

the war of numbers: a BIGtable



WRITING *Simon "Skipp" Morin*
EDITING *Felipe Real*
COLOR ART *Ellis Goodson*
LAYOUT *Xanditz*

*Your regular
players. Friends,
allies, family. A nice
evening. You throw the perfect game.
Epic quest, treasure, creatures. You laugh, yell,
enjoy. The evening ends on a cliff-hanger. What more
could you ask for. The word then gets out.*

Everybody wants a piece of the action. One of the players wants to bring her boyfriend, the other wants his best-friends there. Some may avoid these situations out of fear but, if you dare, you can sit them all down for a big table: five to nine players and only one GM.

This is the challenge that I want to help you undertake today with this guide. Here we will dive into how you must act, set-up and play to help you get the most out of a large number of PCs.

CONTROL IS EVERYTHING

First off, when facing 5-9 story-hungry, battle-ready players, you must remember that keeping an iron fist is of the upmost importance. Even the smallest slip-up can derail the game into a 30-minute kerfuffle. You don't have to turn into a dictator, but this is the perfect opportunity to flex the muscle of power. Use discipline, don't be afraid to warn (and punish if need be), control access to media (cellphones, computers, etc.), and limit outside conversation, as well as any other behaviors that can affect the session's flow. For this game to work, your players and you have to use serious and immersed behaviour. If you see someone slipping and losing either focus or interest, you must adapt and react. Using all your tools and skills, you must try as hard as you can to pull them back into your world and story to keep moving forward. Start an unplanned battle, a skill-based puzzle, or an NPC encounter: anything that gets their attention.

Everybody reacts differently to stimulus, but in RPGs getting the blood flowing with a battle or a puzzle usually does the trick.

Also, try to keep them on a track, story-wise, without railroading them. View this game as if you were a dog herding sheep in a cattle. You know the direction they need to go and they have notion of the path ahead of them, so you just have to guide them subtly. Try to be discreet and vague about your hints and tips, but keep a firm hand on the story. A small group may live well in a sandbox world, but a big group needs a little bit more guidance.

SETTING A RHYTHM

Story, like songs, are carried by a rhythm. You set them up with an intro, they follow with a series of adventures, which slowly rise into a climax before gliding into a smooth finish. It happens in waves, slowly climbing to a climax and ending on a big note. Keep this as simple as possible and you should be fine. Too many cliff-hangers, and you're looking at an exhausted group. No climax and the session will feel empty. Even if you throw something half-assed at the end, just give your players a bone to keep them interested.

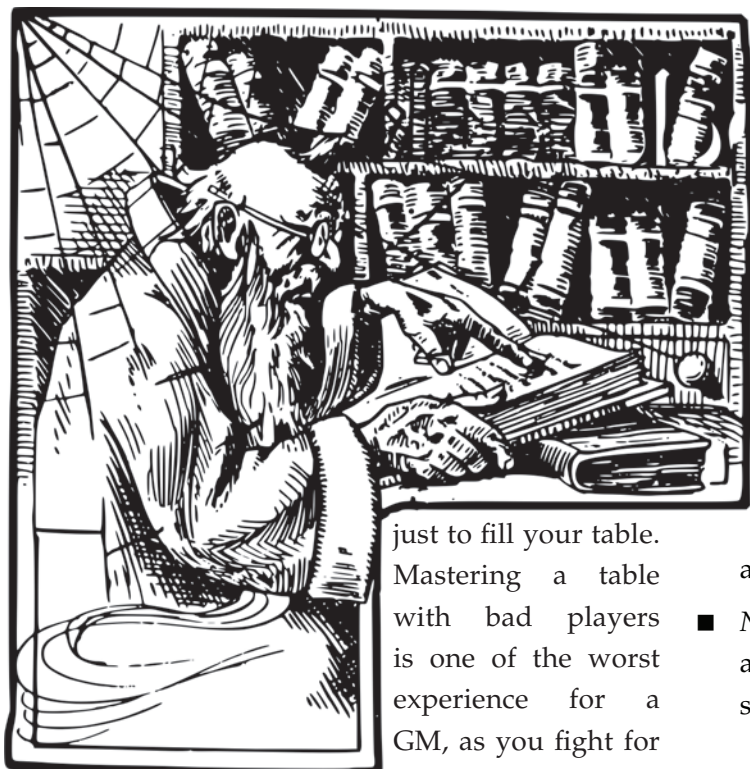
STATISTICS, STATISTICS, STATISTICS

On this battlefield, certain numbers will come up often. Keep track. Keep simple and important information handy by writing a cheat-sheet before the start of the game. Make one for fighting, with the attack bonus and the armor class of every character, and keep one for the spell-casting, with the difficulty checks for the spell saves of each caster. By having this close-by you can keep track during fights, adjust the difficulty and balance of them, keep an eye on less experienced players, and plan ahead your future encounters.

CHOOSING YOUR PLAYERS

Big tables need solid travelers. Choose your friends wisely as they will hold this game together. If you surround yourself with turbulent and wild players, try to balance it out with a calm and charismatic leader that can keep them within boundaries. It may seem harsh, but don't be afraid to reject the ones that get out of hand easily. The easily distracted, the jesters, the trouble-makers: these will bring the game to a squelching halt. Also, keeping new players out of this game might ease the pressure too. Not having to hold player's hands can help a game to pan out peacefully.

Also, when you make your plans, don't water down the quality of the game with awful players



just to fill your table. Mastering a table with bad players is one of the worst experience for a GM, as you fight for control, try to block their attempts to turn everything into a joke, and shut down their bad behaviour, all in one evening.

set rules, set boundaries

Some rules are more important to implement when playing on a big table. First off

- *Never allow players to go into "lone wolf" mode.* This is a recipe for disaster. As a big table, the strength of the story and flow is in the group. Splitting it in multiple groups may prove to be your downfall. You can always have a separation, having two small units, but ending up with 3 players going different directions from the rest of the group can lead to a warped, unmanageable story.
- *Keep the characters simple.* No four class spread-out character that covers the role of everybody else in the group. Limit everybody to one or two classes and one specific role in the group. I've never heard of a group that needed a caster/healer/fighter when there's nine players around the table.
- *Limit the interactions.* I know I'm going to rub some people the wrong way here, but you should keep

the cities and the NPC population to the simplest. You already have a ton of work on your plate; why have a marketplace scene with 200 NPCs? Flesh some out and use generic responds for the small talks, like shopping and resting.

- *Pool the money.* You need to have a group wallet with a little bit of fund that everybody participates in. Questing expenses, equipment, food: bills should be for the group and not individual. Make sure that everybody pitches-in (even the dwarves) to not create sow any discordance among the group.

- *Never give someone authority over someone else.* In a big group, too many opinions on how others should behave always lead to chaos.

timers are a treat

You need a new challenge to spice-up the table? Time some events. It will force the players to make decisions together, creating bonds, memories, and often resulting in stupid choices. From escaping a crumbling castle, to killing a beast before her creator comes back, there is a lot of holes in a story that can be filled with a quick alarm on a phone or watch. You can also make time-activated puzzles. Adding that dimension to the table makes it seem more real.

Just pace yourself. Give your players a break to organize before starting the timer, and be lenient on the event that follow. Nobody wants to see a game end when all the players are killed by an avalanche in the first 15 minutes.

task sharing

I'm not against sharing the burden of paperwork with a trustworthy friend, but try to keep them out of the loop. The story can only hold if the players have no idea on what is happening. Keeping track of initiative, maintaining discipline around the table, keeping track of money and equipment are all tasks that I usually delegate.

I also want to bring up a practice that I use in my big tables. I appoint a leader, usually a volunteer, to make the mundane decisions for the group and to speak-up. In the chaos that is the table, he is in charge of the votes and the choices the group makes. When there's bickering, he has to talk and settle it; when there's multiple voices speaking at the same time he has to shut them down. He's my tiny captain. I always make it fit with the story to make it seem more natural. Every once in a while I appoint someone new as the leader, forcing players to play out of their comfort zones. Leadership can be something we all teach our players.

So, to end this on the words of a fellow game-master: "To be a master, you have to learn to adapt and react, then to balance whatever you changed."

Just keep in control, keep your players entertained, and enjoy. Most memories are forged in these glorious moments. When you are surrounded by your friends and you throw in that sweet cliff-hanger you have been working on for days a dark and hard silence falls on the table and all you can hear is nine people trying to catch their collective breaths, as one of them lets out a slow and so delightful, "Good god, we are screwed."

Then watch them scramble to find a plan.

