

Farmsteads And Foes

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Your Guide to the High Stakes World of Low-level Gaming



Introduction

Most gaming groups try to hurry through the lower levels as quickly as possible—and it's easy to understand why. A Game Master's attention is often called to some ultimate confrontation, for which their players will have to be decidedly more powerful. On the other side of the GM screen, one of the players' key objectives is to gain levels. It's all very intuitive, sensible—and yet it so happens to be completely backwards.

The first few levels are the time when the veil separating a player from their character is at its most ethereal. Think about it: you likely have much more in common with a dockworker than a proven dragonslayer. Since the real currency of a gaming group is the emotions of the people playing, their ability to identify with and experience the world is of the utmost importance — and one that low-level gaming naturally facilitates.

As such, this article will focus in providing a guide through the compelling, almost addictive world of low-level game play. The advice is organized through a series of “edicts”, directives designed to help you create memorable, riotous, and gripping gaming experiences when the characters are just starting their adventuring careers.

1st Edict:

Little Things Are a Big Deal

Consider this. After years of slaying monstrosities on shattered worlds, bargaining with fey queens, and traveling through endless, inward folds of extra-dimensional space, it can be easy to forget one simple fact. Being able to make fire explode from your hands is awesome.

Driving five pounds of steel into something vile, or leaping seven feet across a deadly-deep chasm are inherently legendary acts that demand respect. They’re awesome even to think about. While swordplay in any campaign will, from time to time, lack luster, the beginning of a hero’s saga is an ideal place to savor these often unappreciated delights.

Ways to Emphasis “Firsts”

- Describe events starting with the object, or action. Rather than saying “Danthan stabs the orc with his dagger,” try “Danthan’s dagger sinks, hilt deep, into the orc.”
- Repeat yourself for effect, and add an extra detail the second time around.

- Cue the players to mention their character’s emotional state.
- Prior to rolling the dice, remind the player of the dangers of failure.
- Increase the damage or effect.

2nd Edict: Treasure the Trial

Any decent plot will involve adversity: be upfront with your players so they don’t fall into the trap of resenting the challenge. Make them aware that, mechanically, there’s no difference between low-level characters fighting low-level monsters and high-level characters fighting high-level monsters. The only meaningful deviation is the ease with which most players can identify with low-level characters. Any time you weaken the characters mechanically, remember: your end goal is to make their characters’ trials more relevant to the realities your players live with.

3rd Edict:

Take Everything from Them

Below is a list of mechanical adjustments you could consider employing in your games. Be aware, though: while some of these might seem insignificant at first glance, they will each have a potent impact on the power-balance of the game.

Low-level mechanical adjustments

1. Have the player roll 2d4. Subtract the total from the character’s abilities scores as evenly as possible, taking from class-specific attributes last.
2. Reduce the players’ hit point total by half, to a minimum of 3.
3. The character no longer has access to any abilities or powers specific to their class.
4. The character suffers a -2 penalty to all skill checks
5. The character has only the following equipment: the clothes on their back, room and board for a month, and a single copper piece in their pockets.

4th Edict:

Give It All Back (with Interest)

By now you're probably feeling like the world's worst Game Master. You've taken what little power your players were able to cobble together for their first level characters and reduced it by a size category. The players are perhaps aware that you plan to return everything you've taken from them. What they can't imagine is that you plan to give it all back—with interest. Whenever a player makes a decision that leaves their character at a disadvantage in order to move the story along, you should reward them.

As such, start by allowing them to relocate the points you've taken. This will provide them with a considerable advantage in a very difficult moment. In the case of feats and class features, it's easier to just enhance them slightly. If you're hungry for more of an impact, then grant them a single ability score increase, two hit points, or an extra spell everyday.

5th Edict: **Fear the Unknown**

A powerful component of low-level gaming lies in what the players don't know. While you can use this to add an element of fear into the game, you can just as easily use it to encourage wonder. Try viewing these levels as an opportunity to help the players see the game with a fresh pair of eyes, the way a humble cobbler's child might the first time they see a flock of griffons gliding about some nameless, rocky height. Everything is new to a brand new character.

6th Edict: **Don't Use Common, Out of Game "Names"**

Don't use the names of monster species, classes, spells or even feats. Using this type of names robs everyone: it takes the thrill, fear, and cinema right out of a game. Worse still, it enables lazy narration, which is a GM's natural enemy.

7th Edict:

Let Them Fail

Be prepared to let the player fail. In fact, this should be the standard for the first few levels. They will fail skill checks. They will fail to hit—a lot. They might even fail to complete their quest. All of that is OK. Keep this in mind, though: you can reward them whether they succeed or not. A 25% experience award for failed quests, undefeated monsters, and meaningful skill checks is recommended.

8th Edict:

Force Them to Face Death

The players need to know character death is a distinct possibility, preferably without learning first hand. Don't be afraid to remind them that a few strips of bone and a few chunks of muscle are the only things that stand between their beating heart and their foe's claws. If that doesn't do the trick, introduce a non-player-character with the distinct intention of killing him off later on in the story. For greater effect, make it a character everybody loves.

9th Edict:

Deal Damage as Effects

You've done everything in your power to make the already-dangerous first few levels absolutely deadly. Now that you've convinced the characters you're trying to kill them, you can begin the labor of working behind the scenes to keep them alive. Here's a tool to help you do precisely that.

If attack would kill a character, you might choose to forgo the damage, and replace character death with one of the follow maladies. If you're an old-school gamer like me, you'll want to do this randomly with a d100 roll.

Fatal Damage Alternative Table

01-05	The character is exceedingly unfortunate, roll twice.
06-20	-1 to the character's highest ability score.
21-40	The character's speed is permanently reduced by 5 feet.
41-55	The character regains 1d4 fewer hit points from all healing effects.
56-65	The character loses consciousness, and 1 hit die.
66-75	Several of the character's items of value are destroyed.
76-85	The character suffers a -1 penalty to attack and damage rolls. If they are a magic user, they lose one of their highest spell slots.
86-95	The character has disadvantage on all skill checks with a given attribute.
96-100	The character is exceedingly fortunate. They fall unconscious and suffer no other ill effect.

Any of these effects can be reversed after spending several weeks recuperating with a healer. Also, feel encouraged to describe, in tooth-gritting detail, the traumatic injuries that led to these long term maladies.

10th Edict: Know Their World

You're building an adventure for chambermaids, not champions. So when planning an introductory adventure, ask yourself who would have made enemies of a stable boy or girl? What would haunt a street urchin's dreams? Why did the farmhand vanish, and why did he take the roofing hammer? The answers to these questions will get you in the proper mind set.

11th Edict: Master the Mundane

When thinking about the motivations, foes, and dungeons a low-level character might contend with, style everything with the mundane in mind. Characters have to pack their bags, put on their boots, and eat just like the players that control them. While you wouldn't want to focus too heavily on these details, they make for terrific tethers between your player's emotions and the story's content.

The Last Edict

Mastering low-level gaming isn't as hard as it seems. Hopefully by now you do not only have a sense of how to approach low-level gaming, but also a wealth of places to start from. However, I advise you to not try to use them all at once.

All you really need to remember is to emphasize the story and make the trials as real and relevant to the players as possible. Beyond that, pick and edict or two and try them out. As you uncover a few of your own, you'll know you're on the right track. Make sure to have a blast, delight your players, and remember: the best time to leave the table is when your players can't think about anything other than the very next round.

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