be swamped. And a GM typing furiously is fair game. Worse, after one player interrupts, however rudely, another player may think that the GM is available - they have no reason not to.

Thus commences the *ten minute hour*. This is when you sit at a keyboard for an hour, and produce ten minutes of work.

Stop. Take your ADP equipment, and get your GM out of there. If you have a laptop, lock them up with that. If not, then move your entire desktop machine. But if you want work to get done, get that GM out of contact with the public.

This may save your image too. It is hard to tolerate the nineteenth interruption without snapping "What the hell do you want!" I never mastered it.

The same rule applies to your own staff. Four staff in one room will tend to talk to each other and accomplish absolutely nothing. Three staff stuffing packets will talk incessantly to the GM trying to type, and make sure he or she accomplishes nothing. It's human nature.

Sometimes the person behind the computer is also the Lead, and you feel they are needed to do something else. Call out combat stats, answer critical plot questions, etc.

This is when you have to make a decision. Either isolate the GM, or just wait. That may seem anathema to you. You think "it will only take half an hour to get that sheet done, and we'll have everything finished."

Well...it won't get done in a half hour. In a half hour you'll have work that isn't done, and a GM that has been inactive. The worst of both worlds. *Decide*. Either the work is important enough to lose the GM for half an hour, or the work can wait

until the GM can be off the floor for half an hour. But having a GM trying to write onsite just does not work!

GM to Player Ratio

The normal GM to player ratio ranges from as low as 1:4 to as high as 1:10. In general, games with a 1:4 or 1:5 ratio *on the floor* tend to suffer from too many GMs unless they are very, very, rules or GM intensive systems. With so many GMs, the players get distracted by the number of non-person conversations around. If you have a ratio of 1:4 GMs, it is probably best if some of them are technical staff (sitting behind a computer) or are acting as cast. 1:6-1:8 seems to be the best ratio.

I've run plenty of times at 1:9 or 1:10, and it does tell. The staff gets frayed, people get bogged down waiting for a GM. If you have a very non GM intensive system, you may get away with less GMs, and if you have a very GM intensive system, you may need more. But don't count on it. Remember, if you are drawing on a crowd of players with experience, many of them will automatically seek GM intervention even if they don't need it. For example, many players don't feel comfortable having non-GM adjudicated combat even if the system is "self adjudicating."

Even if they are the best troops in the world, one cavalry brigade can seldom take on an army. If you have a 1:10 GM ratio, your GMs are going to be swamped, even if they are very good. I've seen too many groups make the mistake of assuming its better to run with three really good GMs, rather than three really good GMs and two green GMs. *Don't*. You'll need all the help you can get. My rule of thumb - always have at least one more GM on staff than you think you need. In a minute we'll talk about how to make green GMs useful to your group.

Identify yourself

A GM should have something to make them recognizable. It is easy to think that you've covered identification by introducing yourself at opening. But that may not be the case. Some players may arrive late. Some players have a lousy memory for faces, or can't put faces with names. A distinctive badge, T-shirt, or arm band, or even a whistle around the neck, sets off a GM. Go with whatever works in your ethos, but make sure it is consistent enough that the players can spot it. It is particularly frequent that the most junior member of the staff gets ignored, because no one knows they are a GM, especially if the group is well known, and consists of four established faces, and one less well-known face. If you have a GM sitting idle



because no one will approach them, that is increasing the burden on you. If you have an established team, take special pains to introduce any new personnel. It is especially important to identify all your GM staff. Often there's an "odd man out" - maybe a new GM who isn't part of an established team, who gets ignored because they don't look like they're part of the staff.

GM Meetings

Usually GMs hold meetings on Friday and Saturday night. Some GM groups have a daytime shutdown at dinner or even lunch on Saturday as well. These are your chances to make adjustments to the game as it is running.

These meetings should not be wasted time. This is the appropriate order of business, before unwinding and telling war stories:

- 1) Every GM tells what major plots they've handled, and any environment changes they have created
- 2) Every GM tells what plots or characters they think are in trouble
- 3) The group workshops every trouble spot. Try and produce at least one or two ideas for every problem.
- 4) GMs double check times and procedures for upcoming GM instigated or assisted events (the alien invasion, the high holy festival, etc.)
- 5) Individuals or teams develop specific ideas for run-time corrections (add in plots, messages, NPC appearances, events, etc.)

Some groups like to run down the timing on timed events before doing anything else, and I don't see any problem with this. Some groups may want to take a fifteen minute break, or eat, before getting down to business. Put this on a timer. Usually either a dinner break, or sleep, are closing in, and there is not much time to waste.

I said in the previous section to always GM wearing a watch. GM meetings will give you another use for it. Keep an eye on the time. If you see that you are halfway through the break, and are still discussing the first item, move on!

Remember that the entire group doesn't have to hash over every problem or situation. It can be enough to decide on a general course of action, and establish who is handling it. "Tom, you and George need to find something for the Space



Aliens to do...Hal and I will work with the Spanish Neurosurgeons." Obviously if you think that a plot is really sinking, breaks are the time to brainstorm with the group on ideas to save it. But don't try and have five people workshop a major game revision during a break. Farm it out to a couple of people, or even one GM, and keep moving on with other matters. In the final section of this article, we'll go into the how of saving plots...for now, take it on faith that it can be done.

I like to use a white board, if there's one available, to track meetings. First I run down the list of everything we need to talk about and write it on the Board. It keeps the other GMs aware of what has and hasn't been discussed, and what still needs attention.

Communicate with other GMs

You also do need to communicate with other GMs. If another GM tries to tell you something, stop what you are running and listen. It may be routine, and less important than what you are doing. But if another GM is waiting on you, they are not helping players. Another GMs general report is more important than a player's priority event. This is just logic. It might not seem like it, but if GMs waited until other GMs "weren't busy" to exchange routine information, no information would ever get exchanged.

On the other hand - think about what you are going to say to your fellow GMs and keep it short. Don't go off telling another GM who is trying to run a player event how totally cool some player action was. Communicate essentials - deaths, changes in the environment that affect other players, plots that are advancing or failing, etc. If another GM wants more detail because they are handling something in that plot, they'll ask.

The Environment

The *environment* of the game is all the reality that doesn't really exist. The amount of magic in the air is *environment*. Whether or not the City Hall is on fire is *environment*. Green alien troops wandering the streets is *environment*. A change in the exchange rate is *environment*. If you make a change to the *environment*, communicate that information to another GM as quickly as possible.



Keep GM disputes private

I have been in GM groups with tensions, and I have seen GM groups with tensions. I have been in GM groups with staff members who would not speak to each other. Sad but true.

If it is important not to be rude to players, it is doubly important not to have public disputes with other GMs. Events produce a lot of stress, and GM teams tend to be made up of artists with hot tempers. GM groups are usually made up of friends, and often, lovers. Personal break-ups have happened on staff, during runtime, as have all manner of personal quarrels.

Keep it out of the event. And if you can't, then consider removing yourself from the event. There is absolutely nothing more destructive of player morale than an ongoing fight between GMs. Having a fight between lovers or spouses adds a note of personal embarrassment that assures that 1) no one will talk about anything else, including the games plots and 2) anyone with the slightest sensibilities will be so mortified that they will not dare talk to a GM.

Since people who are having relationship problems are unlikely to be able to help themselves, if you are a member of a team that is having such a problem, it is up to you to bring it under control. "Shaming them into behaving" is the standard tactic. I don't know if it is the best or not - it generally allows the event to proceed, but the relationship rarely survives it. Another tactic would be to suggest that both disputants take a four or five hour nap, or get up and watch TV. Ideally, they'll come back, and if they do, with luck they'll have enough sleep to be calm and be able to deal. If one GM does not come back, that may be for the best.

Of course there are a few GMs who simply vent their temper at each other. This just isn't allowable. It makes your group look amateurish, and it mortifies even hardened players. It also insures that everyone's attention is taken away from the game. If a GM on your team begins to lose their temper, you have two options, and you need to exercise them fast. First, and probably best, call a GM conference. Trying to solve the problem is usually destructive and time consuming. GMs usually fight over referee decisions. Try turning the whole thing over to another GM, and get the disputants to try and stay away from each other. Let both disputants tell the "moderator" GM their side of the story. It might help if the most mellow person in your GM group is appointed as "moderator" in advance if you know your group has spicy tempers.

The other option is to knuckle under. If it looks like you are on the brink of a GM yelling match, consider just how likely the game is to belly up and die if you just *give in*. Then count to ten and do it again. If your only choices are a screaming contest, or letting something you think will damage the game happen, consider it *very carefully* - a GM scream fest does damage the game in a big way. I've several times let major events happen that I disagreed with, because it was clear that another GM was going to cause a public scene if I did not. In several circumstances this has involved seeing a player get screwed over very badly by a poor GM decision. I felt terrible. But I would have felt more terrible if twenty players had a terrible time because I had chosen to stand and fight, and ripped the game to shreds. There are very few turning points in a game that brook no reversal. If you really cannot stand the fallout, call a GM conference, and get the entire group to work on setting it straight.

Sometimes you may need to get another GM to back off. Saying "no that's wrong" is a bad thing to do to your colleagues in front of players. Try "Joe, there's something that I need to tell you before you make that ruling...I have to tell you in private because the players don't know." When you get in private say "I'm sorry, I disagree with that decision, but I didn't want to contradict you in front of the players. Let me tell you how I think it should be, and if I can convince you to change your mind, they'll just assume it's because of some metagame point I knew about and you didn't." Even if you have a knock down drag out, at least it won't be in front of players.

There is another facet to the GM disagreement situation. Often, GMs get possessive over characters they have written, and seem to give them unfair advantages. This can become doubly true if a GM has given a character they love to a close personal friend. If you are a member of the writing team, beware of "competitive" GMing, where GMs fight each other with a player as a pawn. This is an area where only communication will work. Do it privately, without the players present. You may need to say "Bob, I think you are giving Grond the Barbarian an unfair advantage. I realize you are really proud of that character, and that you really like George who is playing him, but if you continue to give him extra throwing cats, it is going to wreck the whole dead-cat economy of the game." If Bob hits the ceiling, get another GM involved. If you know that Bob reacts poorly to you, get another GM involved beforehand. Try not to gang up on a single GM. When push comes to shove behind closed doors, GMs are inclined to be ruthless. Just remember this. If a disenchanted player floating around is a mine, then a disenchanted GM is a free-falling nuclear bomb. It is very important to practice the

fine art of compromise. And in the long run, it may be better for one or two players to have a lousy game, than for everyone to have a lousy game.

Obviously, the corollary here is "don't play favorites." A GM is by definition supposed to be fair. Obviously this means, "fair within the game ethos." If you have a PC who is a demigod and can, by design, crush other players like fleas, this means letting them crush other players like fleas.

Pounding the Pavement

Now that we've seen how to work with your fellow GMs, let's look at what to do while you're out there dealing with the players.

Getting through the initial rush

Usually right after the event starts, there is a "cattle call" as players mob Game Central. Good runtime planning can ease this. Get rules out well in advance. Use known mechanics and systems, and rely on experienced players to act as mentors to teach them.

A good rules briefing is essential - if your opening or briefing is boring, you'll just get asked all the questions you answered, because no-one was paying attention to the answers. Have your best speaker run the rules briefing, and always brief from a prepared script. If you plan on audience participation, plan it well in advance. At some events, the players are asked to "pair off" and fight a brief combat against each other, so they know how it works.

Do *not* take random questions during your briefing. Politely...and remember you are making your first impression on your players...ask your players to wait for a question period. Take a few question, but offer to explain technical issues privately. In nearly every briefing there is a player who feels the need to show off their understanding of the rules system by asking questions, or worse pointing out flaws. Be polite and promise to talk to them privately immediately after the briefing. Questions seldom clarify anything for the majority of players.

Immediately after briefing have your team ready for "cattle call."

Most of the questions you'll get at cattle call fall into three categories. First, many players come to complain about some physical property they didn't get. Remember, even if your prep was flawless, there will be players who misunderstand and think they should have an item, special ability, reference, or other piece of paper or



property that they don't. These players will take just as long to resolve as players with *actual* errors or missing paper or props. Don't be sharp with them, however tempted you may be. You'll put a damper on their spirits, and that damages your event.

Second, many players will want rules clarifications. Even if your rules are simple and crystal clear, there will always be someone who didn't understand them, or wants to do something they don't allow for. Don't expect all of this to be handled at the initial player briefing. For example, the player who wants to assassinate the Pope is hardly going to blurt out a question on the "tiara targeting" system at a public rules briefing. Private questions will tend to be on "secret" mechanics - unknown super powers, breaking and entering, hacking, etc. Don't think that if you don't have these systems it will prevent questions on them. Some player will want to know how it is done, and again, even if the answer is "it isn't" you'll have to spend some time explaining that.

Finally, there will be "people" questions. Questions about whether or not a specific person has checked in yet. Questions about relations in character sheets, or about who is playing who. "So is Lady Bzangor my cousin or my aunt...", and self questions "am I a Lieutenant, or a Captain?."

Many players are very reluctant to make introductions without having these questions answered, so even if they seem transparent to you, it is important to answer them right away. Some players are especially reluctant to introduce themselves to a character they "know" in event when they have never met the player before. If you are GMing for players you know something about (and more often than not you will be if you are running locally), a quick bio will help build their confidence - "that's George Stockton - he's a new player, and I don't know much about him, but he knows Ed Black and Joe White. He seems like a very nice fellow, though his character is extremely sinister."

Make Introductions

This is an important sidelight. As a GM, in some ways you are basically hosting a party for ten to two hundred (or more!) people. Odds are, you will know some of them. Try to get acquainted with the ones you don't know early on, and find out something about them. Try to introduce people across groups of friends. This is important for you, because it will keep your event from bogging down as players forsake "character alliances" to hang out with a social group they know and feel comfortable with. It is also just polite. Obviously as gaming gets bigger and bigger, individual GMs will know less and less about the players. If you know that you are

running for a very mixed group, having introductions before event opening might be useful.

Pound the Pavement!

Meaning, circulate! Don't sit behind a desk and hide. Actually, there probably should be one GM who does sit behind a desk, usually a materials person. This GM would be charged with fixing any problems with items, furnishing new cards or other material, handling any interim paperwork (handing out new spell points, healing points, marking damage on combat cards, or whatever other paper impedimenta accompanies your event). Whether or not they take questions is up to your GM team - I favor having the table GM take "resource" questions (does my supplier have Uzis- can I get a card for one?), "off site" questions (my stash is #174, and I'd like the secret documents from it), and perhaps history questions requiring reference to the full background, especially if it is a big event and the printed background is too heavy for every GM to carry. Some big events have had five or six GMs behind a table with an array of computers, papers, and processing bins.

It is important to have GMs who circulate. I really do believe that this is an absolute. A GM staff with a "floor GM to player" ratio of between 1:8 and 1:10 should be able to circulate without being "pinned" by a constant stream of business. In circumstances where I've seen GM groups that stay in one place and make the players come to them, I've invariably seen unhappy players, and drop outs. *If you aren't out there, you aren't running your event!*

Pound the pavement - (have I mentioned that before?...I'll mention it again). Get out there and circulate among the players. I usually start just like I would at a party. On Friday night I wend my way through the function space saying things like "hope your having a good time. I just wanted you to know we're around if you need anything." Or "how are you doing...is there anything you need help with." After the initial rush you still have a lot of work to do. You will have answered questions for all the players that are self confident, and aggressive. Now there will be a number of people with the same questions who didn't approach you. They fall into two categories, experienced and inexperienced or shy.

The experienced player

First, there are experienced self-confident roleplayers, who felt they could get started without bothering you at the busiest time of the evening. "I need to know how to assassinate the Pope, but since I don't have to do it until tomorrow, I

figured I'd ask you when you were less busy." These are your dream players. You owe it to them to seek them out and answer their questions, and it is time effective to do so. By letting them know that they will get answers even if they don't mob the GMs, you insure they'll continue to be respectful of your time all weekend.

The inexperienced player

Second, there are shy players, who didn't feel comfortable asking questions at all. They'll be the hardest to identify, but here is a hint. A new player, who didn't ask any questions, probably has some. If they don't, it is very rare that someone will respond negatively to a polite inquiry from a GM, so ask anyway. As a rule, ask all of your new players how they are doing on Friday night, and let them know to come to you for help. It's common courtesy, and it could save you a lot of grief and frustration on Saturday. New players who feel overwhelmed on Friday night, and aren't confident enough to approach a GM, sometimes drop out without ever telling anyone. In particular, players who come out of a tabletop RPG background may not realize that the GM is the person to go to for "guidance" as well as questions about rules and adjudication. They may feel the GM is a "rival" who will use whatever knowledge they pass along to screw them over in the long run.

Even if a player trusts the GM, they may feel that their question "I don't have any idea what I'm doing" isn't something they can approach a GM with. Watch for people who disguise "I don't know what I'm doing" with a question about the rules. Don't embarrass them of course. But if a question about the rules seems to overlies a more general lack of grasp of what interactive gaming is about, offer help.

Use positive approaches: "You look like you could use a few suggestions on people to talk to and things to do" not "You don't know what you're doing do you?"

"Sometimes a little rough getting started" rather than "You haven't played before, have you?"

Never directly allude to a player's inexperience. For one thing, you could be embarrassingly wrong. People change weight and hair style, or drop out - it is damned embarrassing to have someone reply to "you're not very experienced" with "I've played your last three events." I'm personally terrible with faces, and can meet someone several times, and know them well by name, but not recognize them until I am prompted about where I know them from. Even if you're a wizard with faces, you may not recognize someone. You may also run into a player who has played for years on another "circuit" and quite reasonably takes offense at being considered "inexperienced" because they haven't played in the same events as *you*.

Often the best approach is to simply offer some advice. "Have you met Lord Trogbury yet?" is a good lead in. If you know the character sheets well, you can help introduce players to each other, especially if they are having a slow start. If you direct an inexperienced player to an experienced player you know well, use common sense. Some players like to meet newbies, others have no use for anyone who they don't consider to be another "power player." Direct new players to friendly and receptive people, and if you have to direct them to a player who you know isn't so receptive, give them a lead in. It usually won't wreck the event to go by and whisper "I just sent Lady Trogbury in your direction...I think you'll find she knows some things that will be of use to you." Obviously use your discretion and don't endanger any plots.

Some GMs are very resistant to this sort of "tampering." But take this into account. On Friday, many players will not have fully read their character. If it was mailed months ago, they may not remember it well, and if they just got it they may not have fully absorbed it yet. The player has just become "Lord Trogbury" but the character has been Lord Trogbury for decades - a few metagame hints to facilitate mingling can offset the fact that the player is drastically less familiar with his social situation than the character.

Also consider the relative merits of stretching "game reality" a little to facilitate introductions and get plots into gear, against the necessity of stretching that same game reality to "plug a hole" when a disenchanted new player packs up and checks out of your venue on Friday night. Use common sense, but whenever possible facilitate social interaction just like you were a host at a party.

Batting them back into play

Try and break up "metagame conversation" circles too. All too often four or five very experienced roleplayers will come together on Friday night. They've worked all day, they are tired, maybe they are thinking of dinner. They drop character and begin to talk about past events, gossip, etc. In other words four or five of the dramatic forces that should be driving your event are sitting idle. Don't be a pest or a party pooper. But most experienced players are sensitive to what they should be doing. They paid money and they want to play. A simple reminder "hey, this sounds interesting, but you know there is a gentleman over there looking for General Groznur...and Dr. Schnelling, don't you need to go sell some widgets..." will generally disperse the cluster. A sort of friendly chiding is usually permissible with more experienced players with whom one is on good terms. I've been known to disperse a group of my friends by making "beating motions" and driving them



down the hall saying "go mingle...mingle" in a humorous accent. With experienced players, and personal friends you're the best judge of what will work.

Allow time for socializing and out of game conversation

Have a realistic appraisal of how interesting your event is, and how driven players are going to be to play it. **Don't get sidetracked**

You need to stay in circulation too. As the hours wear on, it will get easy to get sidetracked in one of two ways. Either you'll find a friend and drift away into a metagame conversation, or you'll get attached as a GM to a "big plot."

If you find you are drifting away from the event, you may need a break. Take it. Look at your watch (always, always GM with a watch on!) and give yourself fifteen minutes. You aren't any good to the players if you are burned out beyond repair. But don't sit down and have two hour bull sessions during event, especially not Friday night. You may fool yourself by thinking that if you are sitting chatting with another player you are "accessible," to anyone who needs you. But you are just kidding yourself. You are accessible to the sort of fairly confident player who would have no trouble getting a GM anyhow. Shy players will tend to avoid interrupting you...they will be looking for a "free" GM. Even fairly confident players may assume you are discussing character matters. So take a break, but time yourself, then get back out onto the floor. Remember, the player whose time you are monopolizing is also not getting anything done, and may need a little "push" to get back into play.

Don't spend all your time with one group of players (unless you're supposed to), even if they seem to have a "big plot." This is probably one of the most frequent GM traps, right beside playing favorites among characters. A GM gets involved in running the game for a group of players, especially one that has a lot of special abilities. Councils, secret societies, etc., or even worse two or three players who are playing an intense scene together. Theoretically the GM is there to handle any rules questions, but all too often, the GM is really there to be an audience and cheering section. The GM is gratified to watch characters he or she wrote in action, and the characters are "playing" with the GM, just like they would at a tabletop RPG, and playing to the GM as an audience.

While this is loads of fun, it isn't fair to other players. ***Moreover, it isn't helping the overall success of your event.*** If you have a group that requires full time GM attention, then by all means attach a GM to them. But make it plain to them and the other players that you are doing so. No player likes to be blown off by a GM



saying "I can't help you with that...I'm running Council affairs right now." If you find that you have become permanently attached to a large group, talk to the other GMs about it. If you find you are playing the game with two or three individuals, then bat them and yourself back into play.

Walking the beat

I usually set a "beat" and walk it over and over, from one end of the event space to the other. This is a good way of testing whether or not you are getting too easily sidetracked or spending too much time with any one group of players. If you are walking a beat, and you are not back where you started at least every hour and a half, then you may need to think about how you are dividing up your time. I usually set the start/finish point of my beat at Game Central. That means I can check with the control desk GM at least every two hours to see if there are major event developments I should be aware of. If possible, I try to set the other end of the arc at someplace where there is food and drink, as it gives some incentive to keep moving back and forth.

Using Saturday morning

Saturday morning is a valuable time. Don't waste it relaxing. Your team can probably get by with a slightly lower GM ratio, so if you have GMs on staff who pulled all nighters on Friday getting supplementary work done (ideally you wouldn't have anyone working on Friday night after close, but in some cases you will) let them sleep in late. Set an alarm and a wake up call, and make sure your function space and Game Central open on time. Charge at least two GMs with opening Event Central, because it is possible that one of them will oversleep. Always make sure that you know the room numbers of your entire GM staff (this applies even more so for Sunday morning). There is nothing more annoying than having ten players waiting for a plot that needs to be resolved by Bob, and having Bob oversleeping somewhere in the hotel, out of contact. Players do not take kindly to this, and it can seriously break up the pacing of the event.

Because the players will not yet be up to speed Saturday morning, it will be your chance to get immersed in the event, to find out what is going on, and to try and pick out the slow starters. As the day wears on, you'll spend more and more time GMing critical events (combats, etc.) This means that you'll have less and less time to pursue the things that you should to make the event run smoothly. Get to work right away on Saturday morning. If the GMs are active, the event will become active more quickly for the players as well.



Look for the player who isn't having fun

Once your event is underway, and you are walking your beat, you'll have plenty to do handling questions, and handling any GM intensive rules. But one of your fundamental responsibilities is to look for players who aren't having much fun.

The Disaffected

In an ideal world, every event would be complete, perfect, and have no errors. Every event would be full of riveting material that each player enjoyed a great deal, and no one would ever be lost or bored. Unfortunately, most events aren't perfect. Even the best events, those remembered as "classics" have problems. Often the difference between an event that receives good critical acclaim, and one which goes down in infamy is the attitude of the GM Staff. Some of the "classic" good events have been rife with minor snafus, and problems, often because they were ground breaking and experimental. A friendly GM staff, that has an attitude of cooperation with the players can get players to go along with even shaky material.

Take care of disaffected individuals and groups

Try and deal with groups of disaffected players because they are your event's worst enemy. Two or three players who have dropped character to complain about their event experiences can derail fifteen players who are still on track. Some responsible and mature players realize that the fact they are not having fun doesn't mean that everyone isn't, and if they have problems they can't deal with, leave. Everyone has had a bad part, or a bad casting job, or just a bad weekend. For the most part though, misery loves company. A player who isn't having a good time frequently blames the GMs, and starts working, consciously or subconsciously, to see to it that nobody else has a good time either. Usually, the GMs are at least partially to blame, though players are usually also the author of at least some of their own misfortune as well. If a GM group writes forty characters, there are odds that a few will be mediocre. If a mediocre character meets a player with a low energy level, or a confrontational attitude you've got a problem.

This can be compounded if you are experiencing breakdowns in mechanics, production, or a short staff. But whatever you do, don't ignore unhappy players. Approach them try and find out what is wrong and why they aren't playing. If you give an earnest shot at trying to make them happy, they may not spend the rest of the weekend sitting around trying to torpedo the other players. We'll look at runtime remedies a little later, but for now, it is important to realize that an unhappy player is a walking mood sump, and can suck up a lot of your event's



energy and vitality. No matter whether the player is to blame for their own problems, or your group's material is to blame, you have to make that person at least feel you have made an effort. Otherwise you are basically cutting a mine free to drift through your event, destroying other players morale.

How to handle a disaffected player:

There are five basic steps to successfully handling a player who is not having fun.

1. Acknowledge that the player is dissatisfied.
2. Find out why the player is dissatisfied. This may take some work
3. Let the player know you understand why they are not happy
4. Talk with them, and work out what things it would take to make them happy
5. Agree on steps that you will both take to clear up their problem, and agree that you'll get back together later and check on their progress.

Let players know you've recognized them, and put them in line

This seems simple, but many GMs are very rude to players. Players often tend to be rude to GMs, but a good GM will take that with a grain of salt. If a player tries to get your attention, try to let them know that you've recognized them. If I'm really rushed, I'll sometimes just say "you're first, you're second, and you're third..." Try really hard to stick to the order. If the first thing you were working on looks likely to take a while, quickly check the other players to see if they have a "long question or a short question" and either let them know they need to find another GM, or preferably find one for them.

Treat your players well

Treat your players like valued customers. Try to explain yourself, and never lose your temper. Sometimes GMing means telling players things they don't want to hear. Many players will try to bully the GM into giving them things they want that would not be fair to other players. Act like you are talking to a respected employer - don't ever yell at a player.

Learn to say "no" without being impolite. Usually a polite "I really don't think we can do that" is sufficient. If a player presses, "I'm very sorry, but I have to say 'no'

on this one" is apropos. Don't be harsh, and don't gloat, even if a player request was unreasonable, and you are glad not to have to honor it. Remember - what you say to one player may be overheard by another. And that other player may conclude from a snappy or hostile manner not that the request made of you was unreasonable, but that you need an attitude adjustment. "tude" on the part of GMs can put players off like nothing else.

If you think a player is being unreasonable, say so, politely. You don't have to tolerate an endless stream of unreasonable requests, but you don't have to be impolitic about it. Whenever you refuse on the grounds of policy, make it clear that the policy is yours, but do not try to make the player feel it should be typical. Say "we don't allow that in our event," rather than "no event would allow that!" Chances are, someone, somewhere would allow it, and your player probably knows that.

Never make accusations of cheating

Never accuse anyone of cheating. I've seen only a few circumstances where players were cheating, and its an ugly scene if you are wrong. Even if you know a player cheated, and you know they know, no one will admit to being a cheat. The player will argue until blue in the face, and backed against a wall will have a million reasons why they weren't cheating. IL Rules are almost never watertight enough to make it clear that someone cheated, and because rules vary from event to event the player can always claim they misunderstood, forgot, or whatever. No matter how enormous their transgression is at the time, later on they will be able to claim that you were unfair to them. And a player whom you have accused of cheating is an enemy forever. This might all be worthwhile if it helped the other players, but it usually doesn't. It starts an ugly, embarrassing fight, that leaves everyone wanting to crawl into a hole. It is the one accusation no one can back away from gracefully. Just correct the player who is a cheat, and let them know they'd better not try anything else. Obviously someday you'll have a repeat offender, and have to have that ugly confrontation. But if you accuse someone of cheating, you'd best throw them out of the event right then and there. If you aren't prepared to do that, then make some lesser accusation like "taking advantage" that isn't a challenge to their honor, and doesn't demand an immediate fight. That will let them know you mean business, without stopping the flow of the event. You'll also have some ground for backing away if you realize the fault is with your rules, a different player, or your memory, which after eighteen hours on the floor it may well be.



Handling Problems on the Floor

The question of how much a GM should affect the course of events tends to be put in bleak black and white terms. "Should the GM manipulate the players, or let them choose for themselves." This makes the assumption that the player and the GM are enemies, working towards goals that are mutually opposed.

The player looks for, and expects, guidance. In many interactive events, the GM is referred to as the "Director," for just this reason. The GM knows vastly more about the work, its potential, and its weaknesses, than the player. The GM has a responsibility to guide the player along paths which will yield maximum drama. This does not mean that the GM should drive the player hard. The best guidance is subtle guidance.

In this section, we'll first take an in depth look at how to resolve player problems. Then we'll look at some basic pacing controls for your event, as well as some other important rules for directing from the floor.

Problem Solving Skills

When you have a player problem, you need to use problem solving skills. This is a very basic basic mini-course in problem solving. There are two things you might need to do in response to a problem:

Expand your thinking - you need to do this if the problem is plain, but you cannot see a solution.

Gather information - you need to do this if you cannot get a handle on the causes of the problem

Sometimes you need to get information, and you don't have much time. Here is (roughly) the pattern of questions I ask a player who appears to have a problem

What's not working out for you?

Do you know what's wrong?

What do you need to do that?

Who have you been talking to?

Who have you been working with?

Don't try to solve the problem on the spot. Tell the player that you need to get some information, and if possible tell them a few of the steps you are planning to take - usually to talk to other characters in their plotline, their enemies, an information broker character, or another GM. Ask them to be patient and wait, and try to tell them a realistic amount of time that it will take you to get back to them. Then try and do what you say you will.

You may try and give your player a preliminary lead that will give you more information, even if it doesn't solve the problem - for example telling them to go talk to another character who has peripheral information about their plot, or who you think might be involved.

If your game has something that is a "one shot" diversion, you might suggest they do that while you work on their problem. For example "this is going to take me about an hour. Why don't you go to Madam Fortunato and get your fortune told." You could even send them out of game "look it's going to take me an hour to get an idea of what to do...why don't you go grab lunch (or a shower, or a nap), and I'll try to have this ready by the time you get back. Make sure to come to see me."

Here are some ways to expand your thinking:

Ask the player what they think the solution is

Ask another GM

Ask another, very trusted, player character in the abstract

Pretend for a moment that you are the player...what would you do?

Pretend you are a member of a different GM group...what would they do?

What is the worst thing you could do (this sounds looney, but it sometimes has the effect of producing the obvious corollary - the best thing to do - when you couldn't think of it before.)

For really tough problems, I go to the bathroom and free-associate. I don't necessarily actually go to the bathroom. But elevators and bathrooms are the quietest place in a hotel, and it is amazing what will happen if you get out of the noise. Just sit there, and let your head unfog. Be careful not to fall asleep if you are exhausted.

Sometimes, you need to organize information - you can think of several causes for the problem, but don't know which is correct

Ask your player to tell you everything that has happened in the game so far

Ask a player they are enemies/friends with who is in the same plot to tell you everything that is going on

Re-read their character sheet

Re-read a different character sheet

Re-read any relevant bluesheets

Oh...you may need to have four or five of these processes going on in your head at the same time. And because of the pace of games, and limitations on human endeavor, there is a good chance you'll fail to help your players about 50% of the time. This is why people who think that GMing is going to be an easy power-trip fail rather quickly. A GM should be devoting mental resources full time to helping the players have a good time.

Specific Fixes

A Dangerous Solution - Re-running Actions

When something goes wrong there is a natural tendency to want to set it right. Sometimes this leads a GM to "recall" actions that have already happened - stopping time and reversing it.

Different groups have different rules. The worst groups have no rules or policy at all, but find themselves driven to re-runs by a demanding player, or the whim of a lead GM.

The policy I prefer is "never re-run anything." Re-runs are almost always called to offset some spectacular loss or victory which a lead GM feels has unbalanced the game.

My cold assessment is this. You make a stupid decision and screw one group of players over. Another group wins a victory. The screwed players complain, and bring up some major fact that you overlooked. So you re-run the event. The original group of players now feels mildly vindicated, but is likely still annoyed

with you. A new group of players is extremely annoyed, because they have been hosed by a re-run.

And peripheral players who are affected by the re-run are also annoyed. You go from maybe six annoyed players to maybe sixteen. *This is not a cost effective trade.*

Alternatives to "Re-running" Events

Barter instead. Do something arbitrary to even up the odds, but don't "re-set" time and stop the entire game. Let's say that a player was killed in a group combat because one GM didn't know the character had an item that should have prevented the death. Just be honest with players. Say "I realize the transmogifier should have saved you. I'm very sorry...Bill knew it had that power because he wrote it, and I didn't. We should have been more coordinated. But I can't re-start time for the whole game. I'm going to rule that instead of being dead, your item malfunctioned and only offered you partial protection - you were actually catatonic, with no EEG, but when the paramedics found you, they were able to get you back."

Sometimes you need to tell the other side, sometimes you don't. If the player were very cooperative, you could just put them back in the game - let the other side figure out that they had a powerful item that saved them from what appeared to be certain death. On the other hand, if your fix is very arbitrary, say "instead of plummeting to his death, Fazzik landed in a mattress truck," I tend to think it's best if you just go ahead and tell the other players.

"The GM staff made a mistake. Your Zarf ray shouldn't have been able to kill Fazzik, but because of some information that I didn't know, I made a bad ruling. We can't reset time, but we are going to rule that although he appeared dead at the time, the paramedics were able to save him, so he will be back in the game. I wanted to level with you, and apologize for the problem."

Who to tell is a judgement call. There is no point confessing to any problems you don't have to - for one thing, if some players get the idea that the GM staff is uncoordinated or "soft" they'll start probing for loopholes, and you'll have a lot more players trying to get actions retroactively changed. On the other hand, if it is obvious you had to pull an arbitrary fix, then it may be best to just tell everyone. Remember - most players want the game to go well, and work out. They appreciate honesty, and will try to work with you. They appreciate seeing a fellow player - even an adversary - get a fair break. Because they want to get a fair break when it is their turn.



A fix need not be returning a character to life. A very common problem is that an item gets "cloned." For example, there is an out of game location the "Temple of Grub." At the temple is the Holy Spuzzik. Two GMs run parties going into the Temple at roughly the same time, and both parties come out with the Holy Spuzzik. Fifteen minutes later, another GM finds two groups of very irritated players waving Holy Spuzziks at each other in a threatening manner. This could have been fixed in advance by having one GM responsible for "offsite" actions - but it's too late now.

First, do a quick assessment. One rule to keep in mind is that what the players don't know can't hurt them! Do the players know, *absolutely*, that there can be only one Holy Spuzzik. What if Holy Spuzziks are magical, and reproduce themselves. Perhaps the party that arrived chronologically later took the most valuable object around, assuming it was a Holy Spuzzik.

Don't take this too far. If the players suspect, tell them. But remember that vast sections of the mechanics are not visible to the players. If it doesn't wreck the game entirely, it may be best simply to leave them with the enigma of two Holy Spuzziks. Perhaps the GMs can even work up a little plot around it on Saturday night, to flesh out Sunday morning. The God Spud is low on energy because he has created two Holy Spuzziks, or demands that the holders of the rival Spuzziks duke it out to see who will be the true bearers of the Spuzzik.

Don't get so attached to your pre-set mechanics, that you can't be flexible in order to avoid having to recall actions. In an early run of Le Soiree Finale, I had two groups of players trying to get clues to the location of an out of game stash of weapons. The weapons had been hidden by an arms dealer, who had been murdered. Unfortunately *both* groups got the weapons, because both figured out where they were at roughly the same time, from different clues. At first I was worried. It would have been a lot more fun if the GMs had realized the players were arriving to claim the weapons simultaneously, and had a confrontation. But we hadn't and the players were off doing other things now. I checked and realized that neither group had any way of knowing that the weapons the other group had were the same cache. So I simply decided the arms dealer had had two different caches. A few of the players thought the resolution had been kind of easy, but they had fun anyway. If I had tried to "fix" the continuity error, I would have had two angry groups of players, as well as angering any other player that they had sold arms to since. I noted the error, and fixed it in subsequent runs.



The point is to be creative, and not automatically panic just because an event happened that contradicts the set game framework. Players had usually rather have a few continuity errors than have objects confiscated.

If there isn't any alternative, level with the players, and try to give a consolation prize. "We realize that you couldn't have gotten the Holy Spuzzik. So we are going to rule that the artifact you got is the Holy Snarg, a slightly less powerful, but formidable, artifact." Players who are given a consolation prize are less likely to become irritable than players who are retroactively screwed, and given nothing. Obviously, in some rare, terrible, cases there is no worthy consolation prize. But try, and you'll likely think of something. The important thing is to communicate to the players that you are sorry about the error, and want to try to restore play balance.

Some GMs are very thick about the concept of consolation prizes. If you have to take something from a player, or rule adversely against them, *always* try and give them a little something in return.

The Dreaded "Style" Re-run

GMs will occasionally decide to re-run a scene because of some missed connection that would have been a "really great moment." Such as the warehouse confrontation I mentioned above. I've never done this, but if you think it's a good idea, go ahead. Just make damn sure the players also think it will be a "really great moment" or you will have some exceedingly pissed off players. If players are annoyed at having actions recalled because of mechanical errors, they are *furios* at having actions recalled at the whim of a curious GM.

If *everyone* who could be affected by the re-run is cool with it, go ahead and give it a shot - but be *very* sure everyone is 100% on the concept.

Obviously this rule isn't as true for light or comic events as for drama. If the stakes aren't high, or the reset would merely provide an opportunity for an amusing confrontation, go ahead and run with a loose hand.

Some Good Ideas for Fixing Problems

There is no universal guide to fixing problems. The more devices for problem solving written into a game in advance the better. But there are a few universal types of problem, and a few nearly universal fixes:

Player Lost

- The player doesn't have anyone to play the game with.
- Make introductions to someone that is critical to their plot.
- Direct them to a player who needs help with something, and suggest their skills might be of use.
- Give them an item or skill that makes them valuable to the other players, and drop the information that they have this skill with an information broker character.

Plot running too slow

- Give the information broker a major hint
- Use an out of game device (a chief or controller, or contact for example)
- Give the character knowledge bluesheets they didn't have
- Engineer a "serendipitous" discovery that sets the players ahead

Plot running too fast

- Uncover a logical complication "now that you have the spell deciphered, you realize you'll need a bigger power source."
- Sidetrack the players with a peripheral crisis requiring their attention
- Give the players rivals some advantage that will allow them to slow the players down (be very careful here)

Players have played/been written into a corner

- Either through sloppy writing, or some major inadvertency in the game, players have no means of accomplishing their goals
- Find new goals (someone who needs help, for example)
- Invent a new way of doing something "hey, according to this ancient manuscript, you can actually *make* a new magical energy source if you have the right components."

Designing Pacing Controls for your Event

One real problem with run time is that you can't think straight. You are bombarded with problems, questions and background noise. You are tired, and you are trying to track a thousand things. Good GMs usually build a set of back doors into their game that allow run-time corrections without disrupting the flow of events.

Some examples of these include: interventionistic deities, corporations, governments, or other non-player powers, information brokers, sites or characters that act as information brokers, and various "item sources" which periodically introduce new materials into the game.

The concept of "cast" has added an entirely new dimension to pacing controls. A cast is the perfect pacing control. The cast can pass among the players and do any number of things. Drop off items or information. Instigate fights, or stop them. Give dire warnings or administer threats.

It is odd to say that players will accept these things at face value from cast in a way that they would not if the GMs tried to "describe" the event, or even roleplayed the participants. Players instinctively understand that cast may be agents for other players who have the ability to act behind the scenes, or may be taking roles too shallow or uninteresting for a player. But they don't *resent* being affected by cast the way they would resent being affected by a GM, or a single GM run NPC. Perhaps part of this is that cast players often do not stay around to gloat afterwards, so it is easier to accept them as pure "outside forces," and harder to personalize them as adversaries.

Let me give an example here. In an early event I played, the GMs had gotten a friend to NPC a character who was, essentially, "The Devil." As an NPC he had a pacing function - he made sure that certain "evil" players did not succeed too wildly, and allowed the GMs a way to put a damper on their activity. The actual effect however was that the character who should have had the experience of being one of the leaders of the "bad guys," felt like nothing more than a trivial minion. This is because he had the almost constant personal attention of his powerful boss. And the NPC felt the need to be witty and clever, which quickly got irritating for the involved players.

In more recent events I have seen very powerful "bosses" portrayed by cast without much resentment. Whether they were fantasy deities, or New York mob bosses. Because they showed up only when necessary, and left as soon as they had made an impression. Players don't mind being *acted on* by a powerful outside force. They like it better if that force is personified by a cast character. But they like it *less* if that cast character hangs out to trouble and mock them. Effectively that makes them just another player - a player that they are "losing" to.

It is better to use an existing device to help a player than to simply intervene as a GM. Unfortunately, all too often GMs forget about their devices in the strain of the game. I suggest you keep a list, divided into three categories:



- 1) Devices for getting information out
- 2) Devices for giving players help
- 3) Devices for wasting players time/slowing down plots.

Here are some examples:

Devices for getting information out:

- "Deep Throat," a telephone informer who occasionally phones an anonymous tip to one of the players.
- "Joey the shoeshine boy," a cast member who always knows the dirt on everyone, and will reveal it for a price.
- The Bulletin Board - a white board or corkboard in Game Central which is used for posting gossip.
- The Newspaper - an actual newspaper printed by the GMs every four to six hours

Devices for giving players help

- "Saint Ambrose" is a patron who occasionally intervenes to those who offer up significant gifts at the temple
- "The Shop" is a shadowy network of agents and contacts who can occasionally provide services or goods to a specific player or group of players.
- "The Arms Merchant" is a cast who might provide heavy weaponry - for a price or a promise. Or for mysterious reasons of his own.
- "The Master" is a wandering swordsman/gunman/whatever who for reasons understandable only to himself will fight loyally on a side for a limited period of time.

Devices for wasting players time/slowing down plots

- "Cutter," is a cast character with a pickpocket ability who operates at the orders of a GM-NPC. The character will sell important items back of course - for a price or a service.
- "The Oracle" is a cast character who must be consulted as to the propitious time to perform certain rituals
- Testing can always reveal an inadequate or under-powered element in a device, ritual, or plan, which requires some special action to correct.

Remember that it is also always better to give a partial answer or a hint, than a pre-packaged solution. It is also important to make it clear that Deus ex Machina will work only once or twice. Otherwise, entire segments of the game economy will become devoted to propitiating a GM plot device, rather than solving problems.

In an early run of *RMS Titanic* insane amounts of money were offered to a particular servant NPC by players who were well endowed with cash, but did not care to expend the energy to track down their own solutions to problems.

Putting the brakes on and giving gas - controlling the Pacing

Sometimes players do too well, and risk bringing plots to an early conclusion that could effectively demolish the game. A well plotted game does not have single plots that could bring the game crashing down, but you may not always be floor GMing a well plotted game.

Obviously the first question is "is this as important as I think it is." Often something that one GM feels will "ruin the game" is just a case of the GM having a preconceived notion about how the plot will work out. Get a second and third opinion from other players. Remember, any time you are intervening against players, you may be considered to be acting unfairly. In some games, where the emphasis is competition, such GM intervention may not be a possibility. In more drama-oriented games, however, GMs usually have a set of devices available for controlling the pacing of the game.

Try player cooperation first. Say a group of players has just come to you and said "we're ready to shoot the Hierophant." It is 4pm on Saturday, and most of the game is at dinner.

First, ask yourself "does it matter if they shoot the Hierophant now?" You decide that it does. The Hierophant is supposed to preside over the Gnurl Festival at 6pm. The player will be very disappointed if she doesn't get to preside. The event, which is critical to several plots, may crumble, and be replaced by nothing.

You suggest "Well...after the Gnurl Festival, the Hierophant has to process out of the Cathedral. That would be a good time to kill her." Nine chances in ten the player goes along with you.

Occasionally, players are resistant to GM pacing suggestions. Find out why. It may be possible to cut a deal in metagame terms. For example the players might say

"we need to assassinate her right now, because the Verginti Plartz will explode at 5:45 if we don't."

You might just come out and confess that you need the Hierophant in play until 6:00 and promise to delay the explosion if the players are cooperative. Some GMs hate to do this sort of bartering, but if a quick metagame discussion with a cooperative player can help the event dramatically, and save hours of GM *deus ex machina*, I feel it is almost always worth the trade.

In some cases, you may not dare to give away metagame information, and you are forced to use a plot device for braking the game. There are as many different devices as there are game plots. General Emergencies, confrontations, unexpected out of game news, etc. This is why keeping a list is handy. If you are floor GMing for a group that isn't organized well enough to have a list, try and ask enough questions to get one together Friday before the game starts, or at the Friday night GM conference.

One thing I recommend avoiding is simply putting the players on a "delay." The bomb expert plants the bomb, set to go off in the middle of dinner. The GMs, who have never thought this far ahead realize that as written, this will kill everyone in the game. So rather than actually deal with the situation, they arbitrarily delay the explosion until the hall has cleared. Never mind that this wrecks the plots and fortunes of the characters that put the bomb there. For the most part this falls into the category of "planning ahead," but if a situation like this does occur, come up with a solution, do not sidestep the question.

Changes on the Fly can Cause Problems

Any plot or item that you "jury-rig" in runtime will be several times more likely to have unforeseen implications, complications, or problems than something you thought out ahead of time. This doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. But when a brief metagame conversation, or simple extension of a character plot/item/special ability will do the trick, don't do anything elaborate.

It is better to "jury-rig" in downtime than on the fly. There is still room for mistakes, but at least you can workshop ideas with other GMs.

When the rules do not apply

Eventually, you'll hit a spot where your rule system doesn't apply, and you frankly don't know what to do. You have three options:



- 1) Make something up. That's fine if both players are decent fun loving sorts who are likely to go along with you amiably.
- 2) Get the players to help. Life doesn't come to an end if you admit you don't know something. If you are standing there going "hummmmm" it is probably pretty damn obvious to your players that combat between a potted geranium and a giant radioactive preying mantis isn't in your combat rules. Try asking each player "what do you think should happen?" You'll be amazed how often they both answer the same thing. It is a game after all. Some players resent being asked, but most are all too eager to have a say in deciding their own fate. Often a player who is obviously at a disadvantage will admit it up front. At worst, you will have delineated two possible choices.
- 3) Roll dice. Carry dice with you. Always, even if your system has nothing to do with dice. Iscosahedral (percentage) dice are the universal equalizer, and they are smooth to fit into the pocket. They are the universal antidote to things that aren't in the rules. Players generally like the fact that you are at least giving them each a chance, and they will blame luck, not you, if the roll goes against them. Often, you can simply assign one player high, and another low, and roll the dice. The winner gets to realize their vision of "what should happen."

Sometimes its more complicated. I might say "hmm...well we don't have rules for what happens if you mix a polymorphic phased weapon blast and a baryonic pulse...you're trying to destroy the alien so I'm going to say on 1-40 it works, on a 41 to 60 it does some damage but not enough to stop the alien, above sixty it fails, and above ninety it blows up in your face..."

When Solutions Fail

Some player problems are things you cannot help. For example a player confesses that in real life "I'm on Lithium, I just broke up with my boyfriend, and my dog was run over by a Zamboni." Offer polite consolation. Find out if the person wants to keep playing. If they do, but just don't have the ability to keep up with their plots, you may want to have a brief metagame word with other people in their plotline "Joan is still in the game (or has decided to drop out of the game), but she's rather upset, and doesn't have much energy. I wanted to give you a warning. You may want to check up on her, but I'm afraid that getting the Maltese Iguana is going to be mostly your task. If there is something we can do to make up for it, I'll try though I can't promise anything."



There is a time to cut a player loose

As sad as it is, not everyone can have a good time in a game. Don't spend more than a half hour to an hour on any one player unless you are making constructive progress. Give them your best advice and help, then keep moving. You may feel guilt as their sad, forsaken eyes beg you to stay for a while longer. But you've got a responsibility to everyone who has paid. A player who is a real basket case, especially for emotional reasons, can tie up a GM for the entire game. I have seen players who essentially acquired a member of the GM staff as their personal, full time, play partner- essentially playing the game for them, while they tagged along to watch. Even if this keeps the player happy, it isn't fair to everyone else. A player who won't act on any initiative without direct GM input is not going to make it no matter what you do for them.

Sometimes one player is more important than another.

As fair as we might like to be, it happens. When you have to prioritize on the basis of importance, try to make it clear to your player that it is the character and the event that are more important, not the player him or herself. Try to prioritize without offending "this affects a lot of people - let me keep the game moving for them, then I'll get back to you" rather than "John is more important than you."

Other miscellaneous tips and hints:

Stay away from other GMs

Two GMs talking is a player who is not getting attention. You'll need to unwind occasionally. Time yourself, then get back to work.

Remember your responsibility to the venue

Some GMs get so caught up in GMing they forget where they are. Remember that you are usually responsible, either to a lead GM, or a host convention. As a GM, part of your job is to be a traffic cop - because the players certainly won't be. You carry the implicit authority to shoo players out of hallways, or other areas where they shouldn't congregate, quiet players who are being too noisy for the venue, and so on. Don't be a shrew about it, but bear it in mind.

Keep your breath fresh

Keep your breath fresh. There is nothing more disgusting on Sunday morning than a GM with bad breath. Remember, when you have been up for sixteen hours, your breath may not have that minty fresh quality it did when you awoke. Keep Tic-Tabs in Event Central, and use them.

Pair off to run combats

Usually GMs work solo. If you have a big combat, or other mass action, try and split it up in order to make it move faster. Have one GM work one side, and another work the other, or split up the room left and right.

Don't disappear

If you are going to be gone for a while, let your fellow GMs know. This includes being closeted with players as well as taking a break. This is important, because if the entire staff doesn't know you are offline, they may waste time looking for you.

Try and be helpful if you have to cross ref to another GM.

Telling a player to see another GM can seem dismissive and arbitrary. Try to tell a player why. "I'm sorry, Bertram has been handling the plot with the guppy-powered launch vehicle. I'd like to help you, but I'd just make mistakes, and we'd end up having to re-run actions, and making you miserable. Bertram knows more about it than I do."

How long will it take me to be an experienced floor GM?

Before 1990 floor GMing was not even a science. Event writing was considered to be the pinnacle of achievement, and the actual of presentation of events was a sort of incidental adjunct to writing. Even now, far more has been written about writing than about runtime GMing, but groups are at least conscious of their run-time profile, and put thought and effort into it. We can say that it takes less time now to learn to be a good floor GM than it did in 1990. Why?

First, writing and production are better evolved. Most events get produced more or less on schedule, and while missing material on Friday night is still extremely common in first run events, the events are in general better planned and developed. That means GMs spend more time practicing fine tuning skills, and less time doing triage and disaster control.

Second, there are many more examples. In 1988, there weren't more than a handful of groups, and most of them were in the dark ages as far as run time skills. With dozens of groups, some very customer service oriented, there are good and bad examples, and that very much helps. The ILF community has played a large part in the exchange of knowledge. As an ILF member, look for panels, group discussions, build-your-own-event events, and socials as opportunities to trade valuable information with other GMs. By trading information about what does and doesn't work, we can keep from reinventing the wheel. That means that every successive generation of GMs will start out at an advantage, as knowledge makes up for experience.

VII. Post-Runtime

Most GMs have the silly notion that the event is "over" when they finish with the closing ceremony (or what have you). On the contrary, I've seen at least one event that had some trouble, but was overall well received by the players picked to pieces because of bad cloture, and I've seen one event which frankly sucked redeem itself with a "Dead Dog" party good enough most of the players left with a good feeling. Nobody cites it as a great event, but most people don't talk about what a crappy time they had (and some of them had a pretty crappy time). I've also seen one event which went so badly that the GMs were advised they'd best not show up at their own Dead Dog...and they didn't.

The Dead Dog

The "Dead Dog" party is a tradition at Theatre Style events, and it is rapidly becoming common at other types of event. It is a way to make sure that in the hours immediately after your event - when memories are slowly seeping down and being stored - the players are fairly "up" and happy. A "Dead Dog" will probably form spontaneously if you don't organize one. This is often accompanied by much cutting in and out of certain people, and confusion, missed directions, and consternation. Not surprisingly, many players don't differentiate between the lousy time they had finding their friends for dinner after the event, and the time they had at your event. It probably won't turn a peak experience into a bad experience, but it could mean a player who had a mediocre time remembers the event badly instead of fondly.

A Dead Dog isn't too hard to arrange for a forty player event. Call a local restaurant which can handle large parties, and advise them when to expect you. Since most dead-dog parties are at about 2-3pm, which is the deathly slow afternoon, most restaurants are *delighted* to have forty diners at that time. The



Bertilucci chain has proven a good choice in Maryland, and has many national locations. The John Harvard chain proved a good choice after Intercon XIII. Various diners in New Jersey have proven slow, but otherwise decent choices. *Don't descend on a restaurant unawares.* Check to see if the restaurant can take a party of 30-40 a few weeks beforehand, and call in reservations on Friday. Even if the restaurant says "just come in no problem" call about two hours beforehand, and alert the manager.

Needless to say, you need to be in the \$10-20 range for most events - preferably a place where there are burger or similar entrees in the \$6.95 range. Bertilucci's works well because they serve pizza which includes white pizza, and vegetarian pizza, as well as Italian entrees. Attempts at a Mexican restaurant for another event worked less well - not everybody eats Mexican. Consider the same to be true of Chinese. Likewise avoid extremely cheap eats. Denny's and Shoney's are just *too* greasy for some people. The last thing you need is a "counter dog" party where a group of diners decide to "go elsewhere." Pick a good family restaurant, with a wide menu selection.

Plan your Dead-Dog and have maps available for players. This is your last chance to make an impression, soothe ruffled feathers, and make sure your players leave with a good impression of your event. Don't try to "run" your Dead Dog party. Just move from group to group. Say "thank you" a lot, and tell the players how good they did. If the game was at all a success, then you have a lot of very legitimate "thank you's" to say, and you'll be telling the truth when you tell the players how good they did. Call attention to players you think got missed "Ed had a great scene, but John and I were the only ones who saw it!" They'll appreciate it, and other players are often eager to hear from a GM what went on behind the scenes, while if Ed tried to tell his own story, they would have no interest.

If a player is being critical, try to let it roll off. If they keep going, try to head them off "Gee I think you have a lot of good insights into how to improve this game, but I've got to be honest and tell you I'm too tired to make much of them right now. Why don't we get together sometime in a week or so, and you can tell me all about it." Sometimes you can actually help your game by listening to bitching at the Dead Dog. Try saying "hmm...that's interesting...come over here and tell me about it where it's quiet." At that point, at least they're only bitching to *you* not twenty other people who are still forming impressions. Don't let yourself get defensive. There will be criticism. Most players know enough not to criticize a GM immediately after a game, but not all do, and overreacting just leaves a bad impression on everyone who sees it. Sometimes you can lead a player that wants to talk about how rotten some aspect of the event was off by trying to get them



talking about some scene they had, or some action they took instead. Also, be reasonable. If well-known complainer A is bitching about the event, and being roundly ignored, don't feel the need to make everyone uncomfortable by being confrontational. Fortunately, if the event went well, you won't need to do much spin control at the Dead Dog party.

For a four or six hour event, dinner afterwards might still be possible. Another alternative is a "Dead Dog" at the site, with some chips and dip, and some wind-down time. This isn't always possible, especially with events running late, but when it is possible, it helps create and maintain the community atmosphere.

Afterwords

Stay in contact with your players afterwards. A simple e-mail message the Monday or Tuesday after a run saying "thank you" can help to clench the impression you made, and make the players feel you appreciated them. This is also a good chance to thank anyone who went "above and beyond" during the run of the event.

Don't be grudging in your thanks, and don't hesitate to thank people you don't like. Heck, they probably don't like you either, so if they went the second mile for your event, you owe them *double* thanks. Not everybody likes everybody personally, but that shouldn't eclipse decency and professional conduct when dealing with events.

- Prices as of Summer 1998, in the DC Washington area - you may need to modify for inflation.

Good Manners and Hard Times

Nobody made me the arbiter of what is and is not in good taste and good manners in the live roleplaying community. But I've devoted a fair amount of time to producing a useful and impartial guide to the art for you, so now I'll diverge and offer a few personal suggestions.

From time to time hard times come to the country and to the industry. In 1991-92 people lost jobs, and those who didn't often had to work longer hours to cover for hiring freezes, or layoffs. That meant less time to spend on entertainment. Trips became more problematic.

The result was a lot of hard feelings. People who had played events a year ago failed to show - and their friends felt angry and betrayed.



The lesson here is that you should not take it personally if someone cannot make it to your event. If you're hurting and you need someone to show, ask them as a personal favor, and offer to help them with something in exchange. It isn't fair to make your event an "obligation" that everyone "must" attend.

The counter responsibility is that you are not a star. Do not sit back and wait for people to give you a personal invitation to events to prove that you are important. If you are interested in an event, say so. Even if you can't pay right then, let the organizers know you are excited and supportive.

There are also some obligations that go with being an event organizer that do not go with being a player. If you organize your own events, at least some of your fellow event organizers that show up will be doing so out of professional courtesy. That is to say that they are showing up to support you, not because they are particularly excited about your event. Certainly, you hope that your event will be its own reward - they'll have a good time and be glad they came.

But you also incur a counter responsibility. Within reason you should attend their events. That doesn't mean skipping your anniversary, or your grandmother's funeral to turn out at all costs. But it does mean trying to show when you can, and if you can't show, it would probably be polite to mention to the producers that you are otherwise obligated and wish you could show.

You also have a responsibility to return favors of help. This does not mean that if someone loaned you a few props you are responsible for being the primary producer for their next event. But it does mean that you should remember who has helped you, and try to return the favor.

Finally, the price of having "earned your stripes" is not to sit back and rest on your laurels. After you've run a half dozen productions you may find it comparatively easy to get help. Other, newer, members of the community won't. It's your duty to try to reach out and offer them a helping hand. Advice is good, but they probably need your help in recruiting cast, rounding up props, and producing materials more than they need your advice. They may or may not want your help writing. If they do, and you feel willing, go ahead. But if they don't it is best not to take umbrage. Good drama is driven by a strong internal vision - let them go in the direction they want, and give them the help they need.

The Live Roleplaying community is dependent on help and volunteers for much of its success. As events become more and more dependent on "cast" this will only increase. Polite behavior and professional courtesy keep the community going



around. None of us is perfect, but if we all try to act decent, the results will tell and make your local community a more enjoyable place to be.

IIX. Background and History

A Quick History of Theatre Style

I'm a firm believer in foundations. We'll start with a look at the origins of "theatre style" gaming.

Before Theatre Style, there was Live Combat, and "Assassin:" My personal thesis, which is increasingly borne out by evidence, suggests that organized modern live roleplay had two "explosions," both fueled by a media event.

In 1978 and 1979, we can theorize that there were a few handfuls of over-educated college kids playing Live D&D on college campuses. We know that a few years before a simple "tag" game called "The Live Ring Game" was published, which made Tolkien's three book saga into a sort of team live combat game. You won't find the "Live Ring Game" around today - it was a violation of the copyrights of the Tolkien estate, and the product was pulled from production.

Live roleplay was a closet phenomenon. Then in 1979 a University of Michigan student with the unlikely name of James Dallas Egbert III disappeared, and the information got out to the press that his disappearance *might* be linked to a group of students who played *live D&D* in the steam tunnels beneath the university. The disappearance turned out to be unrelated to roleplaying, or the TSR product "Dungeons and Dragons," but the case provided the "basis" for Rona Jaffe's fictional work *Mazes and Monsters* set at "Grant University in Pequod, Pennsylvania." Jaffe's 1981 book portrayed a fictional case similar in appearance to the Egbert case - instead of an intriguing side detail, however, in Jaffe's book the roleplaying game is the basis for trouble. Many more people are familiar with the fictional version in Jaffe's book, and in the subsequent movie, than have any remembrance of the actual facts in the case. After Egbert committed suicide, the investigator who found him, William C. Dear published his factual account as *The Dungeon Master*, in 1984. Dear states categorically that it was not a factor in Egbert's decision to flee his family and live underground.

Strangely, a number of Live Combat groups trace their origins to the years 1979 and 1981-82. Treasure Trap at Peckforton Castle in the UK is often cited as the "first" Live Combat Group (rec.games.frp.live-action FAQ), however no dates of origin are given. We can assume that while Treasure Trap may or may not have



been "the first" group to do live roleplay with padded weapons, we can assume that at least in the UK it refined a random phenomenon into an actual system. However, the news, rather than any particular group, seems to have led to the genesis of Live Combat Roleplaying. All across the english-speaking world, D&D playing kids heard about the Egbert disappearance and thought not "how scary" but "they were playing live D&D in the steam tunnels - how *neat* - I bet we could do that!"

And during all the time that this was arousing righteous societal indignation at Dungeons and Dragons, it was also catapulting TSR into the limelight. I bought the game because my father read about the case, and being a liberal sort and a J.R.R. Tolkien fan, thought the game sounded interesting. Every adult rant and polemic was free promotion for a company that, despite bankruptcy, still holds the largest marketshare (34.25%) in the Roleplaying game business (source April 1998, Comics Retailer, page 24).

So we have two explosions of live combat groups - a number of groups in the late 70's, often with membership drawn from an existing local medievalist group. The early groups tended to fight "battles" and modeled themselves as much after the Society for Creative Anachronism's activities such as the "Pennsic War" than after Egbert's exploits. The "second generation" of groups took the idea further.

The influence of the Medievalist phenomenon - typified by the "Society for Creative Anachronism, or SCA" on live roleplay should not be underestimated. Well before Egbert took to the steam tunnels, the SCA were doing a type of live roleplay of their own. Huge events with fighting, feasts and entertainment were run at dozens, eventually hundreds of locations. And though these folks didn't have plots, and sometimes looked down their noses at the rising tide of "fantasy" medievalists, they had one thing in common with live-roleplayers. They took a name that wasn't their own, and made up a background, called a "persona." Like it or not the SCA was roleplaying, and they were doing it in vast numbers.

At around the same time the game "Killer" was published, and a number of other [ref T.A.G. and Gotcha] similar systems came out. Live Action "Assassin" is the forgotten grandsire of most theatre style games. These events were run on college campuses, and despite invectives from the authorities, and problems with students sneaking around campuses with dart pistols, they were wildly popular.

However, they quickly became outlawed, and aficionados needed to find some way to continue play that was less frightening and threatening to the authorities and their communities, or stop playing. A logical step was to come up with a



mathematical "combat" system similar to that used in tabletop RPG - players who found each other could resolve combat using dice. The problem is that stalking someone with an index card of stats isn't very exciting. So the next step becomes adding some plots so that there is something more interesting to do than walk around comparing cards. Theatre style gaming is born.

In 1982, Walt Freitag and some friends at Harvard University "invented" what they called "interactive literature." Like *Treasure Trap*, they didn't precisely invent a new form of live roleplay. Their undeniable contribution was to build a "standard" event which would serve as a model. Freitag called his group the "Harvard Society for Interactive Literature," which was shortened to "Society for Interactive Literature" the next year. The MIT Assassins Guild formed around the same time, and focused on "Assassin Games," at least initially, though by the mid eighties it had branched into live fantasy gaming. The group began running a convention for live games in 1985 called "Silicon," and at the first Silicon they advertised the SIL as a membership organization. It is unclear exactly who and where the concept originated. There are several accounts offered in early editions of the ILF (then SIL) periodical *Metagame*, and in the program books for early SILiCONs (now *Intercon*). Unfortunately the accounts are "mock serious" and diverge both along lines of comedy and consistency. It is safe to assume the concept predated the initial run of *Reklone I* by six months to a year.

Live Action Gaming, particularly Assassin gaming was not unknown to society at large in the early 80s. The film *Gotcha!* (1985) profiled the "Assassin Game" phenomenon. Certainly *Gotcha!* must have inspired growth in the Assassin games genre. It would also be incorrect to assume that the genre is dead. *Killer!* a live action rules system for Assassination gaming by Steve Jackson Games is being re-released in 1998 in a 4th edition.

By 1988, the "Live Roleplaying" phenomenon was embedded enough in SF/Fantasy culture to inspire a science fiction novel. Larry Niven's *Dream Park* codified the concept, adding high tech bells and whistles, and an enormous budget - the first depiction of Live Roleplay as the "entertainment form of the future."

The ILF

As the predecessor to the ILF, the SIL had a turbulent history. Largely this was because of an unspoken, and to a large extent unrecognized, difference of opinion between the groups founders, especially Rick Dutton and Walt Freitag, as to what the SIL represented. From 1985 to 1988, there was some question as to what the



SIL was. It was a membership organization, which began selling memberships for \$5.00 in the program book for SiliCon I in 1985. Yet it was also a gamewriting collective, identified with Walt Frietag, Rick Dutton, and a few others.

In Metagame vol. 1, no. 1, in summer 1988, Rick Dutton said *"The Society for Interactive Literature, as an organization, will write no more games. Desitny has called and we've answered....We are rededicating ourselves to serve as a clearinghouse for news, services and theory on the art and science of interactive literature. Our newsletter will publishe ads and previes of coming attractions, reviews of previous games...stories and articles on the theory of game-writing, game playing and interactive literature in general....We will also provide help for new gamemasters, both at our conventions and elsewhere...The Society's membership will be the same as it has always been: those players, gamemasters, and spectators with an interest in the future of interactive literature."*

However in Fall (Metagame v. 1 no. 2) Walt Frietag wrote of the SIL in terms of a gaming system and organization. A number of the early or founding members felt the SIL should function as an extension of the initial writing group - and almost all favored making the SIL a sanctioning body, similar to IFGS, but without the genre and proprietary rules set that provides the rationale for the IFGS to function in that regard. In 1988, the organization elected a Board of Directors at a mass meeting in New Jersey.

The result was turmoil. Fundamentally the SIL was progressing from being a student organization - little more than a private club - to being a managed non-profit concern. Given the fact that neither the founders, nor newcomers had experience in management, or in how to effect a transition, the result was bound to be painful and disharmonious. Frietag became disenchanted with the organization he had helped to form in 1990, after a fellow officer resigned with feelings that she had been unfairly treated. At a tense Board meeting in Annapolis MD, Frietag asserted a proprietary claim to the name "Society for Interactive Literature." The Board of Directors moved to change the name, and the Interactive Literature Foundation was born.

Eventually most of the founders broke from the organization, several including Dutton resigning from the Board of Directors in 1991, and operating a rival organization under the old SIL name, which issued a version of Metagame sporadically for about three years thereafter.

Lest the author should appear to be re-writing history, I should note that I had a hand in the problems of the SIL during my board term from 1989-1990. Young,



and without adequate business learning or manners, I doubtless made as many immature and poor judgements as any other participant in the debate. Above, I've tried to more or less outline the two basic threads of progress in the organization - towards and away from being a core writing and production group. But by no means should this be taken as villification of anyone involved. Certainly frustrated as I may have been at the time, in historical retrospect it seems that both Rick Dutton and Walt Freitag tried very hard to do the right thing, amid pressures from many different sides, and different basic understandings of what the organization was to accomplish.

Launched into the failing economy that would culminate in the 1992 recession, the new organization dealt with the usual painful pangs of small group politics and rivalries, but stabilized by the middle of the decade under a new management structure modeled on successful non-profit organizations. The ILF launched newsstand sales of its magazine, "Metagame" in 1997, and is rapidly growing to be the leading impartial voice for all types of Live Roleplay. The author had the privilege of being present for many of the early events in the organization's history, and acting as President of the organization from 1995-1997.

The Creation of Theatre Style.

The fact is that an idea whose time has come often enters the market through several outlets. Howe and Singer invented a nearly identical sewing machine independently. The importance of the "turning point" innovators shouldn't be underestimated. Few "inventors" make up something from scratch. The television that Philo Farnsworth in 1926 invented wasn't the first scanning electronic device, and it wasn't even to be the first production television. But it was the television that would enter hundreds of millions of homes over the next five decades.

The refinement of "theatre style" events is still murky. Within a few months of Freitag's first successful public game "Rekon", at the Boskone Science fiction convention in Boston Massachusetts, another group in Maryland ran a similar event. For the next eight years, "Rekon-type" games would be identified with science-fiction fandom.

Obviously other people in other places were running similarly plotted games at the same time. Tracking the theatre style "meme" may be a pointless activity, but it explains a great deal about the growth, distribution, and comparative quality, of various events and systems.



Just like most live combat groups eventually have a trail leading to the "meme dispersal" of the Egbert disappearance, most radically similar groups have a trail leading to science fiction conventions, and ultimately an event spurred by "Rekon" meme. Often the trail is faint - someone running a live combat game heard from a friend about a theatre style game run at some convention he or she had attended.

One big exception is "Murder Mysteries." No single event seems to have spurred groups to start running live murder mysteries. But they did, and by the early nineties they were big business in some locations.

The modern "theatre style" event is more complex than its "Rekon descended" ancestry. To me, modern "theatre style" is the ultimate genre.

Most new arts have a geographic home, and few have founders. Bill Haley may have been the first artist to found a "Rock and Roll" band, but the rising of Rock and Roll from the ferment of Dixieland, Motown Jazz, and Big Band was an inevitability that went beyond Haley, and captured the hearts of millions.

The "Theatre Style" monicker is a random one, and could just as well be replaced by any other. It isn't terribly accurate, and it isn't terribly historic. The first widespread use of the term occurred after the ILF's Interaction I Leadership Convention in 1995.

The form was changing in the early 1990s, and the change has been dramatic. A traditional "Theatre Style" game run in 1994 would be clearly identifiable to most players as an event very much in the same mold as Walt Frietag's "Rekon I." Despite a vastly larger "standalone" site (i.e. one not affiliated with a science fiction convention), drastically more complex plots, and more player input, the event was structurally very similar to its predecessor.

The years from 1994-1998 have seen an explosion in the quality, complexity, and dispersal of the Theatre style event. 1998 will mark the first British convention devoted solely to hosting Theatre Style events.

In 1997 and 1998, the Washington area was the source of a cultural "ferment" that brought many different strains of gaming together. This is no coincidence. For the first time in five years, in the mid nineties, the ILF's annual convention "Intercon" began to range outside the Baltimore Washington area. While this meant exposing other writers and producers to the style common in Washington, it also meant that Baltimore and Washington writers, faced with an increasingly competitive market had a truly vast array of fresh new examples. Most significant was the melding of



Midwestern and New England Murder Mystery writing traditions with more standard "Rekon descended" traditions.

At the same time a number of Baltimore-Washington writers began to experiment with talented and well produced live combat games in Pennsylvania, most of them run by a small group called Xanodria Productions, and talk with NERO system game designers.

The rising wave of "Vampire" games had its impact too. Some Theatre style producers were initially snobbish about Vampire. They saw the participants and designers as "simplistic," and considered the events little better than costume parties with names. Many, however, were not. Vampire games established something that had been unknown before - an "ongoing" or "campaign" theatre style game. While live combat events run by NERO or IFGS had always followed the "campaign" model established by tabletop Dungeons and Dragons, theatre style games had not. The results are still unclear. In 1998, some theatre style campaigns have been running for two years - the level of customer satisfaction seems to be higher than the average vampire campaign (though no better than the best), but the form is still a nascent one.

The result of the exposure of Baltimore-Washington GMs to new forms in the mid 90s was a synthesis. A new class of "Theatre style" event, embodying special effects, complex staging, and the concept of "cast" learned from live combat designers

Baltimore and Washington were not the only places that live roleplay was "happening" in 1997, anymore than Detroit, or New Orleans, or New York were the only place that Rock and Roll was "happening" in the mid fifties. But it is one of the key areas where a big community spurred new ideas and new approaches, and it is the area that launched the first national magazine on live roleplay in the U.S. In 1996, theatre style live roleplay was also growing and changing in places as diverse as Atlanta, London, and New York City. In the early 90s Boston had produced work which was innovative, but poured out in no great volumes. By the late 90s the highly college-oriented Boston market seems on the threshold of an explosion of new work, fueled by Intercon.

Personal Background

I began running "The Assassin Game" in 1985. In 1986, I wrote my first short event, and by 1988 I was producing major theatre style events. In 1989 I found myself drafted as a GM for a game called "The Prisoner," based loosely on the

1960s television series. In those days writing groups tended to be tabletop groups or social groups - "drafting" a GM was unusual.

The fact is, nobody thought about the science and art of GMing much at all at the time. The emphasis was on "writing," and GMing was something that people did when the thing they had written had to actually happen. Some of the conceits that GMs engaged in were appalling - it wasn't uncommon for GMs to be called "Gods." In a few earlier events this made sense because the GMs had players who represented some quasi-deific force of nature. But it was carried widely into events where its only purpose was to butter the egos of the event organizers.

Events happened once, and frequently ended without a copy on paper that could actually be reproduced. Usually, a theater-style event was run by the writing group that conceived of it, perhaps with the help of a few gophers (usually termed "game mommies" or other auxiliary staff. I was an outside writer, who came in to author six characters, and run a "site" - at that time a new idea in games.

A few months later, I found myself up late one night doing unexpected last minute work on another event, and I decided it was time to start keeping track of my runtime hours.

In 1998, I crossed the median on my eight-hundredth hour on the floor, actively running events. While there are probably many Live-Combat GMs with well over a thousand hours, there are not a lot of theater-style GMs with over 700 runtime hours.

I had been trying since 1990 to get as much floor experience as possible, and during 1996 I began to realize that my experience was paying off. I was *easily* thinking of solutions to problems that seemed *impossible* to less experienced GMs. Not because I was smarter, but because I had a wealth of experience to draw on. I was managing to use pacing controls to get games to end exactly when, where, and how I wanted them to, for maximum dramatic effect. And I was being decisive and having a good feel for the progress of an event when other GMs were floundering or confused. There were two possibilities. One is that I was a lot brighter than the other people working with me. While that would be flattering, it was clearly not the case.

The alternative possibility was that experience actually added up to being able to do the job better. In a field where almost everyone is a beginner, and producers are routinely deceiving themselves by thinking that the fact they have fallen into a rut and are running their monthly game by rote means they are "old hands," I had

emerged from being a beginner, into being a journeyman. I still had a lot to learn - more than most producers dream of. But the puzzle pieces began to fall into place, and I began to understand what I didn't know, and figure out how to learn it for myself.

Look at it this way. If running events was my full time job, I would just have completed my first six forty hour weeks. That's the point at which most *new* employees begin to become firmly reliable on their own.

IX. Jargon Glossary

Runtime - the time during which the event is up and operating. Generally from character handout to loadout.

GM - "Game(s) Master" - from tabletop RPG's, the term came into use in the mid to late 70's, as a replacement for "Dungeon Master."

Game Central - a widespread, though not universal, concept. A central staging area, where the GMs meet, confer, and store papers. Often a processing area for character paperwork. The term "Ops" or "Ops Center" is sometimes used, and is probably better than "Game Central" in regards to most modern events.

Metagame - "above the event" - a discussion or conversation which concerns the event itself, rather than the content of the event. An in game comment might be "Die heathen dog" followed by the metagame comment "I am attacking you with thirty points of energy." All GM to player conversation is metagame unless the player is talking to an NPC played by a GM. Among event producers the term is used to refer to the dynamics overlying an event.

X. Cool Links

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