



**Tracks  
in the  
Sand:**

**Advice on  
Railroads  
and  
Sandboxes  
in  
Tabletop  
Gaming**

## INTRODUCTION

Greetings elegant/entlemen,

New GMs have many questions regarding railroading:

How do you deal with railroading? Do you just create a scenario and improvise the consequences of your player's actions throughout the whole thing? Or do you somehow give them a limited array of options for which the outcome you already know? Or do you do something else? Where does "trying to keep them on the quest" stop and railroading begin? Is it the same as forcing a quest if the consequences of not taking said quest are too dire?

This PDF is a collection of tips and advice for how to correctly use railroads and sandboxes generated and compiled by Traditional Games, or /tg/.

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Party on,

Anonymous



## TERMINOLOGY

Before we begin, we should take a moment to first understand the terms “Railroad” and “Sandbox” as they are often misused.

### UNDERSTANDING “RAILROADING”

Railroading is not:

*“Leading the character's in a specific direction.”*

Railroading is not:

*“Offering a path to the players.”*

Railroading is not:

*“Keeping the players from realizing they're on a preplanned adventure.”*

Railroading is not even:

*“Preventing players from doing an action which you have not planned for.”*

Railroading DEFINITELY does not mean:

*“Any time the GM has any plans at all it is railroading.”*

Railroading is a specific term for GM's with ONE adventure.

ONE plot. It can be resolved in ONE way.

*“You cannot decide to go investigate that other place that would mean you fail and the plot can't handle it. I have nothing planned for that area, so there's a wall in the way now.”*

Railroading is attempting to prevent players from making any changes to the preapproved plot, exploring any areas other than the preformed ones, disallowing certain actions, etc. You are stuck on the rails chum, and cannot leave them, for the train would crash and then nothing would move. Don't try to pretend that any time the GM has planned any sort of plot hook that it's at all deserving of the word railroad.

In short, railroading is when the GM takes any measure necessary to ensure that there is only one direction the campaign may proceed — his planned direction.

Railroading isn't *“Hey there's a wall here!”* It's *“Hey there are walls everywhere but here!”*

Railroading is having an idea and keeping the people or places chiseled in stone.

It's better to keep your ideas, people, and places loose and shifting, like grains of sand.

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*It's only railroading if the players notice.*

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## UNDERSTANDING “SANDBOX”

A sandbox is a style of game in which minimal character limitations are placed on the players, allowing them to roam and interact with the setting at will. In contrast to a story progression game, a sandbox game emphasizes roaming and allows the players to decide the quests entirely. It features less emphasis on plot hooks and GM driven story.

In actual usage, “sandbox” is generally a term GMs use when prep gets too much for them. It is also favored by worldbuilders incapable of delivering a story and players seeking more freedom than they know what to do with.

Without plot hooks players feel completely lost. It kills the world dead and leads to the one player who enjoys just making crap up dominating the entire session.

Sandbox versus Railroad is a sliding scale, and all games end up in the middle. But it is just a dichotomy, not a realistic extreme.

GMs must offer story. And in a way, every story is a rail. But the term railroading is usually reserved for extreme cases of leading players by the nose. Normally the GM just tries to present a compelling situation that offers tension and invites the PCs to position themselves by taking action. This leads to new situations, and so on and so forth.

How written out this is in detail depends on so much, it really only makes sense discussing specific details, like player agency, taking notes, or balancing the group dynamic. With experience comes an individual style, which you can then troubleshoot and develop.

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## **SANDBOX VARIATIONS**

### ***The No-Idea-How-To Sandbox***

It’s just a setting. It is static. Nothing happens unless the PCs show initiative.

### ***The Sandbox of Ample Opportunity***

There are a lot of plot hooks, definitely more than the players can follow up on. What develops out of the ones they do is up to the way the players go about it.

### ***The Autoplay Sandbox***

NPCs do things. They have plans and realize them over time.

The players get to watch from the other side of the room unless they get involved.

### ***The Random Box***

Random tables or a mini-game decide what happens off screen to affect what happens on screen.

### ***The Unanticipated Sandbox***

There was an adventure planned, maybe even a published module. But the players went so far off track that it’s broken now and the GM had to set new challenges out of what the players had done.

## TIPS AND ADVICE:

<http://www.gnomestew.com/game-mastering/gming-advice/island-design-theory/>

(see appendix)

Island Design Theory was one of the most useful things I learned as a forever GM. Having set “islands” that can be moved around and placed wherever the PCs go.

Don’t tell the players you’re doing this otherwise it might be met with cries of “muh agency”. I treat my GM scripts/notes as basically madlibs.

It’s useful to have premade NPCs, villages, encounters, etc that you make all at once when you’re feeling productive. All this helps keep things fresh and organic while also letting you plan as much as you can.

**No gameplan survives first contact with the players**, so don’t beat yourself up while you’re learning.

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It’s perfectly okay to set the parameters of an adventure as long as you’re sure it’s something the players are interested in (you can always just talk to them beforehand).

I like the idea of explicitly stating the mission statement before you begin an adventure so that everybody’s on the same page:

*“This is a story of how your band of intrepid adventurers explored the ruins of the fallen stronghold of Kijakar.”*

Doing something like that allows you to focus your preparation on stuff the party is actually likely to encounter, rather than trying to fill out the entire world.

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And if your players object to or refuse to cooperate with this kind of thing, particularly after you’ve consulted with them ahead of time (*“what do you guys think about a good, old fashioned dungeon crawl through the ruins of a fortress around which hang rumors of lost wealth?”*), then you should seriously consider finding a new group of players.

**The players should try to be constructive and helpful, following reasonable hooks, and certainly not refusing a mission they said they were okay with beforehand.**

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The welfare of the adventure is not solely the GM’s responsibility.

The players have a responsibility to cooperate and give things the benefit of the doubt. That doesn’t mean that they have to go along with just anything, no matter how stupid or out of character, but when presented a legitimate hook, they should see if they can find an excuse to bite.

There have been times when the GM didn’t bait what was obviously a pivotal hook in a way that I felt my character would ever bite. I have had an out-of-character discussion about what my issue was and how we could tweak things so I could rationalize my character being interested.

Not everybody will do this sort of thing, but actually talking with your group about cooperating to build a successful adventure will hopefully make them at least somewhat inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt (rather than refusing hooks that aren’t absolutely perfectly targeted to their individual characters).

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Sometimes it's an expectations mismatch. I'm notorious for littering my campaigns with potential endgame content that's available but a bad idea from the get go. It's not a surprise thing; it's usually along the lines of:

*"Your night of carousing nets you a handful of rumors and leads, including the location of an ancient red dragon that has set themselves up as Lord and King over an area. Rumor is the locals have secretly sworn an oath that whoever defeats the dragon will not only have the hoard but that the locals will recognize them as king, as well."*

I had a player literally quit a game screaming profanity when I wouldn't nerf the dragon to a lvl-1 appropriate encounter so he could fight it immediately because in his mind "it's a game so anything I can see I should get to fight, and any fights I'm in should be fair ones."

The guy was an ass for a couple of reasons, but he wasn't automatically wrong. Both ways are fun and have their fans I just like one and he likes the other. Ancient red dragons should never be surprises, though. Players should know when they're looking at stuff that's "red" to them. Even the Balrog was foreshadowed.

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## >The Invisible Railroad

*"If I want a goblin cave then that goblin cave will appear on any road the PCs choose to walk."*

*"The players go to a jungle? They meet lizardman chief and his 8 minions. They go to some hills? They meet orc chief and his 8 minions. Go to the city, and it's thief leader and his 8 minions."*

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I never understood the issue with railroading in a general sense. If I obviously set up the players to go into a dungeon and planned out this dungeon, then screw the players if they want to go spend the whole session doing something completely unrelated.

Of course you can't expect for any single event to go 100% how you planned it, but you can always tell the players *"Hey, I really didn't account for you bypassing A and B, so please just don't do that."*

Hopefully your group is reasonable and doesn't want to skip half of what you planned out.

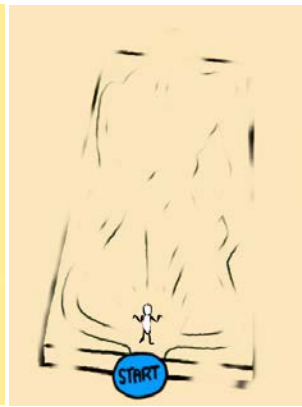
The best way to get better and prepare for this is read some adventure modules, both for ideas and to learn how to plan things out.

They usually aren't reliant on the players acting a certain way. But of course they can't account for "the players try to befriend the kobolds and help them raid all the cities" because that's just silly.

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**RAILROADING**



**SANDBOX**



**INVISIBLE RAILROAD**



**OPEN PLAY**

The third image is the easiest way to move from railroading to completely open play.

>Leaving the city from the west? You're running into a patrol of goblins with a macguffin.

>Leaving the city from the east? You're running into a patrol of goblins with a macguffin.

>Leaving the city from the south? Best believe you're running into a patrol of goblins with a macguffin.

>A sailor wants you to recover his doodad from a shipwreck. When you get there, a necromancer has already got his skeletons digging on the seafloor.

>Ignore the sailor, that old woman's grandson hasn't come back! Turns out he's been captured by a necromancer and is a test subject.

>"Old people bore me. Let's go sign up for the tournament to win the honour of being the prince's bodyguard!"

The bodies of the 3 competitors who died during the tournament vanish overnight. A perception check shows one set of footprints leading to where the bodies were left, but 4 sets leading away.

Your players never have to know. Just be prepared for something to do with the sailor and old woman by the time you get back to town.

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When I run a campaign, I never do a "story-based" campaign. I do more of a "world-based" campaign. I create locations to explore and characters to meet, but it's up to the players to "write" the story. To reiterate, I don't write stories for my campaigns; I create interesting locations (with conflicts and such that the players can get involved in) and characters.

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Never try to anticipate a player's actions or necessarily force them down a path or adventure.

Rather, write the story of what would happen /without/ any character intervention. In this way you have something to fall back to, a story the players can get involved in but they aren't necessarily railroaded.

>Timmy falls down the well into dungeon  
(quest to save Timmy offered, could be ignored)

>If ignored, Timmy gets possessed by well demon  
(quest to defeat well demon, could be ignored)

>If Timmy demon slaughters town and raises dead  
(quest to defeat undead, could be ignored)  
etc... etc...

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I generally only have a rough outline of the world as a whole and flesh out the areas around the party.

The more likely they are to go in that direction, the more I flesh it out. But there is always a skeleton to work with for at least one session in any direction the PCs go.

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Know the plot of your story beforehand.

Example: Evil guild of whatever doing shit in district B?

Players are actively avoiding B?

Then make sure something interesting is happening in district A, then have things happen in B as they would without player intervention and see if players will eventually want to see that.

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When planning a quest I go by the onion method: first, decide how big and what sort of an onion you want, then start building your onion from where you expect the PCs to go, layer by layer from the most likely you intend to the least likely you can imagine.

If the players still manage to surprise me then I just improvise until I can steer them towards one of the other paths.

You also have to realize that players who aren't dicks aren't going to purposefully derail your adventure without a good reason, so once they're in a lane they'll tend to stick to it without much help.

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Railroading is a big problem of every GM when they start out. To deal with this problem I start writing my adventures not as a straight line but in small events which I can chain together and coming up with while my group can play a "free" world. They can do whatever they want, however they want, but whenever a situation comes up where one of my events fits in, I use it. It's important to have a lot of possibilities to connect these events spontaneously to a good story which leads the group carefully in the right direction.

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Usually what you want to do is railroad in a way that doesn't seem like railroading.

Make good reasons for players to follow your quests. Don't force them to do it - make it worth doing. If you can direct the game however you want without players ever noticing they're doing what you want them to do, you're a godlike GM.

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Don't plot extensively, PREPARE extensively. Having a small library of broad hooks/places/encounters/names/maps/etc. will let you remain flexible when players do something unexpected--which is usually inevitable.

Ask questions, both to yourself and the players. Asking yourself "Is this interesting? Will the players like this? How can I flesh this out?" can go a long way to creating diversity in your story/plot hooks and assuring some investment from the players. Asking players questions remind them of their decision-making agency, and in general it's a good idea to be on the same page as your players. Are they OKAY with your self-described railroading? Or are you recognizing that it's hampering their enjoyment somehow?

Consider the "Floating Islands".  
>Build Dungeon A near Town A  
>Players go to Town B  
>Use Dungeon A near Town B instead since they never saw it to begin with  
Used well, it lets you maximize your prep while letting players make their choices freely. Everybody wins.

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I do not give the impression that this is a sandbox world. I tell my players where they are starting and what they should/will be doing at the start and allow them to make up their reason for being there and why they would get involved. Then when the game starts, I introduce my hook or hooks and play the story. This does not exclude freedom of choice but simply limits the players in scope. I still go about creating what-if encounters, places, and things

so that they can make their own choices.

However, the goal here is keep the players on your tracks, even if there are multiple sets, rather than running amok in a universe that may only be half-built and having to make up every encounter on the fly.

Both the GM and the Players should be willing to cooperate with each other for the sake of the game's and the storyline's enjoyment.

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The real answer is "sometimes you need to railroad them at least a little".

They may get pissy about it, they may complain, but if they don't like it they can be GM and flail around trying to do a completely open world that's something more than random encounters and random maps pulled from a book.

Everyone who says *"Don't plan! Let them do what they want to do! Create compelling, rich, original adventures immediately off the top of your head no matter what they decide to do!"* is either an entitled player who is too stupid and worthless to know how much work that is and how difficult it can be, or a self-deluded GM who thinks *"Well it's not railroading when I do THIS."*

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I'd recommend making the plot a product of the players.

I know that DMs 'forcing' long-ass backstories for no reason is tedious, but the motivation is good. I don't ask for life stories, but having a brief timeline of significant events/people in a character's history goes a long way towards creating situations that spur the players on. It motivates the player to get involved with it, and the repartee between the players when "their" hooks intersect/don't intersect writes a substantial part of the story for us.

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Usually what you want to do is railroad in a way that doesn't seem like railroading.

Make good reasons for players to follow your quests. Don't force them to do it - make it worth doing. If you can direct the game however you want without players ever noticing they're doing what you want them to do, you're a godlike GM.

Remember your players are roleplaying. As long as it makes sense for their characters, they are likely to do it.

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Give the PCs a few hooks for a few related quests in an area, come up with an overall story but it doesn't need to be fully fleshed out because what makes the story tense for the players might need ideas to be shifted mid session.

Let's say there's a town and local goblins have been raiding it on and off for the past month, the town has a decent militia so it mostly amounts to hit and run tactics by the goblins, a few people have died, supplies crops etc have gone missing, life is miserable

Now with that we have a few ideas. The players could offer their services and be paid a reward for dealing with the goblins, or maybe they

decide to ignore it, in that case we can maybe roll a d6 and on a 5-6 they are ambushed by goblins along the road as they're leaving down.

Let's say they weren't ambushed then, what next? Well we can say that they weren't ambushed, because up the road the goblins laid attack to a nearby caravan, and a wizard who managed to scare them off is beset because they stole his magical orb, and their shaman used it in battle to spirit the group away under the cover of smoke. The wizard is willing to reward the players if they go after them and slay the goblins before they untap all of the orb's power.

Now if the players don't want to at that point, shelve it, have them ambushed by a group of wolves in the night instead to keep things going, in the next town sow rumors about some ruins to the east, and in the ruins you put in a plot hook that you think the players will really go after, but in the back of your mind remember those goblins, and throw them back later as a greater threat that the players may wish to thwart.

However, ONLY do this a good 75% of the time, allowing certain plot hooks to vanish will make the world seem more real to them.

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Remember your players are roleplaying. As long as it makes sense for their characters, they are likely to do it.

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## Pitch the hook, not the adventure.

The adventure is technically anything they decide to do after falling for the hook, so you should only have bullet points, locations, and NPCs ready to go should they stumble onto your breadcrumbs.

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Don't force the players to take the plot hook, but have there be consequences if they decide not to. If the players don't stop the Orcs ransacking the town for example, they'll come back to find the town burned down and now they can no longer rest there. They fucked up and their inaction caused the world to change.

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Offering up quest hooks is like describing a room with a clue in it.

Everything you mention is going to seem like a flashing sign.

The only good option is mention an assortment of interesting things and let the players decide what's important.

The trick is to go light on the pressure when presenting plotooks. Make the pros and cons of any quest clear, so if the PCs ignore it, the cons are seen as natural developments, not punishment. Ideally, the PCs should want to take the quest, not feel obligated to.

One thing I like to do is set up the area with about 8 proto-BBEGs, and as the PCs defeat them, each other one absorbs more power, influence, and control, getting stronger as the PCs do, whichever direction they choose.

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Someone who goes out of their way to avoid any and all plotooks is someone who you shouldn't be inviting back to your game table.

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There is literally nothing wrong with plotooks as long as you allow the players to ignore them. If they're real players, if they're good players, they will realize that the game will be more fun if they go on an adventure instead of poking around - and they will follow the plotooks.

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A hook is not an end but a beginning. They are vapid and pop up easily all over a story. It is just something that implies there's more to discover, an offer to the players who can go and find out more, or not.

>The trader explaining how prices are bad because of the conflict (which conflict?)

>The drunk blowing off steam because of all the hard work (making what?)

>The village cowered into hiding from strangers (after what happened?)

>The thief stealing to feed her children after her husband was killed and her home destroyed (by what?)

>The passer by murdered in a back alley (over what?)

>The bag of loot lost in the street (by whom?)

Then according to the players' suspicions and expectations you spin a yarn that is centered about leading on to bigger things. If they carefully investigate it becomes a mystery. If they rush in and blatantly demand it becomes a combat encounter, with consequences. If they sneak around it becomes a heist. If they use contacts and position NPCs it becomes a social intrigue. Mix and match as needed.

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Thanks for reading, be excellent to each other, and party on, anons!

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## Island Design Theory

<http://www.gnomestew.com/game-mastering/gming-advice/island-design-theory/>

Posted By *John Arcadian* On January 20, 2009 @ 2:29 am In Gaming Trends, GMing Advice

### Island Design Style

- Take all the things that you feel are important to the story. These should be things such as the Big Bad Evil Guy/Gal, Important NPCs, Important Story Arcs, Important Story Elements, Items, Rewards, Character Goals, etc.
  - Keep them all in your head, but arranged as little islands floating in the water without any direct connections to each other.
  - Arrange the islands in a loose order via proximity and where they should come in the story. Islands that the PCs should get to first, keep up front. End game islands should float around in the back.
  - As the PCs progress through the story let them find their own paths between the islands or move islands into and out of their path by modifying elements of the game being played.
- Linear plots are fine, but flexible ones can be more realistic and more fun to play. Island Design keeps your plots loose and malleable, making them easy to adjust.

One plot element may be the hidden fortress where the BBEG resides. The PCs might discover the location in some way that you hadn't thought of. They might bribe an NPC who knows the location, or sneak in with the laundry delivery. This might get them there earlier than you had intended, but that doesn't mean you have to bring them back on course. If you don't want them to fight the BBEG yet, then move his island farther away and make up a new island or bring something more appropriate in. Maybe a minion NPC is there instead of the BBEG. Maybe they find the fortress unoccupied but without the treasures it would normally have because the troops were away mounting a war someplace else. These elements can be turned into their own islands and moved back in at a better time.

If a story goes in the wrong direction, it doesn't mean everything about it needs to go. The elements of it can be re-skinned for later use. If the PCs get the artifact that was needed to awaken the dead god, maybe the BBEG doesn't spend time trying to get it back but researching a new spell, or killing 100 people from a certain area in revenge. The giant cave beast the PCs would have encountered as they tried to infiltrate the BBEG's lair could now be sent out with a squad of thugs and trainers to help assault the king's city.

### Benefits

- When the players find an interesting solution and you decide to go with it, they feel like they've just "beaten" the game. Their character's actions had an impact and their ideas came into play. The world gets fleshed out a bit because they feel they circumvented an obstacle instead of following a predefined course.
- If something goes awry, or is unplanned for, it is easier to change the plot around to accommodate.
- The Game Master can leave some of the plot in the hands of the players and let them do things that are more interesting to them.
- Even though the plot progression hasn't been laid out beforehand, it feels more linear to the players since they never, or rarely, had to backtrack and try something again.

- In the end the Game Master has more control over the general plot progression since he or she can change things on the fly.

#### **Drawbacks**

- Players who like order and following the Game Master's lead might find it hard to adjust.
- Depending on play style, Game Master's can feel like there is little structure to the story since it is being built as it is played.
- Playing in a more rigid system can have some issues when it comes time to adjust stated properties.
- More time might be taken to research and prepare new things at the gaming table.
- Putting things under definite categories becomes harder to do. A document or file for NPCs will be shredded once you start moving them around in different places in the story.

#### **Some Things To Keep In Mind**

- Pick out the game elements that are malleable and can be incorporated in different places. Make these your islands.
  - Making connections between islands becomes important. If you bring in a new island that the story so far hasn't had any reason to lead to, you'll have to throw some things in to lead the PCs there. You can also use unused elements that are already in the story so far, as long as you remember they won't be available until later.
  - Remember, the players don't see the planning and changes you make to the islands. To them it looks like one big semi-coherent story. Especially at the end. They will, however, realize that they had more to do with actually making it happen.
  - Keeping notes for the islands in a way that they can be shuffled can be a great benefit. Writing things down on index cards or in definitely separated sections of a document can be very helpful.
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