Script – Players Who Don’t Bite

by Justin Alexander – July 6th, 2021

What do you do if you have players who refuse to engage the game?

You’ve prepped a bunch of interesting content, but they just aren’t biting at any of your scenario hooks.

Well, the first question you have to answer is: Why are they doing this?

[INTRO]

Fortunately, I think it’s relatively rare to run into a whole group who’s having this problem. But you’re slightly more likely to run into individual players who do this.

Often they’re doing it for legitimate reasons. The most common variant is, “I’m gonna set up a safe house and hole up.” Given the types of dangers the typical PC encounters in a typical RPG campaign, that’s not an unreasonable response!

Sauron has sent Ringwraiths to hunt us down? Let’s go hide in Rivendell!

But another common variant is, “I want to be a special snowflake and go off by myself.”

Let’s start with the snowflake.

These don’t tend to be a problem for me any more. First, because I actually enjoy running split parties, which is probably a topic for another time.

Second, I make sure to balance the spotlight time between PLAYERS, not groups. So if there’s a group of five players and a group of one player, I will try to make sure the group with five players gets five times as much attention.

Finally, I don’t run linear “this is the one and only path” adventures, so it’s perfectly fine to have a PC – or several PCs – head off to pursue their own agendas.

As a result, the behavior isn’t disruptive. And if the loner’s goal is to pull attention, they’ll quickly discover that they’re actually getting LESS attention because they’re not getting penumbra spotlight from the other players.

So it either works out fine or the special snowflake adjusts their behavior.

Now, what about the PCs who are turtling up in good faith?

Resolving that situation usually just means practicing good pacing habits. That’s also a longer topic for another time, but the short version is that you need to skip past empty time – when nothing interesting is happening – and cut to the next interesting action.

Broadly speaking, this boils down to one of two things.

First, you can ask: What do you want to do?

Second, you can say: Something interesting happens to you.

And maybe that interesting thing is an hour later or ten days later. It doesn’t matter because, regardless of how much time it takes in the game world, the amount of time it takes at the table is twenty seconds.

The key problem here is that the players are making a choice that isn’t fun.

Usually this isn’t the case: If the players choose to do something, it will generally be because it’s something they WOULD find fun. That’s why they’re doing it. But here circumstances have arisen in which they feel that they have to choose the smart thing – the thing that’s least likely to get them killed – instead of the fun thing.

And that’s okay!

But it’s your job to get your players – not their characters, the players! – to the next point where they can have fun. Where interesting stuff is going to happen. And that’s when you either:

Ask, “What’s the next interesting thing that you do?”

Or look ahead yourself and see what the next interesting thing will be that happens TO them and describe it.

The more intractable version of this problem is if the players keep choosing to do things that are fun for them, but which you find boring. Where this problem can be particularly frustrating is if they’re taking actions which they think should result in fun stuff, but because of how you’re interpreting those actions as the GM the results are boring for everybody.

Either way, you need to have a frank meta-game discussion about what kind of game you can run that EVERYONE would enjoy.

Taking a further step back, you can also address this issue by encouraging the creation of characters who are (a) highly motivated to go out and do interesting things and (b) who have strong connections to the world around them, which can be used to motivate them.

That’s all for today! If you enjoyed this video, please take a moment to give it a thumbs up and subscribe if you haven’t already! Thank you to all my patrons on Patreon, without whom these videos would not be possible!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I’ll see you at the table!