

HOSTING A GAME

<http://www.ironclaw.gs/hosting.pdf>

There are certain social aspects to the game that are worth discussion. Not all these aspects are pleasant to consider but a good host must keep them in mind. We have listed several here. The main things to remember are: It's a game, Keep an open mind, Respect your players, Never even appear evil, Don't let the your players grind you down. Also remember that the game is not just for the players, it's also for you.

It's A Game.

First and foremost *Ironclaw* is a game. The object is to have fun. If it stops being fun, stop doing it. Of course it's hoped that everyone will enjoy *Ironclaw* so much that they will buy a copy for each of their friends, but if an RPG—any RPG—doesn't really deliver, set it aside. One can always try a new approach with it later.

Two Worlds.

Parts of making the experience enjoyable lie within the game and other parts in the real world. The Host must not only take care of the characters in his or her game but also the players themselves. The play of the game, the building of its story and action, is a collective effort, but the task of laying the foundation of a good time rests on the shoulders of the Host. Preparation ahead of time will serve the Host well in both the game world and the real one.

Know The Players.

Making an enjoyable gaming experience means paying attention to the players. The Host must offer them what they want if he or she is to hold their interest in the game—an obvious point, yes, but one which is often forgotten and which bears repeating. There's a few ways to find out what interests the players. The most direct method is to ask "What would you like to see more/less of in the game?" or something along those lines. Not so direct but just as valid is to make a mental note of the scenes through which they play which most hold their attention.

Cameraderie.

Knowing one's players' interests outside of gaming is also helpful. The more non-game interests a Host shares with the players, the more likely the Host will be able to entertain his or her players. If, for example, there is a "Star Wars" fan in your particular group, and the night's game involves nature priests being framed for a series of sacrifices they didn't commit, you can have the soldiers taking a good hard look at the nature-boy in the party eventually decide not to arrest him, saying "You're not the druids we're looking for. You can go about your business." This gives a cheap laugh and doesn't disrupt the action too much, and helps create a personal tie. Punmanship, allusion, and broad hints that show up in the Host's story and mirror or shadow a parallel real-world interest can foster stronger ties between Host and players.

Banter.

A group is in a healthy state when they can talk about their game experiences with enthusiasm and interest. The very fact that they swap these "war stories" indicates that they've had a good time! This is a good result. The Host can help this along by making allusions to earlier game situations from time to time (such as, "This

reminds me of the time you tried to drill a hole in your head"). In such situations an in-group jargon is liable to evolve. This should be encouraged, as the evolution of a group's language is good for the group. For example, the Host can use nicknames out-of-character for recurring characters if the players come up with them (e.g., "Shorty Greasy Spot-Spot" for the villain's hyena henchman). After all, a group's language is what helps define it as a group. Whether that group is nation-sized or dinnertable-sized, the principle is the same. You'll know the group has good linguistic cohesion when a new member joins and is out-freakt by the jargon, war stories, and other initially unintelligible banter.

Space Control.

Part of the real world side of group cohesion is making certain, as Host, that one has good control of the gaming space. Below are listed some suggestions. Not all need to be taken, since not every group has the same dynamics, but the listed suggestions have been seen to contribute to good results.

One Table.

Group the players at a table. Physical separation creates an artificial barrier that makes holding the group together more difficult. It's easier for players to relate to one another and the Host if they are grouped together at a table instead of scattered on various sofas and chairs around the living room. The "boardroom" approach with a rectangular table is helpful as well, with the Host seated at one end of the table and the players along the other sides. In such an arrangement the players can face the Host merely by turning their heads or seats a little. There's something of a disincentive to do that when the Host is in the seat immediately to one's left or right. Such an arrangement is advantageous because, like it or not, the Host is the focal point for interaction with the events of the game. The Host also has a better chance of screening his or her game plans from sight.

Spectators.

It's best if everyone present is taking part in the game. If someone is there "just to watch" they may (intentionally or unintentionally) be a distraction from the game. If a visitor is present, offer a redshirted Host-run character for their use. Otherwise, exile them to another room if at all possible.

Pets.

Some pets can be distractions just the same as human spectators. The disadvantage is that the Host can't really enlist the pet to run a character. Admittedly, something like "the cat will play the lions on the savannah, and if she happens to jump on your character you get attacked by one" could be done, but then the pet becomes even more of a distraction. So try not to let pets get out of hand in the game space.

Media.

Background music is good, but it should be something with ambience which won't attract too much attention. Commercial radio's not so good because of frequent advertisements.

Turn the damn TV off.

Social Studies.

Now, to the players themselves. There are a lot of people out there. Some of them are individuals. All have varying backgrounds and are the sum of their thoughts and experiences. Remember that not everyone thinks the same way—many people do not think at all—and by default a Host should treat each of his or her

players with the same respect the Host would reserve for any carbon-based life form. Relations with the players and between the players will not always be easy, however. Be prepared, and be tolerant.

Problem Children.

Some players want a lot of attention. Well, we all want some attention, but from time to time one may encounter players who never outgrew the childish inability to distinguish between good and bad attention. Consequently they may become difficult at times.

Other individuals may merely want to do well at the game but not consider or care about the other players. There are many kinds of problem children:

Virgins, who haven't played much and really don't know what they're doing. These people are really not problems at all, but more experienced roleplayers may become exasperated with them. Always give a Virgin an even break. Let them haggle with a merchant for a few minutes, or be the first to notice something unusual, or—well, in general, it all boils down to giving the new guys opportunities for experimentation and growth. To keep the older players happy find ways to direct a Virgin's character elsewhere if a critical situation arises which demands careful roleplay. Let tolerance be your watchword.

Annoyers, who may have little habits which grate on nerves. Gentle reminders are usually all that's needed, e.g. "Please stop shaking your leg like that, it's making the whole table move." Such individuals frequently don't even know what they're doing when they're irritating other people!

Cheaters, who will do what it takes to come out ahead. It's difficult to cheat in a roleplaying game since the Host coordinates most of the action. Cheaters can find ways, though, accidentally adding levels to their skills or abilities, re-rolling the dice because "I dropped them", or remembering previous actions at auspicious times (e.g., "I bought a crossbow while we were in town."). Usually all the Host has to do is say "I don't think so" and move on. Keep copies of character sheets, insist players roll dice out in the open, and don't be confrontational if cheating is suspected. Defuse the situation with humor or simply gloss over it and keep going. The Host in turn must be seen to be impartial at all times. GIVE NOT EVEN THE APPEARANCE OF EVIL.

Scarfers, whose characters steal everything in the game. Some players get irritated when one of their number makes it his or her goal to acquire everything in sight. If this sort of thing is causing tension it would behoove the Host to talk to the offending player and find out if it's a conscious and/or in-character sort of thing. Perhaps the player will stop being so greedy if spoken with. Alternately, the character might become less greedy if he or she comes in contact with too many trapped or cursed items.

Lawyers, who dispute the meaning of the rules with the Host. Hopefully *Ironclaw's* rules are simple and clear, but if not, the Host's interpretation stands. And that's final. If a question of interpretation really does seem ambiguous, don't waste time bickering over it. As Host, use your interpretation for the rest of that session and then think about it in the time before the next. It's possible for any Host to overlook something. Keep an open mind, but don't let Lawyers push the game around.

Vanishers, who can't seem to be bothered to show up except at irregular intervals. All that can be done in this case is to give the character a greatly reduced role in the game. Don't design adventures which require any skills unique to that character. If the party travels a lot, it may be necessary to contrive a reason for the character to show up when the player does, but that too can be an interesting exercise.

Languishers, who show up but just don't do anything. If a player spends the whole session on the sofa or in the TV room, it may be the game fails to engage his or her interest. Have a chat sometime and find out how you can improve things.

Schitzoids, who behave in no reliable or predictable fashion. This may not be a "problem" at all. It could well be a player trying out new things. To that end encourage activity which enhances the game and discourage activity which detracts from it.

Hackenslashers, who solve all problems violently. In such an instance natural selection within the game world will frequently take care of this. A few disastrous situations caused by injudicious use of force will teach all but the most hard-headed to consider other options. And the other players can always try gentle persuasion. Developing players frequently have this problem but lose it as they encounter new ways to solve problems.

Paranoids, who somehow become convinced that the other players (not characters) are against them. This is frequently a problem which will take care of itself. Either the Paranoid will relax as his or her worst expectations fail to come true, or the Paranoid will get fed up with the party and leave. This happens frequently with young players, new players, and emotionally unstable players.

Dictators, who have to be party leader. This too is a problem which will take care of itself. Either the Dictator will be a good leader and the party will follow and have a good time, or he or she will not be a good leader and the party will stop listening to orders. A Dictator who is a poor leader will either realize it and reform or will get bored and drift away. In the worst case a Dictator will become a Complete Bastard.

Complete Bastards, who specifically annoy everyone else out-of-character. Complete Bastards are really nasty, and may the gods help the Hosts who must deal with them. Hopefully a stern talking-to, Host to player, is all which is required. Complete Bastards rarely reform, however, and a confrontation may be necessary, with Hosts and players together expressing their greivances. Complete Bastards are frequently very self-absorbed individuals with emotional problems and hard feelings are pretty much unavoidable. Don't hesitate to throw one out of the group if he or she should prove intransigent. The Host and Party will have nothing to lose.

With luck, the preceding will help you Host a game campaign successfully. Always keep in mind these basic principles:

1. It's just a game.
2. Keep an open mind.
3. Respect your players.
4. Give not even the appearance of evil.
5. Don't let the Bastards grind you down.

Have Fun and Enjoy *IRONCLAW*!!