From the Desk of The Angry GM

To: The Game Master
Re: Taking Action

Do you want your players to take clear, concise, decisive action? If you're not a professional voice actor doing a D&D performance on YouTube — or you don't dream of becoming one — then I assume the answer's a resounding 'yes.' Well, you've got to make that happen. Train them to Take Action right and smack them hard when they Take Action wrong.

For legal reasons, I don't advise you to actually smack your players.

Don't Fill in the Blanks

If you don't force your players to say, "I want to X by Y using Z" every time, they won't learn. If they leave something out, make them fill it in. If a player says, "I want to attack the ogre," you say, "oh yeah? With what?" If a player says, "I break the lock" or "I pick the lock," you say, "with what? Your bare hands?" If a player says, "I persuade the guard," you say, "how? What's your argument? Are you just saying 'please' really, really hard?" If the players all blurt out, "we go through the door," you say, "okay? But who's going through first? Weapons readied? What weapons? Who's next?" And so on. They won't learn if you don't teach them.

Don't Make the Players Do More

Players have one job. To tell you, clearly and concisely, what they're trying to accomplish, how they're trying to accomplish it, and what tools and resources they're using to accomplish it. That's it. Don't make them spin elaborate descriptive prose. Don't make them speak as their characters would. And don't give prosaic thespians any extra special bonuses for being prosaic thespians. No advantage, no extra experience points, no nothing.

Stop the Players from Doing More

Some players don't need you encouraging them. They'll put on a big damn performance for every action. Flowery descriptions, bad accents, inner monologue made outer. Performance role-play like that is great for YouTube content, but it sucks for team-based games about adventurers overcoming challenges by interacting with each other and the world. It's a series of speeches, not interactive play. Put the kibosh on it. Interrupt your performers and ask them what they're doing, how, and with what. And leave it at that. If a player finds that restrictive, let them go launch a Twitch channel and a Patreon. Tell them Angry says "good f$%&ing luck!"

Reward Interaction

Get the players thinking about their allies and the world by rewarding interaction and teamwork above all else. If the players use the environment to solve problems, if they use information they've discovered to overcome challenges, and if they look for ways to work together, give them a boost. And make sure they see it. Tell them when you reduce a DC because they're using the guard's fear as leverage. Give them advantage for using the broken iron bar as a makeshift prybar.

Don't Answer Questions About the Rules

If a player asks you about the rules, they've got an ulterior motive and you've got to dig for it. Never make a ruling until you know exactly what you're ruling on. Ask "why do you want to know that? What are you trying to accomplish? What's your goal here? What are you thinking?" Keep asking questions until you pry an action declaration — or something close — out of the player. Then rule on that. Make the players work hard to get an answer about the rules. No matter how innocent or straightforward the question seems to be. The goal's to get the players to think about the world, not the game's rules.

Earn Your Players' Trust

The players have to trust you. Not to be fair and objective. Not to know to rules. They have to trust you to work with them. They've got to believe that when they're trying to accomplish something, you'll try to make it happen. That doesn't mean you let them get away with anything; it's okay to tell the players something's impossible. And it doesn't mean you've got to give them all the answers; it's okay to tell them they've got to figure something out or find an in-world resource. You just want your players to treat you like the first, best source of information they've got access to.

Always give your players the benefit of the doubt. If something went unsaid or forgotten — if something wasn't clear — assume the players' best intentions. Don't be a gotcha GM. If the PCs are in hostile territory, assume they're ready for a fight. Even if they forget to say it and you forget to ask. If a player doesn't see an opportunity attack coming, don't laugh and throw an attack roll at his head. Warn him.

Always tell your players the stakes, the risks, the costs, and the consequences unless you have a really good reason not to. A damned good reason. A really, amazingly damned good reason. And always give your players a chance to back out once you tell them the risks.

Practice this:

"If you do X, you're risking Y; are you okay with that?"

Make that your catchphrase.

If a player attempts the impossible, tell them it's impossible. Say, "that won't work." Better still, say, "that won't work; but what's your goal? Maybe there's a way to do it." Don't just say, "you fail." Or worse, say, "roll a die; you fail! Ha!"

And that's how you get your players to Take Action properly. Next week, I'll tell you how to get them to actually Portray Characters.

THE ANGRY GM