

AS A GAME MASTER, YOU ARE CHALLENGED WITH AN ASSORTMENT OF PROBLEMS DURING YOUR GAME SESSIONS

- What are you to do when there's a misfit in the group?
- What about when only a few players make it to the session?
- When it's time to award XPs?

IGNACY TRZEWICZEK, board game designer, RPG author, and GM since 1994 takes us through his vivid interactions with players over the course of many years during his own sessions, sharing with us his unique and personal methods for resolving the issues that GMs may encounter.

Play Smart is a fascinating take on running RPGs, told through the experience and knowledge of a humorous and dedicated GM who goes out of his way for the enjoyment of his players. At it's best, it is a smart guidebook to help GMs approach their game sessions with a pocket full of ideas for the many problems that may occur in their role-playing games.

"The title of the book is Play Smart, but it might be called Play With Heart. Ignacy has created a very player-centric book filled with a kind of bold empathy. The book cuts right to the heart of the matter and boils everything down to RPG fundamentals. I've dabbled as an RPG player, but never had the opportunity to be a Game Master. I've always been intimidated. All of that is out the window after reading Play Smart. I would keep this book with me in spirit at all times. Using both humor and a bit of a potty mouth, Ignacy has outlined tools for dealing with even the most extreme situations, both in and out of the game."

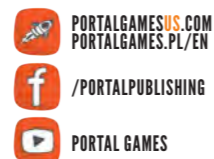
Joel Eddy, Drive Thru Games

"As a Game Master, you want to be more than just background noise to your players. In order to do that, we highly recommend Play Smart as an addition to your role-playing library. This book provides insightful advice on how to be a successful GM and provide an experience for your players that they will talk about for years to come. But fair warning, once you apply what you've learned in this book, a very high bar will be set possibly making you the GM of the group for life."

Tony McRee and Marty Connell, Rolling Dice & Taking Names



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IGNACY TRZEWICZEK

PLAY SMART



INSIGHTFUL ADVICE ON HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL GM



IGNACY TRZEWICZEK

PLAY
SMART

IGNACY TRZEWICZEK

PLAY SMART



Portal Games



PREFACE

I debuted in *Sword & Magic* magazine in late 1997 with *Tale about the Revenge* - a very dark adventure for the *Warhammer* RPG. In the following months, I published dozen of articles for *Warhammer* and soon became a local star.

Exactly two years later I founded *Portal Games* and started publishing my very own magazine about role-playing games. The company grew over the years. We released our first little RPG, then we wrote the *Neuroshima* RPG, the *Monastery* RPG, and dozen of expansions for both of them. *Portal Games* became a major publisher of RPGs in Poland. In 2008 I wrote and published *Play Smart*¹. The book became a phenomenon, but I was slowly losing interest in RPGs. A year later I published *Stronghold*, then *51st State*, then *Pret-a-Porter*. I left RPGs behind me.

A decade passed.

¹ Due to the time in which this book was originally written, some references may now be outdated.

IGNACY TRZEWICZEK

I designed games like Robinson Crusoe, Imperial Settlers, and Detective. My company's tagline - Board Games That Tell Stories - became a worldwide known keyword for games with a good story. I became the storyteller of the board game industry. You have starting equipment in Robinson Crusoe like in every good RPG. You have a few different races to choose from in Imperial Settlers like in every good RPG. You have a surprise handout in Detective... like in every good RPG. Although I now design board games, I use years of my RPG experience to immerse players in the worlds we create. I use the same magic I used back then in my early days. You experience some of my RPG tricks, even though you've never played *Neuroshima*, or ever read my beloved *Monastery*, and never actually discovered what *Autumn Tale* might mean.

This year Portal Games celebrates its 20th anniversary. I guess this is now or never. The 20th anniversary is the perfect occasion to translate at least one of my many RPG books into English.

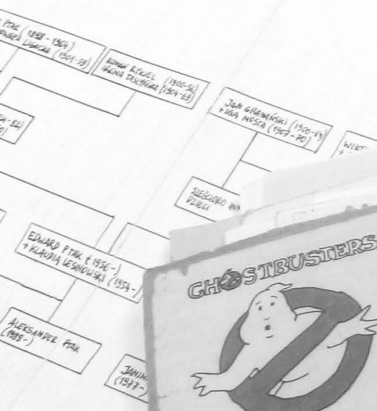
Here it is. Ignacy and his RPG work. Enjoy!

PLAY SMART - PREFACE

Background documents with dense handwritten text in Cyrillic script, likely related to the investigation or project.



ED PAK - NASHNENESSI LOR NABURSI KROWI.



GHOSTBUSTERS



DOKUMENTACJA DUEKRA BIECZYŁA

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W KAWAŁA KAWAŁA
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№ 2500 e.d. w. Panku S.A.



Handwritten notes and signatures in Cyrillic script, including the name 'Ukraine' and other illegible text.

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INTRODUCTION

I have waited eight years for *Play Smart* to be released. Initially, the book was supposed to be called *Saxendorf*, and the first file related to it - *saxendorf_table_of_contents.rtf* (*saxendorf_spis_tresci.rtf*), lies around on my hard drive till this day. It was created on October 22, 2000. A long time ago.

Those were different times. There were two paperback magazines dedicated to role-playing games - *Magia i Miecz* and *Portal*. *Warhammer* had more players than *Neuroshima* and *D&D* combined have today. Role-playing games didn't have to compete against board games for market share. Hardly anyone in Poland had heard about board games in the first place. And I was a widely recognized bloke - the guy who wrote *Autumn Tale* (*Jesienna Gawełda*).

Have you heard about *Autumn Tale*? Just searched for it on Google. The query returned 7,060 related links.

“*Autumn Tale* - Polish fabrication or worldwide norm?”; “Ignacy Trzewiczek in his series of articles titled *Autumn Tale* also tried to (...)”; “Thanks to *Autumn Tale*, *Warhammer* ceased to be perceived as (...)”; “Multiple exploitations of WFRP, the discovery of new riches of ideas and conventions, has triggered the *Autumn Tale* phenomenon”, etc...

This was a peculiar phenomenon. I had written a few articles with advice on running *Warhammer* and it turned out I created a revolution. My lectures at conventions attracted dozens, completely filling up rooms. My articles kept being voted best articles both in *Magia i Miecz* and *Portal*. I couldn't understand it. It was pure madness.

The inevitable thought was born: “Hey, why not write a whole book on running *Warhammer*?”

And so the idea for *Saxendorf*, a 100-page book with *Autumn Tale*-style articles came into being. I was supposed to cooperate with Piotr Smolański. We had lots of ideas on how to describe the most prominent features of the *Warhammer* realm, to show how to present them during a session in an atmospheric way, to show how to run a fight, how to play Non-Player Characters. I'm looking at the file from eight years ago. The table of contents is two pages long. In the final chapter we wanted to include an adventure, a classic, dark, *Warhammer*-esque adventure.

An adventure. Right...

That very adventure became *Saxendorf's* undoing. Piotr began with an adventure outline. That adventure outline grew into a campaign outline, which eventually became a campaign. A big, fully-fledged, wonderful campaign.

Saxendorf paled into insignificance. We sat down to write the campaign. After many months of labor, *The Ruler Of Winter* (*Władca Zimy*) reached the hands of *Warhammer* fans. The best *Warhammer* campaign ever released. I say this seriously and take full accountability for it, no hint of hard selling. The print run has sold out, no

need to promote anything, you won't buy it anywhere. Maybe on Ebay. If you're lucky.

The Ruler Of Winter is a magnificent, 200-page book. An enormous piece of work. When we finished it, we were sick of *Warhammer*. We needed a rest. Project *Saxendorf* was postponed.

A year later I was writing *Neuroshima* with Michał Oracz and Marcin Blacha.

A year later we were writing *Monastery (Monastyr)*.

A year later I was writing expansions for *Neuroshima* and *Monastery*.

A year later...

Eight years have passed. I have written two major role-playing games and I'm finishing a third one. *Warhammer* is no longer the most popular game in Poland. *Magia i Miecz* has collapsed and so has the *Portal* magazine. *Space Pirate (Gwiezdny Pirat)* was born and shut down after a few years - it's available in an electronic format now. These days, fans of role-playing games play mainly *Neuroshima* and *Warhammer*. *D&D*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Deadlands*, *Cyberpunk*, *Wild Plains (Dzikie Pola)* have all but faded into obscurity... I am no longer the guy from *Autumn Tale*. Oh yes, times have changed.

In June 2008, *Portal* released John Wick's *Play Dirty (Graj Twardo)*. It was a collection of articles published many years ago in an American magazine called *Pyramid*. John Wick is one of the icons of the role-playing games market, the author of *Legend of the Five Rings (Legenda Pięciu Kręgów)* and *7th Sea (Siódme Morze)*. A man who has collected piles of awards for his works. By releasing his book, we've set the stage for *Saxendorf*. A guidebook - the notes to which have literally cluttered my hard drive. A guidebook we spoke about in the office. A book which we had no time to finish or release. We didn't even have time to check whether players still wanted to read about running games, the way they did around the time of *Autumn Tale*.

Eventually I found the time, and with the help of my friends, I wrote a modern version of *Saxendorf*. I have discarded many of the old ideas. *Play Smart* is not a guidebook on running *Warhammer*. It's something completely different. It's universal. It's a mindful Game Master's guidebook showing how to solve various problems that may occur during a session. *Play Smart* focuses on relations between the Game Master and the players. It shows how important they are, how vital group creation is, how delicate a matter it is to award XP and, last but not least, it shows different tricks and techniques affecting Player Characters.

By the time this book reaches the shelves, I will be sorting notes regarding the next volume. I will narrate on writing adventures. But that's still ahead of us...

Now, I give you *Play Smart*. I have carried this book in my head for eight years. I'm very curious as to what comes out of this today.

PLAY SMART - INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

THE PLAYER

Let's start with the relation between a player and a Game Master. It's about what a GM should know about players, what they enjoy, what they look for in role-playing games, and how to become their favorite GM.

Ready? Let us begin.

TAMAGOTCHI

Ask a random player what role-playing games are about and he'll tell you without hesitation that they're about creating a character, traveling around the world discovering it, and gaining experience.

And he'll be one hundred percent right. This is what role-playing games are about - roaming the world and gaining experience.

"Gaining experience" is of course most important. Actually it's more about Experience Points, less about gaining experience. It's about character development, about growing our own, beloved Tamagotchi.

A Player Character is a Sim (as in The Sims game). She's got her Stats, which can be increased. She's got her Skills, which can be trained. Nay, new Skills can be bought. New cool items can be bought for her. She can be bought a house or even a castle. All it takes is to sit through a few hour-long sessions and there, a nice 200 XP from the GM and the shopping and development fun begins. New possibilities for our character.

Don't know about you, but I have never heard anyone say: *"I played Baldur's Gate, and there was that beautiful village with that superbly designed orchard and that cool little bridge over the stream. A very pretty place."* What I've heard hundreds of times is: *"If you enter the inn in that village, you can get that kickass sword, combat +4, poison resistance, and a free slot for a shield."*

There's no pretending, RPGs are not about discovering a wonderful world. RPGs are about leveling up that beloved sim. Sight-seeing is merely a nice touch.

EXPERIMENT

I have no idea if you know about this experiment, but if not, I recommend it. It's quite thought-provoking. You take one of the players aside and say to him: *"Listen, I need to plan some things ahead in this campaign. You'll probably get around 150 XP each after this session, what are you going to spend it on?"*

Instantly you'll get his detailed plan for those points. On top of that, he'll tell you what he would upgrade if you gave him an extra 50 XP. And then what he'll upgrade after the next session. And the next after that.

Ask him one more thing: *"Also, you'll probably have to leave this town after this session. What's the plan, where do you think you want to go?"*

After five minutes of dodging the question he'll admit to actually not knowing. *"We'll see."*

Of course it doesn't apply to all players.

Just the majority of them.

Don't believe me? Check it for yourself. It's a simple experiment.

CHARACTER SHEET

What is a character sheet used for? It's for keeping the Hero's Stats. It's also used to keep notes from a session, to scribble on, to have coffee spilled on, or to have candle wax melted on...

Alright. Let's put it another way. What use is a character sheet to a Game Master?

That's a good question. You see, when a player has finished creating a character, I take the character sheet and calmly analyze it. I take notes and find that there are a few things of interest to me.

What is the highest Stat? What is the lowest one? What Skills did the player pick? What did she invest the most points in? What did she ignore?

This knowledge is of great use to me. I do not start a session without it.

If the player has loaded the most points into Personality, it means she wants her character to be tough. It's a clear sign; a placard saying: *"Gosia likes her character being as tough as Bonnie Parker."*

If the player has put loads of points into horse riding, it's not because there are no other nice Skills in this role-play. She did it because she wants her character to be a born rider.

If she has spent nearly all her points on six Allies, it means she would very, very much like to have a squad of trusty, battle-hardened men following her across the land.

So I take a piece of paper and make a note: *"Gosia. Tough woman, born rider, trusty men."* Next to it I stick on a picture of Bonnie & Clyde from a newspaper. It's going to make a nice impact on the imagination. Gosia is Bonnie Parker.

The GM has to remember this. Non-stop. In every minute of the session. When Gosia's character enters an inn I say: *"When you approach the counter, you can feel the fear coming from some smartasses sitting at a table."* When she enters a store, I say: *"When you enter the doorway, you can see the owner gulp, sensing trouble."* Should a couple of thugs bump into her from a nearby alley, I roll against their Courage, ignore the result and say: *"Two guys jumped at you with knives in their hands, looked at you and after a few seconds of consideration, retreated into that dark alleyway."*

Gosia put her best into Personality. She wants her character to be as tough as Bonnie Parker. Gosia wants to feel this during the session.

It's our task to make her feel it.

Of course it applies to all Stats and all characters. One of the players put his money on Agility, another on Constitution - we expose this. No need to repeat it too often, it gets boring. Once in a while though, allow for a description spicing up an event by taking into account the type of characters the players have created. Let them feel they are agile, tough, built like bears.

After all it's their beloved character, their Tamagotchi.

The Character Sheet Will Tell You the Truth

Multidej has pointed out one more little detail regarding the character sheet - small drawings that players decorate it with. For many players, a character sheet is a genuine fetish. Nobody else, except for maybe the Game Master, touches a player-fetishist's character sheet. Often other players must not even look at others' character sheets (lest they see the character's Agility - that is sac-rilege!). But let's not talk about deviations...

What's important for the Game Master is that many players, through their scribbles and more or less successful drawings, are

expressing the way they see their Heroes. They tell exactly what they expect from the game.

It's simple - if there's a huge puppy gazing at you with its sharp eyes from a Beast Handler's character sheet, it means the player wants to have it at his side during a session. He needs scenes which will show plain and simple that his animal is awesome and that by controlling it, he is even more powerful than the rest with their pathetic shooters. If a Warrior turned his character sheet into a sticker album full of goblin heads surrounding his Conan-esque silhouette, you get an obvious message what, beside gold and XP, he cares for most. He'll do everything to keep chopping green heads.

And yes - some of the things from a character sheet can't be taken seriously. If a player has gallows, skulls, decapitated heads drawn on the margins of his character sheet, it doesn't necessarily imply that he wants you to finish off his character.

Go to a pet shop and buy colored pebbles. You'll have lots of nice markers useful during a session. Take a white pebble and place it on a character sheet, next to the character's highest Stat. It's the one the player picked as the most important, right? Let it stay there. If the player during a session fails a test against this Stat, take the pebble, but let the player roll again.

Can't allow one stupid roll to ruin the whole idea behind the Player Character, right?

Take a black pebble too. Put it next to the character's lowest Stat. If during a session the player rolls against it and succeeds, take the black pebble and have him roll again. It's his Achilles' heel. That'll teach him that it's not going to be easy.

CHARACTER SHEET AND A PLOT

What is gained from analyzing character sheets shouldn't only affect the way Player Characters are described. It's also a guideline used when writing adventures. Let me tell you about Obi.

Obi is a guy who likes RPGs, but even more so, he likes battle systems and strategy games. He's fond of planning and commanding, and he loves the tactical aspect in certain games. When we were starting to play *Monastery*, Obi created a character very different from what other players came up with. You see, Obi made a huge effort to give his character a unit of armed men. There is a little beauty in *Monastery* called Allies - they're additional Player Characters one can purchase, who follow the main Player Character.

You can usually afford only one Ally, two if you really want it. Obi went to the extreme and managed to end up with six horsemen. A whole detachment of Allies.

It's a clear sign for the Game Master, isn't it?

In the first adventure of that campaign the players came across ruins of a manor house. These were about to be attacked by an armed detachment. Obi was in his element. Two of his men by the gate, two at a breach in the wall on the eastern side of the premises, and two more at the back. He himself with the rest of the players covering the inside of the manor, awaited the enemy. Didn't have to wait long. A musket shot was heard, a second one straight after. "It's Keltis" said Obi, smiling. He was smiling, because right before the session he had stressed that the leader of his unit, Keltis, has two loaded muskets at hand whenever he prepares an ambush. Keltis, Obi's alter ego.

After an hour of playing, the players had repelled the attack.

Obi's Allies have proved themselves in battle. The beloved Keltis has taken down two enemies with his muskets. Points loaded into Allies weren't a waste.

In every adventure featuring Obi's detachment, there is a task prepared by me for his unit to prove useful. Let it be a damsel escort, chasing bandits, roughing someone up at the docks. If the players can't do it themselves, a split into two groups is necessary.

This guy went to the extreme to have those Allies. Make him enjoy them. During every session.

FAIR PLAY

I think it's worth mentioning fair play. I happen to have played with Game Masters who had never heard that expression. I remember their sessions being bad. It'll be good if we can all learn from their mistakes.

There was a *Warhammer* campaign. And there was the halfling coachman character. He was neither a brave warrior, nor a smart thief, nor a wise scholar. He was a rather average character with almost no unique features. Almost, because he had something absolutely exceptional. He had a wagon full of equipment in his possession. The player had an A4 sheet with a drawing of how the wagon was packed on one side and a list of inventory in small print on the other. There were things like a warm woolen hat, silk tissue, a comb, perfumes, anti-bug powders, anti-mosquito ointment, raisins, three jars of pickles, chocolates, a mug, a needle and threads, and so on. All in all, that player has listed nearly one hundred and fifty items loaded on his deluxe cart. All junk, worthless shit, yet so enjoyable for the player nevertheless.

During the first session he had his cart stolen. The Game Master had no idea what fair play was all about.

We don't break a Player Character's leg after the player picked Agility as the highest Stat. We don't get the insane idea of a mutiny amongst a player's Allies after he did everything he could to get

them. We don't steal a cart from a player who spent a couple dozen hours arduously inventing and listing all it carries.

Players love their characters. Especially their certain traits. Stealing that from them is breaking a Game Master's fundamental rule. The Game Master is there to make players have fun. Not to take the fun away from them.

Session's Crib

Multidej shared a nice trick with me. When he plays RPGs, players bring small pieces of paper with character descriptions on them for the Game Master. Something like a business card. There's the name of the character, occupation, looks, and clothes. More importantly, they keep updating the card every session to account for any changes in regard to the character in question.

Don't know about you, but I'm introducing this habit into my campaign starting next week.

DIVERSIFICATION

I wrote about this both in the main book of *Neuroshima* and in the main book of *Monastery*, but it's an important matter so - pay attention - I'm saying it again.

A Hero's Skill level not only gives the player a test modifier in a certain situation, it also tells us Game Masters how good he is at that activity.

If the geezer has high lockpicking Skills and tells you he wants to break into an apartment secured by a generic lock, then there's nothing left for you to do except to shrug and say: "*Alright, you're in.*"

The guy is good at that. Damn good. We don't make him test it against a bloody generic lock.

This way we're letting the player know his character is really good at something. He's so good, he doesn't have to roll to succeed. We stroke his ego, please him, it's our job, ok?

Of course you can employ common sense here and decide according to your whim, whether to make the player roll or to allow for the Skill level to suffice for a success. You can even make up a rule. A wise and uncomplicated one, or a simple and quick one.

You can settle for allowing an automatic success as long as the test Difficulty Level is lower than the Player Character's Skill level.

In practice it would look like this.

The players show up in high-speed in their souped-up BMW. They drive really fast for two reasons. Firstly, they are being chased by a purple Suzuki full of Yakuza mobsters. Secondly, the players are trying to get an Italian smartass who, in a most brazen manner, nicked their suitcase full of microchips while they were at a table in a pub. You could even find a third reason. A high-speed chase through a city is exactly what they've bought that agile BMW for.

Mike is behind the wheel. Two reasons for that too. His Driving skill is 6. And it's his car. He's showing off.

GM: You're hitting the Washington Junction at 110mph, the lights turn red and some coward hits the brakes right in front of you. The Italian's Ferrari flew past the junction like a bloody hovercraft.

Player: I'm passing the coward on the left, fifth gear, full speed ahead after that bloody hovercraft.

GM: A maneuver at this speed is a Driving test at Difficulty Level 2. What's your Driving skill?

Player: Six.

GM: Alright, no need to roll, you do it instinctively. You pass the coward smoothly, jump past the junction and land in the town center. Left lane, right lane, left lane again,

you flash the lights at some loser in front of you, and the Ferrari hits the brakes, turns sideways, skids and disappears behind a gateway...

Player: Full throttle, then handbrake, turn and in the gateway after him. I fire up GPS and check for possible shortcuts.

GM: It's DL3 for that maneuver, extra 2DL for staring at the GPS while driving, that's 5, what was your Driving?

Player (visibly satisfied): Six. Tell me about that shortcut.

GM: If the guy turns left, you can shoot straight. There's a factory there. If you get through it, it'll throw you at his path. You might gain a few seconds, I think.

Player: Sweet.

GM: Not sweet. A machine gun round rips off your rear bumper, the mobsters are right behind you unloading clips into you.

Player: How wide is that street? Can I do a handbrake turn?

GM: You can.

Player: I'm pulling off a Bruce Willis on them. Handbrake, gas, rotate the car a full 360 degrees. Guys, let's hit them!

GM: Such maneuver at this speed, that'll be Difficulty Level 6. They are shooting at you...

Player: I know, I know, time to roll!

The man drives at high-speeds through a city? He's good, didn't have to roll. Reads a newspaper and texts his girlfriend while doing it? He's good, no need to roll. He does a 180 in a narrow street to shoot the opponent's wheels, then a subsequent 180 to keep getting away? Okay, time to prove this high Skill level didn't come out of nothing.

And now the most important thing. The whole “not rolling” business is like charity donations. You know, it’s not about the donation, it’s about others seeing you helping those in need.

Similarly in RPGs, the fun is not about not having to roll, it’s about knowing that whilst somebody else has to roll, you don’t. Because you’re that fucking good.

Multidej says that sometimes it’s good to have a player roll against a Skill she’s very, very good at, even when it’s about a simple task. Only to have her roll and say: *“Passed. With 13 points over.”*

DIVERSIFICATION 2

Actually, the title “Diversification” doesn’t make any sense. It was supposed to be about something else, I wrote something completely different. Oh well. It may make no sense, but it’s atmospheric.

The fun with exposing the fact that a player has no need to roll doesn’t only apply to Skills, but also to Stats and any other features of the Player Character.

If he’s handsome, girls will be all over him, regardless of whether he rolls or not. If his Charisma is high, people will generally listen to him, no need to roll, etc.

I mentioned it at the beginning - you imagine the Player Character and then you make the world react to him. You make the Non-Player Characters fear him, or love him, make him trip constantly or have a cat’s agility.

It has nothing to do with rolling. This is about you and your description. About being aware of what the Player Character is like and - most importantly - about the player being aware that you know what his character is like.

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PLAY SMART - CHAPTER 5: The End

PLAY SMART

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