

Hey everybody, Matt Colville here. I often, really often, get questions from DMs asking How Do I Get My Players To Engage With My Content? And I think there is an easy way to do it. It just requires thinking of the PCs more like action heroes, and then thinking about what makes a good action hero.

But before we get to that, I'm actually a little suspicious about the question. It's WEIRD to me that I get people in every livestream saying "my players don't seem engaged," but NOT "my players don't seem to be having FUN."

That's weird to me because it makes me THINK that the players ARE having fun. If they weren't having fun, I'd be getting questions about THAT. So I fear the players are having fun, they enjoy playing D&D, but the DM wishes they would be more interested in...the lore. The worldbuilding.

But I submit worldbuilding is something we as DMs do...because we like it. It's mostly...for us. It's not REALLY for our players.

That's not 100% true, there is value to worldbuilding. Players love it when they encounter a well thought-out detail about your world because it makes the world feel REAL. And that feeling is the most precious thing we have. Presenting a self-consistent world that seems to operate on rules, with a consistent tone, that has value, absolutely.

But MOSTLY I think we as DMs should spend our time before the session concentrating on the design of the ADVENTURE we're running, and less time on the lore of our world. Because that adventure is the actual content the players will be grinding through. Not the lore.

Another way of saying this is; my players are having fun, BUT I'M NOT. Because they don't seem to care about MY WORLD. Well that's not the players' fault. The players generally are there to play their character. If you want them to care about your world, then you have to give them a REASON to care. And "my world is cool" is not a good reason.

I think a lot of DMs, they do so much WORK on their world, or their lore, that they think the players SHOULD be interested in it, because I did all this WORK. But players generally want ADVENTURE. Not lore. So if you need them to care about the lore in order for you to have fun, then that lore has to be relevant to the adventure.

Or, another way of looking at it is, you have to present problems, that can ONLY be solved by caring about your lore. And the easiest way to do this is by chasing them up a tree. Presenting them with an urgent problem, that cannot be solved with their character sheet.

Because otherwise they WILL solve all their problems with their character sheet, because to most players I think, that is playing D&D. They will sit back, and wait for the opportunity to use these cool abilities they have, or show off their character's cool personality.

That is the feeling of "my players aren't engaged." They don't care about my world, they're just waiting for the opportunity to roll dice or flirt with an NPC. Or threaten an NPC. Or both.

But we want them to be ACTIVE, we want them to engage with our lore and treat it like content to be consumed. And the way you do make them active is: you give them something to REACT to. Which is to say; we treat them more like action heroes.

You know there's a million different games of D&D being played out there and no two are exactly alike but if I were to GENERALIZE what GENRE of game D&D is designed for, I would say: it's an action movie.

And the thing screenwriters know, but I'm not sure DMs know, is that good action heroes are REACTIVE. They are VERY like players in this regard. This isn't obvious, we've all seen tons of action movies, almost all superhero movies are action movies. But I think if you asked most people if those heroes were active, or reactive, they would ASSUME they're active! Right? Aren't they?

No. John McClane in Die Hard does everything he can think of NOT to get involved. Even though his wife is a hostage! When the bad guys start shooting, he HAS a gun, does he leap out of the corner office and start shooting?

He hides. He tries to call the cops. When that doesn't work, he pulls the fire alarm. Get the fire department here. When that doesn't work and they send a bad guy to kill him, he tries to ARREST THE DUDE. The only reason the first bad guy dies is because he fell down the stairs!

This is one of the ARCHETYPAL action movies. And our hero...doesn't act. Even once he has a machine gun, does he get the drop on the bad guys and save the day? Nope.

He tries to call the cops...again. He desperately tries to get the police to deal with the problem and ONLY WHEN HE HAS NO OTHER CHOICE, does he finally do something. Does he finally...engage. It is literally 45 minutes into the movie before John McClane fires his gun. The writers spend all that time raising the stakes, cutting off his options, backing him into a corner, chasing him UP a tree until he has literally no choice.

He is REACTIVE. Indiana Jones in The Other Good Indy Movie tells this dude to go screw. First, they had to KIDNAP HIM to get him to even listen. Then they show him this ancient artifact which SHOULD get his attention but he's like...I don't...I don't care. No. I don't believe in the Grail. It's a fairy story.

Only when we learn it's his DAD the Nazi's kidnapped, does he act. Only when the DM FORCES him, chases him up a tree, gives him no choice.

Gives him no choice.

Luke Skywalker, we've talked about him before. NO I do not want to go on an adventure. I have responsibilities. That's how we know he's a good person, even though we know he really wants to get off this planet, and this old Wizard is telling him they have to go save a princess from the Dark Lord. He says no, I promised my uncle.

So Luke's DM says fine. I'll bar-b-que your uncle and aunt NOW WHAT. The DM backs Luke into a corner. THEN he starts to act, then he starts to engage. Think of all the worldbuilding Luke's DM did, which he never would have learned about, if the DM didn't force him to REact.

In fact if I think there's a weakness in the Hobbit, a book I think is very close to how normal D&D is played, it's that Tolkien didn't know this. He was not a professional storyteller yet, and you can see him wrestling with the question of "Why would bilbo agree to this?"

And...there's no real answer. Just...you know, because it's cool. Well, that is a bad answer. Almost everything we know about Bilbo tells us how much he LIKES staying at home smoking tobacco and eating large meals and just BEING a hobbit. Tolkien never has a good answer to this.

And it got worse in the Lord of the Rings, he spent a LOT OF TIME trying to figure out why Bilbo would go on ANOTHER adventure, especially after he came back with sacks of gold and explicitly lived happily ever after.

So he decided this next book was about a DIFFERENT Hobbit and he's a better storyteller now. Frodo also doesn't want to go on an adventure, but Gandalf shows up and says the WORLD WILL END if he doesn't. And, by the way, the Nazgul are coming.

So that's the trick. If our players aren't engaging it's because we haven't given them good reasons to engage. It is up to us, to give them those chances. And we do that by chasing them up a tree. Forcing them to act. WE are the antagonists, it's up to US to give the players something to react to.

I keep saying; you have to chase them up a tree, back them in a corner, give them problems they can't solve with their character sheet. What does that mean?

Well, Challenging Your Players is probably a subject deserving its own video. But generally it means problems that threaten something they care about, that are too powerful to stop with swords and spells.

So if the heroes care about...the people of this town? Or this inn? Threaten that. If they care about their family? Threaten that.

But a lot of players, especially when we're young, make characters that have NO attachments. I certainly did that, all my friends did. In the real world, as kids we have people we care about but many of them annoy us, and we have many responsibilities and very little power.

So we make characters with NO attachments, NO responsibilities, and a LOT of power and that is part of the FUN of the game and I am not here to tell you that's bad, it's not bad. It's fun. But it is probably a phase. And people say you will grow out of it, but really I think you're just gonna play so much you get bored of the silent killer with no fixed abode, aka the MurderHobo.

But you absolutely CAN chase that character up a tree! It just involves being a little more direct. Threatening them directly.

A lot of new DMs hit upon the idea of taking something AWAY from the heroes. Ah, this is dangerous. It CAN WORK. But I strongly recommend against taking their own class abilities or ancestral powers away from them. I've done this, I've done this recently, it was a mistake.

Better to GIVE the players something really cool, really useful, first. A magic item probably, but it could be an NPC! A person, a retainer with cool abilities. Then take THAT away from them, and they will be pissed, and they will REACT. And they will want to learn about this villain who stole their favorite retainer.

I think we often reach too far, too high, when we're trying to challenge our heroes for the first time. A world-ending threat. The highest possible stakes! In my experience, The Entire World Is Going To Die is way too abstract. It's TOO big, it's hard to wrap your head around and unless your party is VERY high level...in which case actually this kind of threat is probably appropriate...the players will think...why is this up to US? Good question.

Better to start small. Local. Something that threatens the locals AND the heroes. Like disease! The heroes are infected with a disease that the spells they have access to cannot cure. A magical disease, why not? And it starts by spreading through normal people, townsfolk, villagers. Watching those normal people get sick and DIE in some horrific manner will cause SOME players to feel sympathy. We have to do something!

Then when the NPCs they LIKE and rely on, maybe even some higher level NPC they've always counted on to help them out of a jam gets sick, MORE of the PCs will react.

But there's always some edgelord in the party, no judgement, I have been that edgelord, who doesn't care about ANYONE BUT THEMSELVES.

Well, then THEY get sick. Done. You've got two weeks before the disease leaves you shitting your own intestines out, it's not a noble death, what are you gonna do?!

Once you do that, once the villain has made them DESPERATE, then they'll start asking about your world. Once you start putting challenges in front of them that they CAN'T solve with their character sheet, they'll start looking around for THINGS THEY CAN USE to solve the problem.

And those things are the lore of your world. Here's the simplest possible version. The villain is...invincible. He has an army of demons and they're going to destroy the town, the village, the heroes stronghold. His only weakness? The only thing that can stop him? Is the Stone Of Vincibility. Who has it? I dunno, whoever in your world you wish the characters would care about. WHERE is it? I dunno, but it's in whatever land, or castle, or forest you wish your players would care about. You made all this lore...now you have to make it relevant to the players.

And your lore WON'T be relevant to your players until they see it as a solution to their problems. If they can solve every problem with their character sheet, then they don't need your world.

This is why Plot Coupons are so popular in pulp fantasy and action movies. We gotta collect all these THINGS, these MacGuffins, these coupons and once we have all of them we can redeem them from the DM for the ending of the adventure.

Think about it, how many action movies have you seen that boil down to We Have To Stop The Bad Guys, So We Need To Run Around Collecting Items or Secrets or Notebooks or Code until finally we have what we need.

When it's done well, each of those beats seems really interesting and vital and you don't even notice that if Indiana Jones had LITERALLY just stayed home, the Nazi's would have opened the ark a lot EARLIER, melted their faces off way SOONER and saved everyone a lot of trouble.

Some Plot Coupons are PEOPLE. This PERSON has the information we need. People are GREAT, they are one of the most powerful tools you have! Because they can be funny or grumpy or flirty or confrontational.

And the secret to using PEOPLE as plot coupons is that PEOPLE can care about things. They can, and should, have their OWN motivations which have nothing to do with the heroes. This Ranger knows how to get through the trackless forest to the ruined keep with the scroll we need. Awesome.

But the ranger isn't inclined to help us. She has her own motivation, she is wrapped up in the conflict between the High Elves and the Wood Elves, and she has VERY SOPHISTICATED IDEAS about who the good guys are and who the bad guys are in this forest.

Remember the video about the central tension? Your PLAYERS might not care about these cool elves you created, their unique cultures and the battle between them for control of the Wode, but this RANGER cares and they need this RANGER to help get them out of this tree you chased them up.

Do you get it? You can take ANY LORE in your world and wrap it in one of these little plot coupon envelopes, then chase the heroes up a tree and tell them the only way to get down is to collect those envelopes.

The reverse of this is that if you DON'T take the lore of your world and make it necessary for the players to interact with...they won't. They won't engage. Because that's not why they showed up.

I talk about some of the mysteries in my game, and how NO PLAYERS in 30 years have actively tried to solve them and people are like "That's crazy!" No, it's NORMAL. I made these mysteries, this lore, because I thought it was cool! I don't care if the players never look into it.

I think people watching my game as AUDIENCE MEMBERS get really involved in the lore and WANT TO KNOW. But that's the difference between people consuming content passively and players who want to roll dice and kill stuff.

I often recommend Against the Cult of the Reptile God as a good starter adventure, even though it is really OLD and lacks a lot of the stuff you'd get in a modern adventure. But in fact, that is WHY I recommend it. It doesn't have ANY plot hooks! It doesn't have an inciting incident! It's crazy!

But that forces us as DMs to come up with our own, and that helps us develop good storytelling muscles.

Against the Cult of the Reptile God is about a small town that's been infiltrated by cultists. They kidnap people, drag them into the swamp where an ancient Naga mind controls them so they return back to town as somewhat mindless thralls to the Naga.

That is bad. We should stop that. But the adventure provides no STRUCTURE for this. And that's a problem. That's why I decided one of the PCs had a sibling who wrote letters home and those letters get progressively more dire and frantic until...the letters stop.

That's the hook. Let's imagine the players don't take the bait, the PC is callous and cruel and never liked their sibling anyway, ok, then the cultists will COME TO HIM. They've heard about him and want to convert him. We're gonna chase the PCs up a tree one way or another.

When the heroes reach the town, they have reason to be suspicious. But they often don't know what to DO. They don't know how to go ABOUT fixing the problem. Remember the video on Verbs?

So I chase them up a tree. Not only is there a Cult operating in town, they are allied with the Thieves' Guild! And the Thieves' Guild doesn't want the heroes hanging out in town, so they THREATEN the heroes. And if the heroes don't listen? Well, it's initiative.

I've had the thieves' guild KIDNAP a PC and threaten to kill him if the heroes don't leave town. See? One way or another, those PCs are going to end up in a tree, wondering how the hell they got up here and how do they get down?

And the more desperate they are? The better. The more they will start REACTING. Once they start reacting, they're engaging with my content.

They'll want to know more about this cult, the thieves' guild. Do they have any ENEMIES who can be enlisted to help? As soon as they start asking these questions, they're going to start learning about my LORE.

I enjoy writing lore, if you've seen the lore for the monsters in Kingdoms & Warfare, you know what I mean. But I actually LIKE being a DM. I enjoy the actual mechanics of it, I like building encounters for the players to fight, making NPCs for them to meet, I like painting a picture of a world using only words. I love throwing IMPOSSIBLE encounters at the heroes and then sitting back and watching them concoct an insane plan to get out of it.

And I LOVE that moment when I realize the players plan will work, but I have devised an unintended consequence. I love that moment where Copper realizes he can use his explosive arrow to blow a hole in the floor of the dungeon under the Iron Golem's feet causing it to fall into the level below. And it works. The arrow explodes, the floor collapses, the golem topples over...and grabs Boots, pulling him down into the level below...alone...with the Iron Golem.

That is. Awesome. That is why I love being a DM. I don't need my players to care much about my lore. A little is enough.

I DO expect my players will care about it, when I make it relevant. When I make it URGENT. When I chase them up a tree and they start wondering how they're gonna get down and suddenly my lore is REAL INTERESTING to them.

That's it folks! That's the Engaging Your Players video, I think we could do more videos on this subject, because there are many reasons why your players might not be engaging with your game. But this is the easiest and most straightforward answer. It's not the ONLY answer, but it's one that will help you no matter what.

If you think of the PCs as action heroes, who need to be backed into a corner, chased up a tree, put in dire circumstances, they will start BEHAVING like heroes and the game becomes a lot more fun for everyone.

Thanks for watching everyone. If you have any questions, I strongly recommend you come by our Discord server. There are always folks there happy to talk about whatever, and we just passed 25,000 users! Madness!

If you want to help support the channel, come by our store, buy a book or preorder a DOPE mini, these will ship this year.

Finally...hey...we got this PDF magazine we put out now. ARCADIA! People really seem to like it! Issue 2 comes out next week, you can get issue one for \$7 in our store, or become a Patron at the \$5 or \$10 level and you automatically get it.

We're gonna do a livestream friday the 19th, at 11am pacific, you'll get to meet some of the other MCDM folks and some of the people who make Arcadia possible. Always a blast. Tons of fun.

Until then...PEACE! OUT!