

Using Technology In Tabletop RPGs 11/12/2018

Who Am I?

- I run games for the MU Skulls which, among other things, is a Gen Con Premier game group. I've been using media in gaming since the 3.5 inch floppy disk drive, Windows 98 Pentium 2, Milwaukee Gen Con days. I've tried a few different configurations over the years including; projector, different monitor setup styles, and I've used a tablet. Presently I settled on a laptop and 20 inch monitor. I run games that are fantasy, contemporary and sci-fi. Today I'll be speaking primarily from the viewpoint of someone that runs games at conventions but the same ideas apply to online or games with regular sessions and attendees. Feel free to ask questions at any point or wait until the end for Q&A time permitting.

Why Use Technology?

- The most important thing is that technology inspires me to run games. Technology gives me a way to express myself in a way that is interesting and fun for me and that enthusiasm can carry over to the players for a gaming experience that is fulfilling for everyone involved. If using technology is not fun for you don't use it. Ditch technology and find the method or approach that brings out your creativity and joy of gaming.
- As a GM you can lean on your technology a little or a lot. Having this level of preparation can help boost your confidence and encourage you to run a game and the world needs more people running games. The more games you run the better you get at running games.
- Theatre of the Mind style vs. media presentation style
 - Some people have a gift with crafting words with a mesmerizing voice. Michael Parks from the movie Tusk or Red State or describing anything is amazing. Kevin Smith once said he could read the phone book and you'd be totally engaged. We know GMs like that and bad day for me, I'm not that guy.
 - But I do like putting a story together with images and audio clips. For those of us that are not natural orators, we can display cool images and play evocative sounds. A derelict spacecraft drifting around a ringed planet. That echoing drop of water suggesting a large, damp cavern or distant wolf howl and you picture gathering shadows in a darkening barrow.
 - Because you like the convenience of PDFs and/or using technology in general.
 - For the gamer that likes images and miniatures and drawing cool, detailed, color maps but is on a budget. Hunting for the perfect miniature for every situation (Stormtrooper or Sandtrooper?) and every game can be expensive let alone the expense of the landscape itself. A castle at any scale seems to cost a chunk of money. Even an aquarium castle decoration can be \$60, but a picture of the same thing is about free.
 - Dungeons and castles and mysterious mountain passes AKA landscape set pieces can be expensive to model (especially in 25mm) and will for sure at least

be time consuming to create and setup. Finding an image you can turn into a scene or a token can be cheaper, easier and just as satisfying. Misty ruins of a dwarven bridge in a desolate mountain pass triggers ideas for your players.

“Looking at that picture I’m going to be on my guard against trolls...”

- Technology writes the story for you! Well, NO IT DOESN’T but it can help you get started or spark some interesting options you may not have thought of otherwise. Like CHUD shields.
- Can help get everyone on the same page if they don’t have the same background of the source material:
 - Have you seen Akira?
 - Have you seen The City of Lost Children?
 - Have you seen Zardoz?
 - Have you seen Bladerunner?
 - Have you seen Warhammer 40k artwork? Things that are hard to describe quickly or effectively can be very effectively presented with images.
 - The difference of simply telling someone they love their home planet of Mandalore or when you play the audio of the powerful War Song Rage of the Shadow Warrior and display an image of the majestic royal plaza in the glittering domed city. Then later what happens when they return to Mandalore and instead they hear the Imperial March?
- Can help keep your game organized.
 - Helps you build a logical path. A few times I looked at my images and realized I didn’t have enough written to connect point A and B. Playtesting can help surface this defect but it’s better if you get it ahead of time and building a logical sequence of images can help with that.
- Can help you remember certain important details about the game.
 - Oh yeah, when you’re in this room you notice this clue because I’m noticing the clue displayed in the picture. Even better is when your players look at the image and ask, “what’s that, a CHUD shield?” It can add a layer of immersion to the game experience and give you the GM more to work with. You may have added a red herring if you like or better yet it may help get the PCs back on the track of the plot.
- Can help when you don’t have a full table of players.
 - Full games provide the best experience because everyone at the table contributes in varying degrees at different times and a degree of synergy builds between the players and the GM. Each person doesn’t have to be the sole fountain of correct ideas and others can help reality check. Conversely, when you only have a couple of players it can be a lot more work for the players and the GM and the GM can feel overwhelmed trying to fill in the gap that more players would have filled in. Having some media takes some of the pressure off of you and it can help stimulate ideas for the players as the intended atmosphere can be communicated with less ambiguity. Instead of, “I thought the area was supposed to be safe.” you have a picture of a clearly unsafe, crumbling structure.

- An entertaining way to interact with the media that you are a fan of:
 - Taking a storyline or PC you really like and building on it and using the images that you liked so much when you first watched or read the media. Like how did the Ents know how to destroy the dam in the War of the Ring? Maybe because your gaming party has a dwarf that could educate them on weak points of the fortress. And maybe you'll fix the things you didn't like about it. Like I never cared much for Orks so I never ran Orks in my Dark Heresy games. They basically didn't exist in my version of 40k.
 - You can introduce others to what you liked about your subject matter (like 40k or Shadowrun, or Neo-Tokyo anime) in a way that is entertaining for you and interactive for them.
 - Maybe it's the slightly more acceptable form of pseudo fan fiction. At least in my social circle. Suddenly it's OK that I'm writing a plot involving Sabine Wren because it's for the Star Wars Edge of the Empire game, not because I'm a lovesick fanboy.
- *Keep it cool. Don't sell it! Don't market with it if these images and audio are not yours. Be cool!*

Audio Content

- 16,000 BBC wav files <http://bbcsfx.acropolis.org.uk/>
- Occult audio tracks on UbuWeb <http://ubu.com/sound/occult.html?fbclid=IwAR0xovPX44rt8AdOhqT3jNvJS6IFiH3r6kULmQqltq6sWNJSqVNhyqLU3v4>
- ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response) YouTube videos for ambient noise of about any kind. Abandoned Fallout bunkers to medieval villages at night, to repair garages, to Millenium Falcon noise. This can really draw your players into the scene.
 - Think of seeing a small town with people being active or laughing off screen, "cool we can recover here!"
 - Think of the same small town with people crying off screen, "uh oh, keep your guard up."
- 501st legion provides StormTrooper assorted voice recordings on YouTube. Nothing like the door opening and you have a Stormtrooper asking for identification.
- **ALSO THESE PAST FOUR THINGS ARE GREAT FOR AUDIO ONLY** Even if you don't use images just audio only can be helpful establishing a scene.
- What about setting the mood with background/ ambient music not sound effects? For sure that works and that's why it's created. I don't use background music though because:
 - It can be/ will be confusing for players to know what is a sound effect for their character and what is a mood setting piece for the player.
 - You may get repeated questions, "is this music playing in the dungeon?" Which is a fair question for a player but sort of annoying for the game experience to have to continually separate out the differences if you are also using sound effects.

- I recommend using a separate speaker from your laptop so you can point the sound toward the players. Rooms for games at conventions tend to swallow sound or throw it to the wrong place.
- If you are in a room with other games being run, I recommend using no more than a USB powered device which is about 1 to 2 amps. If you start getting into battery powered or AC powered devices it will be disruptive to other tables. It's possible a USB powered device won't be loud enough and some/all of the audio is lost but at that point the room is too loud in general for the sound effects to be effective and rather than fight that, I would just bail. The images will still work.
- If you have your own room or it's your home game, consider a subwoofer. Deep base for those tense moments is always good.
- Also, by NOT using a battery powered device it's one less thing you have to worry about keeping charged. And after a couple of days at the convention it's funny how the charge-up checklist ends up disregarded. With a USB powered device as long as my laptop is running I have audio.
- Other people have used an iPod or their phone with a speaker to run audio.

Image/ Video Content

- I recommend staying away from graphic images of real life.
 - No one's preference is seeing some real world suffering when they're trying to escape a bit and play a game. There are a ton of movie captures available out there that will represent the same thing.
 - That said I've used newscasts, CNN whale attack, MK Ultra Congressional Hearings, CNN Dr Sanjay Gupta commenting on Psychedelic therapies.
 - How about instead of searching radiation burns google radiation burn makeup?
- Recognizable movie images can accomplish your goal even if your preference is that the image is not associated to a particular movie/ TV Show. I think of this every time I show a Bladerunner image in 40k. Everyone knows it's from Bladerunner which maybe isn't the actual game we're playing but it still does a good job of conveying a dystopian city at a particular technology level.
- When displaying your image or video, consider other interesting ways to present it besides just a full screen view.
 - Video could be displayed within an image of a TV or military style monitor or datapad.
 - VCR tape MK Ultra hearings played within an image of an old TV/VCR combo.
 - The target image photograph is displayed with a group of photographs that are casually placed on a cluttered desktop.
- Video concerns:
 - At a convention be prepared to be in a room with too much noise to properly hear your audio for the video. You may have to summarize the audio for the players.
 - Newscast video

- Be mindful of the length of the video. Two minutes can seem like a really long time at a game table. Especially when it's expository background info in nature.
- Be aware that some people will simply not pay attention or follow along closely to your content. You may have to summarize the content to keep everyone up to speed.
- Consider a still image with ambient sound effects vs an image that quickly vanishes and can be too easily missed.
 - People like to comment to their friends about what they're seeing and may miss an element in a video, i.e. The ghoul running off the screen which out of two game groups of 6+ people only one person actually saw.
- Cool Things available with electronic media
 - Fake Twitter messages from the president!
 - Cosplay images explosion for your NPCs and PCs! I love supporting these creative folks!
 - Jerry the Young Rebel contact (The doors open and you see [this guy...](#))
 - Line Capt Gerberius Clanerel ([Do you even hesitate to shoot him, aim for the mustache?](#))
 - Pocahontas inspired Mandalorian armor with and without helmet
 - AND THEN staged cosplay! [Awesome photoshoots!](#)
 - Sure maybe the costume doesn't look like the movie or the character or maybe it's just plain weird but that makes it easier for it to be YOUR unique NPC!
 - Genderbent is awesome, now I have my female ranger! [My dwarven femme fatale!](#)
 - Leverage awesome, carefully crafted, handmade props that you didn't have to make! Arcane books, spaceships, steampunk era gadgets, exotic swords.
 - You now have the option to also use awesome props to also throw your players off the track if you like. Everyone knows if you have an awesome prop sitting on the game table it's going to be used in the game otherwise why would the GM put in all of the time and energy? But what if there are a dozen different individual swords. They all look really cool but which one is the one that has the fated destiny?
 - You can size any image how you like. So two action figures of different sizes can now be displayed as the relative size you want. Is your 25mm figure of Sauron smaller than your action figure of Gimli? Easy to resize on the screen. A matchbox car can be the size of a house if you like.
 - Your players can't wreck your awesome props or carefully painted miniatures!
 - Thanks to Rob for rubbing the face off of my RAFM Call of Cthulhu miniature.
 - Do your props turn out as good as the ones you see on the internet? Have no fear! Just use theirs!
 - You can have as many of one type of miniature as you want with copy and paste.

- A great GM that watches eBay for sales of multiple minis and buys out the lot. He also travels with a pelican case the size of a coffin.
- Do you have the time and eyesight to paint three dozen alien monsters? Paint one and take a picture! Or use the pro-painted one you found on the internet and copy and paste!
- And where do you store all of that physical stuff? Physically, my digital stormtrooper army takes up nothing.
- Awesome 3D Floor plans. Many apartments and houses now have 3D floorplans online which can make a great map for your players with very little effort from you. Beats the stained vinyl map and blue/green fingers and the time to draw it all out every time.
- Utilizing a great map making program but the maps are too expensive to take to Staples to print out in color for 25mm. And sizing is always a challenge. What if the players never even end up going to the location and you spent \$30+ to print it? Do you laminate the color maps because they were so expensive now adding even more expense?

Hazards and Worst Case Scenario Considerations

- Stress test with a real or mock session. Trying to run an iMovie on a Windows machine can fail on you.
- You will become obsessed with recording cool images in movies and constant pausing while watching DVDs will annoy fellow viewers.
- You may begin doing voice overs of snagged movie clips with varying results and consuming huge blocks of time for little payoff.
- You may not be organizing your images well so you can find them again. Spend some time deciding on a good way to organize. Maybe by particular game or category of image.
- Don't forget your power cable! Or your laptop! Keeping everything in one bag is the best option. When you are finished using your gear put it back into your game bag for storage.
- Firstly, consider that all or part of your equipment may fail at the actual game and then what is the subsequent impact on your game? How to mitigate:
 - So far I haven't had a system failure. BUT That said:
 - I have a booklet hard copy of every session adventure usually runs 20-28 pages in the booklet format. I practice writing my descriptions to match the pictures and sounds I'm exhibiting so I can run the game without any technology.
 - Don't rely on a PDF rulebook for everything, be rules competent before deciding to run your game and/or consider including specific, critical rules within your hard copy.
 - Consider having a hard copy GM screen or reference doc so you have the required charts and tables.
- Consider that you may not have an internet connection due to lack of wifi or lack of signal. Best not to count on internet or cloud access outside of home.

- Test your equipment day prior or day of for that massive service pack update that decides to install the day of the convention, i.e. Grandcon 2018 and my online Star Wars game.
- Ugh! No outlets! Or WTH no extension cords allowed?! Even if extension cords are allowed they always seemed to get kicked out of the wall anyway. There was only one outlet in my OFFICE/ MEETING room with five game tables at the JW at Gen Con 2018. For two of my games I was not scheduled to run near the outlet. I was able to have some tables switch with me because they were my friends so I could be closer to the outlet. It's not a good feeling to wonder if it's going to be a problem for you or not.
- The solution? Consider extra battery packs (Mophie makes a bunch for phones, tablets and laptops) or a Lithium Ion portable battery backup, the kind typically used for camping, will have sufficient power for your laptop and monitor.

Minimal hardware Setup and Recommended hardware Setup

- Minimal could be a tablet with some images or a chromebook laptop.
 - Tablet is great if you have a small table and it's easy for the other players to see what you're doing. I used this method at Dungeons and Dark Arts, a local brew pub convention where my assigned table was a hi-top bar table.
 - My preferred set up is an i7 laptop computer with 8gb RAM.
- Running video and a digital tabletop consider an i5 or i7 powered laptop with separate 20 inch monitor if displayed on table or 26+ if the monitor is displayed off table. Stress test your actual equipment with your local group or online. At one point I used an Ideapad with an atom processor and the multi-layered maps took minutes to load. I should have managed my images to be within the capabilities of that low-powered machine but because I didn't have an issue with the desktop I sort of lost track of the possible performance issues.
- Do you just clone your desktop or do you extend your desktop?
 - **Clone Pros:** You can easily tell what you are displaying to your players. It's simple.
 - **Clone Cons:** Changing programs or setting up things can take players out of the moment.
 - **Extend Pros:** You can stage things for your players ahead of time. You don't have to turn off the external monitor if you want to make a bunch of desktop changes.
 - **Extend Cons:** More complicated. You may not realize your presentation isn't displaying as you expect, i.e. map size may be off the bottom or side of the player's monitor.
- Using just the laptop screen vs. adding a portable external laptop monitor vs. adding a PC monitor.
 - I've put a laptop on a rotating swivel plate and suggest it as a possible choice for larger laptops with screens 15 inches or larger.
 - There are portable external laptop monitor that are operated by a USB connection to the laptop. The portable monitor won't be as large as a PC monitor

(somewhere like 16 inches) but is very convenient and if you are concerned about outlets this could be powered suitably with laptop battery backups. Make sure you double check the resolution.

- A 20 inch monitor is about as big as you want to put on a standard gaming table itself and likely you would want to modify the stand to sit lower or it could block your face. Off table your concerns would be how close to the other tables are you and what type of stand do you need and general transportation to the site.
- Say, what about a projector!? I could display stuff on the whole wall and it's a small form factor to carry! I tried this once. Great idea except that you would need to be sure where your assigned table is placed (middle of the room placement is worst) or what the lighting conditions are because your images will get washed out. Most conventions won't guarantee specific placements without special arrangements that may be costly. Maybe the people running games in the room won't want to dim the lights because he has his custom designed 12 player Settlers of Catan game he wants to showcase. True story from that one time I tried a projector. And of course, crazy hotel wallpaper or dark colored wall paint can make your display look bad.
- Plan on a display at 1366 x 768 (720p) or 1600 x 900 (1080p) if you are using a 20 inch or smaller monitor for a digital table top. Lower resolutions like 800 x 600 can make your map play area too small and medium ranges on your map will probably not be effectively displayed, i.e., they'll be off the map. You'll also have more of the TV framing than a wide screen framing. That said I started my tech journey with 800 x 600 resolution and didn't have complaints. I just worked within my limitations. Lots of close combat encounters and small rooms for the characters to explore.
- Consider NOT having rechargeable accessories, like a speaker or mouse. It can be hard to keep up on the charging schedule to keep it operational over a multi-day convention.
- Consider keeping your set up more simple rather than more complicated, i.e. using your phone as a remote control to advance your slides because maybe for whatever reason day of, it won't work. You could have radio interference in the room that may mess up your connection.
- Once again, I recommend don't rely on wi-fi. You may not have wifi or it's throttled or if you do actually have a great signal, Windows may start to download a giant critical update because you forgot to change those settings for the con. This very thing has happened twice now when I started to run a convention game and an online game.

How to Organize your images and your audio and your scenario and Everything

- So now you have a bunch of images, audio files, and video but how do you go through your game and control what you want to exhibit? Maybe something like Photo Gallery but what about the audio?
- Years ago I accidentally became my department's resource for PowerPoint because while I was looking for something that would connect my gaming images to specific wav files it turned out PowerPoint enabled that. Messing around with animations and getting the timing correct for images and sound effects and suddenly I could answer anyone's PPT question at work. I was the PowerPoint Czar because I was goofing around with

game stuff! A free version of PowerPoint might be WPS Office Presentation. Apple people version is Keynote.

- I have a hard copy with detailed descriptions with certain written sections underlined to indicate when I need to advance my PowerPoint. I chose the underline as the signal as I read a writing article suggesting that seeing an under-line causes your brain to stop at the underlined word. Therefore, in my mind that made it a good indicator to advance the slide and it has worked since.
 - You could also just display the image in a default program and then play the sound in another default program but keeping track of both of these things and exhibiting them is challenging and then you have to do it all over again for the next scene.
 - For a tablet where I didn't have a good software display option I put my images in numerical order in the folder by naming the files 1,2,3,4, etc.
- Digital Tabletop/ Battle map, I use EpicTable which has a player screen that can be displayed on another monitor. That said anything that can display layers could work as a battle map.
 - The bottom layer is your terrain map and on top you display your PC/NPC tokens. You can decide to add movable objects like cars or crates as well.
 - Since this style of map would not necessarily be player interactive you may want to make a pointer dot token to help determine what location the GM or the player is talking about. So, if the players states they want to be by the tree, you can ask, "this tree?" and move the red dot "or this tree?" and move the dot again.

How to Gather and Fix Everything

- Snagging images from the internet as easy as save image
- Snagging images from Netflix/ DVDs
 - Use Snipping Tool and be patient while the Netflix video controls disappear.
 - Just take a picture of your TV screen. With a little practice this can work but I suggest blu-ray/ 4k resolution images.
- A frustrating thing was finding a great image of a dark cave or an old forest road but it would always have a smiling well adjusted, attractive person standing in the image which did not fit my goal of creating dreadful horror. Then I discovered InPaint, a free/cheap tool that can easily remove small imperfections, like happiness. Even if the fix isn't 100% it will be good enough that your players won't be distracted by it vs the smiling granny next to the ancient shrine. This also is another reason to keep the resolution to 1600 x 900, lower resolution favors hasty fixes.
- I used to look for wav files specifically but now I start with YouTube videos.
 - Using a YouTube Downloader to take just the MP3 and chop it up with EX Studio. (For me I have to run it in safe mode)
 - Mining YouTube for black mass audio and haunted house sounds.
 - The dog barking doesn't sound mean enough? EX Studio; lowering the pitch and slowing the audio to make it sound bigger and slowing the audio adds gravitas.

- YouTube Downloader can grab the subject matter video for you and many times it will be edited to a good length for you already.

But Doesn't it become too Empty with just a monitor?

- So now you have this scaled down set up and maybe to you it can look a little sterile or empty. Less like we're interacting and more like I'm supposed to sit back and watch something. To help with this transition, I like to have a map or some other piece of descriptive artwork for the table itself that can be rolled up easy. Vivyx makes affordable, durable full color vinyl signs for businesses. They print up to 5' x 12' so when you want something that fits on a table it costs you about \$16 with shipping. First thing I did was print out the Star Wars FFG galaxy map and it looks awesome. Also at Gen Con I found a rawhide map of Middle Earth for my The One Ring game. I love the back and forth reference from the monitor back to the real world game table to keep it interactive. and for Cthulhu I printed the poster image of the tentacles across the old world maps through Vivyx again. Now in that case it's not a map but some descriptive imagery that brings the theme of the game through. The Vivyx vinyl maps have a linen texture to it that makes it look a little more interesting and durable. This provides a more tactile presentation and fills the table space in a way that it can also still be functional as a surface. I store these flat when not in use but they flatten pretty easily at the table after being rolled up.

Transportation- But You Do Still Have to Carry it!

- Less to carry for what you can deliver. You can have an endless dungeon with thousands of unique figures. You can carry an entire multiverse in a messenger bag.
 - Or when you're running later to your game session you can have your top heavy bungee corded roller tote tip over and Henry the Red's army spill out into the street, while your battlemat unrolls across the sidewalk in front of Lucas Oil Stadium on opening day. Luckily curious people wearing Peyton Manning jerseys (he was with the Colts then) will come over to help you put everything back together.
 - Your dungeon exit can suddenly appear around the next bend because of time constraints and the players won't notice or feel cheated or that they did something wrong.
 - But what if I own a ton of Dwarven Forge stuff! No worries, I suggest you prepare to use it. You could build your dwarven forge sections in the comfort of your home and display the sections electronically at the convention. You can now have multiple levels easily since they're now digital. You could incorporate images suggesting puzzles and traps and other interactive things very seamlessly. Best of both worlds and you don't have to haul all of your pieces to the convention and try to figure out how to set it all up with the space/time available. And you don't have to store all of it with the rest of your roommates in the tiny JW Marriott rooms.
- Carrying all your gear or adding a cart

- My preference is carrying everything over the shoulder messenger bag style keeping both hands free for opening and closing doors and waving to friends and being able to wash both hands in the bathroom.
- Discontinued Maxpedition Gleneagle messenger bag- still available at Amazon.
- Aerostitch messenger bags and other Bike Messenger bags and then you can yell at cars like Puck from MTV Real World: San Francisco.
- Arco Video makes great, expensive cases in a bunch of configurations.
- Dufflebags or large backpacks
- Foldable luggage carts, hard to get through the exhibitor's hall. Not great on escalators and even worse if the escalator breaks down. Then you have to find elevators everywhere you go. And where do you park your gear when you have to go to the restroom?
- Making sure your electrical gear is well protected. You can make a padded sleeve for your monitor and the folks at your local sewing/fabric supply shop will help you select fabrics. Consider craft foam sheets and different thicknesses for interior padding. Consider integrating a rigid material into your sleeve like plexiglass (cheap) for covering the screen area.

Questions?