

PBEM: by David Hatch

What is a PBEM?

PBEM or 'Play By E-Mail' describes any game which is being played by way of electronic mail. For example, you can play chess by E-Mail, taking turns to exchange moves with your opponent in alternate mail messages. Many games are designed to be played by email and many boardgames and wargames can be modified to allow it.

This guide is specifically aimed at people who are interested in playing WFRP via e-mail, but most of the content would be equally valid for other PBEM games.

A PBEM can easily become the most frustrating gaming experience you have ever suffered, or one of the most rewarding. The key to success is understanding both its limitations and its advantages, and at the same time recognising just how much effort is involved in exploiting them. I have seen many PBEM games start with a flourish only to founder very quickly as the full impact of what is involved in running one becomes apparent to the GM.

The best advice I can give to anyone thinking of running a PBEM game is to read through this guide first, and then ask yourself.

Am I sure I want to do this?

Trying to dissuade you from running a PBEM might seem an odd way to begin a guide, but it's not fair on you or your players to rush ahead only to find that it isn't as easy as you expected and to end up having to drop the game soon after it has begun.

If after reading this guide you are still keen to go ahead then hopefully it will help make your game even more rewarding for you and your players.

The Pro's and Con's

The following table provides a quick summary of the main benefits and pitfalls of PBEM gaming.

The advantages of PBEM

1. It's Global

Perhaps the most important benefit of PBEM gaming is that there is no shortage of players. Literally anyone in the world can join the game as long as they have access to a computer and an email account.

2. It's Time Lite

For many people getting a group together round a table for an evening can be a problem. PBEM games have no such problems, players are able to chose a suitable time to read and respond to a GM Note and as long as the GM can spare the time every day or two to process the incoming mail then there is no need for everyone to be available at the same time.

3. Encourages Characterisation

A player who wants to embrace the full character of his role will find it much easier to do so in writing than trying to act in front of an audience.

4. **The Fog of War**
One problem with any round table game is that players tend to have far too much access to information. In a PBEM game the GM can restrict the information provided to any or all the players as much as he likes and so there is a lot of potential to enhance the challenges that players face during play.
5. **Plot Development**
In a tabletop game a GM really has to think on his feet and be able to react rapidly to any unexpected player decision. The situation is much easier in a PBEM game as the GM can afford to take the time to ponder the implications of a player's action and even construct a new plot around it if necessary.
6. **Plot Innovation**
Because of the nature of a PBEM game it is possible to work concepts into plots which would be very difficult to manage in a tabletop game. For example: It is quite easy to allow a group of PC's in a PBEM game to split up and go off alone to complete separate tasks. It is far easier than trying to manage four or five separate plot threads in real time during a round table game.
7. **It's a Casual Environment**
There are a great many people who would like to get involved in an RPG but cannot spare the time to commit an entire evening every week or month to do so. There are also a lot of people who are intrigued by roleplaying but are too shy, old, young or nervous to plunge cold turkey into a tabletop game with a bunch of people they have never met. A PBEM can provide a perfect opportunity to play or just try out a game without a major commitment or time or courage.

The disadvantages of PBEM

1. **It's slow.**
Nobody can claim that PBEM games are fast paced. The actual pace is determined partly by the GM, and partly by the players. But a PBEM is never going to be able to match that of a group of players and a GM sitting together round a table.
2. **It's not very sociable.**
If one of the reasons you play a game is to make new friends or meet with your mates then a PBEM can be disappointing. Drinking a beer whilst typing in a player response is just not the same as sitting round a table with six friends.
3. **It lacks dice.**
It is said that when Austrian Army Officers first heard of the new Kriegspiel being played by their Prussian counterparts they were very enthusiastic and put a lot of pressure on the Austrian government to introduce the game at their military academies. However, they quickly tired of it when they realised that the rules did not allow them to use dice to determine the outcomes. Players joining a PBEM may be equally disappointed as there is little one can do in practical terms to allow players to roll their own dice and for some this may take away a major part of the fun of playing. This issue is discussed in more detail later.
4. **Accurate location detail.**
One of the biggest challenges for a GM running a PBEM is making sure the players know exactly where their characters are standing and where everything else is in relation to them. In a round table game a GM can resort to quick sketch maps, the use of miniature figurines and even use the salt and pepper pot, if all else fails. But unless the PBEM game being played comes

with a purpose built electronic mapping system, the GM of a PBEM is left with nothing but words to describe where everything and everyone is located, and sometimes words are just not enough. Later on I will discuss ways to overcome this problem and some of the useful tools that can help.

Finding Players

If you were planning a tabletop game it's likely you would already have a group of players in mind. This is much less likely when planning a PBEM and the chances are you have already decided to run a game and are now looking for players to join it.

Players are the most important part of any game and to be a success the game has to match the expectations of its players. Unfortunately, what makes a good tabletop player does not necessarily make a good PBEM player, and players who enjoy a tabletop game don't always enjoy its PBEM equivalent.

A bored or frustrated player can be a major headache both for a GM and for the other players in the game and so finding and selecting the right players for your game can make the difference between it being a success or a failure.

The best way to attract players is to advertise your game on the appropriate forums. Some game sites actually have databases of players looking for games.

My own WFRP PBEM is still advertised on the WFRP Directory run by Glen Sharman (<http://wfrpdb.shargl.net/intro.php>) and has obtained a number of new players as a result.

I also used a simple online player application form on my sons WFRP website, which prospective players can fill in and submit.

Be prepared for a shock.

If you are used to tabletop games you probably expect it will be difficult to find new players. However, PBEM games frequently have the opposite problem.

With the whole world to choose from most PBEM games will rapidly find themselves with more people wanting to play than they can cope with, even after the most mediocre attempt at advertising.

My own game rapidly amassed a waiting list of 21 players, some having to wait months to get any sort of role.

- Think about how you will handle this situation if it does arise.
- How will you deal with an enquiry from someone wishing to play?
- How will you keep track of everyone who is waiting for a game?

My own approach was to ask everyone to complete a simple application form, either on-line or by email. The form only asked the following basic questions but made sure I had a consistent record for every prospective player.

PLAYER APPLICATION	
Name	
Age	

Gender
Country of Residence
Previous Roleplay Experience (if any)
*Fantasy Race Preferences (if any)
*Preferred Character Type
*Preferred Character Alignment
Your Email Address

*There were background notes to help applicants who had never played an RPG before to understand the questions.

Selecting Players

Be realistic, if you end up with a waiting list of 20+ people wanting to play your game, you are not going to be able to give them all a role. So, someone is going to have to be disappointed and you will have to make that choice.

The first stage of my selection process was to send every applicant a standard Player Briefing which explained how the game worked and gave some insight into what it was like to play.

The deliberate intention of this briefing was to give the applicant enough information to decide if they really wanted to play. If they did, then they were told to complete the application form and submit it.

Approximately, half the initial enquiries resulted in firm applications.

At this point it might seem tempting to generate 21 new PC's and stick them all in the game, but the extra administration this would create for you as GM would swamp the game. I soon found that I could only cope with about nine players and several of those had to be given roles which a tabletop game would have classed as NPC's.

The use of players to roleplay NPC's actually became a feature of my game and the term NPC quickly became reclassified as *Non-Permanent-Character*. Several players became specialised in NPC roles and ended up playing a whole series of different characters over the course of the scenario.

When a new character appeared in the plot then I would judge whether that character was suitable to be offered to one of the players on the waiting list.

The main criteria for deciding if a character was playable was how long it was likely to remain in play and how flexible its role was in the game. If a character appeared suitable then a Character Briefing Document was prepared and sent to the selected players.

I always considered how long someone had been waiting for a role, but at the same time those with strong preferences for specific roles were given a chance to play those roles if a suitable character became available.

Finally, because most roles arose quite suddenly and had to be filled quickly to avoid delays in play I usually offered the same role to several players on the understanding that the first player to reply got it. This meant that I could normally fill a role within 48 hours and delays in the game were minimised.

Lurkers

One way of priming new players is to allow them to become lurkers.

I had several lurkers in my game. These were people who received copies of the Game Journal but didn't take an active role in the game. The most notable claimed to be a University professor doing a study on the importance of roleplay amongst young adults.

Be aware however that lurkers are gaining a lot more than just an insight into the way the game is played. They are also gaining a lot of insight into the plot, its characters and their personal motivations. This could give them a huge advantage if they subsequently join the game in a character role themselves and so care needs to be taken over who should be allowed to lurk and what information you let them read.

The big benefit of lurking is that the potential player gets a real feel for how your game works, compared to other PBEM games and what it will be like if he joins.

Guest Appearances

If lurking for a few game turns doesn't put them off, the next stage is to offer them a small NPC role of limited duration just to let them stretch their legs and give you some real measure of how they will perform under fire. Innkeepers, Tavern Wenches, Street Brats and Watchmen are all good candidates for this sort of test.

This has the added advantage of keeping the PC's on their toes as they never really know if the NPC they are talking to is another player or not, or indeed what the NPC might suddenly decide to do.

These guest appearances have been a source of some considerable amusement both for myself and the other players but can be a problem if they get out of control.

There is always the risk that a player controlled NPC may suddenly 'go rogue' because the player decides the task it has been given is too limited. Sometimes, the results are amusing on other occasions they can be very disruptive. Needless to say the guest player takes a risk when he decides to deviate from the plot. The worst case scenario being that he causes just enough mayhem to ensure he never gets a more permanent role in the game.

Nevertheless, some guest appearances have developed into full blown NPC roles as the players proved to be so good that their characters became an integral part of the plot. Likewise, one NPC who had quite a limited role became so involved in the game and so loved by his player that he was given the chance to join the adventure party as a full PC.

Which is the main reason for using this technique in the first place.

What to look for?

In my experience, the best PBEM players are frustrated story writers.

These are the sort of players who are constantly looking for ways to add interesting ideas and colour to the story unfolding around them and see their characters as a part of that story rather than merely an extension of their own personal ambition.

The worst players tend to be those who consider the game to be nothing more than a backdrop upon which they must impose their personal mark. This is the sort of player who will deliberately start a bar-room brawl just because he is bored and wants some action.

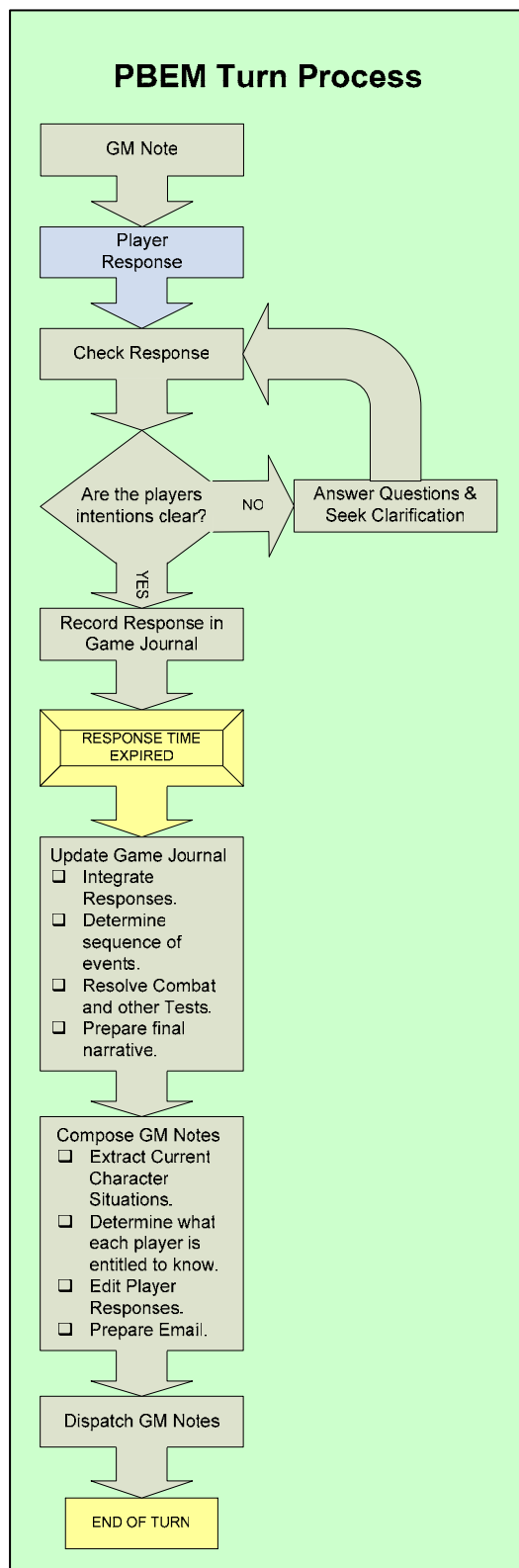
Regretfully, PBEM games are just too slow paced to suit this sort of power-gamer and boredom often leads to disruptive behaviour. The fallout from such activities can take weeks of game time to resolve and will completely derail a plot if they occur repeatedly.

Dealing with this during play can be tricky, but if all else fails, be prepared to use in game elements like the City Watch to remove the character from active play and thus the player from the game.

The Overall Process

Before delving into the detail I want to spend a few minutes considering the overall process of managing a PBEM game.

In a tabletop game, where the players and GM are face to face, and able to talk to each other the flow of play is largely a matter of interrogation and negotiation.



Typical Tabletop RPG Turn Process

- *The GM presents the players with information.*
- *The players interrogate the GM and each other until they are satisfied they understand what they have been told and have decided on their respective character responses,*
- *And then the game moves on to resolve their actions.*

A PBEM game is different in that neither the players nor the GM are able to talk directly to each other and so a natural flow based upon direct dialogue between the GM and players is not practical.

Instead the flow of a PBEM game is driven by a fixed process cycle which determines both the sequence and the timing of the events which have to take place to complete one period of play.

“A PBEM must be driven by a fixed process cycle which determines both the sequence and the timing of the events that make up one turn of play.”

In this respect a PBEM game has more in common with tabletop wargaming than tabletop RPG's. Typically the Umpire of a tabletop wargame will operate to a fixed turn sequence which the players must complete within a certain time limit for

each Turn or Bound.

The diagram above depicts the schedule of activities which make up a Turn for a typical PBEM game.

Lets look at the steps of this process in more detail

GM Notes

For the purpose of this article a GM Note (Game Masters Note) is an official message sent by the GM to the player informing him of the situation his character at the start of each new turn.

It's worth highlighting the importance of GM Notes by giving them a distinctive prefix in their subject line.

It's important that GM Notes are kept distinct from any other Email that the GM sends to the players because they also act as a warning to the player that the clock is now ticking and that the player only has a limited time to respond. I always begin the subject line of my GM Notes with the letters 'GM' just to make it clear that this is an official email from me in my role as GM.

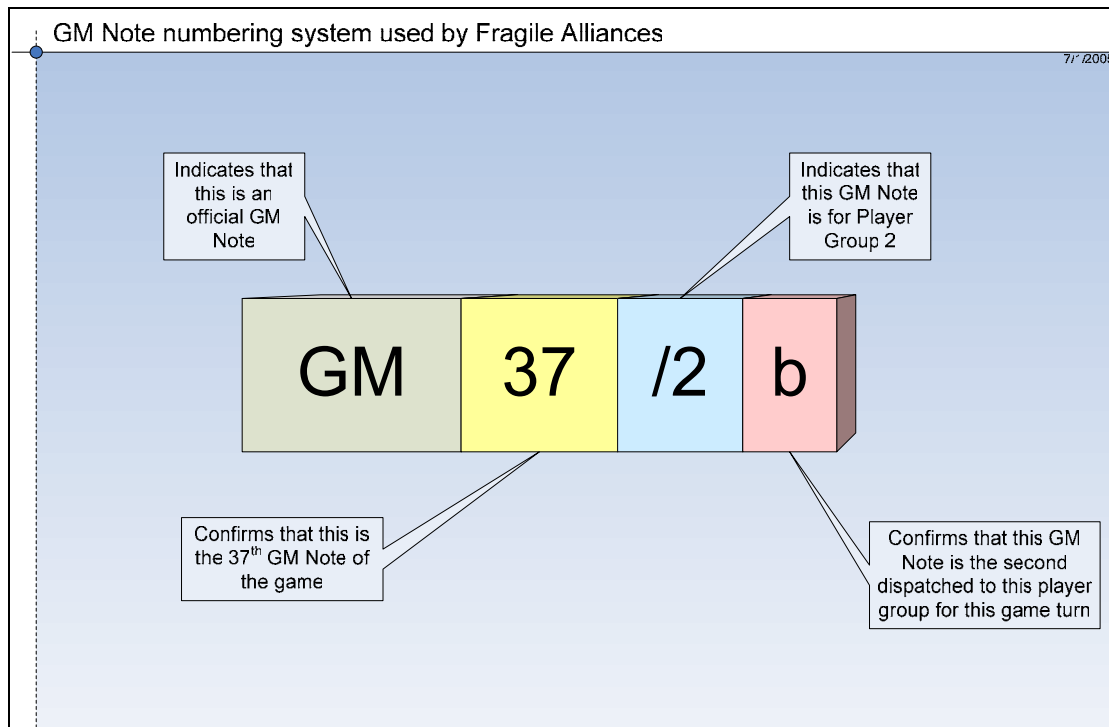
It's a good idea to number your GM notes. You might think that this is a bit bureaucratic but it actually avoids a lot of potential confusion.

It's a good idea to number your GM notes.

- Firstly, it means that if a GM Note goes missing (which does happen) then the player can see that there is a gap in the sequence and can request a duplicate copy of the missing note.
- Secondly, it helps no end when collating player responses if their reply includes the number of the GM Note they are answering.
- Thirdly, because if you are running an international game you cannot rely upon the time that a message was sent to determine its sequence. Giving your GM Notes a number provides a more reliable means of sorting messages into the correct chronological order.
- Finally, the GM Note number acts as a direct cross-reference with the appropriate section of your Game Journal. making it very easy to track between your Email folder and your journal if you need to clarify something later. (More on Game Journals later)

My own numbering system consists of a sequential number followed by a PC group suffix. The PC group suffix merely identifies the group of PC's that the note was sent to and is sometimes useful in collating the replies. The alphabetic suffix on the end

allows me to break a Turn down into number of sub-turns (or phases) in situations like combat when play is being conducted at a more detailed level.



So, the subject line from one of my GM Notes might begin GM37/2b, indicating that this email is the official GM Note for the Phase b of Game Turn 37 for PC group 2.

Player Responses

After a while you will get used to the pattern and style of response you can expect from each of your players.

Remember, if you are running an international game then differences in global time zones will mean that no matter when you send your GM Notes some players will be at work, whilst

others will be asleep. So, it's unreasonable to expect an instant response from everyone. It is also unfair to use the speed of response to determine any sort of initiative or reaction sequence.

MARTIN	Almost instant one line reply, knee-jerk response, little thought to 'what if' options.
ANN	Rarely checks her Email, long delays in response, normally queries GM Note content before deciding what to do. Does not reply at all if she does not have any new instructions for her character but frequently brilliant when she does. A casual player.
ALAN	Very detailed responses covering every possible 'what if' option and including detailed insights into what his character is thinking

If you use an Email filter remember to ensure that game Emails are allowed through.

It sounds obvious but its easy to forget to update your Email filter, especially when new players join during a game.

I tried using a universal filter that allowed any Email through with 'GM' in the subject line but found that players could not be relied upon to use the Reply button when responding to GM Notes and so after losing a few responses I decided the only sure way was to add each players Email address to my friends list.

Set message rules that automatically files game replies to your game email folder.

If your Email client includes message rules it is also worth setting one up that automatically files incoming messages from players into a special

PBEM mail folder so they do not get lost amongst your personal and junk mail.

Make sure all your incoming mail is scanned for virus infections.

Obvious advice, but worth repeating anyway. You are going to be receiving a lot more mail, some of it with

attachments. So, make sure your PC is protected.

Check Responses

Check each player response as soon as you can even though you may have no intention of doing anything with it until the rest have arrived.

Occasionally a player doesn't understand something in a GM Note or wants to ask for more information, so check the content of every reply as soon as possible and ensure it makes sense.

Sometimes players completely misunderstand and come up with a plan of action that is completely impossible.

Sometimes players completely misunderstand the content of a GM Note and come up with a plan of action that is completely impossible.

Even with a 48 hour turn delay there is not much time to deal with these issues and so the sooner you can identify them the better.

Take the following example which occurred during the 72nd game turn of Fragile Alliances.

GM:GM72/2b Rats! Wadyer do that fer?"....Poppy gives the pile of empty crates a vicious shove sending them clattering across the dockside. "Rats! Wadyer do that fer?" exclaims Scout as they both duck back down behind the remainder of the pile. But Poppy is already moving quick and low heading for the gangplank leading to the nearest barge and Scout has no choice but to scurry nervously after her.

IAN (Poppy): Re: GM72/2b Damn! No-one's coming over! I get my sling out and make ready to distract the dockers once I'm on the boat.

GM: Hi Ian, Actually its too early to say whether anyone will come over to investigate the crash. Remember you are dealing with other players so I have to let them decide what they will do when their characters hear the sudden noise. So, far I've had two replies and neither Gus nor Wolf are planning to come over and investigate but I am still waiting for replies from several other players. The best idea is to let me know what you want to do if someone does come over and what to do if they don't.

IAN (Poppy) : If no-one comes over, I fire my sling at the feet of the nearest adult (don't want to harm them). If they do, I give them a story along the lines of "Sorry Mister, I knocked over your crates. It was on'y an accident, 'n' my ma's wanting me home soon.

In the above example Ian had assumed that as the GM Note did not indicate that his deliberate distraction had worked then it must have failed. In fact all the other players had only been notified of the clattering of crates at the same time as he had and so I was still waiting to see if it had provoked any response. A quick Email clarified this for Ian and allowed him to send a slightly modified response.

Recording Responses in a Game Journal

Having read an incoming player response and confirmed that it makes sense and does not include any questions your need to deal with immediately, I suggest that you copy and paste its entire content into a Game Journal.

Copying player responses into a game journal makes it easier to collate them and prepare your next GM Note.

The Game Journal for Fragile Alliances is simply a Word document. It is structured so that the subject line of each outgoing GM Note is a heading within the journal and as players respond to that GM Note I copy their replies into the journal under the next GM Notes heading.

The wording of the next GM Note will eventually be composed from the combined content of all the player responses copied into that section of the journal.

The following diagram shows the relationship between the Game Journal and the Email in the Game Email Folder.

The wording of each outgoing GM Note is composed and finalised in the Game Journal before being copied into an outgoing Email and modified for each player. The Game Journal therefore retains the master copy of each outgoing GM Note and ensures continuity, especially if some players were not entitled to receive the full information it contained.

Once the GM Notes are dispatched a new heading is added to the Game Journal and as the player responses arrive they are checked and copied unchanged into the Game Journal under the new heading ready to form part of the next GM Note.

Once all player responses have been received, the content which has been copied from them into the Game Journal is edited to form the narrative of the next GM Note and the cycle begins again.

Response Time

To keep a PBEM game moving it is important to set a limit on the time you will allow for a player to respond.

For Fragile Alliances this response time was set at 48 hours.

48 hours might seem a long time as it means that you will only be able to complete three game turns per week but because of international time zones anything up to 12 hours could elapse before a player actually reads an incoming GM Note and a further 12 hours can be lost before you read their response.

However, if you find that 3 hours after sending a GM Note every player has replied then there is no reason to wait and the next turn can begin immediately.

Updating the Game Journal

Once all the player responses have been received, or the deadline has expired, and everything has been copied into the Game Journal the next phase is to update the journal and compose the narrative which describes the sequence of events that will occur during the next game turn.

This requires a lot of skill and imagination on the part of the GM. The basic problem is that every player has written what he wants his character to do next turn without knowing what the other players have decided for their characters.

This can create tricky problems particularly if the consequences could be quite serious for one or more of the characters involved. The approach to this task needs to be systematic and thorough but can also be quite fun and was my favourite part of the process.

It basically involves four steps each of which has an impact upon the other three.

- Integrate the responses.
- Determine sequence of events.
- Resolve combat and other tests.
- Prepare final narrative.

The challenge is to integrate the responses of the players so that the activity which happens during the next Game Turn flows in a logical sequence and every player is satisfied that his character has at least attempted to do what they wanted.

For example, if Steven's Player Response said 'Toric hands Falco a tankard of ale.' and Martin's Player Response said 'Falco will join Waynn at the table where the dockers are sitting.'

Then clearly Toric cannot give Falco his ale after he has walked off and so regardless of any other considerations the sequence of events for the next game turn must allow Toric to give Falco

his ale before he leaves the bar to go and talk to Waynn.

At the same time to integrate the two responses and avoid insulting Toric I would arbitrarily add that Falco thanks Toric for the ale and excuses himself before walking off. There has to be an element of GM license in making such changes but none of them should be serious and the result should be a workable narrative for the next GM Note.

Occasionally you may find it impossible to squeeze everything that a player wants his character to do into the Game Turn.

It is sometimes impossible to squeeze everything a player wants their character to do into a single game turn. If this happens then I suggest you add an

explanation to the player at the foot of their next GM Note and let them know that unless they change their minds then their character will continue to try and complete the instructions they have given as part of the next turn and if necessary subsequent turns.

As GM you should do everything you can think of to ensure that every players instructions are carried out,

Do your best to ensure that every players instructions are carried out. But, accept the fact that this is not always going to be possible.

Unexpected events can always conspire to make it impossible for the character to do what the player has asked.

- One reason is that the character simply fails to pass the required test.
- Another is that the characters action was either blocked or interrupted by the behaviour of another character or characters during the turn.

If the player knows that there is a risk involved in any of the instructions he has given for his character then it would be prudent of him to anticipate the possibility of failure and state what he wants his character to do if his action fails.

As the GM, how you handle these situations is up to you but it is worth noting that the player does have a responsibility too.

Likewise, if the player suspects that something he wants his character to do might be obstructed or opposed by another players instructions then he ought to explain his suspicions and state

what his character will do in the event that he is correct.

My view is that if a player fails to anticipate a possible event when he submits his response then his character is equally unprepared for what is about to happen, and so, I treat it as an indication that their character is either shocked or surprised and impose the appropriate penalties on them in the game.

An example of Interrupted Play	
Wolfgang and Gustavus have squared up to each other and are toe to toe exchanging insults when there is a sudden loud crash behind them.	
The two players Harfar (Wolfgang) and Zoey (Gustavus) respond as follows:	
Harfar (Wolfgang Balifonse)	Re: GM72/4b What the? Wolf takes advantage of the distraction, quickly drawing his sword and takes a swing at the docker's head in an attempt to knock him

	out.
Zoey (Gustavus the dockside foreman)	Re: GM72/4b What the? Gus positions himself so he can see what's happening while keeping my attention on his adversary. Other than that, he will wait to see what's going down. Given his unarmed combat prowess I feel he will handle himself well. If he can get close enough he will prevent his opponent drawing his sword and then headbutt the git in the schnozz! I hope things turn out peacefully. But at least it'll be exciting!
As you can see from the above responses there is a conflict of actions arising between Harfar's desire that Wolfgang draws his sword and Zoey's anticipation of this very move and desire to prevent it. As GM I resolved to use a Grapple Test to determine whether Gus managed to prevent Wolfgang drawing his sword and whether his headbutt managed to connect with Wolfgang's nose.	
GM72/4c	Taking advantage of the sudden distraction the Wolfgang tries to draw his sword. However, it was a move that Gus had anticipated and he was far too shrewd to take his eye off his opponent. He lunged forward and grabbed Wolf's wrist in a vice like grip making sure he was unable to withdraw the blade from its scabbard. (Grapple Test: PASSED 75/15) Gus attempts to follow through with a headbutt to Wolf's nose but Wolf manages to avoid the blow. (Opposed Dex Test: GUS: FAILED) As the two men struggle there is the sound of broken glass from the direction of the inn and Karl yelps in surprise but Gus is too busy now to take much notice.
Gus manages easily to grab Wolfgang's arm and prevent him drawing his sword, but is less successful at smashing Wolfgang's nose and the two characters end up locked in a grappling match that the end of Phase 2 Turn 74. Both, Harfar and Zoey had part of their the instructions for their characters blocked or interrupted, however, the narrative of the action made sense and both players understood why their instructions could not be fully completed.	

Composing GM Notes

Having updated the Game Journal with a narrative which describes all the events that will occur in the next game turn, it is time to let each of your players know what happened.

This might be as simple as copying the entire content of the Game Journal narrative into the GM Note, but more often than not it involves a certain amount of editing to produce a note which is limited to just the information each character is entitled to know.

Some things to consider when producing a GM Note for a specific character are:

1. Could the character see everything described in the Game Journal?
2. Did the character hear everything that happened in the Game Journal?
3. Does the character know the names of all the other characters named in the Game Journal?

4. Can the character understand everything being said by the characters around him, or are they speaking in a language he cannot understand?

This is also the GM's opportunity to add his own clarifications to the information being provided to each player. For example, you might want to add a more detailed description of an NPC to a player whose character has special skills or interest.

Lets look at game turn GM72/4 again and compare the content of the Game Journal produced with the actual GM Notes which were sent to Harfar and Zoey.

<p>GAME JOURNAL FOR GM72/4c</p>	<p>Taking advantage of the sudden distraction the Wolfgang tries to draw his sword. However, it was a move that Gus had anticipated and he was far too shrewd to take his eye off his opponent. He lunged forward and grabbed Wolf's wrist in a vice like grip making sure he was unable to withdraw the blade from its scabbard. (Grapple Test: PASSED 75/15) Gus attempts to follow through with a headbutt to Wolf's nose but Wolf manages to avoid the blow. (Opposed Dex Test: GUS: FAILED)</p> <p>As the two men struggle there is the sound of broken glass from the direction of the inn and Karl yelps in surprise but Gus is too busy now to take much notice.</p>
<p>GM NOTE to: Harfar(Wolfgang)</p>	<p>Taking advantage of the sudden distraction Wolf tries to draw his sword. It was a move that his opponent had obviously anticipated and he lunged forward grabbing Wolf's wrist in a vice like grip and making sure he was unable to withdraw the blade from its scabbard, at the same time attempting a head butt to Wolf's face which he was barely able to avoid. (Grapple Test: PASSED) (Opposed Dex Test: GUS: FAILED).</p> <p>There was the sound of broken glass from the direction of the inn and a loud yelp of surprise from one of the dockers but Wolf is far too busy now to take much notice.</p> <p>GM Note: Wolfgang is now held in a wrist lock by the large docker. He may attempt to pull his hands free but the dockers grip is quite strong. Whilst his hands are held he cannot draw his sword or use his hands for anything else.</p>
<p>GM NOTE to: Zoey(Gus)</p>	<p>Taking advantage of the sudden distraction the one eyed man tries to draw his sword.</p> <p>However, it was a move that Gus had anticipated and he was far too shrewd to take his eye off his opponent. He lunged forward and grabbed the man's wrist in a vice like grip making sure he was unable to withdraw the blade from its scabbard. (Grapple Test: PASSED)</p> <p>Gus attempts to follow through with a head butt to the nose but his opponent manages to avoid the blow. (Opposed Dex Test: GUS: FAILED)</p> <p>As the two men struggle there is the sound of broken glass from the direction of the inn and Karl yelps in surprise but Gus is too busy now to take much notice.</p>

	<p>GM Note: Gus is now locked in a grapple with the one-eyed man. If he lets go of the mans wrist he will be able to draw his sword but if he does not he will not be able to use his fists.</p> <p>Head butts and kicks are still possible but will be based upon dexterity rather than weapon skill as you will need to manoeuvre both yourself and your opponent into a suitable position to land a blow.</p>
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As you can see both GM Notes have been tailored slightly.

Gus and Wolfgang have never been introduced to each other in the game and so the GM Notes of both players have been changed so that they don't give the name of their opponent.

The description of the struggle has also been changed slightly to emphasize the event from each characters perspective and both players have been given further explanation from the GM regarding their PC's current situation and options.

The potential to exploit tailored GM Notes is probably one of the most exciting aspects of PBEM and can be used to add considerably to the roleplaying challenge of the players.

For example:

- There is no need for anyone other than the hunter in the party to be told that there are fresh tracks on the path the group are following.
- Players of PC's with heightened senses like Elves and Dwarves might regularly be given extra information on the sights and sounds around them that the rest of the party don't notice.
- Players of PC's with special skills like Sense Magic, Spot trap or Thieves Sign might be given information that other are not entitled to know.

It is then up to these players to decide whether to share this knowledge with the others. In most cases they will immediately inform the other PC's, but not always. There have been several occasions in my own game where players have deliberately kept the rest of the party ignorant of the information they have been given and a couple of occasions where they have deliberately lied.

Dispatching GM Notes

Its best to send GM Notes to all your players at the same time.

Whilst it may be tempting to send each GM Note as soon as it is ready the potential chaos if you get interrupted or hit a problem half way through is not worth the risk.

I usually prepare each GM Note and save it as draft until I have finished all of them and then send them all together. That way every player has exactly the same length of time to respond.

Continuity

Continuity: the smooth development of a sequence of events so that they follow each other logically without breaks.

Continuity is a major consideration in the motion picture industry and we have all been amused when the directors get it wrong.

My favourite example being a scene from Tarzan of the Apes, where Tarzan puts down his spear, dives into the river wrestles a crocodile, swims across to the other bank, gets out, picks up his spear and runs off.

As a GM you will have similar challenges to deal with, particularly in situations where parties split up.

The biggest problem I found was the passage of time.

As soon as you have more than one player group the relative passage of time becomes a problem.

Group A: might be in the tavern, drinking and talking.

Group B. might be travelling to a nearby village to collect something before returning.

Ironically, dialogue in a PBEM game uses up a lot of game time, whilst uninterrupted travel is relatively fast. So, if you are not careful, you can get ridiculous problems arising where Group B say goodbye disappear out the door to make their long trip to the nearby village, only to re-appear before Group A have managed to finish their first tankard of ale.

The best way I have found of maintaining continuity is to keep a timeline chart.

The Timeline Chart

My own Timeline Chart is an Excel Spreadsheet but it could just as easily be ruled paper. Mine actually contains a set of worksheets each of which deals with the passage of time at a different rate.

Worksheet 1 deals with time in days and is used for plotting major events.

Worksheet 2 deals with time in hours and is used to plot normal roleplay activity.

Worksheet 3 deals with time in pulses and is used mainly for tracking combat events.

Here is an extract from Worksheet 2 for the 4 hours around lunch time on the 12th day of Konistag.

WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLE-PLAY													
Month#	Day#	Day	Translation	Hour	Moons		Sun	Weather	Nyden	Walibaen	Aste dritha	Wayrun	Wayrud
					Mauruslieb	Morrislieb	Light Level						
4	12	Konistag	King Day	11				Breezy	Asleep Rear Cabin	Galley	Galley	On Bank with	At helm
4	12	Konistag	King Day	12				Breezy	Asleep Rear Cabin	Serving Meal	Serving Meal	On Bank with	At helm
4	12	Konistag	King Day	13				Breezy	Wakes for lunch	Serving Meal	Serving Meal	On Bank with	At helm
4	12	Konistag	King Day	14				Breezy	On Helm	With Nyden	Upset	On Deck	On Bank

Each row represents an hour of elapsed 'game time' and each column records a continuity issue for that hour. You can see columns for phases of the twin moons,

light levels from the sun, the weather and five of the NPC's involved in the plot at this point in the game.

All of my Timeline Charts work along the same principle but deal with events at a different level of detail.

Passage of Time

It's easy to get too pedantic about the passage of time, but nevertheless some logic needs to be applied if players are not going to spot the obvious continuity problems in the game.

If Group B leave a tavern in Nuln at 8pm to walk to Wahnfurt 6 miles away, Group A who remain drinking at the bar would not really expect to see them again for about 3 hours. Therefore, Group A would expect to get a whole nights drinking and talking done before their friends returned, if they suddenly reappear in time for the next round of drinks some players might consider this to be rather strange.

To try and avoid this I assign every turn in my game nominal time duration of 30 minutes, and I try to ensure that about 30 minutes of action takes place before I increment the turn number. Bearing in mind that in my game the turn might consist of any number of phases and thus involve numerous email interactions.

So, if the GM Note sequence of GM12/1a, GM12/1b, GM12/1c, GM12/1d, GM12/1e, GM12/1f would indicate that Turn 12 had been a pretty busy 30 minutes probably involving a lot of detailed dialogue between the characters. Whilst, if GM12/1a had been followed immediately by GM13/1a this would indicate a very uneventful 30 minutes, probably involving nothing but silent walking.

Therefore, If Group B's departure for Wahnfurt is recorded in GM12/1a I can decide in advance that they are not going to be re-united with Group A until the start of Turn 18 (3 hours away) at the earliest and I can be reasonably sure that any minor variations in arrival time are not likely to be noticed, especially as watches and clocks don't feature in my game.

The astute reader will immediately realise that the implication of this is that the number of game turns taken by Group B to complete their village trip will need to be padded out to match the number of turns expended by Group A drinking in the tavern. This means that at some point Group B's trip will have to get more complicated than a simple 6 mile walk, otherwise Group B's players are going to be sitting twiddling their thumbs for weeks whilst Group A complete their social drinking.

The same approach can be used to schedule other events in the passage of time such as nightfall, the appearance of important NPC's or the arrival of the watch patrol.

I prefer the use of turn numbers rather than actual game time as turn numbers provide me all the control I need over continuity without giving the players an unreasonable understanding of what time it is in the game.

Keeping the passage of time vague in a game where nobody owns a watch works very well and makes things much easier for the GM.

First Person v Third Person

Given that a PBEM game is driven by its narrative it makes sense to give some thought to the writing style you intend to use for GM notes and player responses.

First Person

The narrative is written as though the writer is the character involved in the action.

Example	"I will charge the nearest Orc and hit him over the head with my hammer."
Pro's	Highly personal and exciting to read.
Con's	Easily confused with 'Out of Character' comments from the Player to the GM. Does not identify the character performing the action.

Second Person

The narrative is written as if the writer was talking directly to the character rather than the player.

Example	"You charge the nearest Orc and try to hit him over the head with your hammer."
Pro's	Highly personal and exciting to read, encourages the player to associate himself directly with the character in the action.
Con's	Can be confused with out of game comments to the Player from the GM and doesn't identify the character performing the action and so fails to highlight an error should a player accidentally be sent text which was meant for the player of another character in the game.

Third Person

The narrative is written as though the both the writer and the reader are separate people watching the events unfold.

Example	"Falco will charge the nearest Orc and try to hit him over the head with his hammer."
Pro's	Clearly identifies which character is involved in the action and makes it possible to cut and paste the narrative directly to and from the Game Journal without the need to edit.
Con's	Rather impersonal as it relegates the player to an onlooker in the events being described.

Although writing in the first and second person is more personal and exciting to read, my own preference is to use the third person for both GM Notes and Player Responses.

Doing so reduces the amount of editing necessary when copying text from player responses into the Game Journal and also means that finished narratives can be copied almost verbatim from the Journal into next turns GM Notes.

It also minimises the potential for confusion by making it perfectly clear which characters are involved in which action, and should I make a mistake and send a GM Note to the wrong player he would spot the error immediately whereas if the note were written in the Second Person he may not.

Dealing with absent players.

No matter how riveting your game may be players do go missing.

Holiday's, work commitments, family commitments and health can all affect the ability of a player to respond to your GM Notes. I even had one player who had to take a break to do a tour of duty in Iraq.

In a tabletop game players either turn up or they don't and about the only unexpected situation that may occur is if they suddenly get paged and have to leave part way through a session.

In a PBEM game every GM Note produces an unknown level of response.

Sometimes players just stop replying, sometimes they just miss one post. I have even had a player respond unexpectedly to a post I sent out months before due it being delayed by a technical problem on senders Email Service.

I am assuming that as the GM you will take temporary control of any characters whose player has failed to respond to your GM Note until they either return or are replaced.

So, as such you need to consider how you will manage the characters of absent players.

Planned Breaks

If the player is taking a planned break from the game then it's possible to discuss what his plans for the character are before he leaves and get some general guidelines on what the character is planning to do and how it should behave under GM control.

However, even the GM will have no insight into exactly what might happen in the players absence and so no instructions will be all encompassing.

Unexpected Breaks

This sort of player absence is by far the most common in a PBEM and the first the GM knows of it is when the time limit has expired and there has been no email from one of the players.

At this point you as GM have no idea whether the player had just failed to reply because they had nothing to say, failed to receive your GM Note, gone on a long holiday, or abandoned your game for good.

Whatever, the reason the game must go on and so as GM you must take control of that players character.

Accepted Conventions

Its worth considering in advance how you will deal with the characters of absent players and to let the players know how you plan to approach the problem.

In my own game I introduced '**The 48 Hour Rule**' which made my policy on how I would handle the characters of absent players perfectly clear. The players were aware of this rule and so were able to minimise the consequences of their absence.

The 48 Hour Rule

This rule just states that

If the GM has not had any instructions from a player within 48 hours of sending that player a GM Note, then the character will automatically revert to GM control until that player notifies the GM he is ready to resume control.

However, the rule went on to state that:

When controlling the character, the GM will conform as far as possible with any prior instructions, guidance and intentions given by the player and will not initiate any action deliberately intended to cause the character to come to harm.

In other words the GM was considered a temporary custodian of the players character and had a responsibility to keep it as safe as possible in a world of grim and perilous adventure.

Maintaining Party Cohesion

One of the first problems I encountered when I started my PBEM game was that of party cohesion.

In a tabletop game players will normally discuss their next moves and agree a common plan of action before announcing it to the GM.

In a PBEM this is much less likely and I soon found that conflicting player responses quickly resulted in the adventurers wandering off in different directions or getting left behind.

To overcome this, and to make it easier for parties to stay together if they want to, I introduced the '**Do as you are told rule.**'

This rule attempts to simulate the fact that people in groups tend to naturally follow each other about and that a person wishing to break away from a group usually makes a conscious decision to do so.

The 'Do As You Are Told' Rule.

This rule quickly became abbreviated to '**DAYAT**' and proved very popular, particularly as players soon realised that they could use it to keep their parties coordinated.

The rule states that:

Any character who is ordered to do something by another one will do as they are told unless:

- 1. Doing so would place them in danger.
[e.g. 'Go jump off that cliff']*
- 2. Doing so would leave them financially worse off.
[e.g. 'Give me your purse.']*
- 3. Doing so is contrary to an implicit instruction from their own player.
[e.g. 'Toric's not going anywhere until he's drunk his flagon of ale.']*

4. Any tests deemed necessary by the GM prevent it.
 [e.g. 'Open that door right now. (Leadership Test: FAILED)]

This rule not only helps keep adventure parties together but also helps to keep characters active in the absence of their player.

Using this rule a player, can just get his character to shout 'Follow me' and be assured that the rest of the characters in the party will follow him, unless one of the other players objects and specifically refuses to allow his character to do so.

My players quickly became quite adept at using the rule during play. They soon discovered that instructions like 'Falco shouts 'STOP!' could literally halt the entire party instantly. Whilst, comments like 'Eilwyn says 'Lets all go shopping.' could easily result in the dwarf being dragged around the local market unless his player was quick witted enough to prevent it.

Handling combat encounters

In my experience, if a PBEM is going to fold it almost always happens soon after the first combat encounter. I suspect the reason for this is that combat tends to be the most anticipated event in any roleplaying game and so if it is not handled well the consequences are all the more significant for the players.

A group of bored players might persevere with a badly run PBEM in anticipation of the first combat encounter of the game, but if this too proves to be boring then its the most likely time for them to decide to jump ship.

For this reason alone I thought it worth dedicating a section of this guide just to the handling of combat encounters in PBEM games.

Combat encounters in PBEM games can either be their greatest asset or their death warrant and the person who makes the difference will always be the GM running the game.

My first and most important advice to any GM running a PBEM is to forget how combat is handled in the tabletop game.

A PBEM game is different, and trying to reproduce the tabletop combat system in a PBEM format is doomed to ignominious failure before you even reach for the on-line dice cup.

Instead, the key to running a successful combat system in a PBEM game is to exploit the advantages of the medium you are using and to minimise its disadvantages.

TIME	
Advantage	A tabletop GM has very little time to think during a combat encounter, players are excited and once dice are being rolled the time for reflection is limited. Combat in a PBEM does not have that natural excitement and speed but the slower pace can be used by the GM to really enhance the combat experience.
Disadvantage	PBEM's are slow,....I know this keeps coming up but it's important. Tabletop combat gains a lot of excitement from its pace which a PBEM just can't hope to match.

	<p>However, a badly thought out PBEM combat system can make things a lot worse. Imagine for example a system which expects every player to roll their own dice and which sticks to the round robin approach to player involvement.</p> <p>DAY 1: GM to Player1 – Roll a WS test to see if you hit. DAY 2: Player1 to GM – OK! I rolled 43. DAY 3: GM to Player1 – Sorry you missed. DAY 4 GM to Player2 – Ok! Your turn roll to see if you hit. DAY 5 Player2 to GM – 39. DAY 6 GM to Player2 – Well done you hit now roll for damage. DAY 7 Player to GM – Woooopee! A 6. etc.</p> <p>As, you can see the above example is just emphasising the time problem, taking over a week to resolve less then two attacks.</p> <p>This is going to get boring very quickly.</p>
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LACK OF DICE	
Advantage	Although many tabletop players view dice rolling as one of the most exciting events of the game, there are advantages in not having them on the table. Generally speaking, the act of dice rolling during combat encounters tends to dominate the play. So, not having dice on the table leaves the players with nothing to do but consider their next combat move. If exploited properly this can produce much more interesting combat encounters.
Disadvantage	Many players like rolling dice, and many players will be sceptical about someone else rolling the dice for them. There is little the GM can do about the trust issue, except give reassurances and gain acceptance. However, a well run combat can more than compensate the players for this loss of personal control.

Spatial Awareness	
Advantage	If you are running a PBEM there is no point spending hours painting a miniature for every character in your game and modelling the inside of 'The Three Feathers' in scenic plasticard. Therefore, the time you save can be used to enhance other aspects of your game. Also, by not having these physical tokens on the tabletop for all the players to see you actually have the option of using 'The Fog of War' to full effect without needing complicated hidden movement systems and screens.
Disadvantage	Words are sometimes just not enough to explain a PC's situation and so the problem of how to provide the PC's with a clear understanding of their own positions and their opponents has to be addressed. The good news is that there are numerous ways to do this and a list of techniques and utility software appears later in this section.

Key Factors for Successful PBEM Combat.

Simultaneous combat	Get all the players to submit their characters actions at the same time.
Roll all the dice yourself	In effect all dice rolls become secret dice rolls from a player perspective.
Use diagrams	Sort out an easy technique for producing diagrams before you need to produce one.
Ham it up and have fun.	Use the extra time that a PBEM gives you to really make your combats exciting and fun.

Simultaneous Combat

Combat encounters in a PBEM are by implication an extension of the narrative between yourself and the players and therefore part of the overall flow of the game.

As GM you have already been dealing with the integration of simultaneous player responses probably using the approach described early in this guide. It would therefore seem odd to suddenly change to a round-robin procedure just because a conflict is about to start.

The only real difference between combat and non-combat in a PBEM game is that the level of interrupts is likely to be higher and that as a GM you will probably give more weight to the relative initiative of the characters involved when deciding on how to integrate their actions.

One nice bonus of the PBEM game system is that as a GM you will be in little doubt as to whether the PC's involved in the encounter are surprised by the sudden outbreak of hostilities. It's quite easy to tell from the players last few game responses whether their character was anticipating trouble or not, and so there can be little room for debate about whether a character should suffer the penalties for being surprised.

Narrative Combat

Narrative combat is a technique which can be used in tabletop games but in a PBEM you don't really have a choice. The important thing as always is to make sure that the finished content of the GM Note flows logically and makes sense.

Also bear in mind that in combat a characters awareness of events beyond the immediate combat he is engaged in will be severely limited.

Note to players:

Your anticipation of events can be mean the difference between the life and death of your PC in a combat encounter.

Remember, if the GM is using a simultaneous combat system, every character involved in combat is going to act at the same time. Just as in real combat. For players this means that they must decide what the other characters are likely to do and how they want their characters to react if that is what they do. If players wait until the other character acts and then try to submit their

instructions to the GM it could be too late.

So, more than at any other time conditional actions are vital in your player's responses.

If that guy reaches for his sword then...
If that old man makes any sort of strange gesture with his hands then...
If those loud footsteps get any closer then...

Don't blame the GM if your character is left open mouthed and without a plan, anticipation and survival go hand in glove in a PBEM game.

Players in more experienced or combat oriented parties should also consider establishing standard team tactic's with the other players in their group.

Again with everyone acting at once it is quite easy, even for experienced parties, to end up tripping over each other when a combat encounter occurs. If you have any sense you will at least agree on each of characters primary combat role and targeting priorities. More importantly some common understanding about mutual support and tactical co-ordination would be useful, and even the nomination of a leader can make a big difference.

Imagine for instance the confusion that could arise if you are using the DAYAT rule discussed earlier and two rounds into the combat the player of the cleric gets nervous and orders his character to shout '*Runaway.*'

Combat in a PBEM is going to be chaotic, so any preparation will be beneficial.

No preparation at all will quite likely prove fatal.

Roll all the dice yourself.

Whilst I accept that there are dice rolling utilities on the web which are of value to Play by Message Board (PBMB) games they have little real value to a PBEM and trying to use them is merely going to slow down the game.

So, my advice is to roll all the dice yourself and apply the results immediately to the narrative of the current combat phase. This means that a player who decides to attack an opponent will get a GM Note in return which tells him exactly how his attack went.

It is a matter of personal choice how and what you tell the player about the result of your dice rolling.

My personal approach is to keep a careful record in the Game Journal of what I rolled but only to inform the player of the result. Thus, a successful WS roll of 24 would be recorded as (WS Test: 24/36 HIT) in the game journal but would be shortened to (WS TEST: HIT) in the GM Note.

In many cases it is not appropriate to even inform the player that a test has been successful or unsuccessful. For instance (LISTEN TEST: PASSED) gives away far too much information to the player. He can assume that, having passed the test and not heard anything, then there cannot be anything to hear. Instead, I frequently use (LISTEN TEST: RESULT WITHHELD) this lets the player know that I have carried out his instructions to listen carefully for noises but leaves the player to decide for himself whether his character is likely to have succeeded or not.

And of course secret dice rolls are just that, secret, and the players don't get informed of them even though they are noted in the Game Journal.

Use Diagrams

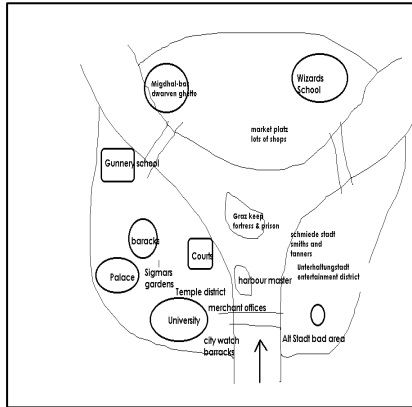
Don't wait until your first combat encounter to sort out how you are going to provide your players with combat diagrams. The last thing your game needs is for players to spend weeks slogging through the forest only to have the game stall just as they come face to face with the bad guy, because you haven't thought how you are going to produce the diagram showing them the layout of his temple.

Accept the fact that sooner or later you will need to produce a map or diagram and sort out how you are going to do it before you start playing.

Summary of a few useful Diagramming Tools

In practice you will probably need more than one approach as some utilities like Game Mapper are useful for maps, whilst other like Dungeon Crafter are better at combat diagrams.

Pen, Paper Scanner



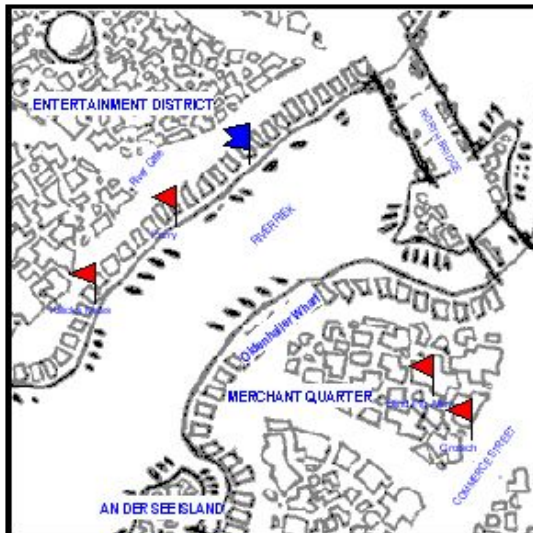
If all else fails a scanned sketch is better than nothing, and much quicker and easier than most. However, be aware that some suppliers object to having material scanned from their books even for fan use.

Digital Camera

If you don't have a scanner a digital camera can produce an image. One could even take photo's of miniatures and scenery laid out to depict the scene.

Game Mapper

URL: http://www.imagineimage.org/products/game_mapper.htm



Game mapper is really aimed at the PBEM wargaming market but can also be used for large scale RPG maps particularly those needed for tracking the relative movements of characters.

One nice feature is the ability to import a background .bmp image and then place objects on an overlay layer above it which can be relocated without corrupting the background.

This means that you can import a map of somewhere like The City of Nuln or the Grand Principality of the Reikland and then plot the movements of the PC's and

NPC's as they travel across it.

Dungeon Crafter

URL: <http://www.dungeoncrafter.com/>



Despite the name, Dungeon Crafter is not limited to the mapping of dungeons.

It is a tile based mapping tool, which limits what it can do, but actually makes what it does do very easy to achieve. You merely select tiles from a palette and click where you want them to appear on your map.

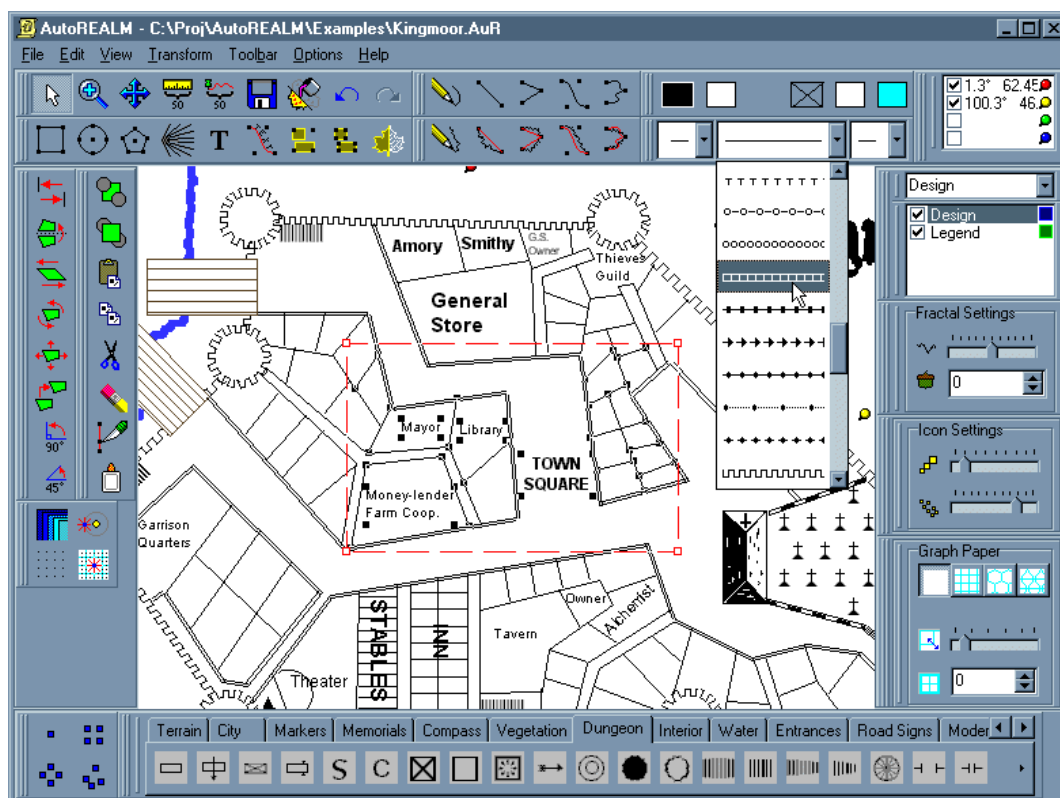
Dungeon Crafter was the main tool I used for all my combat diagrams and floor plans, simply because it was so easy to use.

The other advantage was that the tiles themselves are just .bmp images and so it is quite easy to create your own tile-sets. One of my first experiments in tile creation was to produce a customised tile for every PC in the game so that their location on the map could be marked with a little image of themselves.

The web-site includes a growing gallery of fan-produced tile-sets many of which are of use in RPG's including the Wizards Lair, Ships Deck Plans, Castle Walls and City Streets.

Autorealm

URL: <http://gryc.ws/autorealm.htm>



Autorealm is a free purpose built fantasy mapping tool and whilst I found it a little too complicated for my taste it seems to have a lot of potential if you have the aptitude to master it.

ProFantasy Software Ltd

URL: <http://www.profantasy.com/>

This section would not be complete without mentioning ProFantasy Software Ltd who produce a range of mapping products for gamers. They are the Rolls Royce solution for game mapping, although I didn't actually buy their products until I was planning to produce a web-site for my game.



As with AutoRealm the effective use of these products requires a reasonable investment of time and effort neither of which were really available when I was running my game.

However, as this example drawn by Allyn Bowker of Dark Leagues (www.darkleagues.com) shows, if you have the skill and budget the results produced with ProFantasy software are really stunning.

3D Mapping Tools

The one utility I really wanted but could never find was a tool which would allow me to produce 3D images of locations so that I could produce character level views of locations. Many on-line RPG games like Neverwinter Nights have mapping utilities which allow players to produce 3D maps but everyone I tried used a block matrix for object location. This meant that either I could never orient the objects accurately enough to match the location diagram, nor could I place them close enough together to produce a solid image. The classic problem were the houses, which could never be placed close enough together to form a street.

If anyone finds or makes a utility that does this please let me know.

Ham it up and have fun.

This is probably the most important advice I can give to any GM dealing with their first combat encounter. In a tabletop game the energy and excitement of a combat encounter is generated by the close proximity of the other players and the suspense of rolling the dice.

As GM of a PBEM game all you have is your imagination and the words you put in the GM Note. How you use both will either bore your players to tears or have them panting for more.

Use the extra time that a PBEM game gives you to really add value to your players gaming experience and bring the combat to life in your narrative.

Lets look at a small combat encounter and compare two different GM styles.

This is the classic opening encounter from 'The Oldenhaller Contract' the WFRP scenario from the version one rulebook.

The adventure party have been lured down a dark alleyway by Grolsch and have been ambushed by four footpads intent on robbing them of all their worldly goods. But typically the PC's are having none of it and a fight has begun.

The player responses have been processed and Falco despite standing slightly behind Waynn and Eilwyn has decided to draw his axe and charge through the gap between his two friends to attack the footpad menacing Eilwyn.

Waynn has also noticed the threat to Eilwyn and without anticipating Falco's plans has decided to step directly into Falco's path to protect the Elf and to threaten the footpad verbally.

Eilwyn who is unarmed decides to back off slowly and let the humans deal with the problem, whilst Toric who has just chased off two of the attackers is too far down the alleyway to be of any immediate help his friends.

As the GM you have resolved all the actions, rolled all the dice and determined the results, so its time to sit down and compose your first combat related GM Note telling the players what has just happened.

GM Note

Waynn moves to stand in front of Eilwyn and says to Footpad A "If you want trouble mate, then I'm yer man."

Falco attacks Footpad A (WS TEST: FAILED)

Eilwyn backs away letting the men do the fighting.

Toric looks back and realises the manlings are in trouble.

The above GM Note is factually correct. It covers all the actions the players gave to their characters. But it's about as exciting as a limp lettuce leaf draped over a piece of dry bread.

Compare the above example to the actual GM Note for the above combat encounter as it went out to my players.

GM NOTE

Falco decides to attack the man threatening Eilwyn and lunges forward quickly in an effort to take him by surprise.

At precisely the same moment Waynn decides to step forward with the intention of placing Eilwyn is slightly behind him.

"If you want no trouble mate, then sh.. wha..." (Both Waynn and Falco pass their initiative test and arrive at the same spot at the same time).

Despite a desperate attempt they fail to avoid a collision (Dexterity test both Failed) whilst Eilwyn only just manages to duck out of the way in time (Initiative Test Passed).

As Falco cannons into Waynn he trips over Waynns foot and sprawls face first at the feet of the man he was planning to attack (Dexterity Test Failed) his axe drops from his grasp and skids off behind the mans feet.

At the other end of the alley Toric quickly looks back to check the situation behind him.

In the light of the tavern torches he can see a scene of total chaos. Falco is down sprawled at the feet of a man in a dark cloak. Eilwyn is ducking away whilst Waynn sword drawn is trying to defend himself against two assailants.

Hopefully, you will agree that that the second example contains a lot more excitement than the first. The addition of a few more words and the exploitation of the conflict between the actions of Waynn and Falco have produced a not only humorous but potentially dangerous situation to heighten the drama considerably. In the real game all four players were galvanised into desperate action by this note which saw the fastest player responses I had witnessed in the game up to that point.

Toric's player actually jumped to the wrong conclusion, assuming that Falco had been struck down by the footpad, and Toric immediately went berserk practically severing the poor mans leg from his body during the next combat round. Waynn in a desperate attempt to keep out of the way of the mad dwarf nearly trips over Falco again, whilst Falco's player became obsessed with his characters apparently clumsiness for weeks after this incident pumping all his experience points into raising his Dexterity Score, in the hope that next time Falco would avoid Waynn's big feet.

So, don't be afraid to 'ham-it up' when it comes to combat encounters. Players want combat to be exciting and dramatic.

Think of yourself as a film director on an Errol Flynn movie and pull out all the stops.

Rewards and Feedback.

Assigning Experience Points.

Experience Points (XP's) can be awarded on exactly the same basis as any tabletop RPG would award them.

However, PBEM games do offer the opportunities to change the format slightly because unlike the Tabletop GM you actually have a full record of everything that took place during the last session of play.

There are no convenient session ends in a PBEM so as the GM you will have to choose a logical break in the action as the time to call for a tally of experience gained.

At this point I would recommend reading through the Game Journal for the period of play since the last experience award and carefully noting any actions which you consider worthy of a reward.

I provide each player with a list of these actions and the award I have given for it.

Fragile Alliance Rewards System	
Good Characterisation	1-5 XP per example
Bad Characterisation	-1 XP per example
Good Roleplay	1-5 XP per example
Bad Roleplay	-1 XP per example
Personal Objectives	As per character briefing
Scenario Objectives	As per Scenario notes
Player Awards	1-5 XP per player

Note that in addition to the general awards for good characterisation and roleplay I award characters XP for completing personal objectives.

Personal Objectives

These are agreed between the player and myself for each character in the game and are used to reward those who fulfil the role they are expected to fulfil in the game.

For example: Eilwyn being an elf and therefore believing herself superior to the other races in the party naturally assumes that she is in charge of the group. Eilwyn therefore gets bonus XP every time she gives the others an instruction which they follow.

Waynn on the other hand joined the party in order to make his fortune and buy his own river barge. Therefore, he gains XP every time he saves 1gc towards his boat fund.

Player Awards

The other innovation I found to be successful was to allow the players themselves to make XP awards to other characters who they felt deserved some recognition for their role in the last gaming session.

These player awards are more gratefully received than the GM ones by most players and give the players a motivation to reflect upon the recent events in the game and reward those players who they felt made a good contribution.

PBEM Player Guide

Although this is a GM Guide I thought it would be incomplete if I did not include some tips and guidance for those who join PBEM games as players.

Reasonable Expectations

The first point to make is that PBEM games are not for everyone. Read the Pro's and Con's section of the GM guide and you will see that PBEM games have both advantages and disadvantages.

Most notably, they are slow paced and they lack the excitement of rolling large numbers of dice.

So, don't expect to see your PBEM character rise rapidly up the development tree to become a super-hero and don't expect to wade rapidly through an entire scenario in a few weeks.

PBEM gamers need to recognise that they are in for a long-haul which might take years to complete and modify their expectations accordingly.

That said PBEM games still offer a lot of advantages in terms of roleplay and characterisation. They provide players with plenty of time to consider their responses and research their characters background.

Make the most of that time and you will get a lot of fun and enjoyment out of your PBEM experience.

Message Management (from a players perspective)

It a good idea to keep your game Emails in a separate mail folder.

If your GM is using a standard subject line format then a simple Email rule can be devised that will automatically spot an incoming game message and redirect it to your Game Folder.

Remember to move your replies from your sent folder to your game folder so that you have a record of all your responses.

If you are using Web Based Email or multiple Email accounts consider keeping a journal of GM Notes and Responses and copying their content into it so that you have a full and complete history of recent events in the game.

Formulating a response.

Many new PBEM players have difficult formulating their responses, so I thought I would provide a checklist of things to consider.

PLAYER RESPONSE CHECKLIST	
Who are you?	It may sound obvious but one of the most common errors in player responses is not making it clear who you are, both in real life and in the game. Always put the name of your Character at the start of your reply and when writing to the GM 'out of character' use your real name but remind the GM which character you are playing in the game. e.g. David (aka Drachenfels)
Read the GM Note...Again.	It is always worth reading the GM Note again just before you send your response. Just to make sure you haven't misread or overlooked something.
Dealing with 'What If's'	Before you send your response give some thought to what you want your character to do if things don't go as planned. It's impossible to cover every eventuality but think about the most likely things that may happen during the next game turn and let the GM know how you want your character to react if they do.
Stay in Character	Try to keep your reply 'in character'. Many player responses include both 'in character' instructions and amusing personal asides aimed at the GM. If you decide to do this make sure it is clear which are which, particularly if you are writing in the first

PLAYER RESPONSE CHECKLIST	
	person. 'Out of Character' comments can be very confusing for a GM, particularly if they are mixed in with character instructions.
Make your intentions clear.	<p>Whilst, in postal chess it's normal practice just to send your opponent your next move, in an RPG game it helps the GM understand your intentions if you explain why you are making that move and what you hope to achieve as a result. Some players do this as an extension of their characterisation and a good GM will use your intentions as a guide on how to carry your instructions out.</p> <p>For example:</p> <p>Cuffy looks the scene over and sees the distraction Poppy is making. Cuffy will try and see if he can get behind the guy holding Lurk. If so he will try to charge full speed and hit the person in the back of the knees with his whole body. Cuffy's goal is to knock the guy down so Lurk can escape. He will worry about his own safety later.</p>
Talking to the GM	<p>There will be times when you wish to talk directly to the GM. Either to ask a question or to let him know you are going away from a few days. Try to keep these messages separate from your player responses.</p> <p>If you send them as a separate Email remember to mention who your character is in the game, but there is nothing wrong with tacking such messages on the bottom of a game response as long as you make it clear that they are not part of the response itself.</p>

Memory Management

I know I keep saying this but, PBEM games are slow. It might take weeks, months or even years for a plot to develop to the final showdown.

A few days in game time might be weeks in real life, during which period you may have been to work, been on holiday and perhaps even been involved in other games.

Over that time you will probably have received up to three GM Notes a week containing all sorts of information from NPC names, clues, locations, maps, notes and background detail.

The biggest problem players have is trying to remember everything that has happened in the game. Little wonder then, that most PC's in my game seemed to have very bad memories.

My advice is simple.....Keep a Game Journal.

Clues?

GM37/1g Orsen the Innkeeper of The Killicks Mess in Nuln

Someone, was or is going to be smuggled into the city, nobody seems to know or say much more.

All vessels, carriages, wagons, and persons entering the city are being search -- thoroughly.

Has the watchmen and excisemen stirred up like mad hornets.

GM37/1g Brother Francis – Shallyan Cleric just returned from Drakwald Forest

Normally if the watch are looking for someone its common knowledge all over the city.

“Why would they search our bags, if they were looking for a person?”

Brother Francis thinks that they are not looking for someone but something and the person who is carrying it.

This might seem a bit bureaucratic but it will pay dividends in the long run. Such a journal should not contain a complete record of everything, but should just be used to record any thing which you think might be important and might be needed later in the game. It can be sub-divided however you wish with sections for Maps, NPC's, Clues etc. and will provide a quick aide memoir over the weeks and months to come.

If your GM is using the numbering system suggested in the GM Guide you can use this to cross-reference your notes back to the full message.

Away from your computer?

If you know you are going to be away from your computer for a few days or weeks it's a good idea to let your GM know. That way they will not expect a response from you over that period and so your absence will not slow down the game.

It is also a good idea to inform the GM what your intentions are for your character over the period you are away. It's unlikely that your character will be allowed to sit and do nothing and the GM will probably take personal control of it until you return. So, any instructions you wish to give the GM on how to look after your character in your absence will be useful in making sure that you don't have a nasty shock waiting for you when you get back.

And finally...

PBEM gaming can be one of the most rewarding types of roleplaying, or one of the most frustrating. My advice to anyone is that if it starts to becoming more like work than fun, then the best thing you can do is take a break from it.

A GM who is tired and bored will make the whole game unpleasant and tedious for everyone involved.

Also, if you are playing in a PBEM game and you are unhappy with how things are going, then write to the GM and discuss why you are not having fun. A good GM will want to hear constructive criticism and may be able to adjust his style to meet your expectations.

But most of all have fun, isn't that the whole point of why you're gaming!