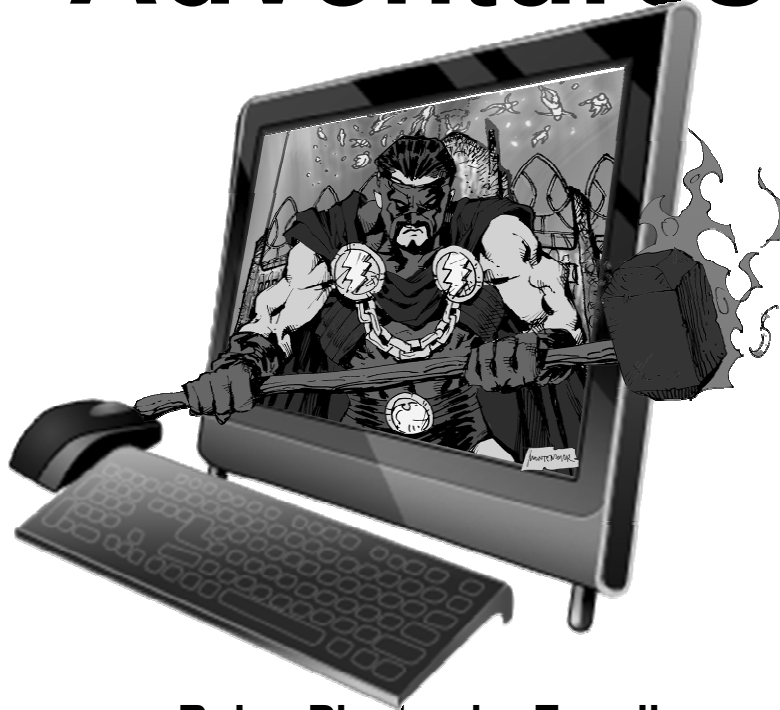

Cyberspace Adventures



**How to run a Play-By-E-Mail
Role-Playing Game
Campaigns**

Cyberspace Adventures



Role - Playing by E-mail by Simon Burley

A set of Role-playing Game rules will be needed
to make full use of this pack.
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Introduction

Welcome to a great new way to enjoy your favourite Role-playing game. Whether your taste is for Fantasy, Science Fiction, Gothic Horror or Superheroic games – or one of the many other genres available – you will find it full of useful and thought provoking advice.

Through this book you will discover how many Referees and Players have been able to have even more exciting and enjoyable adventures together.

You see, the great majority of role-playing games are “tabletop” games. Unlike – for example – computer role-playing games, it is played by a group of players sitting around a table with a Referee controlling the action. Campaign activity is acted out through verbal interactions and any conflict is usually resolved by using figures and some sort of map.

And it's FUN!

But if you've bought this book, you already know that.

However, sometimes it is not possible for players to meet together on a regular basis. That doesn't mean that the fun has to stop, however, there are loads of ways that you can keep having fun with the game – especially in the virtual worlds of the 21st century.

From early times, chess players have often used whatever forms of correspondence they had – pony express, telegraph, radio, telephones etc. - to carry on long distance chess games. In the 20th century many board gamers would engage in “play by mail” versions of their games.

Even if you can't get together with a group of friends every week to play a face-to-face game, you can keep games going through:

- Play by mail
- Play by E-Mail
- Internet-based communications – web cams, chat, Skype™ etc.
- Dedicated internet gaming software – eg. Battlegrounds™
- Bulletin Boards
- Internet Forums
- Social Networking
- Virtual Worlds – eg. Second Life™



All of these offer their own attractions and disadvantages and they're NOT virtually exclusive.

Players and Referees will each have their own favourite method or combination of the above methods which will help them keep their game going.

In fact, even if you DO play face-to-face games on a regular basis, judicious use of the above communication methods can add a bit of spice to events.

Three uses for e-mail:

If an Heroic Dwarf gets a scrawled parchment slipped under the door of his room at the Taverna – the Referee could send its contents to the player secretly between games.

Captain Stennart of the Star Patrol Scoutship Pathfinder could receive her orders from Star Federation Command. She could brief all her Senior Officers before they meet for the next face-to-face session.

The Superhero Lionheart could set up an e-mail to receive information from the great British public and the Referee could actually send some messages to that e-mail.

Because of the many, many options and combinations of options available, this book sticks to one method of remote-playing role-playing games – that of using e-mail – so-called “play by e-mail” or PBEM games. (It also happens to be the method I'm most familiar with.)

Introduction

In a Play-by-Email game, the Referee sends their players e-mails describing what is happening in the game. The players then respond with e-mails describing what their characters are doing. The Referee amalgamates the players' responses. They use the rules to determine what happens as a result of the characters' actions and e-mails everyone with an update of events. A story unfolds episode by episode through your computer in which you can influence events through the actions of your player-character.

Put like this it sounds really simple and, in truth, it is. However - like role-playing games themselves - hearing about PBEM games is nothing like playing them. Like RPGs, PBEM games can be absolutely fascinating and extremely addictive.

Like table-top RPGs, refereeing these games is a lot of fun but requires a special kind of person. There is a lot of work involved and many Referees can leap into running this sort of game without understanding some of the pitfalls.

This book is intended to help anyone who hopes to run a PBEM Role-playing game - in any genre.

It will give you clear warning about some of the difficulties to might face, and suggest strategies which should make you life easier and running the game more enjoyable. This might be alternative ways of handling combat, advice about structuring the plot-lines, initial planning or myriad other things.

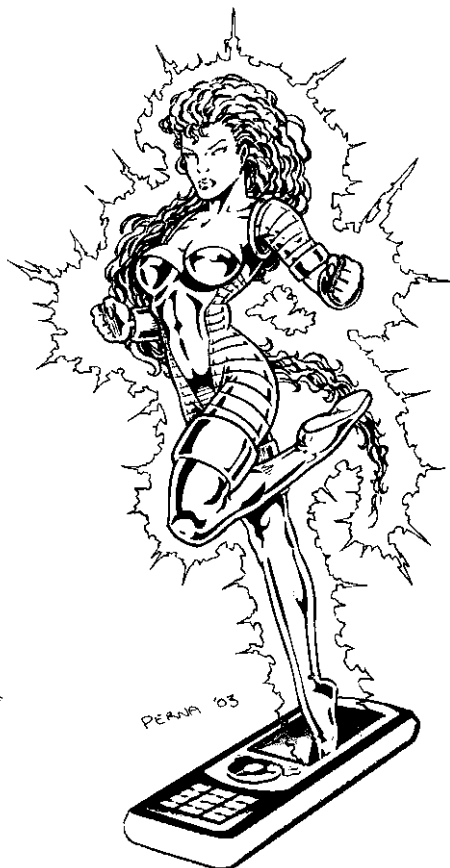
Much of the advice and many of the rule variations suggested in this book can apply just as readily to other methods of remote or, even, face-to-face play. So I hope it'll be useful even if you ultimately decide the playing by e-mail isn't something you want to try.

My recommendation is:

Have a read of this book.

Even if you decide playing by e-mail isn't for you, there's still loads here to spark your imagination.

And if you DO decide to run a Role-playing game in cyberspace, though e-mailwelcome to the future!





Chapter 1: Why P.B.E.M.?

The most obvious reason to play be e-mail is because you want to continue playing your chosen RPG but, for some reason, can't meet together to play face-to-face as often as you would like.

Often people who have attended University or worked together and become gaming buddies wish to continue with a campaign when they move apart at the end of their courses or when promotions cause people to move.

Sometimes it allows people who live away from populated areas to take part in games which they would otherwise have no access to. PBEM gaming groups often consist of people who have only ever "met" through e-mail. Players can come from any part of the world as long as they all have access to e-mail and can speak a common language. In fact this can be the source of loads of fun – especially when the "common language" is shared – for example – between Americans and the English!

However, there are more than just practical considerations.

PBEM games by their very nature develop different emphases than fact-to-face games. Many RPGs are based very heavily around combat. In a Superhero RPG, for example, a gaming session can be occupied entirely with a single battle between the characters and their dastardly opponents. Traditional fantasy RPGs involve lots of kicking down doors,

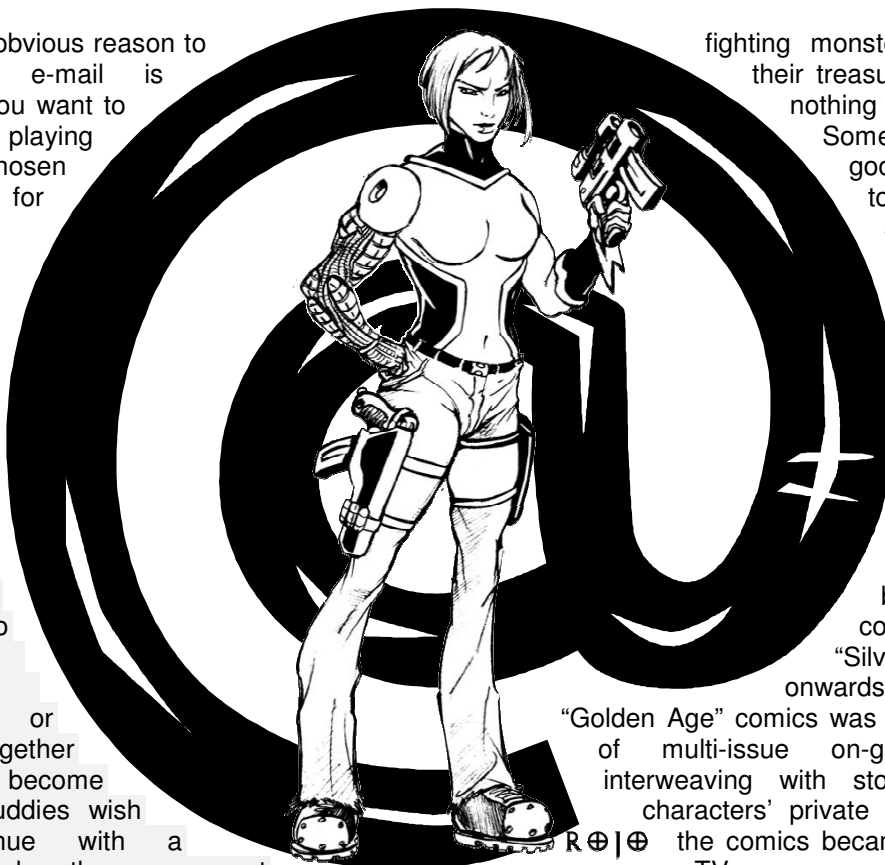
fighting monsters and taking their treasure. And there's nothing wrong with that! Sometimes it feels good to just go toe-to-toe with some bad guys and just kick their back-sides.

But then there's the campaign.

Take comics, for example. One big difference between the comics of the "Silver Age" (1960's onwards) and earlier

"Golden Age" comics was the introduction of multi-issue on-going plotlines interweaving with stories from the characters' private lives. Suddenly the comics became as addictive as TV soap operas with plot, sub-plots, cliff-hangers, running characters and running gags. Even when an individual story was resolved and planet Earth was saved from destruction, readers wanted to keep reading to find out what happened next to their favourite characters.

In recent years, the same thing has happened with most television Sci-Fi series. In the past, TV series were dominated by a "circular narrative". The situation at the end of each story was always returned to the way it was at the beginning. This allowed the shows to be shown in any order and meant that you could miss an episode without losing track of the storyline. It also meant that you knew none of the main characters were going to die. Even when you saw them wiped out on screen in front of your eyes, you knew they'd be back by the end of the story. Nowadays, most individual series of a television title have their own "story arcs" with the series as a whole building towards a climax – even if some individual stories are still "stand alone". Many series have become totally episodic – needing to be watched in order and often finishing each story with a cliffhanger ending.



Even fantasy films often exist as parts of an on-going “franchise”.

People like to see their favourite characters grow and change. They like to see them face real challenges with a real chance of death. (Births and Marriages are also popular.) They like the background world to develop and change, allegiances to shift and secret agendas to be revealed.

Most RPGs – whilst also having a fun and action packed combat system – allows players and Referees to enjoy this more immersive (and addictive) campaign aspect of the game.

In a PBEM game, battles and slugfests become less important as foci for game activity. You can enjoy a good battle face-to-face but they are not as engaging over the Internet. It's fun planning and preparing for them and even more fun finding out what happens afterwards but – with all the options possessed by both the characters and their opposition – it would prove extremely tedious to play out every combat round-for-round by e-mail. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The Campaign aspect of the game, however, really comes into its own when played by e-mail.

Face-to-face games fit with the quick decision making and high octane actions. PBEM games are much slower and allow time for reflection. This gives players time to THINK about their characters. They develop a much deeper insight into how and why their characters act as they do. There's time to deal with mundane matters “at home”. Detective work is carried out a lot more thoroughly.

Whilst it might be said that this is a lot less exciting than playing face-to-face – and there is certainly less adrenalin involved – the whole experience can seem a lot deeper and more involving. Less exciting but a lot more satisfying is one way to describe it. Possibly less like a blockbusting film and more like a high budget television series.

In fact because of this deepening of the campaign aspects of the game, some Referees actually use some PBEM elements even if they are able to have face-to-face sessions with their players. The face-to-face games are usually for resolving combats or other direct character interactions.

Character development, research and aspects of their characters' private lives are handled through e-mail communication between sessions.

Playing by e-mail is also an extremely cheap way of running a game. As long as you've paid for your Internet connection and can cover your electricity bill the only additional cost is TIME. You don't need figures, characters sheets, pencils, paper, maps or munchies to keep the players fed. All you need is a few spare hours per week.

Game Systems

So which game system should you use to run your PBEM game?

Personally, I think this is a non-question. You should try to make the game system you like and your players are familiar with fit into the PBEM framework. This is what this book's about, after all.

However, some people do wish to change systems:

- You might want to try something different
- You might think that the game you usually play won't adapt well to PBEM
- Your players existing perspectives on the current game system might make them less flexible when adapting to PBEM

If any of these are the case, there are possibilities:

1) No rules

You can actually make things up as you go along in a PBEM game. You don't need rules to decide what happens, you just use your common sense as Referee.

Some Referees like the freedom this offers. However, this does require Referees who are always scrupulously fair and imaginative. I think that having sooner or later, you are going reach a time when you've had hard week at work and don't have the usual time or level of motivation to devote to the game. At those times having rules to fall back on is invaluable. Also, the rules act as a moderator of your actions. Sooner things are going to happen which the players aren't going to like. This is a lot easier to swallow if it is as the result of some bad die-rolls rather than a decision on your part.

Even if you decide to run a game without a formal game system, I'd still be tempted to rolls a d6 from time to time to decide what happens.

Many Referees do run games where they just make things up as they go along, anyway. They just tell the players that they're using a given rule system to give them a feeling of security.

Finally, having rules makes defining the player characters a lot easier. Even if you throw the rulebook out of the window after they've been made – keep some kind of rules for character creation. Rule-less games often accept prose descriptors of characters. However, two different characters can be described as “strong” and possess different abilities in that area. Rules tell you exactly which one is strongest in a given situation.

2. Rules-lite

You can pick a simple – usually generic – game system as the backbone of your game and create all the campaign detail around it. There are hundreds of systems around. Often they are free.

If you are a really creative individual, this might suit you. Personally, I prefer to have loads of reference materials to back-up my own ideas.

Just because you adopt a particular set of Fantasy Role-playing rules doesn't mean you have to use all the characters classes and races it covers. However, if you do decide you want Elves in your game at least you won't have to invent them from scratch.

There's more to a game than the rule-system, and the more material you can pick up “ready-made” the better.

3. Invent your own rules

This is tempting – especially if you are setting your campaign in a totally original setting (see chapter 2). However, the question to ask is: With literal thousands of sets of RPG rules in the world, why invent a new one? Many of the rules already out there have been around for a while and have been play-tested are balanced and work. Many have expansions or additional materials which you can draw upon for your game. There is no need to re-invent the wheel when all the work has been done for you.

4. Adapt existing rules

This is my recommendation. Running a PBEM is difficult enough without giving yourself extra work. It is easier to adapt, edit or cut existing material than it is to create new stuff for yourself.

Of course, you might still be worried about picking the most “appropriate” system. Here are my pointers:

- By preference choose a system to you have some familiarity with. This not essential - you have time to read and reread rulebooks in a PBEM – but it makes it easier to adapt the rules to your own requirements.
- Choose a game with a significant element of die-rolling to stop the players feeling that you, as Referee, are just making things up.
- A game with a points-based system which allows players to design their own characters can be easier to handle at the beginning of the game.
- A game with lots of support materials will give you greater freedom in ignoring some of the material in the “core” rulebooks to get exactly the game that you want.

However, I stick to my original position. Keeping the games system you enjoy playing and adapt it to the PBEM environment is by far the best choice.

Referees

The best advice that can be given to a person intending to Referee a PBEM game is:



DON'T DO IT!

This is a serious endeavour. It will take a big chunk out of your life. There is a BIG time commitment, a significant intellectual commitment and, possibly surprisingly, a considerable emotional commitment.

If you have a life, then you might want to think seriously before taking on this level of responsibility. Because it IS a responsibility. Trust me, your players will love your game. You'll be surprised how committed they become to it in a very short time. If you are not able to deliver it to the level they, and you, want then there'll be a lot of disappointment.

Don't take on this responsibility lightly. If you don't have the time or the stamina then don't do it.

OK, I'll be honest. If you are that special sort of person who can find the necessary level of commitment to run such a game, then it could be one of the most satisfying experiences of your life. Just don't expect it to be easy.

This book is devoted to you so I won't say too much more here. If after reading it you ARE still determined to run a PBEM game then I doff my cap to you sir. Hopefully some of the suggestions it includes – for example the “honeymoon period” introduced in Chapter 2 – will make your life a bit easier.

Players

Playing by e-mail is not for everyone. Some players may only have time for one game session per week and/or enjoy the social aspects of getting together. Using e-mail can be more time-consuming and can be seen as a solitary activity. Face-to-face gaming also suits people with quick wits who are more verbally adroit.



The opposite is what makes PBEM so attractive to many people. Whereas a face-to-face game requires a player to be at a certain place for a certain time, reading and writing e-mails can be deferred until a convenient time.

In many ways this way of playing the game is a lot easier than tabletop gaming. You have time to think about your responses carefully so you know that every action your character takes and every word they say is exactly what you want.

The fact is that most people enjoy playing PBEM games as much as – or even more than – face-to-face ones.

They give a different type of enjoyment. You will have no problem attracting players to your game. If you're hoping to be a player in a PBEM game then you really don't need to read any further.

You don't even need to know the rules of the game. Your Referee will handle everything for you. Once your character is made, all you need to do is to be able to read and write and have a degree of imagination.

You also need to be committed to the game. There's nothing worse than a PBEM game being held up because one player is unable to get his responses in on time. Your Referee will be devoting hours to giving you and your fellow players the best game he or she can. The least you can do is to write an e-mail every week.

Lurkers

A slightly surprising side effect of a PBEM game is the emergence of so-called “Lurkers”.



These are individuals who don't want to actually play in the game but who are interested in watching what's going on. They ask to see the public e-mails which are circulated to every player.

For them, it's sort of like watching a television series. As the story of your game develops, they get to read along with the players. Some PBEM games can have more lurkers than players.

It doesn't cost take any effort to support Lurkers. All you do is add their e-mail addresses to the mailing list and that's it.

Suddenly you've got an audience.

NPCs

In a PBEM game, non-player characters can actually be played by non-players.

I'll explain.



There might be someone who is unable to commit to being a full-time player but who wants to do a bit more than “lurk”. The Referee can e-mail them the details of one of the minor NPCs in the game and – whenever that character appears – the bit-part player can write their script.

Obviously the Referee will maintain a veto over the way the character acts to ensure that they don’t stray away from their role. However, having someone else put the words into the mouth of an also-ran like this can save the Referee some thought and allow them to develop a more unique personality. Used with moderation this can be immense fun.

Lucky Referees might also have some people who are willing to provide other support services.

For example, imagine that the campaign had its own town-crier, vid-show or newspaper which published the events in the campaign at regular intervals. Producing these updates on a regular basis may be too much for the Referee who will be overloaded with other things. But if they can get a volunteer/lurker to produce them it will add immeasurably to the campaign as a whole.

The pronouncements, news-vids or papers would be written from the perspective of the Mayor, TV producer or Editor, not the Referee. The helper might also be called upon the play the roles of roving reporters (or, even, the Mayor/Producer/Editor - if the players choose to complain about the reporting of their activities.) I’ve never heard of a Referee who’s been lucky enough to find someone to do this for them but it’s worth a thought.

A table-top RPG can keep half-a-dozen people entertained. A PBEM game can bring joy to many more.

My recommendation is:

If you get the chance to PLAY in a PBEM game then I’d grab it with both hands – IF you have the time to commit to playing it properly.

If you don’t have the time it’s still fun to lurk or – even – help out as an NPC from time to time.

Don’t take on the role of Referee of a PBEM unless you are absolutely sure it is what you want. If you are able to do it, though, you’ll find it a fascinating and rewarding challenge.





Chapter 2: Preparation

OK you've decided that you want to run a PBEM RPG. How do you do it in a way that keeps you sane?

The first element is preparation.

Preparation is vital.

Before you even begin to put your fingers to the keyboard to put down your first notes about your PBEM campaign, you have some important decisions to make.

And DON'T let anyone know you're even thinking about starting a PBEM campaign until you have made these decisions and started to get your ideas down in print. The instant word gets out, you'll have people asking you all sorts of questions and wanting to start making their characters.

Existing campaigns

First of all, if you're thinking of starting a PBEM game because you want to stay in touch with people you've been playing face-to-face with you may have a BIG decision to make. You might want to continue your table-top game over the Internet.

If at all possible, my advice to you is to put that campaign away and start a brand new one.

There are a number of good reasons for this:

- 1) I explained in Chapter 1 that a PBEM game is a totally different animal to a face-to-face game. Tabletop games revolve around combat. E-mail games revolve around character and campaign play. The whole style of the existing campaign will change. Now if that's what you want that's fine.

However, if your players are looking to keep running their characters in the way they always have, then they may be disappointed by a PBEM game.

- 2) PBEM games generally work better with lower-level characters – especially to start with (see below). Most face-to-face characters will have improved through the experience they have acquired. Their wider range of combat

options will be much harder to handle by e-mail.

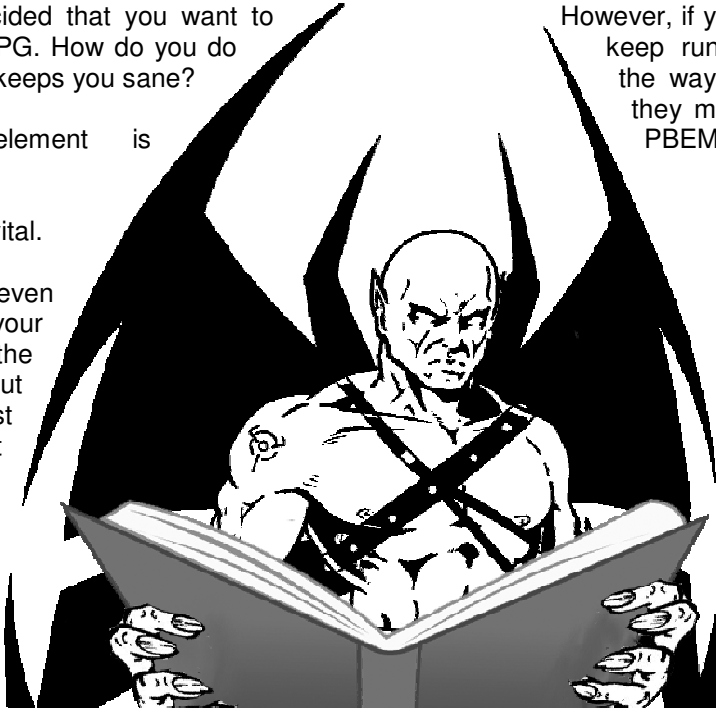
Even if your campaign was a lower level one, the exact skills, feats and abilities selected by players in face-to-face games tends to be more combat oriented. Some players may complain that the abilities they acquired during the character creation process are less useful under the new campaign framework.

- 3) Creating new characters and starting a new campaign is FUN.

You don't have to scrap the old campaign, but you should mothball it. Put it away to bring out like a comfy old pair of slippers if you and your friends ever do manage to get together in the future. (Having this to look forward to might even give you more of an impetus to arrange such a meeting.)

Another option is to start a new campaign but to draw upon the existing setting the players are familiar with. The new campaign could be set in the same town but down in the gutters, or in a different city or on another planet.

Some familiar NPCs and settings could be re-used but will now be seen in a new light.





A New Campaign

So you've decided to start a new campaign to run by e-mail have you? Good choice!

1) Go wild!

Here's some good news. You can now run almost any campaign or setting that you want. You can start to think outside the box.

A world where Magic is outlawed. A world ruled by Supercharacters. Defeating a demonic invasion of Victorian England. Mutants versus monsters in a sewer kingdom of outcasts below an alien city. A giant space station kept functioning by ancient magic. Time travel. Gothic monsters in World War 2.

The reason for this is simple. When you run a face-to-face game you have to have everything to hand. If the players have a question, you have to have the answer there and then. It is why most people stick to fully designed campaign settings, set games in real life locations that they know intimately or keep the background so vague and undefined that it doesn't matter if you make something up on the spot. If the players hare off in an unexpected direction, at least you know what's there – or know that you haven't placed anything there yet and can make up anything you want. You have to keep the background manageable when you're playing in "real-time" on a tabletop.

With a PBEM game you have time in between a player stating what they want to do – or asking a question – and your response. Time to think. You don't need to know what's down in the bowels of the ancient space station before the game starts but, if someone decides to go down there, you've got time to think up an appropriate encounter.

So go a bit wild.

However.....

Don't go so wild that you limit the number of adventures the characters could have.

It's no good coming up with a stunning first novel in trilogy or a great pilot episode for your TV series if there's nowhere else for the story to go.

2) Origins

At this point you may also want to decide where the characters come from. The "kitchen sink" universe - which many Referees choose in tabletop campaigns – is best avoided in a PBEM game. Allowing players to decide whether their characters are Dwarves, Elves, Orcs and the like is might work in a face-to-face setting. In a PBEM setting, with its greater concentration on personality, conflicts between character design are less easy to paper over.

In a face-to-face game Vatrach - the Holy Warrior – might put aside his differences with Grurg – the Ogre – as they stand back-to-back against the invading Goblins.

In a PBEM game, each will have time to mull over exactly why they can't stand each other....

Having some sort of common origin for the characters works best. However, you need to have many different ways for players to design or roll their characters to produce as wide a variety as possible within the limits of your chosen character origins.

In a paranormal game the characters could be re-incarnated souls of ancient characters, modern researchers into the occult, sceptical scientists reformed demons or athletes/martial artists.

Be prepared for your players to come up with other ideas as long as they are compatible with your background.

3) Solo vs. Fellowship

There are two basic ways of organizing the action in a PBEM game. One is to start all the characters off separately from each other. The other is to have them organized as a group or team – possibly called together by some kind of authority or mentor figure.

The solo approach can be fun for some Referees. If a player is slow to respond, it doesn't delay the Referee's interaction with other players. The Referee has great fun as each player explores his or her world.

They bump into each other, pick up each other's sub-plots and hear about each other's adventures – never being sure if they're meeting or hearing about an NPC or another player-character.

Personally, I think this approach is more work for the Referee due to having to keep myriad plotlines on the go at once. Also, even though the Referee might be having a great time sitting in the middle of their web of adventures, they are the only one who sees the whole picture. Players are kept in the dark about each other and there's absolutely nothing for Lurkers in this kind of game. Most novels and films limit the number of viewpoints. There might be seven heroic characters in the group, but they rarely split up into more than two groups as the constant switching between them would make the film or story plot difficult to follow.

If you have the players operate as a team then you have to wait until most or all of them respond before you can move on. This can be a bit frustrating at times. You only need a single plotline, though, and you can publish a public summary of events for the players and any lurkers. There are also ways of dealing with delays. (For suggestions on how to deal with slow or unresponsive players, see Chapter 5.)

There's nothing to stop you "splitting the team" from time to time in the campaign to run parallel plotlines when you feel ready for this. (See Chapter 4.)

I recommend starting with the team approach.

4. Make notes

Now's the time to turn on your computer. Jot down a summary of the background. Decide what makes the characters so special and then half a dozen story seeds. If you can do that then your campaign will probably be a flier.

Example: The Alien invasion of Earth was thwarted when a brave astronaut rammed the mothership with his shuttle. Some aliens are still loose on Earth but even if they weren't, the planet is scarred. Alien viruses affect random individuals – killing many, mutating others and granting abilities to a few. Some choose to use these for evil. Some manage to get their hands on Alien technology from crashed attack craft. Professor Brian Bart has developed a method of detecting alien materials – organic and manufactured – and is convinced that they are infiltrating the city prior to launching a take-over.

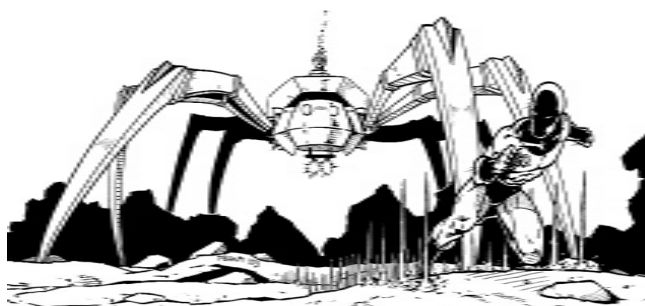
The authorities do not believe him so he is putting together his own rag-tag group to resist the on-coming attack.

Possible story ideas:

- Track down the alien infiltrators and expose them.
- Discover and destroy the alien base.
- The alien virus mutates fatally. Find a cure by finding and making peace with an alien.
- Criminal organization using and abusing captured aliens to develop their own powers and influence.
- BIG alien robots.
- The "authorities" object to the Hero group and closes them down, driving them outlaw.
- Another mothership, another invasion.

If you are able to, come up with a funky title for the campaign at this time. This is earliest time that you should let rumours of your intention to run a PBEM game slip out.

We'll simply call this alien invasion campaign "Incursion".



Internet Backbone

So you've come up with the big idea for your campaign. And you're STILL determined to go ahead and run it.

What you need now is the means. The main thing is you need regular access to a reliable computer with a secure Internet access. Create a separate folder on the hard-drive for this campaign, keep everything to do with the campaign in it and back it up regularly.



I know this seems obvious but it's amazing how many people fail to do this. Really your campaign folder should also be populated with a variety of sub-folders to allow you to keep everything in order.

You need to set up two things on the Internet:

1) Private e-mail

The first thing you need is a secure e-mail address which you and your players will use to communicate PRIVATELY.

You may be tempted to use a pre-existing personal e-mail address. Bear in mind that the campaign will generate a lot of traffic and this will get jumbled up with your other private e-mails. It also makes it difficult to separate the game from your private affairs. You may sit down to read and deal with your personal e-mails and be distracted by events within the game and vice versa.

Also, remember that, if you're opening the game up to players that you haven't met personally, then you can't be absolutely sure who it is you're giving your personal e-mail address to.

For these reasons, I would personally set up a separate e-mail address specifically for this e-mail campaign.

Eg. **incursionreferee@anymail.co.uk**

2) Public information

You also need some way of publishing events in the game in a forum where all the players – and lurkers – can access it.

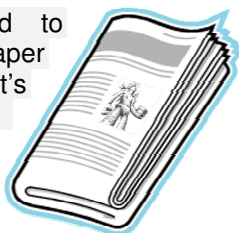
This can be as simple as a second e-mail address.

Eg. **incursion@anymail.co.uk**

This e-mail address should have a contact list attached to it which automatically e-mails any updates to all those who need to see them. No-one except you should ever use this e-mail address.

Example: Carlton has agreed to prepare a regular newspaper reporting the events in Stuart's Incursion campaign world.

As Referee, Stuart wants to review and check it before publication.



The completed issues are e-mailed to Stuart using the private e-mail address. He then uploads it for public reviewing as soon as he has approved it.

Players should not use the public forum to contact you about game events. They should use the private e-mail address (above). (They may, however, use it in other ways – see Chapter 7.)

There are alternatives to a simple e-mail, however. Many companies offer the ability to set up "groups" which allow registered users to post and share messages, files etc. A group allows you to archive events in the campaign. Public postings remain on the group area indefinitely. Any lurker or player who joins the group would easily be able to catch up with past events.

The players would also be able to upload pictures of their characters to the files area of the group. The Referee could use this area to store newspapers and any other documents they prepare to support the campaign – maps, background documents etc.

Using a group like this is extremely useful but you need to be clear about exactly what players are allowed to do in the group – what files they are allowed to upload, for example. Many Referees set up a group and make it available for viewing by the public. (This means ANYONE could look at your campaign in action. You don't know who is lurking or how big your audience is.)

However, they do NOT make their players members of the group or limit their access rights. This would mean that the only the Referee can upload messages and files to the group. Alternatively, you could limit access to specific members of the group – controlling who can see your game – and/or allow those members to upload files openly.

If you do this you would have to carefully control it through your "Netiquette" rules (see below). There are advantages to this. (Discussed in Chapter 7.)

Another great advantage is that a system with archived messages and files – such as a user group – would allow any new players to easily "catch up" with events in the campaign – saving the Referee all that extra work.

Other possibilities include Internet Forums and/or Bulletin boards. Some of these have been set up specifically to support the running of RPGs across the Internet. These are worth looking at even if you don't end up using them. Many of them have FAQ's, advice or articles about running Internet-based games which you might find useful. (Not as useful as this book – obviously – but still worth reading.)

There are also opportunities offered by Social Networking, FTP or other file-sharing sites and utilities.

Which method(s) you choose depends upon your personal preferences, level of knowledge and your intentions for the campaign. Two simple e-mail addresses is all you need to run most campaigns, however.

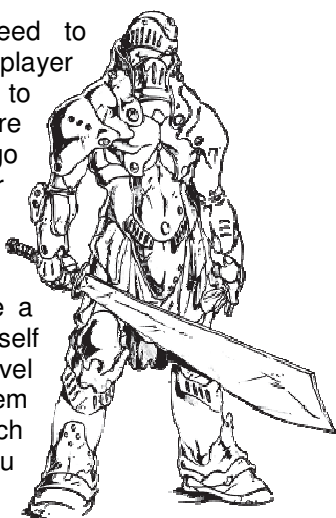
Personally I would set up a private e-mail address and a group to handle public messages.

What is crucial is that the players should have no way of communicating directly with each other about events in the game. If your players know each other prior to the campaign - and exchange e-mails, talk on the telephone or even (shudder!) actually meet in the real world – you need to be clear with them that they are not to discuss in-game matters with each other.

You should be involved in *all* exchanges of information between players in the game about the game.

Characters

At this time you need to decide how the player characters are going to be created. For more details on how to go about this, see Chapter 3. If you have the inclination and the time it is probably a good idea to generate a couple characters yourself to see if the power level and limitations system you come up with match the background you have in mind.



The Honeymoon Period

Now is the time to sketch out the first adventure in the campaign. Again, this is discussed later – in Chapter 4.

However, this is a good time to introduce the concept of the “Honeymoon Period”. Simply put, this first adventure is going to be short and simple. You don't know at this stage – despite all your good intentions – just how well you're going manage running this PBEM campaign. You might love it. You might find it doesn't work out the way you expected.

At the same time, you don't know if your players are going to enjoy it or how easy they are to work with on the campaign.

You might find yourself with too many players or with the capacity to take on a couple more.

In short, go into the campaign treating the first adventure as a honeymoon period. Set yourself an achievable short term goal. Be prepared to make changes to the game or, even, give it up when you reach this plot resolution.

There is no shame in this. Many people find running a PBEM game to be different than they expected. It is sad when a Referee puts a lot of effort into designing a highly detailed campaign and starts a complex multi-layered plot and is unable to see it through – leaving their players hanging. Make sure you can at least finish off the simple introductory chapter.

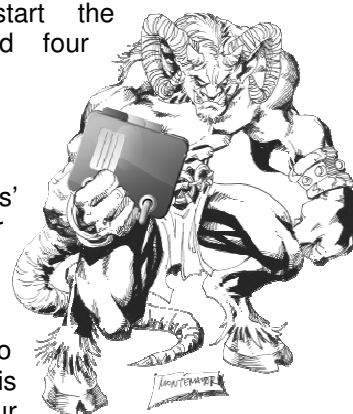
Think of it as a “prologue” to the campaign proper.

Paperwork

Before you can start the campaign, you need four items of paperwork.

1) The Background

This is the players' introduction to your new campaign world. This is the first thing you send them after they have signed on to the campaign and it is what *sells* your campaign to them.





You'll probably need to redraft it a few times to get it right. It needs to:

- grab their attention
- communicate the mood and style of the setting
- give them all the information they need
- be as short and concise as possible – the equivalent of a single side of paper is best

This is the keystone document of the campaign. Take your time about it.

However, as this is the honeymoon period, you don't have to cross every "t" and dot every "i" in the campaign background. You will probably revisit this background from time-to-time to refine it and add some more polish to it. It doesn't have to be perfect to start with.

Feelings are more important than facts. Purple prose is perfectly acceptable.

2) Netiquette

This is a simple list of rules which govern how you, the players and any other participants should communicate with each other.

It is surprising how essential this is. Things which may seem obvious to you (eg. Always be polite in e-mails) may not be as obvious to some players.

This could cover:

- Methods of communication (public and private)
- Timetable of communications
- Content of communications (length, depth, style, acceptable level of profanity, tense etc.)
- Responsibilities of players
- Responsibilities of the Referee
- Rules which apply to non-players
- Likely methods of addressing any issues which arise

Use a light hand and be very polite when writing this. Be as clear about your responsibilities and your commitment to the success of the game as you are about the players. It's not about stamping your authority on the game, it's about trying anticipate and resolve any potential misunderstandings or issues which might arise.

In his Netiquette document, Stuart explains that he will be posting a public description of events in the game once per week. He expects a private response from each player every week. If a player is unable to respond with instructions for their character in a given week, the game will continue. However, that character will not take any decisive action that week. Any actions they do take will be determined by Stuart based upon standing orders (see Chapter 7) or his knowledge of the character.

By doing this he is showing his commitment to the game, encouraging the players to be as committed, giving an incentive not to fall behind when sending in instructions and deflecting any possible complaints from players should he need to take control of their player-character in this way.

You WILL want to revisit and redraft these Netiquette rules at the end of the Honeymoon Period. It is highly unlikely that you will cover everything you need to at this stage. But try to think of as much as you can. The more you put in the easier things are going to flow.

3) Character generation rules

You'll need a simple sheet which outlines the kind of characters you expect to see in this game and how they are going to be created (see Chapter 3).

You may wish to give them some examples of possible options – maybe the test characters you created (see Chapter 2). Personally, I find that - if I give examples - some players use these as templates rather than letting their imaginations roam free. It's best to give them just the rules for character creation. Only give them example characters to look at if they seem to be struggling.

If your players are unfamiliar with the game you are playing, you may wish to encourage them to purchase a set of the rules. It saves a lot of time if players can do a most of the character creation themselves.

This isn't essential though. The only person who needs to understand the rules behind a PBEM game is the Referee. A player can take part without knowing the game and – from their point of view – participate in the joint story telling.

4) Introduction to the adventure

This is to be given to the players after they have created their characters but before they start playing the first adventure. You may wish to draft an outline introduction at this stage and then customize it for each individual character as they are created.

Stuart decides that each character will suffer in some way through the legacy left by the alien invaders and are rescued by Professor Brian Bart. If they are mutated by the alien virus, it will become deadly and he will arrive with a serum which stabilizes the mutation. If they are using alien technology, it is backfiring, out of control, when he pops up to point out the correct controls. He will visit scientists and show them the errors in their work. He will rescue martial artists from attacks by left-over alien robot drones. In each case he will then invite the Hero to a meeting where he will outline his plan.....

Invite Players

Now is the time that you can “officially” announce your intention to run a play-by-email game.

If you already know some people who might like to play, contact them and explain your plans. If, for some reason, you don’t attract enough players at first, ask them to invite friends.

If there still aren’t enough interested parties trawl the Internet for fan-groups, RPG web-sites or RPG forums and announce your game there. (Do this one site at a time – don’t do a blanket marketing campaign or you WILL be swamped with offers of interest.)

You’ll find yourself overwhelmed with interest. DON’T be tempted to take on too many players at first. Sign up a small number for the honeymoon period (5 at most).

If possible, take on one less player than you think you can cope with in case someone you simply HAVE to let play wishes to sign on after your deadline is passed.

For example, one of your close friends might say they’re not interested in playing but change their mind after you’ve filled all the available places.

In my opinion, 5 players is the “ideal” number for a PBEM game. In the Honeymoon period, when you’re getting a feel for things and everyone is (over) enthusiastic, then you should consider it a maximum number. (So you might start with 4 players to keep a space “spare” for a late-comer.)

However, when you move into the main part of the game you need to have enough player responses every week to keep the game going – in the face of real-life commitments and waning or variable enthusiasm – you probably need a minimum of 5 players.

If you reach the maximum number you feel you can cope with, you can always put other interested parties on a reserve list and introduce them into the campaign later when you feel you have the capacity. You may wish to let these reserves “lurk”.

It is up to you how you feel about letting other people “lurk” during the honeymoon period. You may prefer not to have too many lurkers in your honeymoon period – whilst you are still finding your feet.

On the other hand, a bigger audience might give you more motivation. (It also gives the opportunity for a wider range of feedback – see Chapter 7.)

How you select your players is up to you. If you’re inviting people you already know then you’re probably alright.

However, if you’re signing up a friend of a friend or someone who has contacted you through the Internet you might want to have some criteria other than “first come first served”. When you get an e-mail enquiry send them a polite note back thanking them for their interest. Say that they’re on the waiting list and you’ll get in touch soon.

After a short while – a couple of days maybe – you will probably be able to tell from the e-mails you’ve received (and their response – if any – to your “thank you” message) which of the interested parties you can work with.

Send these people an e-mail informing them that they’ve got a place in the game let them know that it is for a trial period to see how things go.



Let everyone else know that they are on the reserve list or (if you want) that all the places in the game are gone but they are welcome to lurk.

You can now post the full background for everyone to read and send your players details of how they are going to start making their characters (see Chapter 3).

The one thing you WON'T have to worry about is getting enough players. Trust me, they'll be queuing around the block and you'll have to fight them off with a stick!

My recommendation is:

Think carefully about what you want before starting to run the game and don't be afraid to think "outside the box".

Prepare your Netiquette rules, campaign background, character generation rules, first adventure and half a dozen further adventure seeds before advertising for players.

Have some "in-game" origins for characters and start them off as low level or with a limited number of character creation points to spend.

Set up a private e-mail address for players to contact you and a public e-mail address or internet group to publish events in the campaign.

Always plan to start with a Honeymoon Period.

Sign up four players for the honeymoon period and raise this number to six when you start the campaign proper.





Chapter 3: Character Creation

Time to make the characters for your campaign.

This is one area which is influenced significantly by the game system you have chosen to play. If the game system uses a design method of creating characters – usually involving the spending of points – and you're lucky enough to have players who are familiar with the game, and have their own rule-books, this step doesn't take long at all.

If the system involves a random element – such as die-rolling – there are other issues to face.

Systems which have a random element and then require some decisions to be taken as a result of the die-rolls take the longest.

Don't forget, though, that this stage is FUN. There are times I think making the characters for a game is almost as much fun as actually playing them.

Sometimes people are so keen to get on with their PBEM that they want to get this stage over as quickly as possible. Don't do this. Creating the characters is part of the game. Take your time. Savour it. Enjoy it.

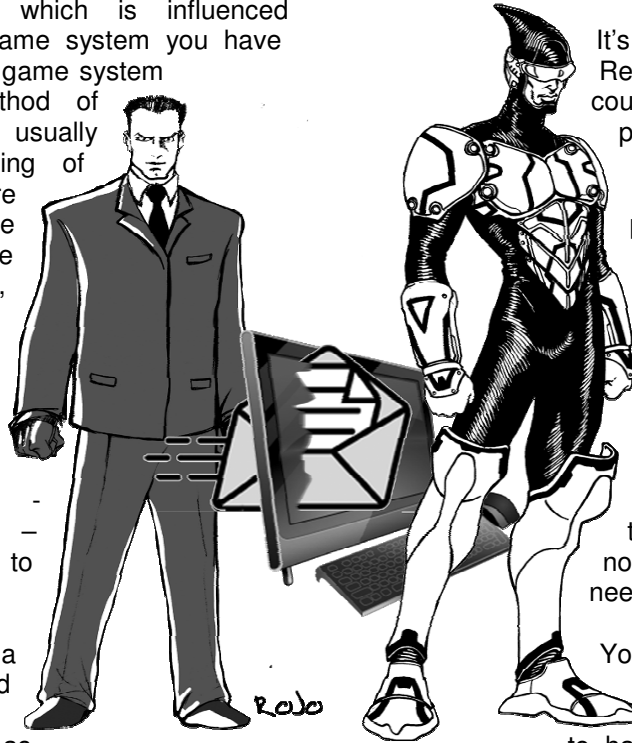
From the moment you have selected your players and e-mailed them details for creating characters the game has started.

Rolling the dice

The first decision you may have to make is who gets to roll the dice.

Do you let the players roll the dice when they are creating (and running) their characters? Can you really trust all of them to always tell the exact truth about what they roll?

Even the most honest person can be tempted to "shade" the odd die roll if there's no-one around.



It's generally best if the Referee rolls all the dice. Of course, this means that your players have to trust you. However, if this isn't already the case then perhaps they'd be better off playing with another Referee who they DO trust.

You've probably got a long reserve list by this time anyway.

Of course, if you've got the players' trust, there's no reason why you actually need to roll dice, is there?

You could just make up all the die-rolls. Just decide what you want to have happen in the game and just decide that that is what happens.

This is what lots of Referees do - sometimes even when they are playing face-to-face. They make their die-rolls behind a screen and just announce the results.

Even if you do decide to adopt this system when you run the campaign, I'd recommend you stick to die-rolling for character creation. This random factor is one of the most appealing things about the game. Most RPGs have Referees and Players making decisions which affect the course of events. However, the game system itself can be like a third-person in the equation – another equal partner deciding how the game develops. It can make a big contribution to the creation of characters.

So for character generation, I thoroughly recommend that you, the Referee, rolls the dice and that you DO roll them, honestly.

As you're at the computer you might prefer to "roll the dice" on the computer using a spreadsheet or something similar. See Chapter 6 for more details about this.

Another alternative you may wish to consider is the use of “on-line dice-rollers”. These are web-sites programmed to simulate rolling dice. These might be dedicated to games other than one you’ve chosen to play but you can normally find ones which allow the die rolls you’ll need for your game.

You could use these to generate your rolls whilst at the computer if you’re unable to use the spreadsheet option.

Sometimes the sites have an e-mail option which will e-mail the results of any rolls directly to specified e-mail addresses – in this case the Referee and the Player. If you can find one of these sites, it solves the issue of trust. The player uses the web-site to generate die rolls and these are e-mailed directly to the Referee who knows there has been no fiddling. In this case you could use these sites to allow the players to “roll” their characteristics. Using these sites during play might slow things down a bit (see Chapter 6) but - if you find one you like – there is no reason you shouldn’t use them during the character generation process.

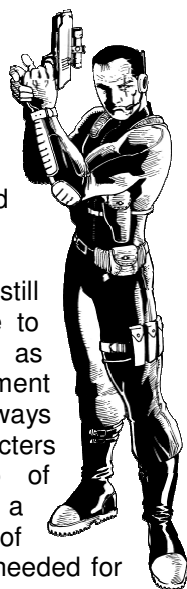
Pre-generated characters

If you DO want to get into the game quickly and you have a clear idea about how you want the story of your game to develop one option is to give the players pre-generated characters.

If you choose this option, I’d still recommend that you use dice to help create the characters as usual. Cutting the random element out of the equation almost always results in stereotyped characters being produced. The group of characters ends up being a perfect mix with each sub-type of character the Referee feels is needed for the game represented.

This can be a bit predictable.

By using die-rolling, the characters you create will be more unique. Characters and combinations of abilities you weren’t expecting will emerge to give you fresh inspiration. In my experience this will give you more ideas to flesh out your campaign and keep it going.



Stuart wasn’t expecting to roll a character that had found an alien device which could control the weather. However, once this happened he developed a whole story-thread revolving around the aliens’ attempts to Xenoform the planet Earth.

If are using a system which doesn’t involve die-rolling – or any one which has a large amount of decision- making - try to develop a wide range of different characters who are equally interesting. Do it over a period of time. If you try to make 5 characters in a single sitting, some of them are just going to be “fillers” lacking the spark they need to be a truly memorable. You’re working with just one imagination here, your own, so take the time to use it to its fullest. Every character you make should be one that you yourself would be happy to play.

You will be tempted to develop a perfectly balanced party but if you make just exactly the right number of characters for the game, some of your players will have no choice over which pre-generated character they wish to play.

The best way is to create far too many and give players a choice. Ask them what sort of character they want to play and then give them the choice of the 2 or 3 closest ones from your “pile”.

Any unused characters won’t be wasted. You can keep them in case other players join the game or use them as NPC characters or – even bad guys.

One advantage of pre-creating the characters is that you don’t have to bother writing out any character generation rules for the players. If any problems occur during the generation process you can deal with them without the players ever having to be aware of them. You can ensure that rationalization of the characters fits perfectly with your background. You can just issue the characters to your players and start to play.

By denying players any control over their characters’ development, however, you run the risk of them not feeling as attached to them.

Pre-generated characters should really only be used for players who are totally new to the rules or if you really can’t wait to start playing.

Player generated characters

Another option is to give the players total control over creating their characters. You give the players details of the character generation system and leave them to it. They tell you what character they have created.

The advantage of this is that it gives the players more autonomy and they feel happier with the characters they create.

The disadvantage is that – if the system involves any random elements - you really can't be sure that everyone has been totally honest with their die-rolls. Letting players have total control over creating their own characters only really works, then, if you use a system of character creation which has no random die-rolling element – if the characters are designed using a points-based system – or similar.

If players come up with their own background stories, they feel a lot closer to their characters. You've also got half a dozen more imaginations to draw upon. You might have ideas for some adventures but these will mushroom as soon as you read the backgrounds created by the players for their characters.

One of Stuart's players – Stephanie – decided she wanted a character who kept an intelligent alien as a "pet". Though Stuart hadn't considered this as an option, initially, he soon comes to realise that this will be an extremely useful plot device for getting background information to the players.

If you are playing a game with a point-spending character design system you can just leave the players to design their own characters. They can then check with you that their design and interpretation of the rules fits with the game you had in mind. This is an extremely fast and efficient way of generating characters for the game.

Mixed Economy

The best option is to try and emulate face-to-face character creation. Someone (preferably the Referee) generates the Hero's characteristics.

Then the player makes any decisions (race, character class etc,) required by the system and offered by the Referee. Any further rolls (eg. Hit points) are made as e-mails are exchanged between the player and Referee until the character is finished.

This is quite a long-winded process. If you are working with multiple players generating characters simultaneously, it can be mind-blowing. However, it is intensely satisfying.

This is the system I recommend. Players will be hooked right from the word go and you will be surprised how quickly many of them can dash off e-mails about the characters they are creating. The time and effort put in now will reward you later in the campaign.

Generation Systems

You should use the character generation system given in your chosen set of rules, but you will probably want to adapt it to suit your particular campaign. Here are some possibilities:

1) Limit the levels

Most Referees find PBEM games easier to supervise if the characters are less powerful than those in face-to-face games.



Traditional Fantasy Role-playing Games where characters start off at 1st level are great for PBEM. However, other games – particularly Superhero games – may need some adjustment.

As a general rule, you should reduce the power level of the characters to between 50% and 75% of the recommended starting level for face-to-face games. If characters are usually "built" on 100 points, give them 60-75. If Supercharacters have 8 superpowers, start them with 5 or 6.

2) Limit options

If you are making characters for a specific setting, you may want to specify the races, character classes, skills, feats and abilities which suit that campaign setting.

If you only have minor changes you want to make you could probably get away with allowing players to create their characters as usual and just over-rule any incompatible design elements as they occur.



For his “IncurSION” campaign, Stuart could allow the characters to make any Hero which they think fits with the background.



However, if anyone tries to take “Mystic” Superpowers, he asks the player to redesign the Hero.

Alternatively, you can make it clear up front that some options cannot be chosen.

You could ban all non-human races.

Don’t cut too much. Only cut an option if it would NEVER fit in your game. Reducing the number of options too far will result in a narrower range of characters being generated.

Feel free to add new options if you want them for this campaign but, only do this if you are really familiar with the rules. If you’re using one of the more popular RPG games, the existing published rules probably covers most things.

You may also wish to give players guidelines as to things they *should* choose.

Every player has to be a signed up member of the “Star Patrol” for example.

3. Design Elements

Even if the system you are using is normally based around random character generation, you could allow players to select some minor aspects of the characters for themselves. This is particularly attractive if the Referee is doing all the die-rolling.



Typically this would include mundane skills which the character possessed before they became a Hero.

The mighty warrior, Vatrish, is good with horses because his father was an ostler.

Captain Stennart of the Star Patrol Scoutship Pathfinder comes from a long line of explorers.

Sally Smart might be an alien hunter, but her day job is using a computer to manipulate graphic images for the local paper.

If you allow players to “pick” some abilities like this you should reduce their starting options in other ways.

Eg. Instead of giving them 75 power points, you might give them 60 power points plus 20 to be spent on skills from a highly restricted list. (It’s amazing how many characters apparently do Martial Arts in their spare time!)

Other factors

You also need to give the players details of style and preferences. Often this can be a list of book, film or TV titles which have the same mood or style you are trying to emulate.

You also need to be clear which clichés of the literature apply. How do the characters dress and what sort of names do they have?

Stuart indicates on the sheet of instructions that the characters will be issued with uniforms and given “call signs” during the campaign. The players should come up with appropriate codenames for their characters.

My recommendation is:

Remember that character generation is an enjoyable part of the game. Savour it and don’t rush it.

Limit the power level of the campaign.

Disallow any Character Classes, Races, Skills, Feats, Superpowers or abilities, which definitely won’t suit your campaign. Invent new ones if appropriate.

If the game system is one where players design their character – based on points – allow them to create their own characters within the limits of the rules and the campaign guidelines. Maintain the Referee’s veto on approving or modifying any and all aspects of the characters.

If the character generation system has a random element, allow players to pick a limited selection of their options or skills. Either use an on-line die-roller or the Referee should make the die-rolls – using a spreadsheet by preference. Create the character interactively with the player through exchanging e-mails throughout the process.



Chapter 4: Adventures

Now you've got your campaign all set up and you've got a few characters ready to go, you need something for them to do.

Again, designing scenarios for a PBEM game is different from planning games for face-to-face games.

The key difference, as has been mentioned before, is that combat is a lot less central to the scenario than usual. It is the narrative which leads up to the combat and the stories which lead on from it which are important.

At their most basic level, a Play-By-E-mail, Role-playing game is about TYPING. You type what the characters can see and the players type what they are doing. It is the contents of the text which are important and the pictures they paint in the minds of the participants.

If you want to simulate a table-top RPG more closely, there is software available which will let you show maps and the position of "figures" etc.

But there is loads you can do with just writing, trust me. Somehow falling back onto just reading and writing seems to fire the imagination. PBEM games can be seen as a form of communal story-telling. And in stories the most important element is the PLOT. You should design adventures with this in mind.

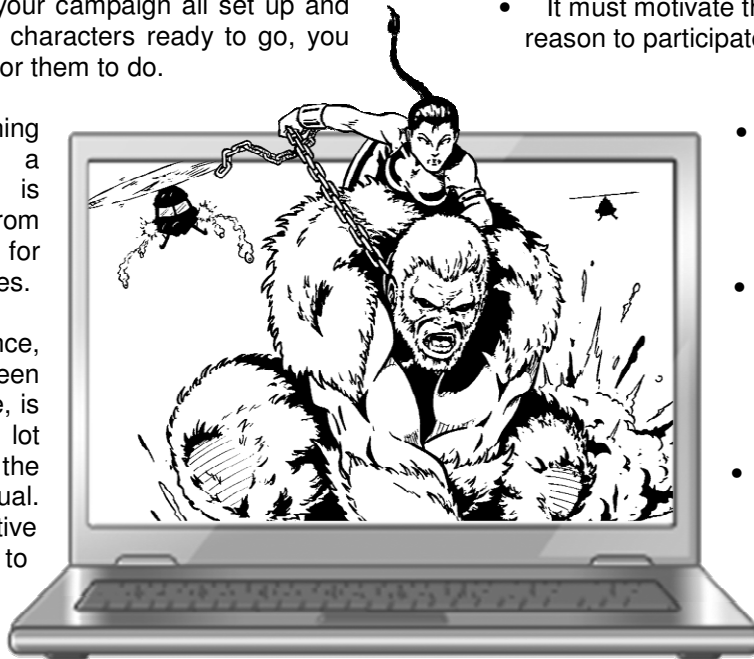
Before we discuss that in any detail, however, there is one adventure which does not necessarily follow these rules.

Your First Adventure

This adventure fulfils many purposes:

- It has to get the characters together and introduce them to each other.

- It must motivate them and give them a reason to participate in the events of the campaign.



- It needs to get things moving as quickly as possible.

- It has to "hook" the players into the campaign so that they want to keep playing.

- It has to allow you to work out any "kinks" in the systems you are using to supervise the game.

- It has to be simple to run so that you can concentrate on resolving those "kinks" (or other issues which do arise).

- It mustn't be so complicated that it puts you or the players off.

- You've got to be able to complete it even if you decide after a couple of "turns" that running a PBEM game isn't for you after all.

- It has to be short. It has to fit into the "honeymoon period". You and your players want to get to a point where you can draw breath and reflect upon how the game went so you can resolve any issues before moving on to the real meat of the campaign.

In order to be able to do all this, the key factor is to keep things simple. Most likely you and your players are new to PBEM. Even if you have some prior experience, this particular game and this particular group will be new.

You will find there's enough novelty in the new game as it is without having to make the first adventure particularly original. You could lift a plot from the world's most famous fantasy book and populate it with the most obvious stereotypes and your new group of characters will still turn it into something fresh.



Make things easy for yourself. Have a linear storyline. Use every cliché you need to. Here are a few:

1) Mentor

This is someone who is already aware of whatever the big menace is behind the campaign and calls the characters together to tackle it. A mentor saves you having to manipulate the players through information they have to discover playing the game. The mentor just calls them together, tells them what's going on and gives them their mission.

There has to be some reason why the Mentor cannot tackle the situation themselves. They could be ill, infirm or just too old. Maybe they cannot afford to reveal themselves or are unable to travel to or manifest themselves on this world. It could be that – despite their great knowledge – they don't actually possess any great power themselves.

Mentors make things easy at the start and during the honeymoon period. Later in the campaign, however, they can become a pain. Often the players tend to lean too heavily on them for information they should be gaining or remembering for themselves. Sometimes they come to resent the mentor – seeing them as a way the Referee uses to keep control of their characters' actions. Because of this, it is usual to remove the mentor at some point:

- They could be killed by the bad guys. This gives the characters a revenge motivation to carry the campaign forwards. It is particularly effective if you've painted the mentor as a highly powerful character.

"If it killed Goodgulf, what chance do we stand?"

- They could easily lose communication with any mentor who is not physically present.
- The mentor could just disappear enigmatically. Often they turn up later and tell the characters they were just testing to see how well they coped on their own. At this point they often either disappear for good ("you have passed the test") or get nailed by one of the other options given here.
- (My favourite.) The mentor turns out to have had their own agenda all along.

The characters come to realise the mentor does not have their best wishes - or the welfare of the world at large – at heart. The characters have to challenge someone who knows all their secrets.

I highly recommend you design a Mentor for the first adventure/honeymoon period of your first PBEM.

Stuart has designed Professor Brian Bart as a character who can bring the characters together and set them working as a team.



2) Steering

If you don't have a Mentor then you need some other way of bringing the characters together. This is a bit more tedious but can feel more satisfying.

Basically you have to give each character their own individual storyline leading up to the final battle of first adventure. During this period the characters will be getting some extremely easy to follow clues which lead them to various locations where they begin to cross paths and meet up. They should finally come together in the battle at the end of the adventure and realise how effective they are as a group.

3) Linear storylines

Make the missions/errands in the first adventure very straightforward.

"I've detected powerful emissions of alien energy from a warehouse in Temple Street. It's locked and seems to be guarded by armed men. Go there and find out what's inside."

"Land on the planet and evacuate those archaeologists before the sun goes nova."

"Please rescue my daughter from the Ogre in the woods."

"We need to get that book back to the Library before anyone notices it's missing."

At first just getting somewhere in the game world and performing the most basic of errands will be interesting to the players. They tend to over-think at this stage and expect an ambush behind every door. You don't need to offer them much to keep them engaged.

4) Sense of dread

If you can, try to make the players feel that something bad is just around the corner.

"The warehouse is empty but, judging by the marks left on the floor, there was something big here..."

"The star is giving off masses of delta radiation – the first sign of stellar collapse."

"There is no sign of life in the wood save for a distant rustling....."

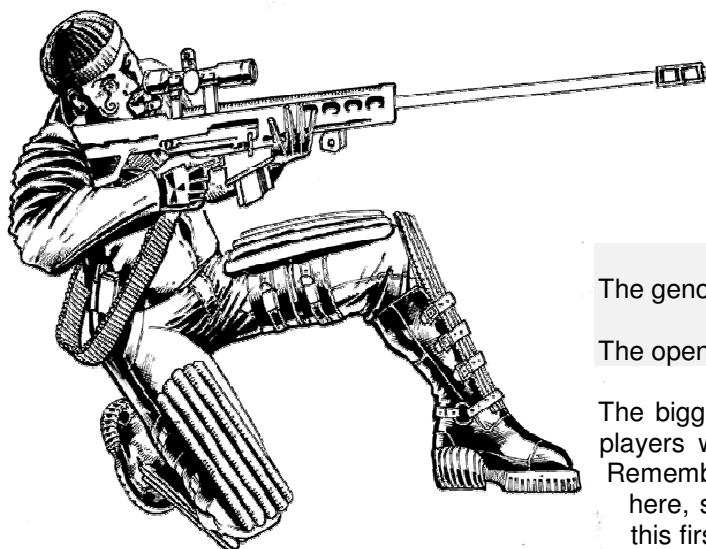
"Whatever you do – don't read the book."

During this early phase you will probably find the players being paranoid enough already. It won't take many hints to have them seeing shapes in the shadows or assuming the worst from fairly basic clues.

5) Climax

The first adventure should not involve much, if any, combat for the bulk of the game. Taking out a couple of goblins or thugs to gain entrance to a location is the most that should happen. It's not the fight that's important but what the characters find inside or what the uglies say when they're questioned.

The main combat should come at the end of the adventure and everything should build towards it. It shouldn't just happen out of the blue, characters should be expecting it and have plenty of information – not all of it accurate – about the trials they are going to face.



Decide what the final battle in the adventure is going to be and work backwards from there.

6) The Twist

The final confrontation should have an unexpected twist to it. If you've had a very linear and clichéd storyline so far this isn't hard to do. Just change the ending from the expected one to something else.

"You haven't been looking for my father. I'm not even related to Doctor Krauss. I just wanted him found so that I can acquire him for my employers. Thanks for finding him for me. Now, step aside!"

"Nova? What Nova? You detected a simple delta wave generator, that's all. I just needed someone to get rid of those pesky natives....."

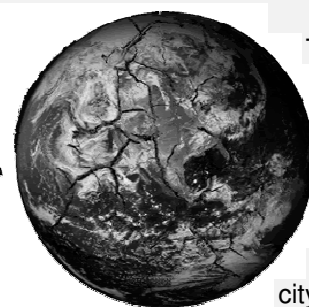
7) The Reward

All RPGs reward characters through gaining experience points, power points and the like. However, the adventure also needs to reward the characters in other ways.

When they finally defeat the bad guy at the climax of the story, they need to know that they have saved someone or foiled a heinous plot.

As simple as this story has been, don't stint on the depths of the villains' evil scheme. It's better to go for broke.

It wasn't the merchant's daughter they rescued. It was the Princess.



They villain might have been planning to poison the entire city and hold the world to ransom.

The genocide of an entire species.

The opening of the Gates of Hell.....

The bigger the plot, the more satisfaction the players will feel when their characters foil it. Remember you're trying to hook the players in here, so you need them to feel good when this first adventure is resolved.

8) Hooks

You need some unresolved plotlines to suck the characters in to further adventures.

Just who were the bad guys working for?

What happened to all that plutonium?

Was that REALLY a gateway into hell or just a clever illusion covering the Sorcerer's escape?

Why is there nothing living in the forest?

You can add some throwaway lines as you run the game (see Chapter 5) but build in some pointers to future adventures just in case.

Example: For his Incursion campaign, Stuart has Professor Brian Bart call the characters together. He explains that he can detect alien energies and bio-signatures – which is how he found each of the characters. He believes an attack on the City is imminent but the authorities don't believe him. He needs the characters to find proof.

He gives them costumes, call-signs and walkie-talkies. He splits the group in two and sends them to investigate two locations where he has detected alien influence. (Stuart has "split the team" deliberately. He wants to test this facet of the game during the Honeymoon Period.)

Both the teams of characters are sent to locations that are empty, having just been cleared.

However, there is enough evidence to show the characters that there is something BIG going on.

Whilst they are investigating Brian Bart is attacked and killed. The characters will hear some extremely disturbing noises over the walkie-talkies before the signal goes dead. Rushing back they find their mentor slaughtered with evidence of great power being used. Putting together clues from the scene of the massacre and the two sites they've visited, they head towards a mansion on the edge of the city.

There they find, not the alien cabal they were expecting, but a human crime lord who has been accumulating alien technology.

He intends to use it to spread his criminal rulership across the city and – eventually – the whole country.

He is aware of the imminent alien attack upon the city but expects to be able to negotiate with them from a position of power. If he helps them conquer the world, all he wants is a country or state of his own to rule.

His alien gadgets make him a difficult opponent but the characters outnumber him – once they've defeated or scared off his goons. The battle should be a tough one but the characters should prevail.

They've lost their mentor but they now know an alien attack IS coming. If they keep working as a team, perhaps they can save the city.

The Review

I think it's important to take some time at the end of the first adventure to draw breath, look back and plan for the future.



Hopefully you've enjoyed the experience of running a PBEM game. Hopefully your players have enjoyed the game you offered them.

If you want to continue you need to be clear about what worked for you, what the players really enjoyed and what issues – if any – arose. You need to address the issues.

For example: If you found conducting combat difficult you may want to switch to a simpler method of resolving it. (See chapter 6.)

You need to make sure that any elements which were a success are replicated in future adventures.

If the players enjoyed interacting with a particular NPC then they should make a re-appearance. You might even want to consider building a whole adventure around them.

How you conduct this survey is up to you. You can probably glean a lot of information from the e-mails exchanged during the honeymoon period. However, some players tend to be a bit uptight about expressing their feelings.

You might find a player continuing to play out of politeness when there are things about the game that they're not 100% happy with. So it might be worth actually ASKING your players for comments and opinions.

You're not seeking praise (though you'll probably get some). On the other hand, having asked, you need to be prepared if anyone does make any critical comments.

If you've working hard at the game and making compromises in your private life to get e-mails to the players on time and then someone says they found the turn-around a bit slow, it can be a bit hard take!

Having sought the feedback, be grateful for it. Some matters you will be able to address, others might just be a case of explaining to the players issues of which they are not aware. Always send thank you e-mails and don't make "knee jerk reactions". Think before you write and always remain polite.

NOT: "If you think you can get the results out any faster YOU try running the game!"

BUT: "Thanks for your response. I'm glad you're enjoying the game and are so keen to get your results. Unfortunately I have to wait for responses from all the players before I can work out what happens next in the game. Then it takes a bit of time to combine all the e-mails into a coherent response and this takes a while. I'd rather take my time to do a good job on this"

If you've set up a public arena such as an Internet Group to handle this element of communication, you might wish to consider posting some or all of the players' feedback and your response to them where everyone can see them.

This might even form the basis of a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section within the group.

You might also consider asking for feedback from any lurkers who you permitted to watch the game.

Ongoing adventures

You can now think about running a long-term PBEM campaign. Some things you need to bear in mind when planning adventures for this campaign are:

1) No dungeons!

The first (and easily the best) way to design adventures for Fantasy Role-playing Games is dungeons. Complexes of rooms and corridors stretching for level after level underground – filled with all manner of cruel beastie and valuable treasures. Absolutely superb for face-to-face tabletop role-playing. An absolute disaster for playing by e-mail.

When playing face-to-face, many Referees find it difficult to run adventures outside the controlled dungeon environment. The countryside, the city, the open sea. All of these are places where literally anything can happen and a Referee has to be on their toes if games are set there.

So prevalent is the dungeon-type environment that you often find them translated into other genres. An abandoned alien outpost on a distant planet, a Supervillain's secret base, a haunted mansion. All of these are attempts by hard-pressed Referees to coral their players' actions into a controllable environment.

Because of the delay between player instructions and the Referee's response, in a PBEM game you can't be "caught out". You've plenty of time to come up with something to cover any gaps the players might find. Running an adventure in a crowded tavern suddenly becomes easy. Trawling through a dungeon becomes tedious in the extreme.

If the characters do wander into a cavern complex or wizard's tower, plan to deal with the entire location in a single turn. At the very least, rattle through half a dozen rooms at once.

"The party moves through the tower, with Fiador giving each room a cursory search as the others watch. The first room is some kind of dining room. Down the corridor is a library. No books of interest but Fiador picks up an interesting looking dragon-shaped golden firelighter. Upstairs to a living area, kitchen, bathing room and midden. Even Fiador turns his nose up at searching that...."



2) Feature the characters

If a player has agreed to play in a PBEM game and, after playing through the prologue, wants to continue, then the odds are they like the sound of their own typing.

Many PBEM players are frustrated authors ready to churn out a couple of hundred words at the drop of a hat. Sometimes, in face-to-face games, players can be a bit slow getting around to typing up their characters' backgrounds. This isn't the case in a PBEM.

In fact, by this time you'll probably have discovered that it's worth running a game just for all the free fiction you get. Some of the characters' backgrounds are great fun to read.

So USE them. Pick the best ideas in them and use them as a basis for adventures in the campaign. Players are always happy to see their ideas used in the game. See if there are any cross-overs you can find between the characters' backgrounds and build a story about them.

If both the characters have a similar upbringing then they came from the same village.

People who have lost a family member to a horror from beyond realise their experiences are similar. Was the same hideous aberration responsible?

If one character comes from a long line of Star Patrollers when another has a shadier background, perhaps their fathers crossed swords years ago.

3) The World's a Stage and Life is a Soap Opera

Even if not specifically mentioned in their background stories, develop the characters' private lives and work these into the game. Relatives will come to stay. The local Baron will throw all the villagers out of their homes, including the characters. A neighbour will borrow something and not return it. A crewmate will develop a crush.



Try to fit in at least one Birth, Marriage and Funeral into the campaign.

Many of these can be developed just through the occasional throwaway line.

"As T'sara enters Bridge, Brian – the Head of Security – throws her a smile and invites her to a game of Grav-ball, again!"

"The beer tastes awful. The landlord grunts an apology about his supplies being disrupted."

Adding this layer of "normality" to the wild and wacky world inhabited by the characters somehow grounds events and makes them seem more real. (Ha!)

4) Chapters

PBEM games take longer to play than face-to-face games. You need to keep the characters involved.

The way to do this is to break the campaign down into sections. Call them sub-adventures, episodes or chapters. Whilst you may have a complex on-going storyline, you should resolve one or more sub-plots on a regular basis.

It's all about finding the right balance between anticipation and satisfaction. The players need something to look forward to but if they have to wait too long to get it they will get bored.

Give them lots of developing plots and storylines, whether from their backgrounds or normal lives or through combating evil. Keep the number of sub-plots topped up. Every so often throw in another one. This can be explicit:

"It seems to be the map of an island."

Or a throwaway:

"As you enter your quarters, Fritz – your cat – rushes up and rubs against your leg. She seems remarkably affectionate today."

And then, every so often, give them a mini-climax to the campaign where something dramatic happens and one (or more) sub-plots gets resolved.

4) Combat isn't important

PBEM games revolve more around character interaction and solving mysteries than fighting.

You should put your effort into designing the plot, the clue the characters are going to have to follow and designing the personality and character of the NPCs they are going to talk to. There is no need to spend a lot of time working out the exact details of the bad guy. The plot's the thing!

Try to think up some whodunits (or work out how you can steal some) which the characters can solve. Then work out how you can offer key clues to them without actually giving them the resolution of the story. It is better to build in twice the number of clues the characters need to solve a crime but then make them hard to find. That way they will miss some but it's OK because they should still find enough. And they'll get a feeling of satisfaction from the ones they DO find. If you include just exactly the right number of clues but the characters have to find them all then you have to make them easy to find, virtually giving them to the players on a plate.

5) Combat IS important

The characters are Heroes after all. They can't prove their Heroism unless they face real danger. Every so often (at the end of each chapter) the characters need to confront a bad

guy of some kind in a physical confrontation.

The characters don't have to win the fight - as long as some survive to continue the story.

Being defeated can lead to some interesting storylines. Apart from anything else it means you still have the bad guy and their plot around for the characters to foil. You don't always have to come up with something new.

My recommendation is:

Make your first adventure incredibly simple.

Use events which arise during the first adventure and details from the characters' backgrounds to create further adventures for the campaign.

Keep these short, planning them as chapters in a book or episodes of a television series.

Build the storylines of the chapters about solving mysteries and allow the characters to do this by the end of the chapter.

Include a battle in each chapter – usually as part of the climax.





Chapter 5: Running the campaign.

So you've got the characters and some idea of your first adventure. But how do you actually *run* one of these games?

At its most basic, you type a description of what the characters see and hear. The players all type what their characters are doing or saying. You decide what happens in response to their instructions and mail out the next description to everyone.

Dead simple. IF you follow a few simple rules:

Set a timetable

Some players (bless 'em) can get a bit carried away. They will happily send you a dozen e-mails a day asking for clarification, explaining how their character's feeling, WHY they're doing what they're doing etc. etc. You end up wondering where they get the time.

Other players might send you one terse e-mail per week.

You need to make some rules about when and what goes down the wire. These rules are as much for yourself as for your players.

However enthusiastic a particular player might be, don't get sidetracked into their agenda. You've got enough on your plate without getting into debates about exactly what components their magic spell needs or what sort of noise their gadget makes.

Also, you've made a commitment to these people and it's up to you to deliver on that commitment. The first time you are late sending out an e-mail it's a step on a slippery slope.

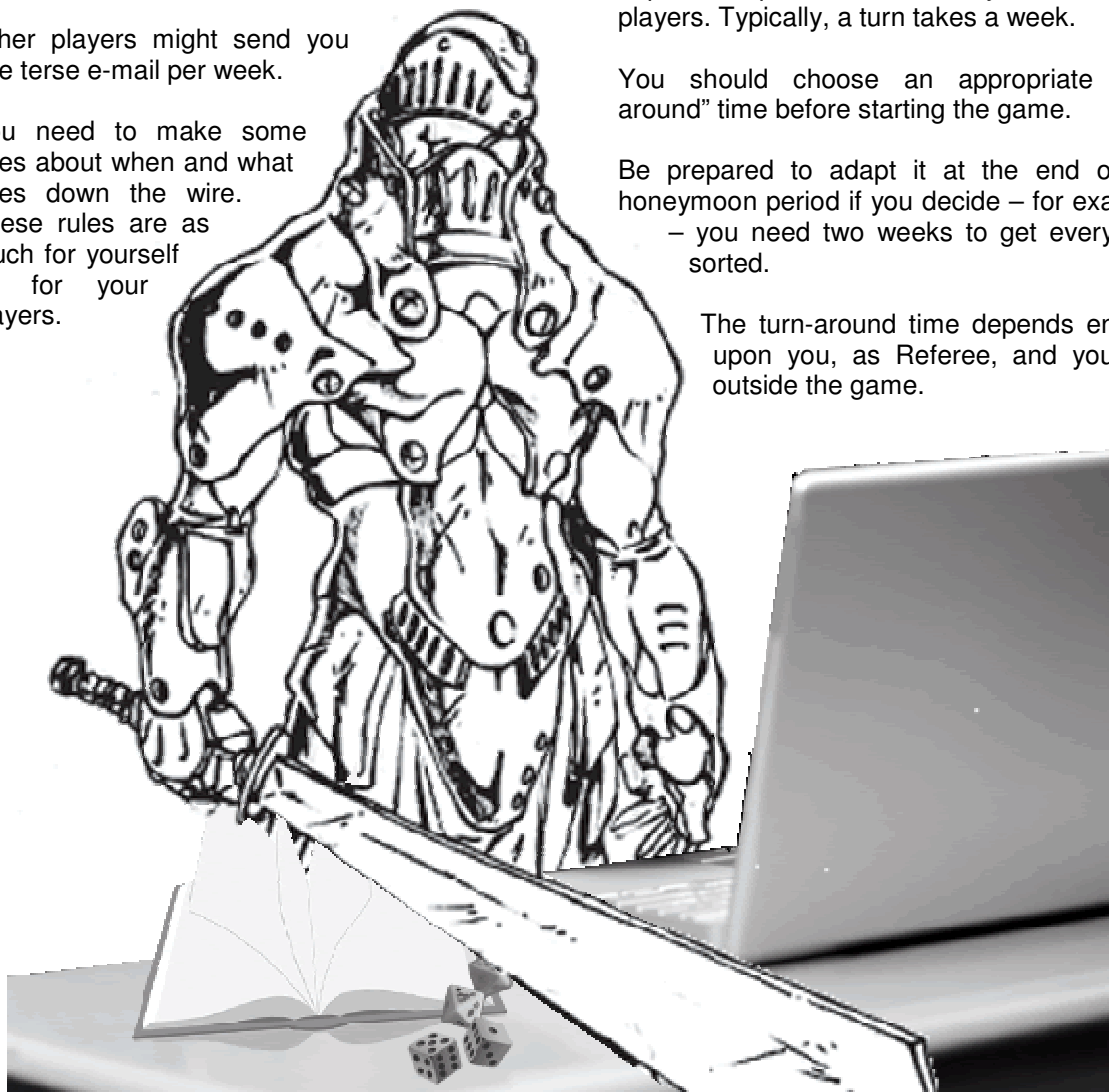
You need to set a time-scale for everyone and everyone needs to stick to it.

Just like any game, a PBEM game is played in turns. A turn starts when you e-mail out a general notice about what is happening. It finishes when you send out the next notice. How long the turn takes is up to you and depends upon what suits you and your players. Typically, a turn takes a week.

You should choose an appropriate "turn around" time before starting the game.

Be prepared to adapt it at the end of the honeymoon period if you decide – for example – you need two weeks to get everything sorted.

The turn-around time depends entirely upon you, as Referee, and your life outside the game.



How much time do you have to devote to this game each week and when do you get this time? You **MUST** build in a safety margin into the timetable which would allow you to keep posting regular updates even in your busiest times. It is better to have a slower game that keeps going than one which buzzes along but which stops whenever the Referee gets given some overtime at work.

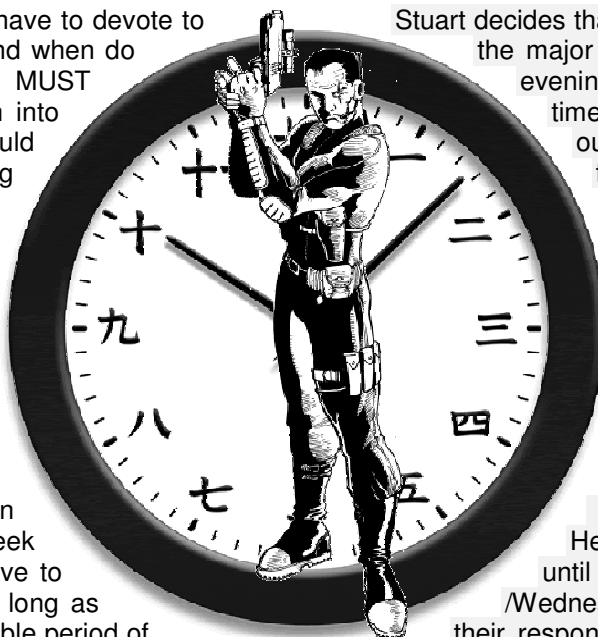
Players only have to turn in one response per week (and they don't even have to do that, see below). As long as you give them a reasonable period of time in which to give their response, they should be able to fit in with any timescale that suits you.

From now on I'll assume we're talking about a week per turn. It makes discussion easier. However, the exact timescale you pick must be one which suits you.

So the first thing to decide is when you're going to be able to sit down and work on the game. Ideally this should be a set time in the week. Even if you only have one slot in the week to work on the game that should be okay – if the slot is long enough. Only practice will tell how long you need but think in terms of a couple of hours a week at least. This is just to keep the game running. Setting it up in advance will take a bit longer.

Then work backwards from that slot. Give yourself a reasonable safety margin. So plan to e-mail out the weekly update two days after you plan to sit down and produce it. If anything happens one week to delay you, you've still got a chance to get it out on time.

Then set a time by which the players have to get their responses in to you. This should be about halfway between the publication of the weekly update and the time when you intend to sit down and deal with things. There shouldn't normally be any reason why you need time to swap private e-mails with any players but it's best to build it in for emergencies.



Stuart decides that he is going to handle all the major campaign stuff on Friday evenings. (He has some free time because his wife goes out for a drink with her friends from work that night – but we don't need to go into that.)

He will aim to e-mail the weekly update out to his player on Sunday mornings but commits himself not to go to bed on a Sunday until it is e-mailed.

He then gives his players until Tuesday night/Wednesday morning to e-mail their responses in to him. This gives him Wednesday and Thursday to deal with any issues which might arise.

Ideally you don't need look at any of the players' responses until the deadline for their submission is passed. I know you won't be able to resist the urge but the problem is that, as soon as you read what the player has written, your mind can't help come up with ideas for what's going to happen as a result. So it often becomes a case of "first come first served". Best to read all the responses at the same time – and in a different order each week.

And – to be honest – you've got a life to lead outside the game. You can't be checking you e-mails every few hours to see if someone's responded.

This is another good reason why you should have set up a dedicated e-mail address for the players to contact you – separate from your personal one.

So your commitment to the game consists of three timing points during the week. There's a slot when you read all the players' responses. There's a slot a few days later (after you've had time to mull them over) when you produce the next bulletin. Finally there's a slot a couple of days after that when you e-mail it out to everyone on the mailing list.

If your PBEM game is going to work you need to stick to this timetable. "Drift" in response times is one of the reasons games come to an end.



Splitting the party

Though it's easier to keep things going when all the characters are in the same place at the same time, from time to time it is fun to split the team up.



In this case, the Referee would NOT post a weekly update through the public communication channel. As long as the characters were split, the referee should post the weekly results privately to the players. They can only see what their character sees.

To start with, try splitting the characters into two groups and see how that goes. If you find you are able to handle it, you can try giving each player an individual adventure in a future chapter.

Ideally, when the team comes back together again, you should post a copy of all of the "missing" weekly updates on the public area. However, you might decide to post an edited or summarised version. If you do this, you might wish to show it to the players before posting it.

If you care about your lurkers, you might choose to send them private updates on one of the sub-group's adventures. Don't send them from your private/Referee e-mail address though. Lurkers should never have access to this address.

Use the players' words

You will soon decide in the honeymoon period whether you want to put any limits on what the players' write each week. You may decide to limit the number of words or – even – send them a set format to use to respond. Sometimes some of them CAN go a bit over the top!

Hopefully you won't need to do this. A quick note asking them to keep it a bit shorter – or add more detail - is often all most players need.

Because you don't want to put limits on what they write. Very often, what they write is pure gold. It can surprise you, impress you, make you laugh. When you read the responses each week it'll remind you just why you've committed so much effort to this game.

So what you need to do is to share the players' work around. If there's something entertaining in their responses, you should just cut and paste it into the weekly update. You may need to change the tense:

From: STORMFRONT will summon up a small snowstorm and say to the thug, "It's going to get a lot colder out here unless you tell me what's going on..."

To: STORMFRONT summons up a small snowstorm and says to the thug, "It's going to get a lot colder out here unless you tell me what's going on..."

It is normal for players to phrase their instructions in the future tense and for the Referee's responses to be phrased in the present tense. Some Referee's prefer to phrase their responses in the past tense to make it feel more like a story. I find this can distance players from the action emotionally.

If you're feeling lazy, you can ask the players to use the present tense when writing their responses. This will save you time in the cutting and pasting. However, players are more likely to feel that what they say is going to happen has actually happened and are more likely to feel slighted or complain if the Referee rules that their intended action doesn't occur. (This is why I would NEVER ask a player to use the past tense in describing their Hero's intended actions.)

Player: STORMFRONT summoned up a small snowstorm and said to the thug, "It's going to get a lot colder out here unless you tell me what's going on..."

Referee: STORMFRONT started to summon up a small snowstorm but, before he could finish, a shot rang out.....

You may want to put some instructions about how you want player responses phrased into your "Netiquette" document (See Chapter 2.) Whichever way you decide to handle things, it can be infuriating when different players use wildly different styles and tenses, making them difficult to amalgamate.

Not all of a player's instructions will work out or can be followed. As Referee you get to decide which ones apply and which ones don't. Some players will write entire soliloquies for their characters. You need to pick and choose the bits that co-ordinate with other characters to make a coherent conversation. You may even need to put words into their mouths from time to time – though often you'll be able to get away with a non-committal grunt, a nod or a significant look. (They're still the player's characters. Try not to do too much with them yourself.)

Creating a conversation like this usually isn't as hard as it sounds. Once you've done a couple – and have a feel for the players' preferences – it becomes second nature.

Remember that you will often need to edit a player's instructions to state what is seen rather than what they do.

"Vatrich is going to pray to his God. He will kneel and ask for guidance in finding the source of the evil besetting the land."

Becomes:

"Vatrich kneels in silence in the corner."

Subtle use of cut and paste can save you a lot of typing. As much as 80% of a weekly update can be gleaned from player responses.

It gives the campaign a more shared feeling without your single voice/style dominating the text produced.

Most players are dead chuffed when the words they typed are reproduced for everyone to see.

It makes them feel what they are doing is worthwhile.

Keep things going no matter what

There are two areas which come under this heading. PACE and CONTINUITY.

1) Pace

PBEM games are a LOT slower than face-to-face games. Each turn takes a whole week!

You need to ensure that you keep things clipping along at a fair old rate to keep the players' interest up. Don't get drawn into side debates, extended conversations or the needless for endless clarifications. You decide what happens and move on.

In the last example, Vatrich had just prayed to his God. In order to get the game moving, his Referee, Clive, decides that he will receive a Holy Vision.

Clive has a key decision to make here. Should he relay details of the vision privately to Leon, Vatrich's player, privately or just assume that he will pass them on to the group as a whole?

Clive tries to find time on Wednesday night to send Leon an e-mail giving detail of the vision.

He wants to ask Leon what Vatrich is telling the party. If Leon hasn't responded by Friday (or if he didn't have time to send the extra e-mail), he will just assume that he passes on all that he sees.

Clive must be careful that Wednesday evening does not become another extended work evening. The occasional private e-mail to one or two players asking for clarification of instructions might be useful but if he doesn't have time for this that's fine. He is the Referee and can decide what happens from the players' orders without further input.

Hopefully as the game progresses past the honeymoon period players will learn to put enough into their responses to allow you to keep things going without constantly asking for more input. If you find yourself doing this then just send one e-mail to the player concerned asking for more detailed instructions and stating that, from now on, you are going to decide what happens from their one weekly response, with no further enquiries.



Then stick to your guns. As soon as you make one decision they disagree with, you'll find their responses start to contain a lot more detail. (If necessary, amend your Netiquette rules and publish the updated version.)

Another way to keep the pace up is to come down firmly on the side of generosity when it comes to decisions regarding actions or abilities. You can far more generous in a PBEM game than you would face-to-face. You want to keep the pace up, so why undermine what the players are doing to keep things going?

When STORMFRONT threatens the thug with a quick freeze, instead of responding with "So what I got my thermals on..." or something like that – requiring a further threat and more e-mails - Stuart should just have him cravenly cave in. He should give up everything he knows. (But who's to say he knows a hell of a lot?)

If a player fails to respond or their response is late or incomplete, you should feel free to refer to their standing orders and/or determine appropriate actions for their characters (see below). If you've read all the players' responses and worked out what's going to happen, you shouldn't have to tear it all up and restart just because one player sends in their stuff late or decides to amend their instructions. Keeping the campaign moving forward with a reasonable workload for yourself is far more important.

Set yourself targets for where you want the action get to each turn. Don't take two weeks to resolve a scene and move forward when you can sort it all out in one. Expedience is usually preferably to thoroughness in a PBEM. Crack on, crack on.

2. Continuity

As well as keeping up a good pace, you need to make sure that the players want to keep playing, and you want to keep Refereeing the game.

So you need to keep things interesting. Part of this is down to how you plan your adventures. (See Chapter 4.) As I mentioned there, it's important not to have long-running plot-lines that are never resolved. With one turn per week it can easily seem to players that a couple of months have gone by without anything significant occurring.

If you find this happening, then introduce a plot element to get things moving. If all else fails, set off a bomb.

SET.....OFF.....A.....BOMB.



You don't need to know who set it off or why at this stage. You can always rationalise this later. Just set one off to get things moving again. It can be in the room where the characters are sitting, chatting their lives away or halfway across town – as long as the characters can see and hear its effects. If you REALLY want to put the cat amongst the pigeons set off two or more bombs throughout the city and throw your characters into a frenetic, chaotic situation.

By the time the characters have resolved this problem – even if this is just saving some people trapped in the rubble – the other plotline (the one which was flagging) should have moved on and be easier to get to the bottom of. Or – by then – you should at least have worked out a way to get things fixed more quickly.

The characters can come back to solve the mystery behind the explosions later (when you've come up with an explanation for yourself).

Obviously there are loads of other plot developments you can put in instead of setting off a bomb. A knock at the door, an unexpected summons, a story on the TV news, beaming them up a passing starship, a nearby planet explodes etc. etc. The point is, don't let the plotline founder. Keep it going by any means necessary.

Standing orders

A REALLY useful tool to help keep things going is to ask the players to give you some standing orders. Then, if, for some reason, they don't respond one week you can work out what their character is likely to do by looking at these. They are also useful if a player's instructions for a week do not fully cover the situation they are in.

Obviously, you wouldn't want to do this too often, but they are an essential tool for keeping the campaign moving.

Chapter 5: Running the Campaign

You can ask your players for standing orders at the beginning of the campaign. However, the best time might be at the end of the honeymoon period. By then the players probably have a better handle on their characters and the campaign world as a whole.

(If you didn't get standing orders from a player before the campaign and find you need them *during* the honeymoon period perhaps you ought to consider whether to continue with that player in your game.)

There are a number of ways of handling this.

You can just ask players at the beginning to describe their characters' attitudes and how they are likely to respond under pressure.

They will then use their own methods to outline what is important to their characters and how they go about their business.

This method puts no limits on the creativity of the players but can result in you getting a wide range of different documents in different formats. Some of these will be more useful than others.

Alternatively you could give your players an outline to work within. This could be a series of unfinished sentences for completion by the player...

"If { VATRICH } were to find an injured and apparently unarmed goblin he/she would....."

Alternatively you could ask the players to give "ratings" scores to their characters in key areas. These can be general, such as Patience, Compassion, Determination, Aggression etc. or specific to the campaign...

Hatred of Aliens, Suspicion of authorities.....

Fear of magic, fear of the dark.....

Love of space travel, Fear of matter transmission.....

Hatred for Goblinoids, Piety.....

If the top number of the rating is the same as a given size of die, you can roll under the relevant rating using that die. This is extremely useful if you want everyone to know that you are using a random element to help determine

what happens and are not just making up things up arbitrarily.

Eg. Clive decides to use Ratings out 6 for his campaign. Leon decides that Vatrach has a Hatred of Goblinoids score of 4. If he encounters Hobgoblins and Leon has not sent in orders to cover the situation, Clive will roll a 6 sided die. Vatrach will initiate an attack against the Hobgoblins if he rolls under his rating - that is if he rolls a 1, 2 or 3.

He has a Patience score of 6. If he is secretly watching an evil temple for a period of time, he will only get bored and undertake some pre-emptive action on a roll of 6.

Personally, I find that written standing orders and my own common sense are normally sufficient on the rare occasion that I have to determine the actions of player characters. If you're expecting to need to refer to them on a regular basis – often enough to need the alternative outcomes given by a ratings system – perhaps you need to consider finding some more committed players.

Three things to bear in mind:

1) Weekly responses take precedence

Standing orders are for emergencies only. They are not intended for regular use. It is what the player states in their regular e-mails which is the important thing.

If a player specifies that he is losing his temper and getting really stuck in to a group of thugs that is what happens – even if the player has specified that the character is a pacifist.

If there is a mismatch between standing orders and any given weekly response don't be tempted to



use the standing orders to over-rule the character's actions. The player decides what their character does on a day to day basis and if they decide to go against what they stated in their standing orders that is fine.

(Unless you want to run a game where you take in everyone's standing orders and then just use them to decide what the character's do throughout the campaign.



You could then just e-mail the characters' actions and events to the players every week without having to ask them what they think their characters would do. YOU might enjoy such a game but your players wouldn't)

If the players specify something in their standing orders and then choose to ignore it in play, you should amend their standing orders.

Standing amidst the fallen, battered and bloodied thugs, the character from the above example would presumably feel the need to reassess his pacifist attitude.

2) Character Background takes Precedence

Of course, nothing a player puts into their standing orders should conflict with any part of their character design or background. A player wouldn't specify "riding off if the going gets tough" if their character never learnt to ride. You can – and should - deal with any such conflicts when the orders are written.

If a situation ever arises where a character's standing orders don't cover a given event, you can often use any appropriate parts of the character background to help you decide what they are doing.

3) Update standing orders

However a player thinks, at the start of the campaign, they will play their character, events will change this. Characters evolve and change. Attitudes are often reforged in the crucible of life's challenges.

It would be a bit silly if, halfway through the campaign, a long-time player misses weekly response and you slavishly use out-of-date standing orders to decide their character acts in a way which no longer matches their disposition.

By this stage, I like to think that I know the characters well enough to decide what they might do without reference to any formal orders. As a Referee I'd probably just have the character act in a way I'd see as consistent with their previous actions.

However, if you don't want to be that high-handed you might ask the players to revise their standing orders on a regular basis. This could be done at the end of each "chapter", for example. Alternatively, you can revise the standing orders in light of the characters actions in the campaign and then e-mail them

to the players from time to time to check they approve.

One really good trick is to make a permanent record of any great quotes the Hero makes and include them in the standing orders.

"I let an alien live once. Then, it killed a friend of mine. I didn't give it a second chance."

"As long as I'm breathing, I'm fighting."

"All the truly brave people I've ever known are dead."

"Living as a coward isn't living."

Recalcitrant players

Sometimes, despite all the efforts you put into a campaign, you get a player who just doesn't play ball. Either they regularly fail to get their responses in on time, or they are incomplete, or they use ideas, phrases or language which you find inappropriate.

You find yourself wondering why they said they wanted to play the game.

The first thing to do if you encounter this situation is to take a look in the mirror. If you were a player in your game, would you feel like getting your responses in on time and taking a full and active part? Are you sure that you, as Referee, are offering the player the best experience you can? The answer to this is almost certainly YES. However, if you identify any slight niggle you think might be best corrected – for example making the campaign more pacy, or making sure their character isn't being sidelined – then fix this and see if it improves things before going onto any of the suggestions below.

If you're sure you're holding up your end of the deal and the player is still not responding then there's no point in carrying on as things are. This game is supposed to be enjoyable for everyone and that includes you.

Make sure you keep your worries between yourself and the player concerned. If you've been doing your job right, the other players shouldn't be aware of any problems with this particular participant. Under no circumstances share your thoughts with the other players. No rumours, gossiping or bitching behind his back!

The best way to handle things is to be honest and up front with the player. Send them a private e-mail saying you're a bit worried. Explain the situation as it seems to you and ask them if they have any concerns. Try not to be confrontational.

Four things can happen:

1) They don't respond. This would seem to confirm your worries. This player needs to leave the game.

2) The player responds and confirms that they aren't enjoying the game. In this case you can negotiate how they want to withdraw from it.

3) The player responds and gives you clear feedback as to what is causing the problem. Whether it is due to their situation or something about the way you are running things, you can negotiate a way to keep the player in the game or agree a suitable exit strategy.

4) The player responds in shock – totally unaware that there was any issue. Having drawn it to their attention, the issue normally fixes itself.

If, for any reason, you decide that the player shouldn't continue in the game, you need to decide how to accomplish this. Ideally, you should try to negotiate for the player to continue running the character until the end of the current "chapter" and you can try to write an appropriate ending for them. If the player agrees you can even give them an "Heroic Death". If you don't tell the other players about your scheme, this can come as a real surprise to them and become a really memorable event.

Alternatively, the player may wish to keep their character alive in the hopes of one day returning to the game. In this case it is up to you to craft an appropriate exit for them.

If the player is totally non-responsive or wants to leave the game immediately then you should run the character according to their standing orders (see above) until you have a chance to remove them from the game without disrupting the current storyline. In this case you should NOT aim to "kill off" the character.

In any event, you should always offer the player the opportunity to continue monitoring the campaign as a "lurker".

Even if they haven't e-mailed you in weeks, still send them the invite and keep them on the mailing list.

At the earliest opportunity you should ask a person on your reserve list if they want to create a character to enter the campaign at the beginning of the next chapter. If this fails you can always ask a lurker if they want to join in. If you can't find a reserve or lurker who wants to join in the game.....well that tells you something. Perhaps there IS something about the way you are running things which needs addressing. (See chapter 8.)

My recommendation is:

Use a weekly turn-around for your game. Set a strict timetable for yourself and your players and stick to it.

Amalgamate the players' responses to create the weekly report.

Don't slacken the pace and don't stop. Use whatever means you need to keep the game flowing.



Chapter 6: Combat

Absolutely key to any table-top RPG is combat. Playing out the various melees between the monsters and characters occupies big chunk most playing sessions and – let's face it – is great FUN.

However, a different approach to combat is needed when it comes to a PBEM game. It is important more for the way in which it drives the plot forward than as a source of entertainment in and of itself.

Here are a number of options:

A turn is a round

In this option, one round of the PBEM game represents one round of combat. Usually, the Referee posts a map every week showing the location and relative positions of all participants. Often they publish the results of the initiative roll. All the players specify what they wish their characters to do. The Referee then determines to the outcome of the characters' actions and posts a new map along with a description of what happens.

Super-keen Referees might even want to try swapping private e-mails with players during the "round" to give them more control over their character's actions during the round. This takes a LOT of commitment, however.

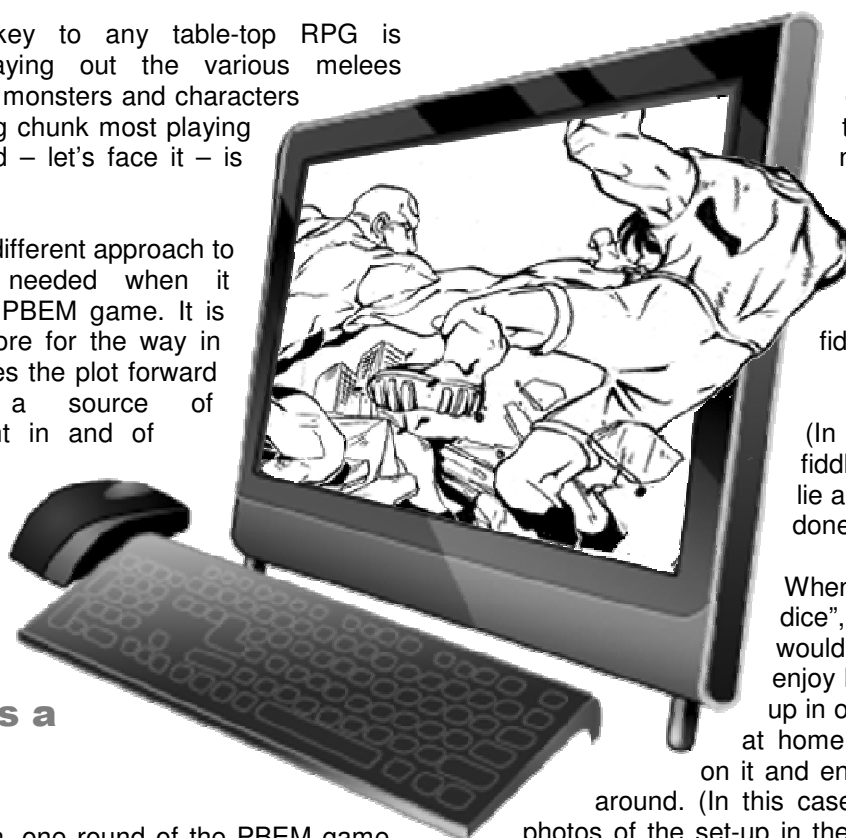
There are four options for rolling dice in this situation.

1) Make it up

Don't bother rolling any dice and just decide what happens. Not my personal preference but some Referees use this system effectively. Just don't let your players even suspect you are doing this.

2) The Referee

By far the best option is for the Referee to "roll all the dice".



It's quicker and easier – provided the players have no reason to suspect any fiddling and you give them no reason to suspect any fiddling.

(In other words - no fiddling. Let the dice lie as they roll and be done with it.)

When I say "roll the dice", personally I wouldn't. Some people enjoy having a map set up in one of their rooms at home with the figures on it and enjoy moving them around. (In this case you could post photos of the set-up in the place of maps.) It's a bit like a postal chess player having the board set up in their den – a situation we've all seen on film many times. However, I, myself, find sitting alone and rolling dice a bit sad. So I don't do it.

On the same computer you use to type up the weekly results and e-mail them out you've almost certainly got a spreadsheet program. It's five minutes work to use the RANDOM function of the program to set up a sheet which generates the rolls of d6's, d20's, d10's etc. at the push of a button (usually F5).

Alternatively, you could use a computerised dice-roller program – either downloaded or on-line.

When I'm typing and rolling at the same time, I find using this sort of system means I don't have to turn away from my machine. It's faster, easier and – if anyone were to pop in – it doesn't look at all odd (well...except for all those little figures on the map on the table).

3) Die-roller as it comes

The Referee could get the player to use an on-line die-roller (see Chapter 3) every time their character takes an action.

This is probably the closest you're going to come, using e-mail, to simulating face-to-face play.

You'll be swapping multiple e-mails every day, though, and I doubt you'll be able to complete a round of combat in one week.

4) Die-roller in advance

Either at beginning of combat or the beginning of each round, the Referee asks each player use the on-line die roller to generate multiple die rolls of different denominations. More than should be needed by their character's actions. The Referee then uses these rolls in turn whenever the player would roll a die.

This is faster but some unscrupulous players might use advance knowledge of die-rolls to affect their announced actions.

If a player knows his next roll strike roll is going to be a critical hit, he will probably break off from his fight with the goblin to charge the dragon.

To avoid this, start to use the die rolls at a random position, for example, from the 6th roll onwards. (This is one reason for generating extra rolls.) Alternatively, you could just use them in reverse order.

However you roll the dice, this method of handling combat is extremely labour intensive and extremely slow. This is why I don't recommend using this method of controlling combat when running a PBEM game.

A combat is a turn

In this method, the players describe their actions and intentions in detail at the beginning of the combat. The Referee then plays out/determines the outcome of the whole combat. Afterwards, they write a detailed description of the entire battle and post it on-line.

This means that from giving their orders, the players only have to wait a week to find out what happens. Much faster. It keeps the pace going in the campaign and allows you to move the story on.

Of course, some players might feel that this gives them less control over the minutiae of their characters' actions in the midst of battle.

You have to decide if the benefits outweigh this drawback.

As for determining the outcome of the battle you should refer to the methods outlined above should you choose to "roll dice". I would strongly recommend that you do roll dice when determining outcomes instead of just deciding everything that happens. As I've said before, I use a computer spreadsheet. However, getting the players to use on-line die rollers - to generate loads of die rolls at the beginning of the combat - works extremely well in this situation.

You may or may not feel the need to move figures about on a map. I've always found I can visualise the situation in my head for the short time it takes me to work out the results. (You need to make some kind of note where everyone is if you are disturbed halfway through, however.)

Another option is to use a computer graphics program to keep track of characters' positions. and then drag and drop them around the screen.

Short cuts

Even though you may use some form of die-rolling to determine most of the important actions throughout the combat you may feel – as I do – that it is OK to just use short cuts to speed up combat resolution. Here are a few to consider:

1) Ignore initiative

Instead of rolling initiative each round, have all the characters act in a set order. This can be Dexterity, alphabetical order or the order determined by a single initiative roll at the beginning of the combat.

Personally I wouldn't use this short-cut. The wide variation in possible actions given by the initiative system is one of the features which makes individual battles unique. I'd try to keep it in at all costs.

2.Rolling to hit

It IS possible to cut down on strike rolls. Apart from just deciding for yourself if the attack strikes or not – which I don't prefer to do myself – you could, for example, just make a single strike roll for each character at the beginning of the combat and use that value throughout. Or decide that Strikes hit and miss alternately.



The main argument against systems like this is that they mitigate against Critical Hits and Misses - another key feature of many combat systems.

You should try to keep the strike rolls. However, for speed, I have been known to “guestimate” the results of strike rolls without calculating them all out precisely. Just roll the dice and if it seems right then it hits.

If you make a wrong call from time to time, it shouldn't make too much difference to the outcome of the combat and – even if it does – it won't be noticeable in the write-up of the combat.

Note, this is not the same as “fiddling” die-rolls. If you guestimate a result, you are honestly trying to come out with the correct outcome, not changing one you don't like into one that you do.

3) Critical Hits and Misses

There's absolutely nothing wrong with picking the results of any critical which is made. Don't feel as though you have to make another die roll and refer to a table, just pick a critical which applies and which will help bring the combat to a close more quickly. If a critical hit requires a further roll, just pick the most appropriate/effective result of that roll as well.

4) Standardise damage

Instead of rolling damage for each and every attack you can use the average damage such an attack would cause.

Alternatively you could decide that all attacks do maximum damage. This will certainly bring the battle to a conclusion a lot more quickly.

If maximum damage seems too extreme, you can decide that damage dice will roll a standard amount, for example, that a d6 always does 5 points of damage.

As long as you are consistent in the rules you apply, then whichever system you pick is “fair”. Even the maximum damage rule applies equally to both sides (and has the advantage that it will bring combat to a close more quickly). I recommend the use of this system.

5) Mix and Match

Probably the best thing to do is to vary the systems you use. As long as you use die-rolling most of the time even making up the results is acceptable sometimes.

It's Sunday afternoon. Stuart hasn't produced the weekly report yet and he only has an hour free to get it typed up and posted out. In these extreme circumstances he decides to just make up what happens instead of rolling the dice.

As he has always scrupulously stuck to the rules up until this point, it is highly unlikely that his players will notice this one-time lapse.

If you ARE pushed for time, another extreme technique is to just assume that EVERY die roll – rolls to hit, damage, everything - is maximum. If you do this, you can cycle through a combat very quickly.

Of course, sometimes, when you've got time, you may want to play out a combat “properly” making all or most of the required die-rolls. This keeps the combats in the game seeming more reasonable.

Overall

- Don't get caught up with making loads of die-rolls to resolve unnecessary detail.
- Don't get caught up in the minutiae of individual types of combat system.
- Don't feel you have to count and keep track of each and every last point of damage.
- Don't stick to the same short-cuts for every battle.
- Don't use these short-cuts if you feel it is unfairly affecting the outcome of the combat.
- Don't, under any circumstances, let the players find out what you are doing.

Keeps notes about what happens during the fight. You will know when you come to write your report on the combat if the systems you chose to expedite matters “feel” right. If anything doesn't seem to fit, try a different short-cut next time.

A turn is 5 rounds

This is basically the same as trying to complete the combat in a single round but the Referee stops every so often – usually at 5 combat round intervals – to ask the players for updates. In this system, combat usually takes a couple of weeks to complete.

Even if you are trying to resolve an entire combat in one week/round, there may be times when you have to suspend it.

This is when a major event occurs which players were unaware of or could not predict at the beginning of the combat. If a third party suddenly makes an appearance, if one of the characters is knocked from the side of a cliff, if a stray blaster shot causes the chamber to decompress - you should probably stop to ask the players how they respond to it.

Face-to-face

If you can manage it, it's extremely enjoyable to actually meet up to actually play out the combat sections of a PBEM game face-to-face.

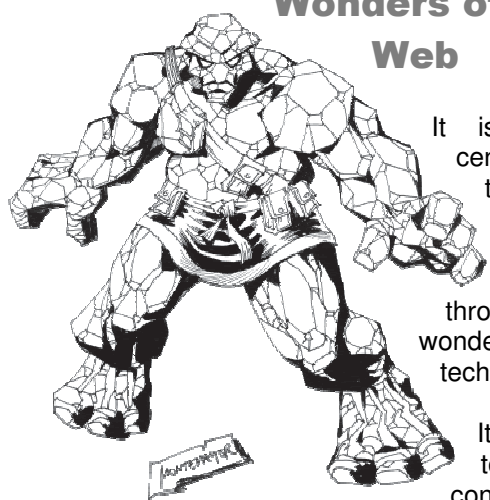
But if you can meet face-to-face like this, why play a PBEM game at all?

Remember that to run a tabletop game effectively you need to meet up regularly – typically every week. If you run the game as PBEM, you'll only need to meet to handle combats once every couple of months or so. This might be possible for some people.

Even if you intend to use another method for handling combats, it doesn't hurt to say "I don't suppose everyone's free at the weekend?" in your e-mails. Once in a while you might find a time when everyone is.

Some people find playing-by-e-mail for campaigning but meeting face-to-face for combat to be the ideal way to play role-playing games.

Wonders of the Web



It is the 21st century and there are other options offered through the wonders of technology.

It is possible to set up conference-type communications through internet chat and the like. It is possible to run a combat using a systems like this.

(I've never actually tried it myself but it should work – if everyone arranges to be on-line at the same time).

Taking it a step further, there are examples of dedicated software (eg. Battlegrounds™) which are designed to allow you to run Role-playing games across the Internet. Again, I've never used these myself but they may be worth looking into.

However, since these require everyone to be on-line at the same time, even if you decide to use one of these methods for combat, I'd still recommend using e-mail for the bulk of the campaign.

If you use a "group" or message/bulletin board to post your weekly updates, another option is to use that forum to handle combats. Instead of players having to e-mail you privately, you can allow them post openly in the group for the duration of the combat. This might allow you to use the round-for-round system outlined above within a reasonable timeframe without everyone having to be on-line at the same time. If everyone agree to post their actions to the group once per day during combat then it should be possible to complete most battles in about a week. This would take a huge chunk of the Referee's time, however.

My recommendation is:

If the opportunity exists for the occasional face-to-face meeting to resolve combat, then take it.

Otherwise, describe the situation to the players and ask them for their instructions and intentions for the entire combat.

You, as Referee, should then play this out in its entirety in a single week/turn.

Use a spreadsheet or computerised die-rolling program in place of rolling dice.

Shortcut the rules where possible – I recommend assuming all damage is maximum.

Only stop if a major event occurs.

You should try to post the results of combat in a single update.

Chapter 7: Character development and the Campaign

In a PBEM RPG game, the Campaign game and character development become more important. There are often great little game systems hidden away at the back of rulebooks which are intended to make running the campaign aspects – which occur between adventures – easier and/or more consistent.

There are also some options offered by the Internet which can be used to add some extra spice to the game.



Points Awards – Public or Private?

One issue you have to decide is whether the exact experience points (power points etc.) each player/character is awarded should be private between yourself and the individual players or whether they should be published for everyone to see.

There are pros and cons for each of these. There is absolutely no logical reason why characters' rewards need to be made public. Other players should be able to easily estimate which character has the highest experience level and know why.

Personally, however, I favour publication. It adds a further nuance to the game – another thing for the players (and lurkers) to read and enjoy. On occasion I even welcome debate. Though I am quite good at assessing my opinion of a character's actions and rewarding them accordingly, there are still times when I vacillate over whether give bonus points or not. If a character has been particularly Heroic, I have been known to seek the opinion of other players about exactly how much reward they deserve.

Feedback is always fun – if you have a thick enough skin. Be prepared for people – sometimes a LOT of people – to disagree with you.

Commentaries

It is possible to take the concept of “feedback” a little further and invite commentaries upon the campaign. That is, you allow players AND lurkers to post comments on events.

Of course, hopefully the players will be e-mailing you regularly to let you know how they are feeling. If they're enjoying it, it's only polite to tell you that. (Keeps you motivated, keeps their fun going.) If they have any issues or queries, then they need to tell you so you can address them.

Commentaries are different. They are postings which are intended to be seen by other participants.

“I agree with Fiador. Dwarves love gold above all else.....”

“Love the weather-based puns – STORMFRONT – keep them coming”

“Are we ever going to revisit that volcanic planet? I thought the adventure there was great.”

“Whatever happened to Patriarch Prasidees?”

OK, so there are some potential issues here.

Firstly, not all feedback is useful and/or positive. Sometimes, even if it's meant well it can be received negatively.

"That's it Fiador. You be selfish."

"What's with all the weather puns, STORMFRONT?"

"Are the characters scared of going back to the volcano planet?"

"What's the point of coming up with a great NPC like Patriarch Prasidees and then just forgetting him?"

Secondly, if we don't want players discussing plot issues directly, do we want lurkers doing it?

"That's twice now the Referee's said your cat is happy to see you. I'm getting suspicious....."

"Use the Amulet!"

"This is just like the plot of the novel 'Space Wolves'..."

There are two ways to deal with these. You can choose to accept feedback only through the private e-mail and then filter the responses. Publish only those which help the game forward. This method is a bit like a comicbook "letters column". (You can actually call it that, if you like.) The trouble is, it's all more work for you as Referee. If you can find someone to edit the letters column for you, that's great, but you still need to read the feedback and approve it for publication.

The other one is through tightening up your Netiquette rules. Invite feedback but be clear about what is and what isn't allowed. Anyone who is unsure can e-mail you directly. Anyone who flouts the rules gets a warning and – if it's repeated – is out of the game. Even if just a lurker they don't get posted any more updates.

If you adopt this second, more adult, approach it dovetails well into a situation where you're using a group, message board or forum to post the results. As well as your weekly updates, you could find fanmail, debates.....

"Should they make peace with the aliens or just wipe 'em all out?"

"Can the Elves be trusted?"

"Who's your favourite character and NPC and why?"

.....suggestions or, even, artwork depicting important events in the campaign.

"Stuart hasn't actually described the aliens in any great detail. This is what I thought they might look like...."



"Here's a sketch of the Pathfinder landing on the Volcano planet."

"How about this figure for Patriarch Prasidees?"

If this works, it can be tremendous fun and add immeasurably to the campaign. Whether you go for it or not depends upon how much of a control freak you actually are.

Lifestyle

Whilst the rules give some guide to the character's lifestyle, PBEM games give you the opportunity to define their lifestyle in more detail. You and your players should try to find time to flesh out exactly how the characters live their lives.

Where do they come from? Which area or planet? A room in a posh Inn can be twice the price of a terraced house in the Thieves Quarter. A poorer character could actually seem to have a nicer place to live if they've been given public housing and the, nominally richer, character is a home owner.

It is rare, in a face-to-face game, for characters to use their finances to do little more than buy a new suit of armour. Sometimes it becomes a major plot development – I mean, we've all played the game where we've had the characters thrown onto skid row for a while – but these events are few and far between. In a PBEM game, they can become more important. Don't be afraid to give a character a pay rise, put up their rent, charge them for an anti-matter converter or send the King's tax collectors after them.

Play the characters' backgrounds. If a character needs a piece of kit which they don't own, you might to make them role-play (by which I mean – specify in their weekly orders) locating the item (at the best price?) and then raising the money to buy it.



Like experience awards, regular publishing of characters background details can be interesting. Only do this if the players are in agreement though. Sometimes a character who is filthy rich, or living as a tramp, in their private lives likes to keep this secret.

Character Development

I've found that many gaming groups are cautious in their use of the character development rules. They worry that, if their characters develop too much, they might change radically and no longer be the characters the players want to play.

This is a reasonable concern. When your character changes from "leaping tall buildings" to actually flying - and from being resistant to bullets to being totally invulnerable – it can become hard to find reasonable opponents – and plotlines – for them.

Because of this, Referees can be cautious in their award of reward points.

Because the PBEM game is so involving in and of itself, some Referees totally ignore the issue of character development and issue few – if any – rewards or experience points. The plot's the thing. The story is what matters. If we are planning our campaign like a television series then most characters are the same at the end of the series as when they started out, surely.

If players do want some development to take place in their characters, it is normal to try to keep the developments small so as not to change the feel and nature of the campaign.

However - in a PBEM game - there is nothing to stop you pushing the boat out. You could go the opposite route and give faster developments or developments with greater increments of power. As Referee you have greater control over combat in a PBEM than you do on the table-top. Whilst a player gaining a magic sword or mega-blastor might make a huge difference in face-to-face play, in a PBEM you can downplay it.

Nominally, PBEM games take longer to play out than face-to-face games. It can take several months to play out a single chapter of the plot. So even if you do give players big upgrades at end of each chapter, they're not going to happen overnight.

If you do decide to use a faster method of handling character development, you should take care that you apply it in a balanced and fair manner. Typically, each character should get a noticeable improvement – possibly a one level increase - at the end of each chapter.

Play the systems exactly as they are written in the book but – because the PBEM game is slower – be prepared to be generous. You can try to use the Honeymoon Period to determine what an appropriate reward rate is. Personally, I'd veer towards generosity but, if you're in any doubt, give them more limited rewards at the end of the Honeymoon Period and see how this affects the characters. You can then choose whether to give more or fewer experience rewards per chapter for the main part of the campaign.

Some Referees give rewards out more regularly – possibly giving a few points every month or – even - with every turn of the game.

Of course, you can always do a mixed economy, giving out limited rewards every week and with a big bonus at the end of the chapter, for example.

Giving out reward points during play can raise issues about how and when characters are supposed to use them. Can they “spend” them whilst in the middle of an adventure? Giving them out at the end of the chapter gives you more chance to build in some “dead” time for the characters to use their points (and spend some time living their normal lives).

In a PBEM game, the character’s “ordinary” persona can have a much bigger footprint within the game. Their activities outside scheduled adventures can be referred to more explicitly. The character development can be built into this part of the game.

TACHYON wants to build a radar system to allow him to teleport into “blind” spaces safely. Having written down his method for doing this, he leaves the Referee to work out the details. The Referee can let the player know whenever TACHYON has time to work on his device.

He can let him know when each of the phases – Design, prototype etc. - are complete.

If he needs to, TACHYON could take his device out untested or, even, in the prototype phase. (He better be extremely lucky, though, or be prepared for his device to malfunction at a critical time.)

It might be useful to set targets for character development. You could expect characters to gain one experience level every two chapters, for example.

My recommendation is:

Publish characters’ experience awards and broad details of their finances.

Invite open feedback from all concerned – including lurkers – but be clear on the Netiquette surrounding this.

Use the systems given in the rulebook to detail character development as an integral part of playing the game.

Give characters regular but small increments of increase in power.

Set Power Level targets for your campaign and aim towards achieving these.



Chapter 8: All Good things

Experience has told us one extremely sad thing about running a role-playing game, as a PBEM. They start with immense enthusiasm on the part of all concerned and prove to be thoroughly enjoyable. But, somehow, most of them seem to just peter out sooner or later.

My experience is that this is after a couple of "chapters" but before the Referee has a chance to resolve any of their major plot-lines.

Why this happens I don't know. I suspect it is because of

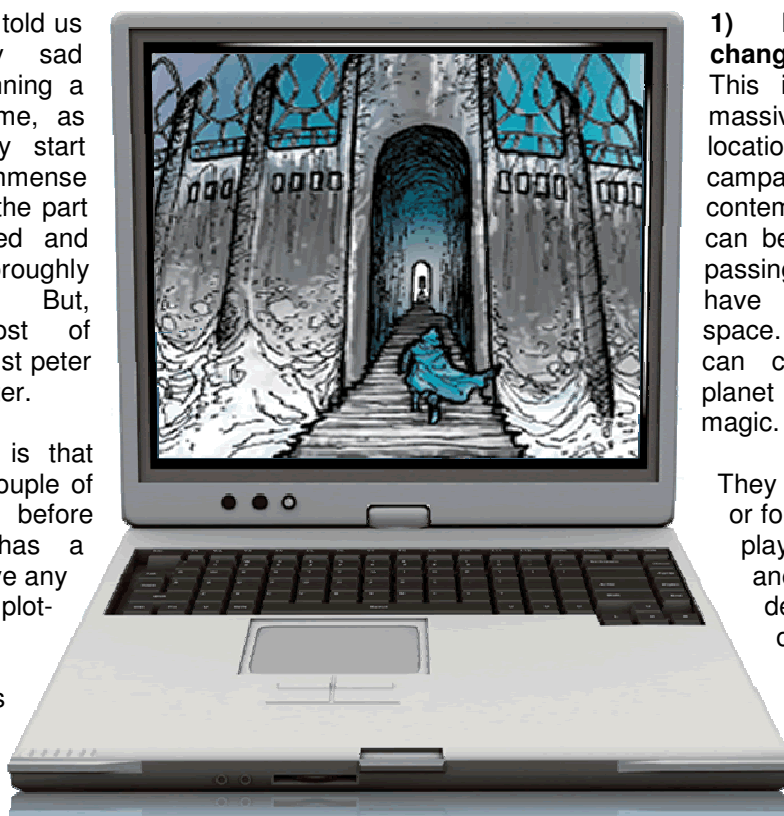
the intensity of the experience. Until you've played in – or refereed – a PBEM game you've no idea how enjoyable it is. But, as they say, a candle that burns twice as bright burns half as long. I think it's hard to sustain the enthusiasm.

As Referee, you'll probably begin to see the signs when things are slipping. Anything from reliable players sending in slow or incomplete orders to your wife moaning you're spending too long on the computer. Be aware. This time WILL come. Don't miss or misread the signs. There is no point in flogging a dead horse. Plodding on with a game past its sell-by can be unseemly.

There are a number of things you can do to keep a campaign on its feet when it begins to flag. There are also some things you should bear in mind to end the game with some dignity should this become necessary.

Keeping things going

Things are beginning to slow down. There are some signs that the game has become a bit lack lustre but it still has some legs in it. You can revitalise it by:



1) Radical setting change

This is a sudden and massive change in the location or time of the campaign. Fantasy or contemporary players can be beamed up to a passing starship and have an adventure in space. Sci Fi characters can crash land on a planet dominated by magic.

They could travel back or forwards in time. The players could play ancestors or descendants of the original characters. Many television series have begun to use flashbacks or flash forwards.

Your players might like the new setting and want to stay there or they might see it as a holiday and want to return – invigorated – to the original setting, so build in a way out. Flash forwards, for example, are often warnings given before the characters are sent back to change the dystopian future they have seen.

Stuart sets an adventure DURING the alien invasion featuring the characters BEFORE they got their superpowers. They are taken hostage aboard the alien mothership and discover that they are the ones who were responsible for causing its self-destruction. Stuart introduces a shadowy group that wipes the characters' memories of this event, however, substituting a different story for the general populace.

He prefaces the adventure with the characters finding an alien artefact which envelops them in a blinding white light. He finishes it by telling the players that the light from the device has awoken their characters dormant memories.

The characters now have to find out who wiped their memories and why. And how was it that Professor Bart brought exactly this group back together again?

2) Change the Referee

If you're finding things heavy going, tell your players. If they want to keep going, then ask if one of them wants to take over the reins. If they do you can e-mail them all your notes (they might be surprised how few you've actually got) and the password to the private e-mail account.



Then you have to decide what you want to do. At the very least you will want to stay on as a lurker and see what happens to your world. However, you could join the game as a player. This would mean the new Referee would need to change some of the "secret" background information but they'll probably do that anyway.

However, it is a BIG thing to give up something you've created into the hands of another. What if they run your world into the ground?

It might be best to suggest to the new Referee that they set up their own campaign. Tell them how to get their hands on a copy of this book and leave them to it.

3) Change the players

If you've got loads of energy left but your players are flagging, draw the campaign to a close (see below). Then restart it with a totally new playing group.

If none of the new players were players or lurkers in the previous game, you have the option to "reboot" the whole game and start from the beginning. If you've been using an Internet group or bulletin board to post results you'll need to delete or, preferably, archive all the posts pertaining to the original game so that the new players never see them.

Rebooting the game has advantages. You've already got everything designed. You've already played through the material once so you've got a chance to correct any mistakes you felt you made first time through. Any lurkers or players from the original game who choose to lurk in this one will have a great time seeing how the new guys tackle the old stories.

If you have a player from the old game who wants to keep playing but you desperately want to reboot the game, try negotiating with them. You could offer them the job of managing (not playing) a major NPC.

"Say! How about you play the editor of the game's newspaper?"

Give it a try, you never know. He might say yes!

If you've got some old players playing and/or promoted some lurkers to player status, you can continue with the storyline from where it was left off but with new characters. I'd suggest making all the players – even the ones "in situ" – create new characters. If someone REALLY wants to continue to play an existing character then you should negotiate a power downgrade with them. Working out the characters LOSE power can be an interesting challenge in and of itself.

They could be crippled or have lost the alien/magical artefact (or pet) which gave them their powers.

They should start with the same equivalent power level as the new characters. However, knowledge of the campaign so far counts as an ability so they should be taken into account as well.

One great option is to have the existing players be the mentors of the new players. They're forming the team to face the threats.

(A really devious Referee could negotiate with another one of the players who has dropped out. They could ask them to come back for one chapter of the new game.....as a bad guy.)

Of course another option is to keep the existing players at the current level and introduce new players at that level. Again you may decide to give them a bonus to "off-set" the existing characters' greater experience within the campaign world.

Personally I wouldn't start new characters off at this higher level for two reasons. I mean, where have these powerful guys been hiding up until now? Also, starting at a lower level allows the players and their characters to "grow into" the game world which is more satisfying for all concerned.



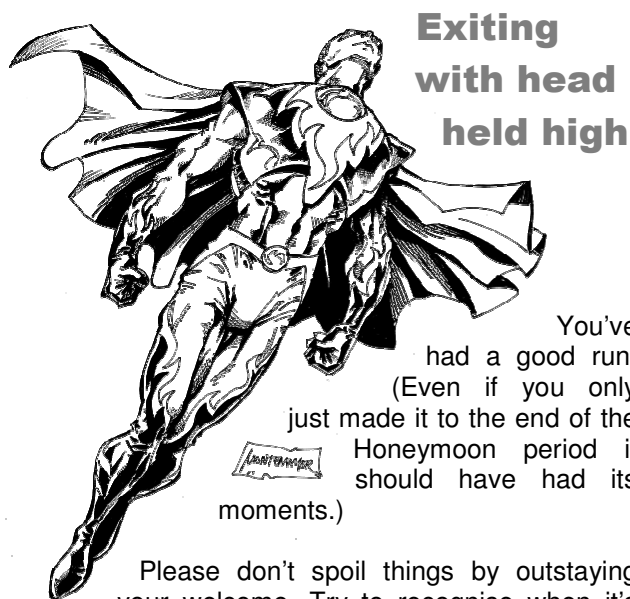
4) Set off a bomb

(See chapter 5)

5) Gone but not forgotten

Retire the campaign but keep everything. Tell the players you'll e-mail them all in a Year (or two) and ask if they want to play in one more adventure.

You might find "parking" the campaign like this from time-to-time is the most effective way of keeping it going long term.



This is how you handle your exit strategy:

1) Decide that you're going to end the campaign.

This is the big one. You've given blood, sweat and tears to this game. You'll find it hard to give it up.

Make the decision and stick to it.

2) Don't just stop.

Too many campaigns just stop when everyone gives up. All the e-mails begin to dry up and suddenly the game disappears with a whimper rather than a bang. Having decided to stop the campaign you should feel relief. This should give you enough energy to see out the final chapter.

3) Tell/Don't tell your players

This is a hard one and I can't advise you here, other than to tell you that you should think about it and make a decision one way or the other.

Giving the characters one last great adventure and then telling the players by surprise at the end that it's all over is the dramatic thing to do. It might upset a couple of people but it's memorable.

Giving your players a warning that this is their last adventure might re-invigorate a couple of the more lethargic ones. It'd give time for a replacement Referee or game to be found if desired (see above). It's probably fairer on the players. However, you might lose one or two. They think - if the game's over - why bother playing out the last couple of turns.

Please think carefully about it. You should know what the right decision is for your group.

4) Resolve plot-lines

Plan one last grand adventure which will tie up any and all hanging plot threads - however many you have. You don't have to finish them off in the way you originally intended, as long as they are dealt with in some way. There should be no unresolved issues at the end of the campaign.

Yes, even the sub-plot about the happy cat needs to be explained and put to bed. If you don't have time to conclude your original story idea about her being taken over by an alien life-form, just make her give birth to a litter of kittens.

However, don't feel the need to unburden yourself and reveal all the secret information behind the campaign or throw in all the plot threads you were INTENDING to use. Just tie up all the bits and bobs the players are aware of.

Keep all your unused stuff for future games or in case you ever decide to resurrect this campaign down the line somewhere.

5) Go out with a bang

Make the last adventure memorable. Tying up all the loose ends should give you lots to work with. Odds are you'll have so many returning enemies gunning for the characters that you'll have to set them at each other's throats just to keep them busy. Make the threat level high. Put the entire Universe in peril. It doesn't matter if the characters die, it's the last game and you can always fiddle things to make sure they save the day, no matter what happens to them.

Actually, I wouldn't recommend killing them all off if you can avoid it – especially if you are keeping the end of the campaign a secret from your players. However, an heroic death (or two) might be in order.

6) Epilogue/eulogy/awards

You started the campaign with a detailed background sent to all the players. Finish it with an epilogue which ties up the storyline. Include a heart-felt eulogy – reminding everyone what each of the players and their characters has contributed to the campaign. Some people (not my preference) give awards based upon significant events in the campaign. Most memorable quote, most selflessly heroic action....

Most interesting use of an alien device

Best description of a Horror from Beyond

7) Don't wobble

Ironically, often players who had become a bit jaded with the campaign get re-enthused by this heroic final chapter. They love it.

You will find yourself besieged by requests to change your mind and keep on running the campaign.

Don't do it. If you've done it right, your swansong has been a truly memorable and enjoyable experience. You won't be able to top it. Restarting the game will just lead to disappointment and you'll find it fading away with a whimper again – probably even faster than before.

If players want to keep playing suggest one of them gets this book and runs their own game – which you will be happy to play in. At most suggest that you might consider contacting them all in a year (or two) to see if they're interested in bringing back this game or in you starting a new one.

But make it clear – this game is over – for now.

My recommendation is:

Go into running PBEM games knowing that they have a limited lifespan.

Stay alert for signs that interest is waning. If you can't fix things, don't flog a dead horse.

Go out with a bang – a big adventure which ties up all loose plots and sub-plots.

Finish with an Epilogue and Eulogy.

Accept the gratitude of your players and my gratitude for reading what little I have to offer on this subject. I hope it's been useful.



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Someone's moved away

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