

The GM Hintbook

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1 Introduction

So you have read Jake's and my guides on writing games. You're almost finished writing the game, and it's almost time to run it. Now is when things get tricky. Make sure you've read the other guides, and the Standard Rules (<http://web.mit.edu/jemorris/Rules>) before reading this document, or you might not get as much out of it.

1.1 Terminology

RTI: Random Technical Item. A resource that is often needed by some plot in order to build or do something interesting.

Wheeling and Dealing: What players have to do to get their plots done. This often involves exchanges of money/RTIs or promises of help in other things. (Help my research, I'll help yours). Can often result in a good-guy mob.

The Box: A box with folders for everyone involved in the game. Usually also contains a "GM" folder to get stuff to the GMs and a section with some Mechanics based stuff in it.

Good Guy Mob: A collaboration of unlikely characters trying to achieve a common goal. They attempt to find "bad plots" and stop them. This can result in lots of player frustration.

Common Room Massacre: Often the easiest way to gather RTIs or eliminate opposition is to wait for an opportune moment, then kill everyone in the common room. This works more than you might expect, especially in games where guns are particularly deadly.

Paint: The wrapping around an object that makes it fit into the context that you are placing it. i.e. A "riddle trail" is painted as a "Private Investigator feeling out the information from his contacts" in a Film-Noir style game.

McGuffin: An item that is important to a very focused group often for a seemingly-trivial reason. i.e. The nazi's want the canister containing Hitler's preserved pinkie.

SIK Game: Society for Interactive Killing game. A short game focused around improving a player's ability to use toy guns to take out other players. Tend to be light on plot.

2 Pregame

The runtime is coming at high speed! Time to panic!

2.1 Postering and Public Relations

The number of people who app for games is slowly decreasing. This makes it harder than ever to fill a game¹. And you want to have lots of people applying so that you can pick the best people. So, you're going to have to do some Public Relations work. This involves spreading good rumors about the game, and having everyone who contacts the game to have a positive feeling. *Under no circumstances should the pool from whom you are drawing players hear a negative rumor as their first impression.* Fight this by making sure that there are lots of true, positive rumors floating around. You will want to create posters to give to the High Council, and they should look good as that will often be the first thing anyone hears/sees about your game. *Make a good impression!*

2.2 Physreps

Physreps are a great thing to have in game because the players often get a kick out of interacting with real-life objects. It also prevents them from hiding 80-pound warheads in a fire hose box. If you're going to have physreps in your game, now is the time to do shopping. (Not after the game has started). Build up a list of what you're going to need and see who has it. Use your creativity to make new ones. You'd be amazed at what pipe cleaners, concrete, and ingenuity can come up with. Of the stuff remaining, check with the High Embezzler to see if there are sufficient funds for your crazy ideas. Remember that physreps are an accessory, and should only be done if they are critical and/or you have time.

2.3 Contact List and Communication

You will need to share as many communication pathways as you possibly can. This is important in case one of the GMs is the one who knows something best, and you need to ask them a question. (Ideally, you would all know the information equally well. But in the real world...) The information should be placed somewhere that all of the GMs can get at it.

Player lists are a nice thing to have because it allows the players to take lame group members to task. Generally, you want to include player name (character name is optional), email address, phone number(s), and "do not call me between foo and bar hours" info.

If you haven't already, you should set up a GM-only zephyr class. This name should be something related to the game-name somehow, but should not be "gamename-gms". This is to prevent players from subscribing to it².

¹Recently a 40-player term-time was unable to fill. Terrifying!

²It's not perfect security, but it's enough to make it a little work for a cheater or dumbass to listen to.

2.4 Casting

Assuming that you got enough apps to run, it's now time to cast people to the parts that you have created. Hopefully, while you were creating groups and characters, you wrote down how they interact. If not, now's the time. Begin by examining the groups. Classify it's interaction with all other groups as:

1. Allied
2. Opposed
3. Orthogonal

Once you have done that, do this classification for all of the characters and their personal plots. Now you should have a good idea of who has to interact with whom in which context.

Next, print out all of the player applications. We tend to make sure that the applications have the order in which they were submitted somewhere, so that we can give priority to those who actually apped on time.

Separate the applications into 4 classifications

1. Heavily Socially or Character Constrained
2. Power Players
3. Experienced Players
4. New Players
5. Flaky/Time Constrained

Now is when things get tricky. We tend to start with the Heavily Constrained to see if casting is possible at all. Then we move on to the Power Players go next as they may unbalance your game if you don't put them in the right places. Next, in go New players, as they are the future of the guild. And last is the Experienced players since they have already been turned to the dark side. If at this point, you have everything filled, preferably with a few extra – you win. If you have been unable to fulfill constraints, you get to twiddle the system until you can. Expect this to take about 3+ hours for a medium-size 40-60 player game.

2.5 Reserving Rooms and Game Layout

Don't leave room reservation until the last minute. Send mail to high-council as soon as you know which rooms you will need on which dates. If you wait too long, you will not get the

rooms. Think about what rooms you want because it will affect gameplay. Having a common room acts as a great way to get players to meet up. However, this will increase the odds of good-guy mobs and/or common room massacres. Accomodate for high traffic areas (34-3xx is a much-used space by both Guild games and the Ballroom Dance Team. Keep in mind that you will have to compete with other groups in some spaces). Also don't forget that people have to walk between any interesting sites you have setup, possibly causing problems in Lobbies or other populated areas.

One concern to think about when you have a game with a GM room and a common room is the relative placement. If you have them too close together, then you may have unpleasant interactions such as "I was just trying to pick up something from the GMs and the common-room-massacre wasted me.". J's suggestion is to have your common-room one building and one floor away from your GM room. If you have a Mechanic room, you generally want this next-door to the GM room such that it can act as a queue room and have its mechanics easily updated.

2.6 Crunch Time!

About 3 weeks before the game runs will often be "crunch time." This is the time at which all the important details for the game often end up being done. It is a very stressful period that will test your physical and mental endurance. An important thing to make sure that all of the GMs understand the production system fundamentals. Mostly this will involve understanding how to fill in a LaTeX sample sheet such that it will compile. To this end, it is important that from now on, any sheet that is checked in is capable of being printed after a set of edits are complete. *Don't check in things that don't print. This may break the build which is no good when testing other things.*

All of your GMs should be familiar with your revision control system or development environment. Make sure there are backups of the system such that if something goes horribly wrong, you can still recover. If you aren't already using a revision control system, you should be. I recommend CVS, as it deals with a lot of the problems that gamewriting has, but that is only a personal preference. A phrase that I remind GMs to think about with reference to any online development of their game is "If it is not in the repository, it does not exist."

2.7 Rules

Rules have two main camps: Monolithic Rules, and Appended Rules. Monolithic rules are all of the rules in one single document. This is good, as you only need to read one thing to understand the rules. Problem is, the document is often long and repeats between games. The repetition causes some lazy old assassins to not actually pay attention to the new rules. So, Appended Rules have a different section with new rules in it and refer to another document, usually The Standard Rules, which has all the rules that people are used to. This saves paper, and focuses on new rules. However, it requires people to look at The

Standard Rules, which hardly anyone ever does.

2.8 **Sanity Checks**

Have someone who doesn't have much context of the game (like the Zampolit or the Game Mommy) look over your mechanics by reading the greensheets and trying them out. They will give you an early warning if there are any major problems, and minimize the amount of "stupid questions" you will receive later. If they have trouble, you can be almost guaranteed that your players will³. Trust me, this saves time in the long run. And the answer to the question "Can I break your mechanic?" should be a "Just try," not a "No!"

It is important that all GMs read all of the sheets in their final form before the game runs at least once. In a perfect world, you would read them at least 3 times before they are handed to players. This rarely occurs. Writing a guild game is an inherently hard communication and collaboration problem, and often things are forgotten or lost in the details. You can usually catch some of the most glaring mistakes by having multiple people read the sheets multiple times.

Along the same lines, make sure that you have someone (not a GM) try out your mechanics, especially if any of them are divergent from the traditional ones. You will often find glaring imbalances and errors early on if you just let someone else try it.

2.9 **Packet Stuffing**

When you went to the guild office, you got all the stuff you needed for stuffing, right? (Packets, Dime-Envelopes, Paper Cutter, Scissors, Tape, Colored Paper, Stapler) Good.

Now you have to print out all of this crap and stuff it into packets. I suggest that you have at least 2 people working on this. One person should start the printing process and collate documents together by character/player. Obviously, this person should know how to print things in the system you are using (GameTeX or Template). The other person will label envelopes, cut namebadges, and staple memory-packets. They can be dumb but need to be somewhat dextrous..

Depending upon how complex/big your game is, this step will take a while. If everything is ready to go, theoretically you could do this in about an hour. However, you probably want to allocate at least 3-4 hours just in case⁴.

³Remember, you're writing this game so people have fun. Not so you can abuse them. If you're clever, though, these two are one and the same.

⁴You will almost certainly notice at least a few "That shouldn't be" type errors along the way. The files may not latex the first time either.

2.10 Packet Handout

If you're not quite ready to give packets at the beginning of packet handout, you should send a GM ahead of time to the room and have them start the rules seminar. Focus on the rules that are different than Standard rules and make sure people understand the general idea. If you're not actually finished with something, make sure that the players know. Honesty is a good practice here to gain the confidence of the people involved.

Another idea that has been used sometimes is to break the rules seminar into two groups. Newbies and Cruft. You spend the first hour of the rules explaining the more basic (or Standard(tm)) rules to newbies and have this be optional to cruft. Then you go over the more interesting and new rules with everyone.

Make sure that you have figured out your recasting policy by now. Some older games went with the strict policy: "If you don't show up to handout, we'll recast you". Others have a more laid back policy where the character will be recast if the player doesn't show up, and doesn't send email to the GMs indicating that they have a conflict.

2.11 Raiding the Office and Setting up the GM room

Make sure you know the combo before you head to the office to grab things. Otherwise this can become embarrassing. Generally you'll want at least 2 people to load stuff onto the shopping cart and the luggage cart. Remember to bring extra of everything you can, as you will need some of it later.

General Purpose Shopping List

- Envelopes: Packet, and other Assorted sizes
- Colored Paper
- Paper Cutter
- Scissors
- Tape: Duct, Scotch, and Masking
- Binder and Hole-punch
- Log Book
- Writing Utensils: Pencils, Pens, Markers
- Guns and Ammo
- The Box(tm) and Folders
- Headbands, especially White or equivalent
- Badgeholders
- Radios, Headsets, and Batteries
- GM Comfort Items: Cot, Food, Drink, Microwave
- Physreps (Boffers, RTIs, CDs)
- The Plot Bat, just because.

Once you get to the GM Room, it is time to do some organization. While you are doing

GM-ly tasks, you will not want to spend forever looking for things. If you have a room with blackboards, you should pile things in some reasonable order and label them on the chalkboard to make them easier to find. Failing that, make signs and tape them around the room.

2.12 Location Based Mechanics

Don't forget to put up riddle-trails and signs before game. It really sucks to be told that "You can't do that yet. We haven't put it up yet" at the start of game⁵. If you are unable to put things up, make sure that at least the first two days' worth of material are up.

Setup The Box(tm). Printout/write labels and put one for each character or player, your preference. In order to make the box less meta-gameable, you may want to create "filler" sheets in all your default colors to make it less clear when someone gets a new sheet or memory-packet. Setting up the box will take at least an hour, probably more – so don't assume you can do it in an instant.

3 During Game

Game is running! Whee! Oh shit! Game is breaking! Panic! Panic!

3.1 The Players are Your Enemies

OK, perhaps that's not exactly the sentiment. But the basic idea is there. You are running the game and creating challenges for the players in addition to them challenging each other. They will come begging and whining to you about how the plots are too hard. You can't ignore them totally as these might be valid problems, but in general most of the complaints will just be people trying to get things from you to make their problems go away. Don't let them get things for whining. They should get things for being creative and intelligent. Whining is neither of these.

Another aspect of enmity is true: You must not show weakness in front of the players. You may have disagreements amongst yourselves over various things that are not right, or other complications. This may cause fits of anger and screaming. This is OK, but the players must not see any of it. To the outside world, the GMs must seem like the Impossible Mission Force: working together seamlessly and always doing the right thing at the right time. This of course may be a total lie, but it is a necessary deception.

You must also stay positive. People take criticism and other negativity if it is surrounded with sincere positive attitude. "Wow, that was a dumb way to do that" is a lot more

⁵I can't tell you how many times I've been told this.

demeaning than “He had the right idea, but his execution could use improvement. He’s almost there.” This sounds really inane and unnecessarily Politically Correct, but it’s a good way to keep the players listening to what you have to say and doing what you want. If you start getting the players thinking too negative, then they generally don’t have as much fun and have trouble paying attention.

3.2 Logbook

The Logbook is your only friend. Use it to keep track of what’s been going on in game. (It will also help you keep track of deaths and such if you want to put them into the wrapup document). Every time a major ruling is made, it should go into the logbook. Every day (at least), each GM should flip through the logbook and make sure they understand all of the major rulings and events. This will eliminate later confused/conflicting rulings. Repeat: *Don’t forget to record major game events and deaths.* During wrapup, the players will want to know what happened during runtime, and the logbook makes the much more possible.

Every GM should have a little notebook to write down the things that they see/hear. The pages from these notebooks should be taped into the main logbook every once in a while.

3.3 Zephyr

Remember that GM zephyr class you setup? Time to use it. Generally you should have people who want to talk to the team zephyr on a separate class, then move communications to personal zephyrs. A good one to use is class “Assassin” for players to look for GMs. Make sure the GMs are subscribed there⁶.

3.4 Compendium

It’s pretty easy under both GameTeX and Template to print out all of the sheets in your game. This is important, as it will make looking things up much faster. This will also eliminate some of the disagreement that often occurs of “It’s in the sheet!” “No it isn’t!” that occurs between GMs in the GM room. The advent of laptops and wireless technology have made this less of a problem as you can look stuff up, but having a physical copy is still more convenient.

3.5 Thefts

The GM room has no guarantee that it will always be staffed. This means that unless you can lock the doors, there is a decent chance that someone will come poking at your stuff

⁶athena% zctl add assassin

while you are not there. If any of it looks valuable, it might walk. Items in this class are:

1. Laptops
2. Cameras
3. Radios, Cellphones
4. Backpacks

So, make sure such items are hidden before leaving the GM Room. If you can, lock things down that have to stay there.

3.6 Fixing Broken Plots

Fixing things that are broken midgame is often very difficult. The reason that making such a change is so hard is that the system is already in motion. Any change you make to the system is very likely to affect a number of people directly or not.

If you're going to fix something major, it is absolutely critical that a large subsection of the GM team be involved. Try to come up with a way to counteract the brokenness that does not introduce a new problem. The main thing to remember is that you want to maintain the same level of difficulty on a particular plot and absolutely maintain at least the illusion of fairness.

3.7 Forgotten Things

You forgot to give something important to one of the players. Now what? For one thing, get it done as fast as you can. However, you must also take into account that the person didn't get to start game with it when rebalancing things (eg: you've given someone a research plot that has ten steps in a game with only three days left of play. You might want to rethink the mechanic).

3.8 NPCs

One way to make use of those people on your waitlist or the low-time-committment people is to have them be NPCs. Depending upon your game, the role of the NPC can vary heavily.

Some of my more recent games have made use of NPCs as low-time-committment parts. This allows the people who have serious time constraints to still have a chance to play.

If you're having people play multiple NPCs, make sure that there is some way for the players to tell the difference between them. A change of badge really isn't enough. Ways you can make the NPCs more distinctive:

- Clothing
- Hats
- Accessories
- Makeup
- Personality, speech impediments

3.9 Cheating

Cheaters make other players sad. This is often in the form of metagaming or “cheesing the mechanic” or just plain breaking the game rules. If you hear/see a cheater, take them aside and talk to them. (Note the word “talk.” Don’t start by yelling. It’ll only make things worse). You will often find that the player just doesn’t understand how Guild games work. Try and clear up the confusion. If they continue to break the rules, you may have to consider more drastic measures (yes, players *have* been removed from games, but you have to be careful not to screw over their teammates).

3.10 GM Health, Stress, and Hygiene

As a GM, you need to take care of yourself. Others are depending upon you to produce and run a form of entertainment. You’re probably going to end up not getting enough sleep, and running your body to the max. To this end, you need to take care of yourself as much as you can.

- Every time you go by a water fountain, take a drink. Dehydration is a bitch.
- Eat on a regular schedule. You can eat while things are going on in game. You may need to be more careful if there are food poisoning mechanics in games.
- If you’re getting totally exhausted, sleep on the cot or go home after telling the other GMs. If you’re going to start acting weird/irrational, you can cause damage to the game that others might have to repair.
- Never take your stress out on the players. It’s a bad scene.
- Avoid taking your stress out on the other GMs - they’re hosed, too. Try to say at least one positive thing to the other GMs per day. Keeping them in a good mood will keep you in a good mood also.

The GM room is a resource shared by all. Don’t let it get too messy. If you do, you will have a much harder time finding things that you want. In addition, if you start leaving food-wrappers around, this causes vermin to descend in droves. This is not good as the vermin will eat your food. Bad GM, no biscuit.

4 Postgame

4.1 Cleaning Up

The game just finished! Go you. But your job isn't done yet. Gather the players and put everything back to normal. Take down signs/packets/riddle trails. Pick up darts/disks. Clean out the funny-smelling GM room. Use trashcans. Return Guild items to the Guild Office. Sweep the floor if you can.

4.2 Wrapup Document

Remember that Wrapup document I told you to write before writing the game? Well, if you actually did it, now you just need to edit it. Of course, you didn't actually do it, so now you have to write it. If you had a high-death game, you can make a quick list of the kills. Include who killed them and/or a quick sentence on why they died. During the wrapup, don't let people interrupt too much about how their death occurred, or it takes way too long.

4.3 Awards

I have left an archive of awards from a bunch of games in: `/mit/foley/Public/game-awards.txt` It is tradition to give some awards at the end of the longer style of game, and often to create a new award for the given game to add to the history. It is definitely a good idea to give some "done-goods" and other simple awards to newbies who did a decent job. Such awards make the newbie feel good, and much more likely to play games later.

4.4 Wrapup

Wrapup generally consists of a number of phases

1. Overview of the World/Scenario
2. Epic Plot Explanation
3. Groups and Character Synopsis
4. Chronology of Major Deaths/Event during Runtime
5. Postgame Resolution
6. Awards
7. Shameless Plugs for other games

8. Cleanup trip to the guild office
9. Dinner Mob

4.5 High Council Information

At some point, the high council will want to know some information about your game. You should have written down (so you don't forget):

- Number of GMs, NPCs, and players
- Names and email addresses of all players
- Gamespace
- Awards

4.6 Archiving the Game

There are guidelines for what needs to be archived. Covering them here would quickly become out of date. However, something that I usually do is

1. Delete all of the old .dvi, .pdf, and .ps files.
2. Delete the applications if you saved them.
3. Make sure your copy is up to date if you're using RCS/CVS
4. `tar -cvpzf <gamename.tgz> <gamedirectory>`
5. Put the file `!gamename.tgz!` into your Public and mail the high-council