



Convention Guide for Game Masters

A Primer for Running RPG Scenarios at a Con

Hello and thank you for your interest in running an RPG scenario for **TsunamiCon 2019**! We here at TsunamiCon want to help produce a fun time for everyone who attends the convention, from patrons to vendors to the volunteers who help run games. Perhaps more than ever, conventions like this provide not just an opportunity for players to play the games they enjoy, but also to develop their own network of like-minded individuals who are interested in the hobby they love.

We want to help you develop games for the convention that will be fun and easy to run, and that players can get into quickly. With that in mind, we've decided to write this brief primer to help you do that. Informed by our own history at conventions and game days, we've found that the list below addresses most of the barriers that GMs face when running games at conventions.

Writing Your Game

Writing a good game for a convention can be daunting for someone who has never done it before. One of the biggest barriers is how someone can cram a good story into a 4 hour time slot—less if you account for breaks or a wayward GM or players showing up late to the table. One of the most solid bits of advice we can give you is to assume one encounter per hour of time at the table. This encounter can be a combat encounter, an interaction with a major NPC, a chase, or any other encounter where you're going to be going around the table finding out what the PCs are doing. You'll find that, pacing-wise, PCs tend to take about an hour getting to the encounter, encountering what you've set up for them, and recovering from the encounter. This varies for breaks and the size of your group and the complexity of the system, but has been fairly consistent across the games that we've been privileged to run. Using this, you can plan for your game's pacing much better than a home game.

Another very critical component to writing a good convention game is writing a plot that keeps the PCs engaged. While we at TsunamiCon have a love for quality immersive and character-driven games, convention games are often difficult to run in this manner. Many of the players will be new in one respect or another. Perhaps they haven't played the system, or they're new to convention games. Certainly, unless you've got a small intimate setting, the players will probably not have played with each other. The result is that the things that bring groups together in traditional home games is lacking. This means that the strongest tool in your arsenal is a very compelling and driving story and strong and interesting characters. Because of this, it's

critical to come up with a conflict that the PCs can get embroiled in, and relatively quickly at that.

One final bit of advice is to make sure you run a game system and concept that you're comfortable with. As awesome and as wonderful as it is to see a GM who runs an esoteric or unknown title for the convention, if they have little experience in using that system, it bogs things down considerably. Remember that many players are new in one fashion or another, and so a game that has a heavy learning curve could prove to be a significant barrier to your players. It's doubly so if you don't know the system. It helps to use system with light rules, but at least one of the TsunamiCon staff routinely runs GURPS at conventions, so rules-light systems are optional. The important thing is to know what you need to know for your game.

Writing Your Characters

It's easy to concentrate heavily on the elements that go into writing a good adventure and neglect your characters, but that would be a mistake. One of the biggest reasons for that is because in a plot-driven game, it's beneficial to have characters that can add something to the plot as it moves along. One way this can be accomplished is to create PCs that have a necessary skill or part of something needed to complete the adventure. This part can be bits of knowledge or perhaps even an item, but each character should be in some way invaluable to the game. This can be a double-edged sword, however, as sometimes you'll create a tightly interwoven group of characters only to have a few players show up. In that case, you'll need to do one of two things: adjust the adventure based on what characters are available for the game, or let players play multiple characters. Personally the latter model tends to bog down encounters substantially, so we suggest the former if you're the type of GM who can adjust on the fly.

Another suggestion is to create backgrounds that provide the players with some framework for the characters. Convention games are rarely places where players get invested in characters, but if you can help them become more immersed you stand to obtain a more enjoyable experience for everyone. Our suggestion is to create a bit of background for each of the characters you generate. Even if it's a marginal background it gives the players something to latch onto when they play. If you struggle with coming up with concepts, don't be afraid to look to movies, books, or television shows you like for ideas for characters. Mtimes you can use an existing character as a jumping off point for your characters. At the bare

minimum, consider giving characters quirks or small character flaws to play with.

Along with creating a good background, it sometimes helps to outline the relationships characters have with other characters in the group. This can be very beneficial for players who are new to the game or are just jumping into a setting they're not familiar with. Creating character social ties can be a detriment however, to players who perhaps want to explore those themes during the game. Sometimes it helps, rather than outlining specific and well-established relationships, to just have an informal chat before the game begins about the nature of the relationship. This can be accomplished through conveying a general feelings or biases one character has about another.

Other Suggestions

Coming up with a good adventure and good characters is about 80% of the job, but there are many, many other things to account for. Below is a quick list of considerations to aid you in coming up with the best game for your convention.

1. *Test Play*—if you've got a group and time to do it, test play your game. It helps work out the kinks and lets you set pacing. That being said, as individuals who regularly re-use adventures for the various events that we run at, there are always variations. One group may play a game entirely differently than another. The ending you were planning on may be entirely unfeasible now because of events earlier in the game.
2. *Be Adaptable*—We strongly recommend, rather than writing up a long and detailed document for a game you want to run, you create a thorough outline. The reason for this is because as mentioned before, games are dynamic and one thing you failed to account for will invariably come up. Creating too rigid of a game makes GMs inclined to want to put the game on the rails, so it helps to be adaptable enough to know when to take the game in a different direction. This is also important during those times when you realize that you're running out of time.

This allows you to adjust the game and toss out parts of the game that are superfluous (if they exist).

3. *Equip Your Characters*—Make sure you're giving the players completed characters, including equipment. If they have equipment that is uncommon or special, take a bit of time to explain it to them.
4. *It's a Demo*—Whether you've got players who are experienced or new, or players who play regularly with each other or never met, the game you're running is fundamentally a demonstration of a number of things: your gaming style, the system, your creativity, and the setting. Keep that in mind while you're playing and explain things to people who maybe be unsure of things. One suggestion is to informally assume that you're going to be dealing with a new person in one way or another. It helps to adjust to their level.
5. *Have a Complete Product*—It helps to have your printed game notes and the NPCs in a file folder or envelope that you can keep handy. This way everything is ready to go when it comes time to run your game.
6. *Conflicting Gaming Styles*—Conventions tend to draw people passionate about their hobby, so it should come as no surprise that there could be strong personalities there. Keep this in mind while dealing with players who have certain styles they prefer. A hack-and-slash player sometimes has difficulty in more socially-driven games. The only suggestion here is to try to write games that accommodate multiple styles. A good suggestion is to create encounters that can be circumvented through multiple means, perhaps socially, stealthily or aggressively.

There you have it. We hope you find this primer beneficial and worthwhile to your event. Remember the cardinal rule is to have fun, though, so whatever incarnation your game takes, remember to enjoy it.

Good Gaming!