

How to Run Games by Pete Vigeant (vigeant@gmail.com)

The 10-Minute Rule

Do not overplay a game. Every group activity has a sweet spot: everyone has played just enough to start to enjoy themselves. The trick is stopping before anyone has a chance to lose interest or get bored. That happens right around the 10-minute mark. This 10-minute rule does not include the game explanation and is not universal by any means. The idea is simply that short games and activities are much more superior than anything that is overplayed.

Sometimes a game just does not work. Regardless of what was supposed to happen, factors enter the game (such as uneven teams) that cannot be reconciled. Some groups just have a way of sabotaging a perfectly fun game. Short games are almost always remembered fondly. Ceasing play before everything breaks down will ensure that the game can be used again in the future - or perhaps that the game becomes a Favorite Bad Game.

Game time should be about variety. Varying up the skills involved will help the campers that may not be very athletic get the most out of activity time. Frustration levels are kept low and campers see less of an opportunity to go sit in the shade. Although some whining will inevitably occur, doing many quick games in succession will help you become better at understanding the needs of the group.

Challenge By Perceived Choice (Perfect Participation)

Karl Rohnke coined the phrase "Challenge by Choice" when working with Project Adventure. The concept involves allowing participants to make a judgment call themselves about whether or not to play a game or activity. Many of the games that are outlined in the Cookbook are from experiential and adventure education programs, which tend to follow this philosophy. This prevents a facilitator from having to coerce group members into doing something that makes them uncomfortable.

There are many players who feel uncomfortable participating in anything physical. No one wants to put them into a situation that could potentially harm them physically or emotionally. While "Challenge by Choice" protects you from putting any participant at unnecessary risk, it also gives a huge loophole to those looking to spend the session doing as little as possible.

The compromise is the 5-Minute Rule. Whenever leading a new group through a series of games, open by talking about "Challenge by Choice." Explain how anyone who does not feel comfortable with the next activity can choose to sit by the side and cheer everyone on until the next game. Follow this by giving the small, itty-bitty little catch - all players should give a new game 5 minutes before sitting out. There is no force involved. If a participant decides that they are adamantly against playing something, you cannot and should not make them. The 5-Minute Rule is simply a strong encouragement.

Know the Audience

Not every game is for everyone. Age limits are put on games as well as difficulty to execute and play. Most of the time the difficulty refers to the possible risk that is involved. Rowdy crowds should not play games that have potential danger. Neither should groups that have issues following instructions. If the group is having trouble communicating and getting along, do not start them on a difficult challenge like Traffic Jam! Reading the group is a skill that will come as you lead more and more activities.

No Choices

The worst possible statement that is commonly made to groups is, "What do you want to do?" Never ever ask! You are the authority and you should have a plan of what is going to happen next. Asking will only cause needless arguments and will effectively undermine your ability to lead. The participants will not only give you an inappropriate answer, but also completely disagree with one another. This means that when you finally make a decision for the group, the dissenters will moan and groan.

Choice is a valuable tool, but guided choice. Giving several options with the anticipation that the group will be split is appropriate and manageable. Never assume that everyone will want to do the same activity. Be prepared for the possible backfire when a single player chooses the exact opposite of everyone else in the group. This player is less likely to participate knowing that they had a different preferred option.

Clear and Humorous

Each time you lead an activity for the first time, be sure to state the goal clearly and define the rules. Younger participants should repeat back the rules as they are commonly misinterpreted or missed.

Add some humor to your delivery! Be ready to share a short story about where the game got its name, how you learned it or even the historical significance of the event. A narrative, no matter how ridiculous or bogus, will add a little flavor to the experience. World of Warcraft (sorry fanatics) is an incredibly repetitive game before the later levels and is saved by the detailed storyline of the universe. Missions could simply say, "Go kill 10 creatures that are right around your skill level," yet instead wrap everything in a fantastic lore that helps players fall into the fantasy. Knight Cavalier Princess is a game that requires a bit of lore to work - especially with teens!