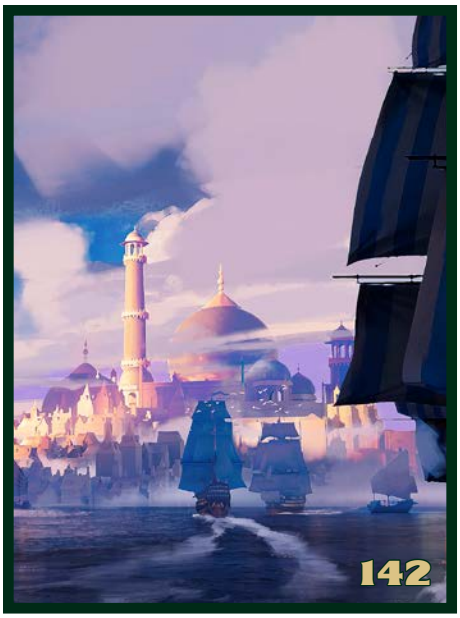


Introduction

The focus of every Pathfinder game is the player characters—they're the stars of the show and appear in every scene that plays out in-game. But what about those scenes? What stories are being told? What old legends are being discovered, and what new ones are being forged? Who are the villains, the allies, the traitors, the lovers, the monsters, and the gods? Who runs the world? When you're the Game Master, that's all up to you!

The Game Master

In Pathfinder, the Game Master (often abbreviated as GM) is the player in charge of the story and the world the other players are exploring. When you're the GM, you take on the rewarding role of crafting fun experiences for a group of your friends. Your responsibilities include...

- Telling the story of the group's adventures in a compelling and consistent way.
- Fleshing out the world in which the game takes place, emphasizing the fantastical while grounding it enough in the real world to feel believable.
- Entertaining the players and yourself with novel concepts and rewarding creative ideas with interesting outcomes.
- Preparing for game sessions by building or studying adventures and creating characters and plots.
- Improvising the reactions of nonplayer characters (NPCs) and other forces in the world as the players do unexpected things.
- Making rules decisions to ensure fairness and keep the game moving forward.

Though the word "master" is in the GM's title, it's not a role that requires—or even benefits from—absolutism. Pathfinder is a collaborative experience, and while your role as the Game Master is one of adjudicator or moderator, it doesn't mean you control everything at the table, especially not the players and their characters. Nor does the role require mastery, either of the rules or the setting. You'll need to understand the game, but you don't need to have every rule memorized. When everyone shares the goal of having fun and telling a story together, the details will fall into place.

How to Use This Book

GM Core is one of the central rule books for Pathfinder, and it provides guidance on building and running whatever fantastic stories you wish to tell. The book also gives information on the Age of Lost Omens—the setting of Pathfinder—as well as rules variants and tools you can use to customize the game. Lastly, the book contains the magical items and other treasure that you can place throughout your adventure to reward your PCs for their victories. Tips and advice for running a smooth game are included as well!

Pathfinder as a game is all about customization, and this book provides you as the Game Master ways to customize your game just as a player customizes their character. The toolbox nature of *GM Core* makes it easy to select whatever parts you need for the game you're running at any time, especially in the Building Games and Subsystems chapters. As with any toolbox, you won't need to use everything at once!

Choosing Your Tools

No two Game Masters are the same. Perhaps you're a veteran GM who's looking for new ways to tailor your game to suit your interests and those of your players. Or perhaps you're a brand-new GM looking for guidance to feel comfortable leading a game of your own. Maybe you've been a GM for years, but this is your first time running a Pathfinder game. No matter where you are as a Game Master, this book is a valuable tool that can help you tell the stories you want to tell with your players.

I'm a New Game Master

You'll find a wealth of information to help you feel confident in running your games. Chapter 1: Running Games can help you better understand how to run a game in different modes of play, set DCs, give out rewards, adjudicate the rules quickly and fairly, and adapt when special circumstances or problems crop up at your table. This chapter also contains advice on using and determining rarity in your game, working with your players to create a collaborative story, and adapting your game to meet the needs of the players at your table.

I'm Running a Published Adventure

You'll find guidance in Chapter 1 specifically for running published adventures, and most of the advice in that chapter about running a game applies to published adventures. The information in Chapter 3 gives you a primer on the Age of Lost Omens setting, introducing the world and its nations, peoples, and history that you'll find featured in Pathfinder's published stories. A number of adventures—especially scenarios in the Pathfinder Society Organized Play program and Pathfinder Adventure Path volumes—use the subsystems in Chapter 4. The Victory Points subsystem is the most fundamental of these, but many adventures also use the other subsystems found there for things like vehicles, chases, and influence.

REMEMBER THE FIRST RULE

The first rule of Pathfinder is that **this game is yours**. The rest of the rules exist for you to use to tell the stories you want to tell and share exciting adventures with your friends. There are plenty of rules in this book, but none of them override that first rule. Take the rules that help you make the game you want, change those that don't do quite what you need them to, and leave the ones that aren't helping. It's your game. There's no right or wrong way to GM so long as everyone is having fun—and that includes you!

CAMPAIGNS, ADVENTURES, AND ENCOUNTERS

The rules and advice in this book frequently refer to three main structures of a game. A **campaign** is your group's game as a whole, a serialized story consisting of one or more adventures. Each **adventure** tells a single story arc with a beginning, middle, and end; it includes many interactions, challenges, and encounters. An **encounter** is a single showdown or contest between the player characters and their foes or other nonplayer characters.

I'm Making My Own Adventure

If you are looking to create your own Pathfinder adventures, Chapter 2 provides you design guidance ranging from the broad strokes of building an entire campaign, to individual adventures, to the particular considerations of any given encounter. This chapter also provides a toolbox you can use to build the creatures, hazards, items, and other elements you want to use in your adventures.

If you plan to set your adventures in a world of your own design, the world-building section of Chapter 2 can guide that process and help you establish the details you'll need to ensure your setting is a vibrant backdrop for fantastic stories. You can also use the information on nations, settlements, and planes in Chapter 3 to detail those parts of your world.

I Need Items!

New and experienced GMs alike will find the treasures in Chapter 5 of great interest, whether you're looking up what a reward in a published Pathfinder adventure might be or searching for just the right piece of magical gear to give your players after a quest. Persistent items like magical weapons and armor can serve as longstanding parts of a player's kit, and consumable items like potions or talismans can inject fun one-off effects into your party. Lastly, the chapter contains highly narrative items that can play a role in campaigns all on their own, from artifacts and cursed items to powerful relics that grow alongside your players.

In many campaigns, you can let players freely peruse this chapter to find items they like. This is especially true when players craft magic items or have broad access to magic item shops in Absalom or a similar location.

Chapter 1: Running the Game

As Game Master, you run each session of Pathfinder, providing the link between the players and the world of the game. It's up to you to set the scene as the player characters battle monsters, interact with other people, and explore new locations.

This chapter provides the tools you need to shoulder those responsibilities. The following sections break down the various components of a campaign, discuss the different modes of play and how to set DCs for the tasks the PCs attempt, provide different ways of rewarding player characters, and describe aspects of the environment that might affect an adventuring party.

A Welcoming Environment

The role of Game Master comes with the responsibility of ensuring you and the rest of the players have a rewarding, fun time during the game. Games can deal with difficult subjects and have stressful moments, but fundamentally Pathfinder is a leisure activity. It can remain so only if the players follow a social contract and respect one another.

Players with physical or mental disabilities might find themselves more challenged than abled players. Work with your players to ensure they have the resources and support they need. Additionally, be on the lookout for inappropriate behavior, whether intentional or inadvertent, and pay careful attention to players' body language during the game. If you notice a player becoming uncomfortable, you are empowered to pause the game, take it in a new direction, privately check in with your players during or after the session, or take any other action you think is appropriate.

If a player tells you they're uncomfortable with something in the game, whether it's content you've presented as the GM or another player's or PC's actions, listen carefully to that player and take steps to ensure they can once again have fun during your game. If you're preparing prewritten material and you find a

character or a situation inappropriate, you are fully empowered to change any details as you see fit. You also have the authority (and responsibility) to ask players to change their behavior—or even leave the table—if what they're doing is unacceptable or makes others feel uncomfortable. It's never appropriate to make the person who is uncomfortable responsible for resolving a problem. It's okay if mistakes happen. What's important is how you respond and move forward.

Gaming is for everyone. Never let those acting in bad faith undermine your game or exclude other players. Your efforts are part of the long-term process of making games and game culture welcoming to all. Working together, we can build a community where players of all identities and experiences feel safe.

Objectionable Content

Before a campaign begins, check in with your players—as a group or individually—to find out what types of content they want to allow in the game and which topics they would prefer to avoid. Because the story unfolds in real time, it's essential that you discuss these topics before the game starts, often in a session zero (see page 9). These discussions are intended to keep players safe, so it's not okay to ask why someone wants a type of content banned. If someone wants it banned, ban it—no questions asked.

It can help to start with a rating, like those used for movies or video games. Pathfinder games often include violence and cruelty. What's the limit on how graphically these concepts should be described? Can players swear at the table? Does anyone have phobias they don't want to appear in the game, such as spiders or body horror?

After you figure out the limits on objectionable content, you have four important tasks:

- Clearly convey these limits to the other players.
- Ensure you and the players abide by the boundaries.
- Act immediately if someone becomes uncomfortable about content during a session, even if it wasn't already banned in a prior discussion. Once the issue is resolved, move on.
- Resolve the issue if any player deliberately pushes these boundaries, tries to find loopholes, tries to renegotiate the limits, or belittles people for having a different tolerance to objectionable content.

The Pathfinder Baseline

You might find that your players don't have much to say on the topic of objectionable content and just assume that general societal mores will keep the most uncomfortable topics out of the game. That's not always enough, as that approach relies on shared assumptions that aren't always accurate. The following is a set of basic assumptions that works for many groups, which you can modify to fit your preferences and those of the other players.

TOOLS FOR RESPONSIBLE PLAY

Consent and comfort are important topics for roleplaying games, and many designers have created techniques to facilitate responsible play. Some methods you can use are lines and veils, developed by Ron Edwards, and the X-Card, developed by John Stavropoulos.

Lines and Veils

The terms "line" and "veil" can give your table a common vocabulary for the concepts described in this section. A line is a hard limit to the actions players might take, such as "We're drawing a line at torture." The group agrees not to cross a line and omits that content from the game. A veil indicates something that shouldn't be described in detail. The scene fades to black, or the group moves on to discuss a different topic, though whatever the veil is drawn across still happens. For example, you might say, "We'll draw a veil as those characters head into the bedroom." Players might find they need to modify their lines and veils as play continues.

The X-Card

Draw an "X" on a card, and you've got an X-Card. Place it on the table at the start of the session. Any player can silently reject content they find upsetting by tapping the X-Card; whoever is speaking then rewinds a bit and continues on, excising the content. As with setting the basic campaign guidelines, there are no questions asked, no judgment, and no argument when someone taps the X-Card. You can, however, ask for clarification if you need it, such as "How far back should I rewind?" Some groups instead make an X with their hands, say "Let's X that out," or use some other method. Either way, follow up with the player privately after the game to see if the guidelines need to be revised. You can find more details at **tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg**.

- Bloodshed, injuries, and even dismemberment might be described. However, excessive descriptions of gore and cruelty should be avoided.
- Romantic and sexual relationships can happen in the game, but players should avoid being overly suggestive. Sex always happens "off-screen." Because attempts at initiating a relationship between player characters can be uncomfortably similar to one player hitting on another, this should generally be avoided (and is entirely inappropriate when playing with strangers).
- Avoid excessively gross or scatological descriptions.

The following acts should never be performed by player characters:

- Torture
- Rape, nonconsensual sexual contact, or sexual threats
- Harm to children, including sexual abuse
- Owning slaves or profiting from the slave trade
- Reprehensible uses of mind-control magic

Collaboration During Play

As Game Master, you have the final say on how the world and rules function and how nonplayer characters act. This rule's purpose is to make the game run smoothly, with one guiding hand ensuring consistency. It's not intended to make one player into a dictator over the rest of the group. Collaboration is vital to roleplaying games!

How you implement collaboration in a game depends on what your players are interested in. In some groups, players enjoy adding details to the world and to the nonplayer characters. In others, players want to feel like the world is outside their control, and the only decisions they get to make are those made by their own characters. Both are fun and acceptable ways to play.

You are encouraged to collect input from your players before you start, asking what storytelling genres they'd like to emphasize, which areas of the world they want to play in, the types of enemies they'd like to face, or which published adventure they want to play. A good campaign includes some back-and-forth at the beginning as the players figure out what characters they want to play and you figure out what sort of adventure would be most enjoyable for the group. The results can range from building an adventure entirely to fit the characters to choosing a specific published adventure, having the players make their characters, and then adapting the beginning of that adventure so that all the player characters have a reason to be involved.

As you play, opportunities to collaborate will occur again and again. When players throw out suggestions or come up with specific theories about the events of the campaign, they're telling you what they'd like to see in the game. Try to find ways to incorporate their suggestions, but with enough of a twist that each still includes something unexpected. Remember that as the Game Master, you're a player too—don't forget to include content that you're excited to see as well!

Villains might engage in such acts, but they won't happen "on-screen" or won't be described in detail. Many groups choose to not have villains engage in these activities at all, keeping these reprehensible acts out of mind entirely.

Social Spillover

As important as it is to take care of yourself and the other players in your game, be mindful of your group's impact on the other people around you. If you're playing in a space that's not your own, respect your hosts. If you're playing in public, consider the comfort of the people around you, not just what your group is comfortable with. It's easy to get caught up in a game, as we get sucked into the microcosm of an imagined world, but don't ignore the real world around you. Be aware when you're making too much noise, leaving a mess, alarming passersby with graphic descriptions of violence, or even just giving the cold shoulder to curious spectators witnessing RPG play for the first time.

Preparing Adventures

An adventure is a self-contained collection of story elements, characters, and settings that form the basis for the story you and the other players tell. Think of the adventure as an outline for your story. You'll have major beats you want to include, some consistent characters, and themes you want to convey, but all sorts of things can change during the process of turning the outline into a completed story.

You might use a published adventure from Paizo or another company, or you might construct your own adventure as you prepare for your game sessions.

Published Adventures

Prewritten adventures include background information and nonplayer characters needed for the story, plus all the locations, maps, and monster groups necessary for both exploration and encounters. Prewritten adventures can speed up your preparation, since you can simply read the relevant sections of the adventure before a game, and you don't have to create everything from scratch. A published adventure already includes the expected amount of encounters and treasure, and you can find adventures built for different character levels to match your group. Reading a published adventure or running one as your first game can help you see how adventures are structured, which makes it easier to write one later if you choose.

Though a published adventure is prewritten, it's not set in stone. Changing the details of an adventure to suit your group isn't just acceptable, it's encouraged! Use the backstories and predilections of the player characters to inform how you change the adventure. This can mean altering adversaries so they're linked to the player characters, changing the setting to a place some of the player characters are from, or excising particular scenes if you know they won't appeal to your players.

Pathfinder Society

Organized play campaigns allow you to play in and run games all over the world with persistent characters. If you want to play Pathfinder this way, you can do so through the Pathfinder Society program! Once you go online to **pathfindersociety.club** to make an account, you can organize games yourself with your friends or join an existing event.

At the start of a session when you're running a PFS adventure, you'll collect your players' information. At the end of the adventure, you'll write down the rewards their characters earn for completing the scenario on a

chronicle sheet your players can keep for their records. The rewards they gain are detailed in each adventure. Once you report the session's results online, the rewards become a persistent part of these characters, even if they play in other games with other groups. These scenarios include important choices, and you can report what your group chose—decisions that will guide the future of the campaign!

Your Own Adventures

Building your own adventure can be much more challenging than using a published one, but it lets you express yourself, be even more creative, and tailor the game directly to the players and their characters. Chapter 2 contains guidance on building your own adventures, as well as tools and resources for designing content for your players.

Adventure plotting can start at many different points. You might begin with a particular antagonist, then construct an adventure that fits that villain's theme and leads the group to them. Alternatively, you could start with an interesting location for exploration, then populate it with adversaries and challenges appropriate to the setting.

Character Creation

At the outset of a new campaign, the players will create new player characters. Part of that process involves you introducing what the campaign will be about and what types of characters are most appropriate. Work with the players to determine which rule options are available. The safest options are the common choices from *Player Core*. If players want to use common options from other books or uncommon or rare options, review those options to see if any of them conflict with the style of campaign you have in mind or might present strange surprises down the road. It's usually best to allow new options, but there's no obligation to do so. Be as open as you're comfortable with.

Session Zero

Some groups prefer to have everyone create their characters in advance and show up ready to play. However, getting the group together to make characters can be fun and can benefit your game down the line. A session for building characters is commonly called "session zero." Session zero is typically shorter than other game sessions, so you might plan a short introductory scene for when everyone has finished building their characters or just hang out and do something else after you've planned your characters.

Having a session zero lets players share character details, making it easier for their characters to have links and relationships with one another before the adventure starts, and gives players the chance to become invested in each other's characters by organically learning what decisions other players made. These sessions also give veterans the chance to help less experienced players through character creation. Lastly, session zero can give you a better understanding of the characters and help the players integrate them into the adventure in interesting ways.

PAIZO'S PUBLISHED ADVENTURES

You can purchase the following types of adventures at **paizo.com**, your local game store, or many bookstores. If you want to acquire all the adventures in a given line, you can purchase a subscription at **paizo.com**.

Pathfinder Adventure Paths

Each monthly volume of a Pathfinder Adventure Path leads into the next as part of a greater story spanning multiple volumes. The first volume of each Adventure Path typically starts at 1st level, and each volume has a self-contained story that eventually leads to a big climax at the end of the final volume. Each volume also typically includes new monsters, rules, and details about the world. Each Adventure Path has a different theme, and their settings range across the Inner Sea region and beyond.

Pathfinder Adventures

Pathfinder Adventures are standalone adventures that cover several levels of play. They're self-contained and typically have a unique structure or theme. You can play through a Pathfinder Adventure on its own or as part of your ongoing campaign—some make ideal side adventures for Adventure Paths that have similar themes.

Pathfinder Society Scenarios

Scenarios are the adventures used by the Pathfinder Society Organized Play program; you can play them as part of the Pathfinder Society or on your own. Each takes about 4 to 5 hours to run, so you can tell a whole story in a short amount of time, but they're also part of a larger continuity and can be combined together to form the basis of a longer campaign.

Planning a Session

A campaign happens over a series of gatherings between you and the other players, called game sessions. Each session is usually several hours long, with multiple encounters, some exploration, and possibly downtime. Your session can be compared to an episode of a TV show; it should include some twists, turns, and changes, and end leaving people excited about what comes next.

One of the greatest challenges in gaming is scheduling a time for everyone to get together and play. Often, this responsibility falls on you as the GM, since you're the one who has to prepare your game between sessions.

Many games have a set schedule, such as once per week, once every 2 weeks, or once per month. The less frequently your group meets, the better notes and recaps you'll need to keep everyone on the same page.

Plan a time for everybody to arrive, and also try to set a time when playing the game will begin. This can make it easier for everyone to finish chatting, catching up, and eating in a timely fashion so you can start playing the game. Having an end time in mind is also fairly important. A typical game session lasts about 4 hours, though some groups hold 2-hour sessions or play marathon games. Less than 2 hours usually isn't enough time to get much done in most Pathfinder campaigns. If your session will be longer than 2 hours, plan out some 15-minute breaks (in addition to bathroom and beverage breaks, which players can take as needed).

Running a Session

During a session, you're in charge of keeping the game's action moving, managing the different modes of play, fielding questions, and making rules decisions. You'll also want to keep a rough eye on the time, so you can end when most convenient for the group.

You're the interface between the rules and the imagined world you and the other players share. They will ask you questions, and they'll act based on their own assumptions. It's up to you to establish what's true in the world, but you don't do this unilaterally. You're informed by the setting's backstory, your preparations, and the suggestions and assumptions the other players bring to the table. Keep in mind that until you announce something, your own plans are subject to change. For example, if you originally intended the owner of a tavern to be kindly and well-intentioned, but a player misreads her and invents an interesting conspiracy theory regarding her intentions that sounds fun, you might convert the tavern owner into an agent of evil after all.

You'll also determine when PCs and foes need to attempt checks, as well as the consequences of those rolls. This comes up most often outside of encounters, as encounters are more regimented about when checks happen and how they are resolved. In an encounter, a player can usually determine their own character's turn, with you chiming in only to say whether an attack hits or if something in the environment requires a character to attempt a check.

Pacing Game Sessions

Most sessions should have lulls in the action punctuated by challenges such as intense encounters, puzzle-based exploration, and investigation. Presenting players with

a variety of such obstacles can help them feel more engaged at the table. Information flow matters, too. If the group meets a large number of NPCs in short order, that can make it harder for them to remember individuals. It helps to break things up into smaller scenes and memorable moments.

Knowing when to end a session takes practice. About 20 minutes before a play session is scheduled to conclude, it can be beneficial to figure out how you'd like to end. It can be memorable to end with a cliffhanger—a moment so curious and abrupt it raises questions about what happens next. Examples include ending play before combat, when the PCs find vital information, or as they discover treasure. Doing so can inspire the PCs to discuss the game between sessions. Note anything that could be satisfying to resolve over media, such as email. This could include divvying up treasure, leveling up, or completing downtime tasks.

Starting a Session

Once everyone is ready, get everyone's attention and cover the following topics. These are in a rough order that you can change based on your group's style or a session's needs.

- Recap what happened during the previous sessions.
- Establish where the characters are at the beginning of this session. Have they been resting since their last challenge? Are they in a hallway, preparing to raid the next room of a dungeon? Tell players whether their characters had time to rest or recover since the last session.
- Remind players that they each have 1 Hero Point at the start of the session.
- Establish goals. The players should have an idea of what they want to do next. Reestablish any goals the group already had, then let the players weigh in on whether these goals still apply, and on whether there's anything else they hope to accomplish in this session.
- Commence adventuring! Decide which mode of play you're going to start in, then lead off with a verbal prompt to get the action started. You might ask a question related to a particular character, have everyone immediately roll initiative as a monster attacks, or briefly describe the environment and sensations that surround the player characters, allowing them to react.

The Spotlight

As you run the game, keep track of who has the spotlight. It can be easy to keep attention on the most outgoing player or character, but you need to check in with all the players. If a player hasn't contributed in some time, stop and ask, "What's your character doing at this point?" If the player's not sure, add a detail or nonplayer character to the scene that the player might find interesting.

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

Just because you're the GM and ostensibly in charge doesn't mean you have to do all the extra work to make the campaign run. Some of the tasks described here, like scheduling games, taking notes, and giving recaps, can be delegated to other players. You might also have someone track initiative or the Hit Points of the PCs' foes for you in encounters, or even run those foes if you have a large group and someone would rather do that than control a character of their own. It's also great when someone else can host a session, provide snacks for the group, or take on other responsibilities that aren't directly related to the game.

It's best to figure out a schedule of responsibilities when you're first setting up a game. Ask the players what they're willing to take on. If you start to feel overwhelmed partway through a campaign, you can revisit the topic and try out new options until you find a setup that's comfortable.

Stakes and Consequences

A GM should always convey a clear picture of the stakes and consequences of the PCs' actions or inaction. What horrible things will happen if the PCs fail? What can they achieve if they go beyond what's expected of them? A well-constructed adventure conveys the stakes at the outset, but it's also important to remind the players of those stakes throughout play. A game where the stakes are extremely high all the time cuts out the opportunity for low-key scenes, and can be overwhelming or even monotonous. In most games, players enjoy having some scenes where their characters can relax and socialize with low stakes as well.

Consequences should be specific and evocative. Don't just tell the players what happened after success or failure; let their characters witness it in the world. Are they greeted as heroes by townsfolk? Does the bastion of evil crack and shudder, falling apart as the PCs escape? Does a failure lead to the death of an ally and a somber funeral? It's usually best if the PCs can foresee the consequences, at least in a general sense. If a villain demonstrates their intention to conquer a city, and the PCs don't stop them, then the city gets conquered. It's OK if you have an idea for an interesting subversion occasionally, but keep those to a minimum or the chain of cause and effect will become too muddy.

Failing Forward

Unexpected failure can bring the game to a halt, particularly during exploration. "Failing forward" means finding a way to progress the story instead of saying, "That didn't work." This doesn't mean the group can't fail, or that the PCs should get what they wanted despite failing. Rather, it means that a failure might still impart more information, reveal a way to improve their

HERO POINTS

As GM, you're in charge of doling out Hero Points during sessions. Recommendations for how to grant them appear on page 57, but you can also consider Hero Points a way to reinforce your personal style of Game Mastering and reward what you and the other players value during play. It can help to keep a Hero Point token on hand as a visual and tactile reminder to hand them out when appropriate. You can also asking your players to tell you when they think a PC's action merits a Hero Point.

chances next time, or even cause unforeseen difficulties. Doing so means the player's choice to attempt a check *mattered*, even if the results weren't what they wanted. Allowing the PCs to fail forward means fewer dead ends and perfunctory checks. It's important, however, not to put unnecessary pressure on yourself to do so all the time. Sometimes you won't know immediately how a PC can fail forward, and in those cases, it's usually best to just move on.

Improvisation

As a GM, you often make things up on the fly. You can find tips for improvising rules within the Adjudicating Rules section of this book (page 15). When an issue seems to pertain to the story instead of the rules, ask yourself the following questions.

- Does something already established in our story so far tell me what should happen here?
- What would the NPC's personality lead them to do?
- What does the player expect to happen?
- What would best fit the themes of our story?

You might not have a good answer for every question, but asking them can inspire useful solutions. If what you need to invent is significant in the storyline or world, there's nothing wrong with asking the group to take a little break while you fill in the gap. If it's not particularly significant and you can't come up with anything more compelling, it's also okay to say "Nothing happens" and move on.

Often, a player will ask, "What happens when I do that?" This is a good indicator that the player expects that what they've done will draw a reaction from an NPC or the environment. Unless the player is way off base, provide an in-game response, even if it's minor. The player has telegraphed what matters to them, and the perceived importance of their action can draw them into the game.

Special Circumstances

The player characters in your group will at times attempt tasks that should be easier or harder than the rules or adventure would otherwise lead you to expect, such as a PC Gathering Information in their hometown. In these cases, you can just apply a circumstance bonus or penalty. Usually, this is +1 or –1 for a minor but significant circumstance, but you can adjust this bonus or penalty to +2 or –2 for a major circumstance. The maximum bonus or penalty, +4 or –4, should apply only if someone has an overwhelming advantage or is trying something extremely unlikely but not quite impossible.

You can also add traits to actions. Let's say that during a fight against a fire elemental, Seelah Interacts to pour water from her waterskin on her sword. You could add the water trait to her next Strike so Seelah can take advantage of the fire elemental's weakness to water. A PC getting an advantage in this way should usually have to use an action to do so, so Seelah would get the benefit for one attack, but to do it again she'd need to use her waterskin once more.

False Information

A critical failure to Recall Knowledge can result in you needing to convey false information, requiring some improvisation. If you aren't careful, this information can be perceived by the PCs as too silly or could derail the game. For example, if a PC misinterpreted text about the god of commerce, Abadar, telling them that they now believe the god is an incompetent chaotic spendthrift who's bad with money might be too far-fetched. Similarly, if they incorrectly believe Abadar will reward them with great wealth if they ring bells in four different temple corners, this could send them on a tangent.

Providing false information can cause the PCs to make mistakes, but the consequences should typically be immediate rather than continual or far in the future. Avoid dispensing false information that might not be used for hours or entire sessions after the check is forgotten. If you're unsure, the safest form of false information is information that's wrong but not in a way that causes major consequences. Remember that a critical failure says you get incorrect information, not that you get important-seeming false information. Erroneously believing Abadar's symbol is a set of scales instead of a key might lead to a miscommunication, but one that's not dangerous, easy to clear up, and only a little embarrassing for the PC.

Secret Checks

During play, you roll some checks in secret instead of allowing the player to do so, as explained on page 405 of *Player Core*. This rule helps ensure that a player remains uncertain at times when their character is unsure of how a situation may resolve, immersing the player in their character's perspective. It can be handy to keep a list of the PCs' modifiers on hand to help you roll secret checks more quickly. At least, you should record each player's Perception modifier, their saving throw modifiers (especially Will), and the skill modifiers of any skills they

often use to Recall Knowledge. Check in anytime the PCs level up, and consider asking the players to update you when any of these modifiers change.

You can still have the players roll the checks even if an action has the secret trait. This is usually best done when the results are going to be immediate or when stakes are low, like when the PC is trying to recall something during downtime that they'll see is false through the course of their research. You can instead have the players handle all their rolls, secret or otherwise. This works best when the group is interested in leaning into the dramatic irony of knowing a PC is wrong and playing up their characters' mistakes.

Metagaming

Knowledge the players have that their characters don't is often called "metagame knowledge," and using it to influence characters' decisions is called "metagaming." Some metagaming results naturally from play and is wise to disregard. The wizard aiming a *fireball* precisely enough to include three enemies in the very edge of the spell's area is probably unrealistic, but isn't that disruptive to play. Things get more questionable if the player says something like "That's a rakshasa, so don't use divine spells against it." —regardless of whether their character has encountered a rakshasa before or identified the creature. Each group is different, and the assumption of what the characters know varies. If metagaming starts to get out of hand, you might use some gentle reminders, like "I'm not sure your character's aware of that" or "Can you explain your character's thinking when they do that?" If the problem persists, see the guidelines mentioned in the Problematic Players section on page 18.

Roleplaying NPCs

Although the PCs are the stars of the game, NPCs make the world around the PCs vibrant. They can become a part of the story, sometimes for years, weaving into the story right alongside the PCs. Portray NPCs however it works best for you. Some GMs keep it simple, describing the NPCs simply by their looks or their hook (see below). Others go into more detail, using accents, mannerisms, or acting.

Because NPCs have smaller roles than PCs, imparting enough information to convey their identities while they interact with the party can be challenging. When you create an NPC, start by integrating a single "hook" into their concept: a widowed merchant, a refugee from a distant realm, or a child who constantly asks awkward questions. Each hints at a backstory but is easily described in a synopsis. If the NPC continues to interact with the party, you can then add to their backstory later.

NPCs from adventures and other sourcebooks often include basic information about their personality, gender, and role in the game. Important NPCs often include more in-depth roleplaying tips, personal edicts, anathemas, and more.

NPC Limitations

Always remember that the PCs have the greatest role in your story. Avoid including allied NPCs who could easily solve any problem the PCs encounter. An extremely powerful NPC should be engaged with matters beyond what the PCs are tasked with or have some limitation that necessitates the PCs' involvement. Remember that an NPC is not "your character" in the way each player has a character. Though NPCs who travel with the party can be effective and fun when handled with caution, an NPC who effectively acts as the GM's character is often called a GMPC (Game Master Player Character) and can contribute to a feeling that the players are being coerced into making certain decisions.

JANATIMO, SPEAKER OF THE WORLD'S TALES

OFF-SESSION GAMING

Session play with a full group isn't the only way to play Pathfinder. Finding opportunities to expand on the game outside of its regular schedule can keep your group engaged between sessions.

You can get together with a single player to run a mini-session for their character, covering a mission that's important to their story but doesn't concern the rest of the group. You and the players can work out what their characters do during solid stretches of downtime via e-mail or chat messages. You can also give players opportunities to collaborate on details of the story, like having a player design a heraldic symbol for the adventuring group or map out their home base. You might even decide to award a Hero Point at the next session to a player for events that happened outside a session.

Some events aren't suitable for handling outside of sessions. Any event that strongly affects a character whose player isn't present should be handled at the table when everyone can attend. It's also helpful to recap events that took place outside of the session for all characters so no one feels excluded or lost.

Betrayal

NPCs, even allies, can shift allegiances. They might betray, fail, or sell out their companions, which can make for a meaningful story event. If an NPC is being set up to betray the party in some way, lay groundwork early on so the players don't feel ambushed by the twist. If the players can look back and see a clear path to this result, it's likely they'll feel the decision makes sense in the context of the story. Try to give the NPC a "tell" or a paper trail that can be found, especially one where the players have chances to pick up on that tell with smart use of their abilities and skills.

IRABETH TIRABADE

Respecting the Character

Sometimes when creating characters, a GM can unintentionally play into themes that can be harmful or hurtful. For example, an NPC with a background of abuse, a former or current slave, or a character with disabilities requires respectful handling. This is particularly true if you, as the GM, do not have the same life experience as the NPC in question. If you want to include these themes for an NPC, you should probably bring it up with your players beforehand and set expectations. You don't need to spoil the character, but sitting down and checking in with your players can help prevent unpleasant surprises and is better than assuming. To keep the representation respectful, avoid cliches and don't use the hook as a joke. Your group's guidelines for objectionable content can also help you portray NPCs respectfully.

A Proper End

An NPC's story should have a satisfying ending. The NPC might leave your story when they achieve a major goal, go on to other adventures, give up their dream, or die. The death of a beloved NPC should have weight. Make it sympathetic and powerful, and ideally have it take place "on stage" with the PCs present. Be prepared that NPC deaths might stir up strong emotions within the group, and be prepared to cut the session short or to fade to black to mitigate the full brunt of the event if necessary. An NPC's death should matter beyond the PCs' emotions or search for revenge, too—maybe the NPC's sacrifice saved a village or inspired others. Let players see that legacy carried on.

Special Considerations

As the GM, you may sometimes need to consider situations beyond the standard assumptions of the game. The following sections will help you in making these tricky calls or modifying your game to suit your unique table.

- **Adjudicating Rules** gives guidelines for how to use your judgment if a rule is unclear or if you find yourself unsure how to implement it.
- **Resolving Problems** contains some strategies for how to deal with common issues that can cause problems at the table.
- **Narrative Collaboration** lets you know some strategies for involving your players in constructing the story of your campaign and world.
- **Group Composition** covers some important information for playing with nonstandard groups.
- **Characters with Disabilities** offers some rules you might want to use if a player creates a character with disabilities.
- **Rarity** explains how you can use the rarity system to both deepen your setting and reward players with unusual game elements.

Adjudicating Rules

As Game Master, it falls on you to adjudicate the rules. This means you're making judgments and decisions about the rules, especially when their application is unclear. Roleplaying games encourage creativity, and however well crafted and well tested a set of rules is, players will always find situations that require interpretation and judgment by the GM. You need at least some familiarity with the rules to run a game well, but you don't need to be the foremost expert on the rules. You don't even need to know the most about the rules at your table to be a great GM! There's a key difference between "knowing" the rules and "adjudicating" the rules.

While GMing, strive to make quick, fair, and consistent rulings. Your rulings should encourage your group to work together to interpret the rules and be creative with their characters' decisions and actions. If your group is satisfied with the interpretation, you've made the right adjudication!

The Basics

The following are some basic guidelines for adjudicating rules in play—these are the same principles that Pathfinder's game rules are based on. You might want to keep printouts of these guidelines and the DC guidelines (page 53) for quick reference.

- If you don't know how long a quick task takes, go with 1 action, or 2 actions if a character shouldn't be able to perform it three times per round.
- If you're not sure what action a task uses, look for the most similar basic action. If you don't find one, make up an undefined action and add any necessary traits (usually attack, concentrate, manipulate, or move).
- When two sides are opposed, have one roll against the other's DC. Don't have both sides roll (initiative is the exception to this rule). The character who rolls is usually the one acting (except in the case of saving throws).
- If an effect raises or lowers chances of success, grant a +1 circumstance bonus or a –1 circumstance penalty.
- If you're not sure how difficult a significant challenge should be, use the DC for the party's level.
- If you're making up an effect, creatures should be incapacitated or killed on only a critical success (or for a saving throw, on a critical failure).
- If you don't know what check to use, pick the most appropriate skill. If no other skill applies to a check to Recall Knowledge, use an appropriate Lore skill (usually at an untrained proficiency rank).
- Use the characters' daily preparations as the time to reset anything that lasts roughly a day.
- When a character accomplishes something noteworthy that doesn't have rules for XP, award them XP for an accomplishment (10 to 30 XP, as described on page 56).
- When the PCs fail at a task, look for a way they might fail forward, meaning the story moves forward with a negative consequence rather than the failure halting progress entirely.

Consistency and Fairness

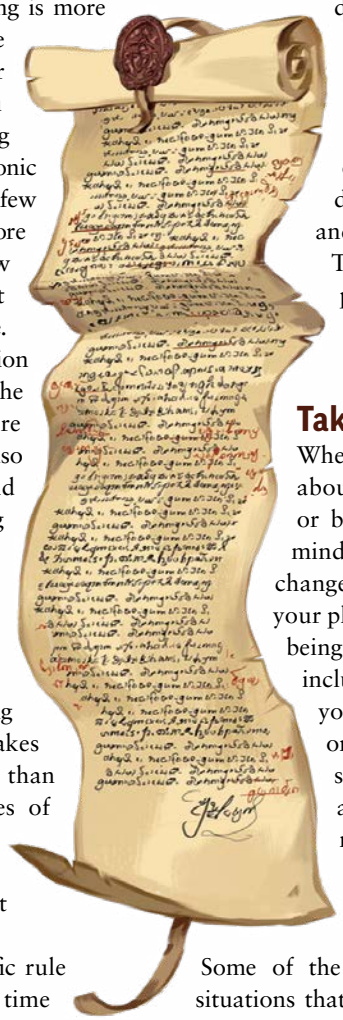
As an arbiter of the rules and the person who's setting the scene for the action, it's in your best interest to appear fair at all times. Your main defense against appearing unfair is consistency in your rulings.

Achieving consistency is as easy as explaining why you're ruling a certain way and comparing this ruling to past rulings you've made in a way that makes sense to your players. For example, you might say something like "When Torben swung from the chandelier and attacked the air elemental, I required an Athletics check as part of the action and gave a +1 circumstance bonus to the attack roll. Hanging from the rope bridge to attack the giant bat sounds similar, so why don't you roll an Athletics check." Do this any time it's applicable when you make a ruling, but don't feel compelled to do so for truly new rulings.

Through the course of playing, your previous rulings will form a set of shared preferences and an understanding between you and your group—or even become formalized house rules. Over time, your players will think about these examples when planning their actions, which can improve consistency during play.

Looking Up Rules

Remember that keeping your game moving is more important than being 100% correct. At the same time, it's perfectly acceptable to refer to the rules during a session. However, you don't have to do this alone. If you're leafing through a book or searching an electronic reference, your players are idle. There are a few techniques that make these intervals more palatable for the players. Letting them know that you're looking something up might prompt some players to also read the rule. This can increase the chances of collaboration and sets expectations for the length of the pause. Alerting your players that you're going to take a minute and read the rules also lets them know that it's a good time to tend to away-from-the-table tasks like refilling a drink.



Listen to the Players

The friends around your game table are perhaps your best tool for achieving quick, fair, and consistent rulings. Sharing the task of remembering the rules makes rules discussions collaborative rather than combative, greatly increases the chances of accurate and comprehensive recall of the written rules and your own past rulings, and is true to the shared storytelling spirit of Pathfinder.

Asking if anyone knows how a specific rule rewards those players who have spent time mastering the rules and involves more people in the discussion. It signals to other players that you are willing to hear opinions before making a ruling, and it builds a more collaborative environment. In addition, for groups with access to a large number of sourcebooks or rules resources, you can ask different players to examine separate sources. This can greatly increase the speed and accuracy of a group's rulings.

Approaching the rules as a group problem also means that you should never trivialize player concerns about a rule. You must also think about each player and assess how important the rules actually are to them. Remember, though—while rules recall is a group challenge, making the final decision on the rules interpretation and getting the session moving again falls to you.

Make the Call

Though all the above are great practices for making good rulings, often the best ruling is the one that keeps the game moving. Avoid getting so bogged down that it takes you several minutes to decide what ruling you'll proceed with. Take what's close enough and keep playing. If necessary, you can tell your group "This is how we're playing it now, but we can have more discussion between sessions." This gets you back in the action, puts a clear stamp on the fact that this is your decision in the moment, and empowers your players with permission to express their opinions on the ruling at a later time. When in doubt, rule in favor of the player's request, and then review the situation later.

The best time to really go in-depth, possibly putting the group on a short break, is when a situation is life-or-death or has major consequences in a character's story.

Take Time for Review

When you make a decision you're not sure about, look back over it at the end of a session or between sessions. You might change your mind—there's nothing wrong with that! If you change or clarify your original ruling, inform your players before the next session. No one likes being surprised by a rule change. Even better, include them in a rules conversation just like you might during a session. The guidance on discussing rules with your players still applies between sessions. Unlike at-the-table rules discussions, there's also much more time in these situations to read existing official rulings or sources.

Saying "Yes, But"

Some of the most memorable moments come from situations that inherently call for a rules interpretation, like when a player wants to do something creative using the environment. The variety of these situations is limited only by the imagination of your players. It's usually better to say "yes" than "no," within reason. For example, imagine a player wants to do something borderline nonsensical like grabbing a spider and squeezing it to force it to use its web attack. But what about a player who wants to use a fire spell to deliberately ignite a barrel of oil? Surely that should have some effect!

This is where you can use a variant of the well-known improv "Yes, and," technique: you can say "Yes, but." With "Yes, but," you allow the player's creative idea, but tie it into the world and the game rules via some sort of additional consequences, potentially adding the uncertainty of an additional roll. Here are some simple ways you might implement this tool:

- Get a fleeting benefit without a roll. Example: dip a sword into a burning brazier to add 1 fire damage on the next attack against a troll.
- Require a check, then apply a circumstance bonus to the PC's action. Example: swing from a chandelier above a foe.
- Require a check, then apply a circumstance penalty or condition to a foe. Example: throw a barrel over a monster's head.
- Require an attack roll or skill check to deal minor damage and gain another benefit. Examples: jump from a higher elevation down onto a foe for a small amount of damage, potentially knocking the foe prone; throw sand in an opponent's eyes.
- Require a directed attack against an object, then allow foes to attempt saving throws against the object's effect at a DC you choose. Example: cast an *ignition* spell at a barrel of explosives.

Another powerful tool you can use to help you say "Yes, but" when you're unsure of the game impact is to allow the idea to work just this once, letting your players know that this is part of your decision. For instance, maybe you think a PC's attempt to Grapple a spider to aim its web attack at another foe is so fun you have to let them do it, but you're worried that the effect would be so powerful that the PCs would just carry around a spider to shoot webs for the rest of the campaign. By making it a one-time effect, you can have fun but don't have to worry about whether you're setting a disruptive precedent for later on.

House Rules

You and your players will inevitably come across a rule you disagree with or that runs counter to the theme of your game. You might even decide to add a specific rule to an area not covered by the written rules. Collectively, these rulings, changes, and additions are known as house rules. It's a good idea to record them in a place where the group can easily access and refer to them, and where a potential new player could find them. Such record-keeping is a great thing to delegate to a player!

The best rule of thumb in these situations is to be slow to change the written rules and quick to revert a problematic ruling or house rule. The simple reason for this is that sticking to the written rules is the easiest way to remain fair and consistent. However, the more you learn your group's play style, the more often you'll find times where you and your group feel it's correct to institute a house rule of some sort.

Resolving Problems

Being a Game Master and running a game can be a tremendously rewarding and fulfilling experience: you get to sit down with friends old and new, roll some dice, tell stories, and have fun. That said, being a GM and running a game can present unique challenges. When dealing with problems at the table, keep in mind the primary reason to play Pathfinder is to have fun. And that's true for everyone—player or GM. Don't "solve" a problem by reducing everyone's enjoyment of the game or their ability to forge a path for their characters. Of course, sometimes your solution might not make everyone deliriously happy. Play style is very personal and individualized; rarely does a group agree on all things all the time. Solving problems can be as collaborative as the rest of the game. It's not a good idea for a GM to ignore the players' opinions—but that said, the final decision in resolving a problem rests with you.

Distractions and Interruptions

Maintaining the players' attention keeps a game moving and leads to memorable moments when everyone's in the same zone. Too many interruptions break the flow.

CHEATING

Players rarely cheat knowingly, so if you suspect a player of cheating, it's safe to assume first that they're unaware of—or simply forgot—how an aspect of the rules works. A gentle reminder of how the rule, spell, or ability in question functions is usually enough to move past the situation. Every once in a great while, you'll encounter a player who is deliberately cheating. The spirit of roleplaying is one of cooperative storytelling and overcoming challenges together, so one player cheating steals fun from every other player at the table. It's natural to feel some anger in this situation, so make sure you let some time pass between when you discover that a player is cheating and when you address it with them.

Ultimately, it will fall to you as the GM to gently make it clear that this behavior must stop. To do this well, think carefully about why the player is cheating before approaching them. The reason behind the cheating often points to a reasonable solution. When discussing the matter with your player, do your best to remain calm and inquisitive rather than accusatory.

This is fine in moderation. A game is a social gathering, so there's definitely a place for conversation that's not directly related to playing the game. These interruptions become a problem if they're too frequent, or if people are talking over others. If a player repeatedly interrupts you or other people or undercuts every crucial moment of the game with a joke, talk to them about limiting their comments to appropriate times. Often, all you need to do is hold up your hand or otherwise indicate that the player is talking out of turn to delay them until after you or another speaker finishes talking.

Phones and other mobile devices are another major source of distraction. Banning them entirely is often impractical—many players use apps to roll dice or manage their character sheets, or they need to answer texts from their partner, check in on a work project, or otherwise stay connected with people who rely on them. However, you can set ground rules against using a device for anything that's not time-sensitive or game-related, such as refreshing social media, checking the score of a hockey game, playing a mobile game, or answering a non-urgent text. You can relax these rules for players when their characters are "offstage." If a player's character isn't in a scene, that might be a good time for the player to use a mobile device.

Problematic Players

Most players who cause problems do so unintentionally—perhaps bringing out-of-game issues and stresses to the table. You shouldn't immediately jump on every instance of problematic play—everyone has a bad night on occasion. However, if someone disrupts the game on an ongoing basis, you owe it to all the players to deal with the problem. If you don't, bad feelings, grudges, and even ruined friendships could result.

Handling a problematic player requires tact: making demands in front of the rest of the group is rarely the best way to resolve the problem. Attempt to handle the problem privately away from the game, or call a break to have a private conversation if the situation is really urgent. As with all emotionally charged conversations, email, text messages, and the like can lose the subtlety of speech—it's better to meet the player face-to-face, if possible.

Here are some problematic behaviors that often come up and might require you to intervene.

- Obsessing over the letter of the rules.
- Constantly "helping" other players make the optimal choice on their turn.
- Making their character the center of attention without allowing space for other players.

Other behaviors are unacceptable and must be dealt with firmly and decisively. These can be severe enough to pause the game in progress. Such actions speak to a deeper problem and require more drastic action to solve.

- Repeatedly arguing with decisions made by other players or the GM.
- Ignoring other players' opinions.
- Deliberately derailing the adventure's plot.
- Being deliberately rude or cruel to other players—especially if it's on the basis of their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political or religious affiliation, the color of their skin, or the like.

Safety Tools

Introducing and using safety tools at your table can help head off some problematic behaviors. The X-Card and Lines and Veils tools described on page 7 allow anyone who feels uncomfortable or unsafe to express their discomfort, with clear guidance on how the rest of the table should respond. This clarity sets obvious boundaries to help enforce the social rules of the table.

Ejecting a Player

Ultimately, there's no place for a serially or deliberately disruptive player in your gaming group. Such behavior is not fair to you or the other players, and the problematic player needs to either modify their behavior or leave the group.

Before meeting with the problematic player, discuss the situation with the other players in private to ensure you make the right call and figure out what repercussions you expect and whether the game should continue at all.

When you break the news to the problematic player, be compassionate but firmly state the decision is final and restate which behaviors are responsible. If parts of having the player in the game were rewarding or you want the player to remain a friend, make that clear and decide if a player's behavior merits other changes to your relationship.

Power Imbalances

You might end up with one PC who outshines everyone else. Perhaps the player is a rules expert with a powerful character, other players are less experienced or more focused on the story of their characters, or there's just a rules combination or item that's stronger than you expected. In any case, this imbalance might mean you have other players who feel ineffective, or the overpowered character's player becomes bored because they aren't challenged during gameplay.

Talk to the player between sessions, and make it clear that no one at the table is to blame in this situation. Most players have no problem making some concessions for the happiness of the group. If the problem results from rules options, offer an easy way to retrain. If the imbalance resulted from an item, come up with a way that item might need to be lost or sacrificed, but in a satisfying way that furthers the narrative. If you meet resistance from the player, listen to their counterpoints. If you're still convinced they need to change, you might need to be more firm.

It's worth stating that players might still have fun, or even enjoy an instance of power imbalance. You don't have to do anything to address it unless it limits fun at your table.

Narrative Collaboration

The relationship between you, your players, and the story is what makes roleplaying games successful and memorable. If all the players at the table contribute ideas, the game holds more surprises for everyone—including you! While some players like to sit back and let the Game Master control everything, most players want their contributions to shape the campaign's story. This is central to the concept of player agency—making players feel like the choices they make really matter, and that the world is a living place they can change through their decisions. In some games, the players can step beyond the traditional divide between GM and players to directly influence how the story progresses. Below are three methods you can use to balance the narrative control of your game.

Idea Farm

Coming up with ideas for a campaign can sometimes feel overwhelming. This is where your players come in handy! You can solicit direct feedback from them and implement their ideas into the game. This style of narrative control preserve your authority over the game while giving players the chance to incorporate elements into the game you know they want to see. It doesn't venture beyond the traditional structure of a fantasy roleplaying game.

Plan for a few checkpoints throughout the campaign where you touch base with your players to get their ideas. The most crucial comes at the start of the game. It's best to take this step before you even set to work on crafting the world or plot, so that player input can define what's important in the game world. Later, checkpoints can coincide with major story milestones. For example, if the players set off across the sea, you might ask where they want their voyage to end and what sites, if any, they'd like to explore along the way.

Creative Collaboration

You might have players develop the stories of some of the regions or NPCs, while your contributions serve as the glue that makes it all work together. This breaks somewhat with traditional RPG structures, in that you might not be the expert on all areas of the setting and plot.

Your collaboration will depend on the interests of you and the other players. Maybe one draws a city map, another makes the stats and personality for an NPC, another controls some monsters in combat, and a fourth doesn't want to do anything beyond playing their character. There's a trade-off here, because while you'll be off-loading some of your work, you'll also need to ensure consistency across these multiple sources of ideas. It can really help to keep a log of which player is in charge of each part of your setting. If you expect one of a player's specialties to appear in an upcoming session, let them know ahead of time so they can prepare or discuss their ideas in advance with you.

Decentralized Storytelling

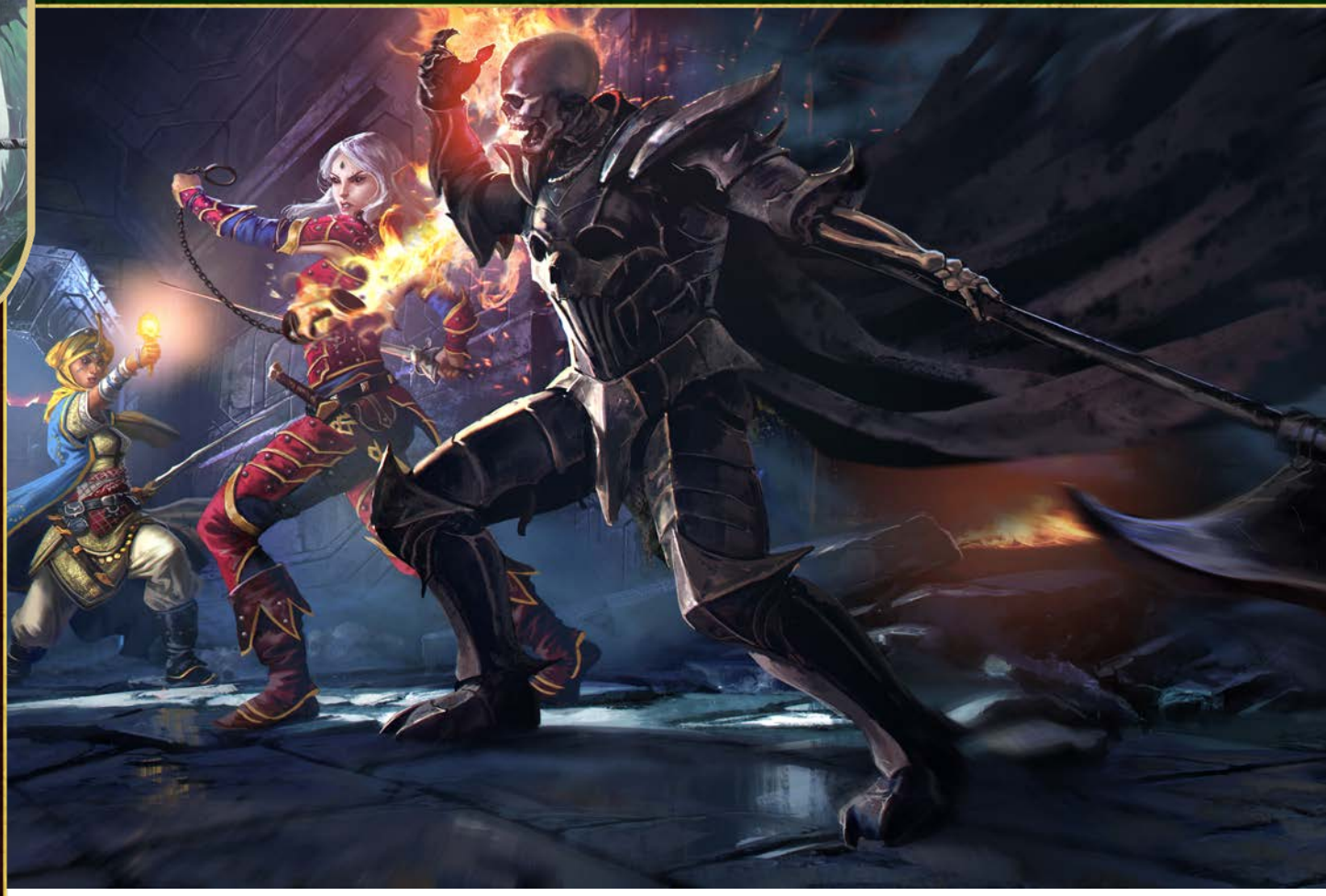
What if you want to go all the way and completely break down the walls between the GM and other players? What if you want to preside over a game in which anyone can speak for any of the NPCs, and when someone tries to determine what's down the next hallway, it's just as likely to come from another player as from you? In this approach, one of your biggest jobs is asking questions or giving prompts. "When you open the door, what's beyond?" "How does the king react to Lem's taunt?" You can direct your questions to individual players, leave them open to all, and put forth your own suggestions.

This approach works best when players are comfortable with one another and willing to both take responsibility in building the story and accept that some of their ideas will go unused. It's well suited for shorter campaigns, or ones in which players take turns in the GM's seat.

Challenges

The largest risk of putting narrative control in multiple people's hands is losing a cohesive story. When multiple people have conflicting ideas about the tone of the game or particulars of the setting, you can end up with something that doesn't satisfy anyone. One of your tasks as GM is to recap events to clarify and reinforce the shared narrative.

Shared narrative control also complicates planning ahead. The group might need to improvise an encounter, take a break while you (and maybe other players) prep



to go in a new direction, or even revise their plans. It helps to limit yourself to creatures that you can quickly find stats for in *Monster Core* or another monster book to avoid spending hours of work on creatures you won't use.

Also, don't lose sight of your own enjoyment! You shouldn't sacrifice how much fun you have for others.

Story Points

If you prefer, you can give players a number of Story Points at the start of each session (typically 2 or 3). They can cash these in to determine what happens next in the story. Having a currency like this means you can keep your steady hand on the tiller while allowing other players to interject when it's important to them. For most groups, a Story Point should allow the player to suggest a plot twist that can be resolved quickly or to establish a relevant fact or NPC attitude. It can't determine the outcome of an entire scene or vastly alter the reality of the setting.

Group Composition

No two Pathfinder groups are exactly the same. At each gaming table, the GM and players work together to find their own style for the game and to tell their own stories. Some of these differences require the GM to make adjustments, especially for groups participating in Pathfinder Society Organized Play, large or small groups, and groups in which one or more players has additional needs.

Pathfinder Society Organized Play

The Pathfinder Society Organized Play campaign is a thriving, worldwide organization of players and GMs. While most home campaigns provide long-running stories with a consistent group, Pathfinder Society provides adventures designed to be completed in a single game session, so that players can continue their characters' stories whenever and wherever works best for them.

To allow this flexibility while maintaining a fair experience, the Pathfinder Society campaign handles some tasks that are normally in the GM's purview, such as selecting which rules options are available to PCs. Pathfinder Society GMs are expected to stay true to the adventure as it's written but are encouraged to allow players to apply creative solutions to the situations they face. For example, PCs may be able to use illusions, bribery, or social skills to bypass a challenge that is presented in the scenario as a combat encounter. For more about playing, running, and organizing games for Pathfinder Society Organized Play, visit **PathfinderSociety.club**.

Unusual Group Sizes

The standard group size for Pathfinder assumes four players and a GM. Some additional changes to your GMing strategy might be useful for groups with dramatically fewer or greater players.

Small Groups

Small-group games focus more intently on the interests of the players and their characters, allowing for an experience that can be more customizable for each individual. However, they can also run into trouble when the PCs have gaps in their abilities. In many cases, the easiest way to adjust for a small group is to add additional characters. This could come in the form of allowing each player to play two characters or adding hirelings and support NPCs to the party to shore up roles that the PCs don't fill. When adding GM-controlled NPCs to the party, it's important to be sure that the PCs remain the stars of the show. In general, GM-controlled characters shouldn't make major decisions, and they shouldn't outshine PCs at their primary skills or roles. You can also use variant rules like free archetypes (page 84), extra treasure, or even just a few bonus trained skills to help improve the PCs' overall flexibility.

Large Groups

Large-group games bring together the creativity and enthusiasm of many players, and they lend themselves to combat at a grand scale. However, they also divide the GM's attention. Large groups also need to set ground rules for how many players need to be present for the game to run when some players are missing. Recaps at the beginning of each session are crucial to keep everyone on the same page. Delegation is one of your most powerful tools to keep the session running smoothly. For example, you can put the players in charge of recapping the events from the previous session, handling initiative, managing the party's treasury, looking up rules, or helping with accessories like props and music. Also consider which tasks really need to be taken care of while everyone is there. For example, you could ask your players to handle selling items, deciding which common items they want to buy, and leveling up between sessions instead of at the table.

Inevitably, there will be situations and circumstances that don't involve the whole group. In a sufficiently large group, splitting the party is not necessarily dangerous. If the party splits up for more than a short stint, you can call for separate sessions to determine what happens to the two halves of the group, allowing them to reunite and share their findings afterward. Whether or not the party splits, having more players means less active time for each character. Look for opportunities to highlight each PC by providing challenges that play to their strengths or tie in story elements to which they are particularly connected.

Player Needs

Sometimes, making your game accessible and fun for everyone at the table requires making some adjustments to your typical GMing style or player setup. The first step is open communication so you can learn what the players need, what accommodations would be helpful, and what type of assistance players do and don't want to receive.

Sensory Differences

Players may have differences in the way that they process sensory information, as well as which senses they use. For players who are hard of hearing or who struggle to process large amounts of sensory information at once, selecting a quiet gaming venue and establishing ground rules about table talk (such as asking players not to interrupt each other) can make the game more accessible. Such players can also often benefit from handouts they can consult during the session. Keep in mind the way your players perceive the world when describing locations. For example, if you have a blind or visually impaired player at the table, instead of simply describing what a location looks like, describe how it sounds and smells, the temperature of the room, the feeling of the breeze, and other aspects of the scene that they can identify with.

Attention Span

It's not uncommon for people to struggle to maintain their attention for hours on end, especially for young players. If keeping attention is an issue at your table, add breaks to the game. Whether you're just taking a break to stretch and chat or enjoying a full meal in the middle of the game, switching up the context helps players refresh their focus.

Some players remain more engaged if they have something else to do while playing, such as doodling or pacing. Maintaining attention can be particularly challenging for some players when their character is not engaged, such as when the party splits or when they have just finished their turn in a large combat. You can allow players to engage in other activities during the session, such as texting, reading, or playing other games, and then draw them back into the game when their character is active.

Characters with Disabilities

A player might want to create a character with a disability, or their character might end up with a disability over the course of play. Work with the player to find ways to respectfully represent the disability. Conditions such as blinded and deafened aren't a good fit for a character who has been living with a disability long-term. Here are suggestions for rules you might use for PCs with disabilities.

MENTAL ILLNESS AND CHRONIC ILLNESS

Some disabilities, such as mental illness and chronic illnesses, are best left to the player to roleplay. Mental illness is an especially fraught topic, with a history of insensitive portrayal. Be careful about the intentions of the player and the impact the presentation might have on other players.

Blindness or Impaired Vision

A blind character can't detect anything using vision, critically fails Perception checks requiring sight, is immune to visual effects, and can't be blinded or dazzled. You might give this character the Blind-Fight feat (*Player Core* 145) for free.

A character with impaired vision might take a –2 to –4 penalty to vision-based Perception checks. Spectacles or other corrective devices might reduce or remove this, which can typically be found in most major settlements.

Deafness or Being Hard of Hearing

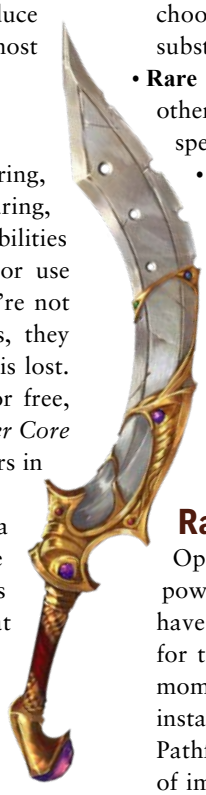
A deaf character can't detect anything using hearing, critically fails Perception checks that require hearing, and is immune to auditory effects. These disabilities typically don't restrict their ability cast spells or use magic items, but if they perform an action they're not accustomed to that involves auditory elements, they must succeed at a DC 5 flat check or the action is lost. It's best to give them the Sign Language feat for free, and you might give them Read Lips as well (*Player Core* 261). You might give one or more other characters in the group Sign Language for free as well.

A hard-of-hearing character might take a –2 to –4 penalty to Perception checks that are hearing-based. Like spectacles, corrective devices for hearing can be found in most places that adventurers find themselves trading.

Missing Limbs and Mobility

Some magic items require certain limbs or other body parts. It's fine to allow an alternative form of the item, turning boots into bracers for a character without legs, for example.

A character with a missing hand or arm might need to spend 2 actions to Interact with an item that requires two hands, or otherwise compensate. Using a two-handed weapon is not possible. Someone missing a foot or leg might take a small penalty to Speed, and if they have no legs or are unable to walk, they might use a wheelchair, a trained mount, or flight magic. Characters can typically acquire prosthetics in most cities or settlements, which, through advanced crafting, magic, or clockwork, can provide various levels of assistive function. Many assistive devices appear on page 293 of *Player Core*.



Rarity

The rarity system is a powerful tool that helps you and your group customize your story, your characters, and your world to better match your game's themes and setting. You can also use it to keep the complexity of your game low by limiting access to unusual options.

The Four Rarities

Let's first review the default usage for the four rarities in the game and how these already start to tell a story about your world.

- **Common** elements are prevalent enough, at least among adventurers, that a player is assumed to be able to access them provided they meet the prerequisites (if any).
- **Uncommon** elements are difficult to access or regionally specific, but a PC can usually find them eventually with enough effort, potentially by choosing a specific character option or spending substantial downtime tracking them down.
- **Rare** elements are lost secrets, ancient magic, and other options that PCs can access only if you specifically make them available.
- **Unique** elements are one of a kind, like a specific magical artifact or a named creature. You have full control over whether PCs can access them. Named NPCs are unique creatures, though that doesn't mean their base creature type is unique. For instance, an orc named Graytusk is unique, but that doesn't mean it would be any harder for a PC encountering her to tell she's an orc—just to discern specific information about her.

Rarity and Power

Options of higher rarities aren't necessarily more powerful than common ones, but they might have unusual capabilities with large ramifications for the campaign setting or the types of narrative moments common in a heroic fantasy game. For instance, the *raise dead* spell is uncommon, since Pathfinder's default setting assumes that the death of important characters, like the leaders of nations or powerful villains, shouldn't be easily reversed by any common priest or spellcaster, only those who have specialized knowledge in these secret arts.

Different Contexts

Just because something is common or uncommon in one context doesn't necessarily mean it's the same in others. This is specifically true when comparing the commonality of a creature and an ancestry. For instance, while hobgoblins are a relatively common monster for adventurers to encounter and are a common creature, in most settings they're still far less prevalent than humans or elves and would be an uncommon ancestry.

Because uncommon elements are available in certain circumstances, they often vary by locale, even within the same setting. For instance, a katana is uncommon in the Inner Sea region of Golarion, but in the Asian fantasy-inspired Tian Xia, a katana would be common and some Inner Sea weapons might be uncommon. Similarly, in an elven kingdom, uncommon elven weapons like the elven curve blade might be common.

Access Entries

Uncommon elements sometimes have an Access entry in their stat block. An Access entry usually speaks to elements of a character's backstory or experiences, such as "follower of Shelyn," "member of the Pathfinder Society," or "from Absalom." A character who meets the access requirements can freely choose that option just like they would a common option, even though it's uncommon. Unlike a Prerequisites entry, an Access entry never speaks to mechanical requirements needed to make the rules function, so if you'd like to modify Access requirements, you can do so without worrying about altering game balance.

Starting Elements

Elements like ancestries, backgrounds, classes, and heritages that a player must select at character creation can still be uncommon or rare. Obviously, there's no opportunity for the player character to search for them during play, but these rarities still indicate the prevalence of adventurers with those elements in the world. You can decide to allow them on a case-by-case basis depending on the campaign and the story your group wants to tell. For instance, a game set in the lizardfolk empire of Droon might have lizardfolk (normally uncommon) as a common ancestry while the typical common ancestries are less common. An official player's guide for a Pathfinder Adventure Path might have uncommon backgrounds that you can access by playing the Adventure Path.

Storytelling

You might craft a quest involving an uncommon or rare subject. For instance, players might encounter a door that requires a rare spell to open and have to travel to an academy to learn it. If a player has their heart set on an option that's not common, look for ways to build a story in which their character acquires that option.

World Building

With the rarities at your fingertips, you and your group can start building a unique world using rarity as a tool. Imagine a world where one or more of the core classes are rare. Maybe the gods rarely answer the call of the faithful and a PC cleric is one of the only clerics in the world. Perhaps sorcerers are rare and feared by wizards' guilds, which have a stranglehold on spell access. For a grittier feel, you could make abilities that can remove afflictions uncommon or rare. You could even create a low-magic setting where all magic and magic items are uncommon or rare.

You can add, remove, or alter Access entries to fit your world. For instance, if in your world the goddess of death guards the secrets of resurrection, you might add an Access entry to *raise dead* and *resurrection* for characters who worship that goddess.

These are just a few ideas to help get you started. The number of ways you can vary rarities to adjust your setting, story, and game are nearly unlimited.

Running Encounters

Encounters are the major set pieces of a story, where characters come into direct engagement with each other. They can take many forms: a brawl in a tavern, a race to disarm a doomsday device before it detonates, or even an impassioned negotiation with the queen. Whenever stakes are high and a character's moment-to-moment actions could make or break the scene, you'll want to call for initiative and dive into encounter mode.

Stakes: Moderate to high. Encounters always have significant stakes, and they're played in a step-by-step time frame to reflect that.

Time Scale: Encounter mode is highly structured and proceeds in discrete rounds, with each character taking their turn to act in a set order. In combat encounters, each round is 6 seconds long (so a minute-long duel would take 10 rounds). In social encounters, you might decide play proceeds in minute-long or longer rounds to give each speaker enough time to make a solid point.

Actions and Reactions: In combat encounters, each participant's turn is broken into discrete actions, and participants can use reactions when their triggers occur. Reactions can occur in social situations, though their triggers are usually more descriptive and less tactical.

Starting the Encounter

Encounters typically begin when you ask your players to roll **initiative**, which sets the order that the characters will act in. The full rules for rolling initiative can be found on page 435 of *Player Core*, but in brief, initiative involves each character rolling a check—usually a Perception check, but possibly a different skill if you deem it appropriate—and then acting in order from highest result to lowest. Below, you'll find specifics on how to run certain types of initiative or deal with problems. These are guidelines, and you might prefer to execute initiative in a different way at your table.

When do you ask players to roll initiative? In most cases, it's pretty simple: you call for the roll as soon as one participant intends to attack (or issue a challenge, draw a weapon, cast a preparatory spell, start a social encounter such as a debate, or otherwise begin to use an action that their foes can't help but notice). A player will tell you if their character intends to start a conflict, and you'll determine when the actions of NPCs and other creatures initiate combat. Occasionally, two sides might stumble across one another. In this case, there isn't much time to decide, but you should still ask if anyone intends to attack. If the PCs and NPCs alike just want to talk or negotiate, there's no reason to roll initiative only to drop out of combat immediately!

Alternative Initiative Skills

Most times, characters will use Perception to roll initiative; however, there are a number of times that another skill might make sense. Occasionally calling for different skills in the initiative check can be a good way to create variety in encounters. Consider the following factors when deciding which checks to allow.

- You'll likely call for Stealth for a character who's Avoiding Notice or hiding before combat.
- You might call for Deception if a character decides to initiate a surprise attack during a negotiation.

- You might call for Society for a character who realizes that the diplomat they're talking to is actually a spy based on misinformation in their cover story.
- You might call for a magical skill like Arcana or Occultism for a spellcaster studying a strange magical phenomenon that suddenly summons a monster to fight the party.

You can allow a player to make a case that they should use a different skill than Perception, but only if they base it on something they've established beforehand. For example, if in the prelude to the attack, Merisiel's player had said, "I'm going to dangle down off the chandelier to get the drop on them," you could let them use Acrobatics for their initiative roll. If they just said, "Hey, I want to attack these guys. Can I use Acrobatics?" without having established a reason beforehand, you probably shouldn't allow it.

You might find that if a player has a low Perception but a high modifier in another skill, that player might keep trying to use it for future encounters. As long as the narrative plays out in a reasonable manner, it's fine to allow the skill. However, if you find that they start making up odd circumstances to use their pet skill, or that their justifications for using the skill take too long at the table, just tell them you'd like them to go back to using Perception for a while.

Initiative with Hidden Enemies

When members on one or both sides of an impending battle are being stealthy, you'll need to deal with the impacts of Stealth on the start of the encounter. Anyone who's Avoiding Notice should attempt a Stealth check for their initiative. All the normal bonuses and penalties apply, including any bonus for having cover. You can give them the option to roll Perception instead, but if they do, they forsake their Stealth and are definitely going to be detected.

To determine whether someone is undetected by other participants in the encounter, you still compare their Stealth check for initiative to the Perception DC of their enemies. They're undetected by anyone whose DC they meet or exceed. So what do you do if someone rolls better than everyone else on initiative, but all their foes beat their Perception DC? Well, all the enemies are undetected, but not unnoticed. That means the participant who rolled high still knows someone is around and can start moving about, Seeking, and otherwise preparing to fight. The characters Avoiding Notice still have a significant advantage since the other characters need to spend actions and attempt additional checks in order to find them.

What if both sides are sneaking about? They might just sneak past each other entirely, or they might suddenly run into one another if they're heading into the same location.

GM PRIORITIES

As the Game Master, you'll want to keep the following points in mind to create a fun experience for all the players–yourself included–when you run encounters.

- Answering questions quickly and decisively whenever possible
- Building anticipation for what happens next
- Emphasizing thrilling action and setting a rapid pace
- Letting players know when they're up, and preferably also when they're "on deck" to go next
- Showing the immediate consequences of actions

Batch Initiative

If you have multiple enemies of the same type, such as four goblin warriors, you might want to have them act on the same initiative for simplicity. If you do, you can roll just one initiative check for all of them. They still take individual turns and can still individually change their initiative by Delaying. Note that a lucky initiative check could mean the batched creatures can easily gang up on the PCs, and a terrible roll could mean they all get struck down before they can do anything, so use this technique only when necessary to keep the game moving.

Placing Characters on the Map

If the PCs are already moving on a grid, as often happens in small dungeons, you already know where they are when they roll initiative. If they're moving in free-form exploration, place them on the map when they roll initiative. The fastest way is to have the players set up their miniatures or tokens in a basic marching order ahead of time, then just move them onto the map in that formation. When that doesn't work, such as when one or more PCs were in a different location or the map doesn't fit the marching order, you can either set up the PC minis yourself, then ask if everybody is happy with where they are, or have the players place their own minis. If you find having the players do it themselves causes too much indecision (especially if they try to count out distances in advance), you can switch methods. Remember to place characters using Stealth in reasonable hiding spots, even if that means you have to adjust the marching order to do so.

Setting the Scene

When an encounter begins, spend a moment to describe the location if you haven't already, using some of the description tips found in Evocative Environments on page 38. It can help to describe where enemies are within the environment to better ground them in the location. You can also use the enemies' expressions to better convey the location. Is an enemy in a wary stance as they stand near a pit? Is another irritated by water dripping on it from the ceiling? Does a glowing glyph illuminate an enemy with a sinister red light?

Unexpected Difficulty

What do you do when an encounter ends up being far more or less challenging than you anticipated? If the encounter is unlikely to kill all the characters, it might be best to roll with it, unless the fight is so frustrating that no one really wants to continue. If it's likely to kill everyone, strongly consider ways to end the encounter differently. The villain might offer the PCs the chance to surrender, consider their task complete and leave, or use their advantage to get something else they want. If the worst does happen, suggestions for dealing with a total party kill can be found on page 30.

If a battle is too easy, it's often best to let the players enjoy their victory. However, if you intended this to be a centerpiece battle, that might feel anticlimactic. Look for ways the enemy might escape or bring in reinforcements, but the PCs' success should still matter. Make sure the PCs feel the enemy's desperation—possibly have the enemy sacrifice something important to them to secure their escape.

In both these cases, consider whether the discrepancy from your expectations is due to luck. One side benefiting from extreme luck is to be expected from time to time. However, if the challenge comes down to a factor you had control over as a GM—like unfavorable terrain making things hard for the PCs or a monster with an overpowered ability—it's more likely you should make adjustments.

Running the Encounter

Once you've rolled initiative and set the scene, it's time to dive into the encounter. Go around the table in initiative order, asking each player what they would like to do on their turn; when it comes time for any NPCs, monsters, or features of the environment to act, you play them yourself.

Choosing Adversaries' Actions

Players often coordinate and plan to be as efficient as possible, but their adversaries might not. As the GM, you're roleplaying these foes, and you decide their tactics. Most creatures have a basic grasp of simple tactics like flanking or focusing on a single target. You should remember that they also react based on emotions and make mistakes—perhaps even more than the player characters do.

When selecting targets or choosing which abilities to use, rely on the adversaries' knowledge of the situation, not your own. You might know that the cleric has a high Will save modifier, but a monster might still try to use a fear ability on them. That doesn't mean you should play adversaries as complete fools; they can learn from their mistakes, make sound plans, and even research the player characters in advance.

Adversaries usually don't attack a character who's knocked out. Even if a creature knows a fallen character might come back into the fight, only the most vicious creatures focus on helpless foes rather than the more immediate threats around them.

Running adversaries is a mix of being true to the creature and doing what's best for the drama of the game. Think of your encounter like a fight scene in a movie or novel. If the fighter taunts a fire giant to draw its attention away from the fragile wizard, the tactically sound decision is for the giant to keep pummeling the wizard, but is that the best choice for the scene? Perhaps everyone will have more fun if the giant redirects its ire to the infuriating fighter.

Speed of Play

Encounters should move quickly, giving the PCs just enough time to savor successes and lament failures. This requires effort from everyone, but you can make it easier by running creatures and NPCs efficiently. First off, don't worry too much about little mistakes you make when running encounters. If you forgot to apply a creature's special bonus or didn't take an action that would've prevented the creature from taking damage, it isn't a big deal. Keep an eye on what you emphasize during the adventure as well. Be quick when describing a normal attack, but spend a little more time on a critical hit or a big spell. This all boils down to significance. It's fine to slow down the game for something important, but it's best to move briskly through anything less so. As you run the game, you'll quickly develop a sense for what's significant and what's not.

Looking up Rules

One of the primary ways the game slows down is when you or another player needs to look up a rule. For something that isn't too impactful, it's better to just make a ruling on the spot and move on. Tell the player they can look it up when it isn't their turn, and you'll play it as written after that, but that the game needs to move on in the meantime. It's okay to look up something that's both significant and heavily rules-dependent, such as a spell description or the death and dying rules. Even then, reciting a full chunk of rules text can pull players out of the flow of play, so feel free to summarize. It also helps to train your players to look things up in advance if they think they'll need them, so they're ready to go when their turns come around. This can be tough as a GM since it's essentially always your turn. However, you can ask a player to look something up for you, or, if you need to pause long enough to reference certain books, remind the players to plan for their next turns while you're busy.

Rewinding

Though "rewinding" can happen in any mode of play, it's usually most troublesome in encounters. Rewinding happens when a player forgot to add in a certain bonus or take a certain action, or wishes they'd used their actions

in a different order, and wants to rewind to account for what they missed. The best policy is usually to let them rewind as needed within their own turn but stop them before they intrude into someone else's. This keeps interruptions within reasonable bounds. You might find some adjustments are easy enough to make outside of a turn and can be allowed. For instance, if someone forgot to add the extra damage from a *runic weapon* spell to one of their hits, it's pretty easy to reduce the monster's HP on another turn, but if they realized their attack missed only because they forgot the bonus from *bless*, that could be too much of an interruption. Your ruling should stand on such matters. Try to be consistent about what kinds of things you'll rewind for and when.

Complex Rolls

You'll often make multiple rolls at the same time, especially when attempting saving throws for multiple creatures against area or multi-target spells. This can sometimes take a considerable amount of time if you're resolving the result of each creature's save and then determining its degree of success. To do so quickly, you could use one of the following techniques. Each of the examples below uses a PC's spell as an example, but these recommendations also apply to similar rolls that aren't caused by spells.

- Get the PC's Difficulty Class first, and have the player roll damage while you roll the saving throws.
- Use separate colors of dice for the different types of foes, or arrange the dice in such a way that it's easier for you to tell which creatures or NPCs are which.
- Go in order from the best enemy results (the highest total) to the worst. This means you'll need to ask for the results on a success only once, the damage on a failure once, and so on. It also means you only need to figure out when you're moving to a lower degree of success, rather than recalculating them each time.

This can be more of a challenge when asking for PC rolls. Make sure you get the attention of every player whose PC is affected. Have them all roll, but hold off on announcing their results. While they roll their saves, roll damage or other variable effects. Then, announce the DC. Say, "Who critically succeeded?" and "Who succeeded?" and so on down the line, so you only have to share the results for each category once. You can choose not to announce the DC if you want and ask for results by multiples of 10 instead, but it typically takes longer, and it's still possible that the players can determine or estimate the DC anyway.

Adjudicating Actions

Some of the basic actions of the game require you to interpret how a rule should apply. Here, you'll find advice on the types of rules calls that can occur frequently. For rules decisions that are either/or (such as whether a creature can Aid or Take Cover), a PC can usually determine before they take the action whether doing so is viable; if it isn't viable for some reason, alert them that it won't work before they spend time, actions, or resources trying. There are some exceptions, especially if the reason an action wouldn't work is something a character wouldn't know. For example, if a character tries to Take Cover behind a wall, not realizing it's illusory, you shouldn't reveal the deception prematurely.

Aid

It's up to you whether someone's preparation is enough to let them Aid an ally. The preparation should be specific to the task at hand. Helping someone hold a lockpick steady might be enough preparation to Aid an attempt to Pick a Lock, but just saying you're going to "encourage" them likely wouldn't. Second, the character who's attempting to Aid needs to be in a proper position to help and able to convey any necessary information. Helping a character Climb a wall is pretty tough if the character a PC wishes to Aid is nowhere near them. Similarly, a character usually needs to be next to their ally or a foe to Aid the ally in attacking the foe. You'll also need to determine how long the preparation takes. Typically, a single action is sufficient to help with a task that's completed in a single round, but to help someone perform a long-term task, like research, the character has to help until the task is finished.

Ready

The Ready activity lets the acting person choose the trigger for their readied action. However, you might sometimes need to put limits on what they can choose. Notably, the trigger must be something that happens in the game world and is observable by the character, rather than a rules concept that doesn't exist in-world. For instance, if a player says, "I Ready to shoot an arrow at her if she uses a concentrate action" or "I Ready to attack him if he has fewer than forty-seven Hit Points," find out what their character is trying to specifically observe. If they don't have a clear answer for that, they need to adjust their action.

Seek

The Seek action leaves it up to you how long a search should take. Use common sense. Most of the time, just trying to spot a creature hiding in a small area, or something else you could find with a simple Seek action rather than a long-term Search exploration activity, should default to a single action. The biggest distinction is whether something uses 3 actions or fewer—and can therefore be accomplished in a single turn—or requires significantly longer and can't be accomplished in an encounter at all. Consider whether it makes sense for the character to pull this off during the encounter or not, and whether that could be an interesting wrinkle in the story.

Sense Motive

When someone tries to Sense the Motive of an NPC, you'll need to figure out how to convey the information they receive. It's best to try to convey this indirectly, such as by describing a lying target's body language, odd word choices, sweating, or other details rather than saying, "They aren't behaving normally." However, sometimes dropping a punchy, "Oh, she is a hundred percent lying about this!" on a critical success can be satisfying. You also might need to determine when the situation changes enough for someone to try to Sense Motive again. Usually, this means either the behavior of the subject needs to change or the person attempting the check needs to receive new evidence that something is out of the ordinary. If another PC tries to Sense Motive, gets different information about the target, and shares it, that doesn't really count as new information for a PC who tried previously. Rather, it's up to the players to roleplay out any changes in their thinking as a result.

Take Cover

You'll often need to determine whether someone can Take Cover. They usually just need a large enough object to hide behind. Imagine the character crouching, and picture whether the object could almost entirely cover up their silhouette. Taking Cover might also require them to Drop Prone, such as if they want to take cover under a table. Most of the time, you can let them combine these instead of using two separate actions.

Ad Hoc Bonuses and Penalties

This section covers a few ground rules for how to best respond to PC tactics, when to apply ad hoc bonuses and penalties, and when to use certain tactics for NPCs. When PCs put effort into getting advantages against their foes, there should be some payoff, provided their tactics make sense in the narrative. Ad hoc bonuses and penalties give you some mechanical tools to emphasize that. Also keep in mind that you can change the flow of the story to respond to tactics as well. Altering an enemy's behavior can be a more satisfying consequence than just getting a bonus.

When you're determining whether to grant a special bonus that isn't defined in the rules, including when a player asks you whether they get a bonus for doing something, ask yourself the following questions.

- Is this the result of an interesting, surprising, or novel strategy by the character?
- Did this take effort or smart thinking to set up?
- Is this easy to replicate in pretty much every battle?

If you answered yes to either of the first two, it's more likely you should assign a bonus—typically a +1 or +2 circumstance bonus. However, if you answered yes to the third, you probably shouldn't unless you really do want to see that tactic used over and over again.

Try to use ad hoc bonuses a little more often than ad hoc penalties. If you do think a penalty might be appropriate, ask yourself the following.

- Does the environment or terrain create any applicable disadvantages for the character?
- Should the character have expected that this would be more difficult based on what they already knew?
- Was this circumstance caused by a bad decision on the part of the one taking the penalty?
- Is this negative circumstance easy to replicate in pretty much every battle?

Once again, answering yes to most of these questions means it's more likely you should apply a penalty, and answering yes to the final question means it less likely you should do so.

Maps and Miniatures

A grid and miniatures can make it easier to visualize combat for players and give a visual centerpiece for the players to focus on. A setup can range from a basic grid with some hasty marker lines and coins for miniatures to a full-color Flip-Mat with official pre-painted minis or cardboard pawns, all the way to a set of 3D dungeon terrain and hand-painted minis for each character. Many virtual tabletops have preset maps, token packs, and built-in functions for movement and line of sight. All of these resources can be fun to play on! Your setup should match your time commitment, budget, and the aesthetics you want.

You can also bring the setting alive by describing sensory details like sounds, smells, temperature, and 3D elements that aren't represented on your map. Describing the echoing ring of a sword striking a shield, an errant *electric arc* spell that leaves sparks dancing across the silverware, and the like makes the game feel more alive.

Placing miniatures on a grid can make it feel like you need to be exacting with the rules, but there's still room for improvisation! You might give another 5 feet of movement to someone running downhill if it will make their turn more dramatic. You're empowered to give players minor boosts that fit the story you want to tell and to fill in nuances of the location beyond what appears on the map.

Cover

You determine whether a character has cover. The rules for drawing lines found in *Player Core* are useful in simple cases, but in more complicated situations, use your own discretion to make the call. Consider the details of the environment and 3D space beyond what's on the battle mat. For instance, hanging banners might give cover, or a PC who climbed onto a ledge might have a clear shot at an enemy standing behind a short wall. Be generous to PCs who use creativity to get into smart positions, especially if they spend valuable actions to move or Take Cover.

Splitting and Combining Movement

The different types of actions representing movement are split up to clarify how the rules work with a creature's actions. However, you can end up in odd situations, such as when a creature wants to jump vertically to get something and needs to move just a bit to get in range, then Leap, then continue moving. This can end up feeling like they're losing a lot of their movement to make this happen. At your discretion, you can allow the PCs to essentially combine these into one fluid movement as a 2-action activity: moving into range for a Leap, then Leaping, then using the rest of their Speed.

This typically works only for chaining types of movement together. Doing something like Interacting to open a door or making a Strike usually arrests movement long enough that doing so in the middle of movement isn't practical.

Special Battles and Movement

More complex battles can require specialized rules.

Mounted Combat

The logistics of mounted combat take some extra work. If you know one is coming up, make sure the fight takes place in a location with plenty of space to move, since you'll likely be dealing with multiple larger creatures. For a fight in which only one side has mounts, you might want an environment with a few areas too small for mounts, so the side on foot can get a tactical advantage there to offset the other side's greater mobility.

When the PCs are mounted, their enemies should focus most of their attacks on the PCs, not their mounts. It can be frustrating for players if foes target PCs' mounts too frequently, so have the enemies remember who the real threat is! When PCs fight mounted enemies, try to keep the mount's level fairly close to the PCs' level; rather than putting a 13th-level enemy on a 2nd-level war horse, use an 11th-level greater nightmare or something similar. This will fit better thematically and prevent the enemy from being dismounted too easily. If a mount is knocked out, the rider might be able to dismount without trouble if the mount was stationary, but if they were in motion, you should probably have the rider attempt a Reflex save. If they fail, the rider is thrown a short distance and falls prone. Setting a simple expert DC of 20 often works well for such checks.

Mounted combat on a grid is difficult for a running fight with both sides racing at full speed. In these situations, it can be better to forgo the grid, though miniatures can still help for relative positioning and distances for ranged attacks. For such a race, consider using the chase subsystem instead (page 156).

GRID VARIANTS

These two variants can change up how distance and movement work in your game.

Going Gridless

You can play encounters without a grid at all. This is best for groups who can easily imagine their surroundings without a visual aid and for battles that don't require understanding a complex physical space. Your game doesn't have to be entirely on or off maps—you might decide to play out most simple fights without a grid, then use one for highly tactical fights or major set pieces. The 3-action structure is your best friend. You might find yourself answering a lot of questions about actions and space, like "Can I get there this turn?" or "How many of the oozes can I catch in a fireball?" If you find yourself needing to repeatedly remind players of the physical features of the environment or enemy positioning, that might mean you're making your encounters too tactical for what a gridless game supports. This style works better to encourage imaginative, cinematic action and quick play without getting too hung up on details.

Uniform Diagonals

If you like, your group can count all diagonals as 5 feet instead of counting every other diagonal as 10 feet. This speeds up play, but some people find it breaks their suspension of disbelief. This is most noticeable when someone moves a long distance along a diagonal all at once or when characters start moving diagonally as much as possible to cover more distance. Using this variant requires thinking of the game map in more abstract terms, and less like a real physical environment where the map is accurately reflecting the size of the room or encounter area. You can choose whether you measure radius-based areas of spells in the same way or visualize them as circles or other round shapes. The latter works best if you have templates to use.

Hex Grids

Some of the challenges of diagonal movement can be fixed by using a hex grid instead of a square grid, or by using a grid with offset squares, which works similarly. This allows you to count movement the same in all directions. However, it makes flanking a bit harder to pull off, requires you to arrange standard Large and larger miniatures differently, and causes challenges when drawing maps that consist primarily of rectangular structures since you'll have a lot of partially occupied hexes.

The mount rules are for common cases: humanoids riding quadrupedal animals. However, you might allow someone to ride a beast or other type of creature by making a few adjustments. For an intelligent mount (such as a pegasus or unicorn), use the standard rules for mounted combat, but instead of attempting a check to Command an Animal, the rider uses the same number of actions to ask the creature to do what they want. As the GM, you determine whether the creature does as requested and whether Diplomacy checks or the like are needed. If one of your PCs is Tiny, they might want to ride on another PC's shoulder. In this case, the two PCs should both roll initiative and act together on the lower count, and they gain only two actions at the start of their turns instead of three since the larger PC must spend one action keeping the smaller PC balanced, and the smaller PC must spend one action holding on.

Aerial Combat

Determining positioning in the air can be tricky, and it's often best to be more relaxed with movement rules, flanking, and so forth than you would be on a flat grid. Note that battles can get more spread out with flight. If any creature is flying, it's important to establish the height of potential obstacles in the area early. This way, no one is surprised to suddenly find out the ceiling is lower than they thought or tall trees create a barrier. Be careful about using aerial combat before PCs have magic that lets them fly. Be especially careful with flying foes who use ranged attacks because PCs might not have many good tools to fight them.

The rules for flight say that a creature might need to attempt an Acrobatics check to Maneuver in Flight to pull off tricky motions. You can generally use the same judgment you would while calling for Acrobatics checks when someone is moving on the ground. Trying to dive through a narrow space or make a sharp turn might require checks, usually with a simple DC.

Falls can be deadly and often happen when *fly* or a similar spell gets dispelled. This is part of the risk of flying! Flying enemies might keep closer to the ground to avoid this danger, or use magic such as the *gentle landing* spell to prevent the damage or a *jade cat talisman* to reduce it.

Aquatic Combat

Pathfinder's rules are fairly generous for high-action battles underwater. Two significant challenges for non-aquatic creatures are breathing underwater (or holding their breath) and lacking a swim Speed. It's often best to save aquatic adventure until higher levels when PCs can get magical solutions for these problems, but you can instead give out such magic early since it isn't easy to exploit in land-based adventures the way flight magic can be. As with flight, dispelling can be deadly if someone relies on magic to breathe underwater. It's generally best to avoid having enemies who can breathe underwater dispelling the water-breathing magic aiding PCs. Though PCs might be able to use *air bubble* and quickly cast *water breathing* again, having this happen repeatedly can

be frustrating, and being forced to prepare an extremely high-level *water breathing* spell to avoid it isn't much fun either. Lacking a swim Speed is easier to deal with, except for characters with poor Athletics, who might need to strategize around their shortcomings. The DC to Swim underwater shouldn't be very high—typically 15, or 13 in calm water.

When someone gets knocked out underwater, they usually float up or sink down. You decide based on their buoyancy; most adventurers carry a heavy enough load to sink.

When one group is in the water and another is outside it, note that the aquatic combat rules for attacks apply when *either* party is in water. You might decide that a character in the water is concealed against someone outside it due to distortion, and vice versa.

Social Encounters

Most conversations play best as free-form roleplaying, with maybe one or two checks for social skills involved. Sometimes, though, a tense situation or crucial parley requires a social encounter that uses initiative, much like a combat encounter. As with any other encounter, the stakes of a social encounter need to be high! A failed social encounter could mean a character is imprisoned or put to death, a major rival becomes a political powerhouse, or a key ally is disgraced and ostracized.

Using the structure of an encounter is helpful because it makes the timing clearer than in free-form play, and each character feels like they're contributing. When running a social encounter, establish the stakes up front, so the players know the consequences of success or failure and the circumstances that will cause the encounter to end.

You have much more flexibility in how you run a social encounter than a combat encounter. Extending the length of rounds beyond 6 seconds, allowing more improvisation, and focusing less on special attacks and spells all differentiate a social encounter from a combative one. In most cases, you don't need to worry about characters' movements, nor do you need a map. Be flexible and encouraging as you run a social encounter, and don't worry about nitty-gritty details like character movement except in extreme cases. Allow the PCs to share information about as freely as the players can around the table. If one character is watching the opponent for signs they're lying, assume they can easily convey that to other characters subtly. It's good to remind players of things their characters might know or be likely to notice even if the players, in the moment, don't have them in mind. Describe NPCs' mental states and ask for clarification about the PCs' attitudes when needed.

Some examples of social encounters include:

- Proving someone's innocence in front of a judge
- Convincing a neighboring monarch to help defend against an invasion
- Besting a rival bard in a battle of wits
- Exposing a villain's deception before a noble court
- Disproving a rival's scientific theories before an alchemists' guild assembly
- Ending a tense standoff

Non-Combat Level

A creature's level measures its acumen in combat, but some creatures who would be pushovers in battle can be dangerous in social encounters or other challenges! Such creatures typically have skill modifiers and mental defenses much higher than their levels would indicate. See page 128 for information on setting these statistics.

Award XP for defeating an NPC in a social encounter based on the relevant level rather than the creature's combat level. Such an NPC might have an ability similar to the following.

Courtroom Specialist In a court case or other legal proceeding, the judge is a 6th-level challenge.

Initiative and Actions

Initiative in a social encounter typically has characters rolling Society or a Charisma-based skill, such as Diplomacy or Deception. As with other encounters, a character's approach to the conflict determines which skill they roll. On a character's turn, they typically get to attempt one roll, usually by using a skill action. Let the player roleplay what their character says and does, then determine what they'll roll. Allow them to use any abilities or spells that might help them make their case, though keep in mind that when most people see the visual signs of a spell being cast, they think someone is using magic to try to influence or harm them, and they have a negative reaction. Generally speaking, a turn should go on just long enough for the character to make one salient point and attempt one check before moving to the next character in the initiative order.

Good social encounters include an opposition. This can be direct, such as a rival who argues against the characters' case, or passive, such as a mob that automatically becomes more unruly as each round passes. Give the opposition one or more positions in the initiative order so you can convey what it's doing. You can create game statistics for the opposition, especially if it's an individual, but in situations like that of the unruly mob, you might need nothing more than to establish a set of increasingly difficult DCs.

Measuring Success and Progress

You'll need to decide how to measure the characters' success in social encounters because there's no AC to target or HP to whittle down. Page 55 includes guidance on setting DCs for social skill actions, often using a target's Will DC. If you need a DC for people who don't have stats, such as a crowd or an NPC for whom you haven't already generated statistics, use the guidelines on setting DCs, found on page 52. You can either pick

BYPASSED ENCOUNTERS

What happens if you've planned a fight or challenge and the PCs find a way to avoid it entirely? This could leave them behind in XP or cause them to miss important information or treasure.

In the case of XP, the guidelines are simple: if the player characters avoided the challenge through smart tactical play, a savvy diplomatic exchange, clever use of magic, or another approach that required ingenuity and planning, award them the normal XP for the encounter. If they did something that took only moderate effort or was a lucky break, like finding a secret passage and using it to avoid a fight, award them XP for a minor or moderate accomplishment. In an adventure that's more free-form, like a sprawling dungeon with multiple paths, there might be no reward for bypassing an encounter because doing so was trivial.

You'll have to think on your feet if information or items get skipped when players bypass encounters. First, look for another reasonable place in the adventure to share the information or item. If it makes sense, move the original encounter to another part of the adventure and give the PCs a major advantage for bypassing the encounter in the first place.

a simple DC or use a level-based DC, estimating a level for the subject or how challenging it should be to sway them.

The attitude conditions—hostile, unfriendly, indifferent, friendly, and helpful—provide a useful way to track the progress of a social encounter. Use these to represent the attitude of an authority, a crowd, a jury, or similar. A typical goal for a social encounter is to change the attitude of a person or group to helpful so they assist you or calming a hostile group or person to defuse a situation. Try to give the players a clear idea of how much they've progressed as the encounter proceeds.

Another option is to track the number of successes or failures the characters accrue, either using a subsystem like Victory Points (page 184) or Influence (page 187), or else something more ad hoc. For instance, you might need to trick four guards into leaving their posts and count each successful attempt to Lie or Create a Diversion toward a total of four necessary successes. You can also combine these two methods; if the PCs need a group of important nobles to vote their way, the goal of the encounter might be to ensure that a majority of the nobles have a better attitude toward the PCs than they have of a rival—all within a limited time frame.

Consequences

When you set stakes at the start of a social encounter, give an idea of the consequences. Beyond whatever narrative benefits player characters might gain, a social encounter usually includes an XP award. Because these are encounters along the same lines as combat encounters, they grant a sizable amount of XP, typically that of a moderate accomplishment, or even a major accomplishment if the encounter was the culmination of long-term plans or if a significant adversary got their comeuppance.

The outcome of a social encounter should direct the story of the game. Look for repercussions. Which NPCs might view the PCs more favorably now? Which might hold a grudge or formulate a new plan? A social encounter can seal the fate of an NPC and end their story, but this isn't true for player characters. Even if something looks truly dire for them, such as a death sentence, the social encounter isn't the end—there's still time for desperate heroics or a twist in the story.

Ending the Encounter

A combat encounter typically ends when all the creatures on one side are killed or knocked unconscious. Once this happens, you can stop acting in initiative order. The surviving side then has ample time to ensure that everyone taken out stays down. However, you might need to keep using combat rounds if any player characters are near death, clinging to a cliff, or in some other situation where every moment matters for their survival.

You can decide a fight is over if there's no challenge left and the player characters are just cleaning up the last few weak enemies. However, avoid doing this if any of the players still have inventive and interesting things they want to try or spells they're concentrating on—ending an encounter early is a tool to avoid boredom, not to deny someone their fun. You can end a fight early in several ways: the foes can surrender, an adversary can die before its Hit Points actually run out, or you can simply say the battle is over and that the PCs easily dispatch their remaining foes. In this last case, you might ask, "Is everyone okay if we call the fight?" to make sure your players are on board.

One side might surrender when almost all its members are defeated or if spells or skills thoroughly demoralize them. Once there's a surrender, come out of initiative order and enter into a short negotiation. These conversations are really about whether the winners will show mercy to the losers or just kill or otherwise get rid of them. The surrendering side usually doesn't have much leverage in these cases, so avoid long back-and-forth discussions.

Fleeing Enemies

Fleeing enemies can sometimes cause issues at the game table, as players often want to pursue them, thinking they might return as a threat later on. This can easily bog down the game and extend an encounter that has already reached its conclusion, so avoid playing this out move by move. If every adversary is fleeing, forgo

initiative order and give each PC the option to pursue any one fleeing foe. Each PC can declare one action, spell, or other ability to use to try to keep up. Then, compare the PC's Speed to that of the target, assess how much the pursuer's chosen spell or ability would help, and factor in any abilities the quarry has that would aid escape. If you determine that the pursuer catches up, go back into combat with the original initiative order. If not, the quarry escapes for now.

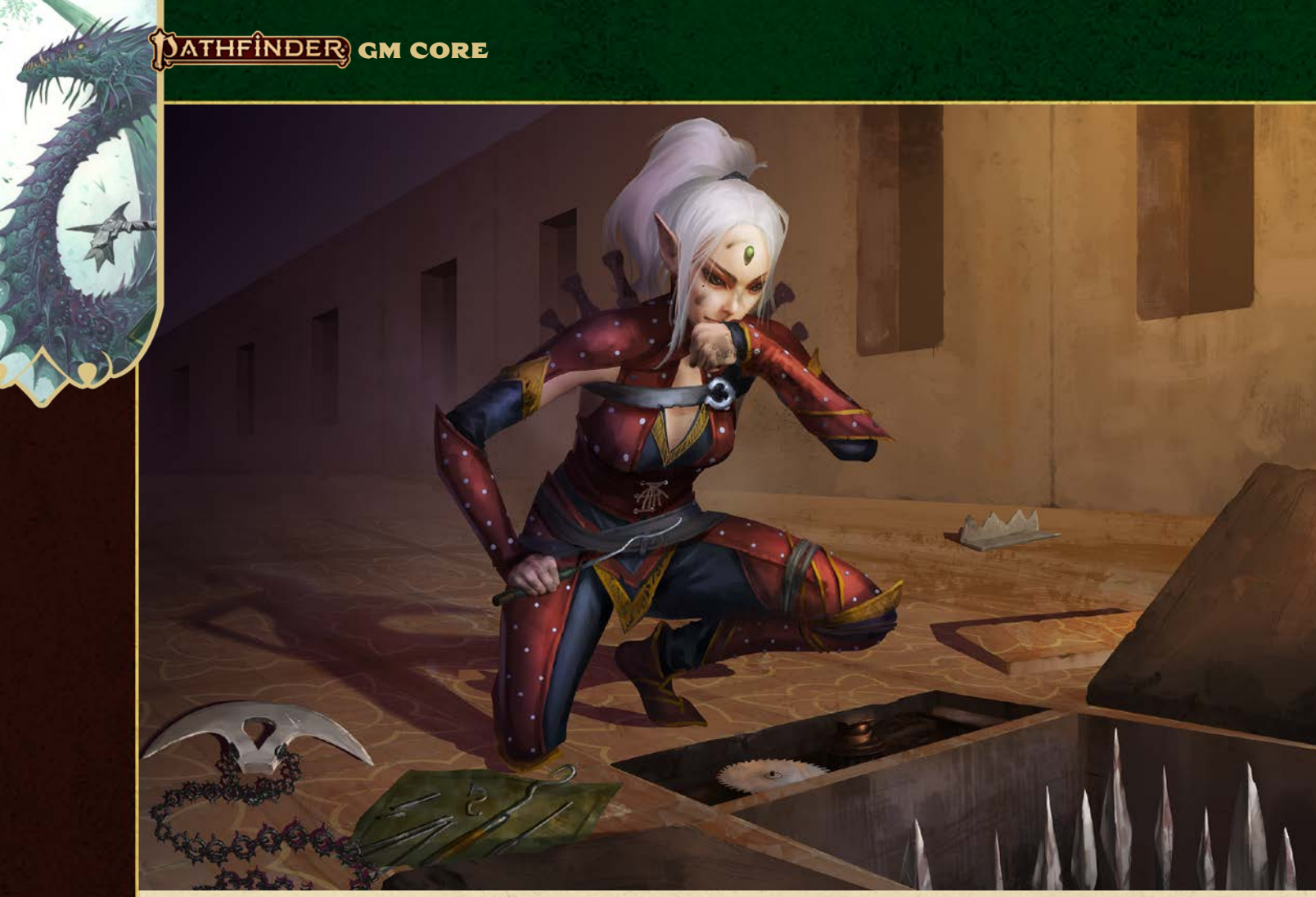
Total Party Kills

Perhaps the most feared of any outcome of a gaming session, a total party kill (TPK) can spell the end of an adventure or campaign. In a TPK, every member of the party dies. Think in advance about how comfortable you are with TPKs and discuss them with the other players. This can provide valuable insights into not only how you should handle one, but also the implied level of lethality the players expect.

TPKs are rarely unavoidable. Usually it becomes evident at some point during the session—whether to everyone or only to you—that disaster looms. What the players do with this insight is up to them, but you have more control and can take steps to avoid the TPK. For example, perhaps the PCs' foe gets distracted by something, an ally arrives to help the heroes, or the villain captures them instead of slaying them outright. The simplest path is to just allow a clear escape route the PCs can take—perhaps with a few characters still falling along the way. It isn't entirely your responsibility to defuse the TPK, but offering such opportunities gives players more say in their characters' fates.

Should a TPK occur anyway, the kind of game you're running should influence your approach to the situation. For example, in a relatively story-light campaign centered around dungeon crawling, a TPK is less of a problem—the players simply form a new adventuring party and take up where the dead ones left off. If you're running a story-intensive game in which each PC has a personal stake in defeating the villain, saving the town, or the like, a TPK could require you to rework multiple plot threads. Here, you might use the story you have in place; for example, a player's new character might be the sibling of their previous, slain character, thus creating some continuity between the two characters and ensuring that the new character still has a stake in defeating the villain.

Note that the game should continue only if the players want it to. The premature end of an adventure or campaign isn't always a bad thing. If the group is interested in moving on, there's nothing wrong with ending the campaign and starting something different.



RUNNING EXPLORATION

Exploration mode is the connective tissue of your adventure or quest—everything that happens as the characters move between encounters. It could be looking for a rare book in a library, trailblazing through a spooky forest, fortifying a castle before a monster attack, or canvassing the city for a missing person.

Fundamentally, exploration is all about rewarding the PCs for learning about their surroundings. To facilitate this, it's especially important to have and to convey a clear mental picture of the group's surroundings. You'll be better able to keep track of where the players are and describe the sights, sounds, and other sensations of their adventuring locales.

Exploration mode is intentionally less regimented than encounters are. As a result, you'll be making many more judgment calls during exploration on just about everything that happens as you build the world and describe how it changes in response to the players' actions. Encourage the players to have their characters truly explore, and reward their curiosity. The things they try to do in exploration mode show you what they're interested in and what they consider important. As you play, you'll get a good feel for the aspects of exploration that intrigue certain players, and you can add more of those things to your adventures or emphasize these points in published adventures.

Stakes: Low to moderate. Exploration mode should be used when there's some amount of risk, but no immediate danger. The PCs might be in an environment where they're likely to face monsters or hazards, but they usually stay in exploration mode until they enter a fight or engage in some other direct interaction.

Time Scale: When the PCs are in exploration mode, time in the game world passes much faster than real-world time at the table, so it's rarely measured out to the second or the minute. You can speed up or slow down how quickly things are happening as needed. If it's important to know exactly how much time is passing, you can usually estimate time spent in exploration mode to 10-minute increments.

Actions and Reactions: Though exploration isn't broken into rounds, exploration activities assume the PCs are spending part of their time using actions, such as Seeking or Interacting. If they have specific actions they want to use, they should ask; you can decide whether the actions apply and whether to switch to encounter mode for greater detail. PCs can use any relevant reactions that come up during exploration mode.

Scenes within Exploration

It can help you to think of exploration as a series of scenes, where encounters break up exploration and function as subsections within it. Many of these are based on geography, for example, with exploring a series of dungeon corridors as one scene and entering the dungeon's great hall kicking off another. Other times, you'll break out of a scene at a point of interest. If the PCs decide to stop their travels and investigate a statue, think of that as a new scene.

This gives you a good point to describe the transition between scenes. Describe what was happening to reinforce where the group was, then describe what they now face to show the change. For example, "You've been making your way through this long hallway, but after a moment of debate, you stop, your footsteps and voices still echoing down the hall. The stone statue before you is seven feet high and adorned with rubies. It represents... maybe a god? Its face is damaged and broken. What do you do?"

When playing out a scene, your initial description should set the expectation of what level of detail the scene might go into, with you and the players adjusting as needed during play. Since players aren't bound in a strict initiative order in exploration mode, it can be useful to proactively call on PCs to avoid everybody talking at once. If possible, start with someone who instigated the scene change, or perhaps with the PC using the most relevant exploration activity, like a PC Investigating artwork or Searching for secrets in the example above.

While the number of scenes that could take place during exploration is limited only by your imagination and your players' actions, there are some common types of scenes that often come up, which are detailed below.

Daily Preparations

Just before setting out to explore, or after a night's rest, the PCs spend time to prepare for the adventuring day. This typically happens over the span of 30 minutes to an hour in the morning, but only after 8 full hours of rest. Daily preparations include the following.

- Spellcasters who prepare spells choose which spells they'll have available that day.
- Focus Points and other abilities that reset during daily preparations refresh. This includes abilities that can be used only a certain number of times per day.

GM Priorities

The following points will be good to keep in mind to create a fun and smooth experience as your players go about exploring the world.

- Evoke the setting with vivid sensory details.
- Shift the passage of time to emphasize tension and uncertainty, and speed past uneventful intervals.
- Get players to add details by asking for their reactions.
- Present small-scale mysteries to intrigue players and spur investigation.
- When rolls are needed, look for ways to move the action forward, or add interesting wrinkles on a failure.
- Plan effective transitions to encounters.

- Each character equips their gear. This includes donning their armor and strapping on their weapons.
- Characters invest up to 10 worn magic items to gain their benefits for the day.

Beyond making these mechanical decisions, daily preparations can be a good time to check in to see how players might think their characters are feeling. The twentieth morning of a long voyage might see the characters wearily strapping on their boots and armor as listlessness sets in, but the sun rising over a hill as the invading skeleton army finally arrives to lay siege to their city could have a tense air of fear or might taste of the rush before a glorious last stand. Use this time to set the stage for the adventuring day to come!

Hazards

The task of looking for and disarming hazards comes up frequently in exploration and is an example of a type of exploration scene. Hazards don't usually appear out of nowhere. A trap might be on a door's lock, at a specific bend in a corridor, or so on. You could have a pit trap in the middle of a large room, but a surprise that's entirely unexpected can be pretty unsatisfying. The same pit trap appearing in the middle of a 10-foot-wide, suspiciously featureless hallway can make the players say, "Okay, we should have seen that coming," with even that minimal amount of foreshadowing.

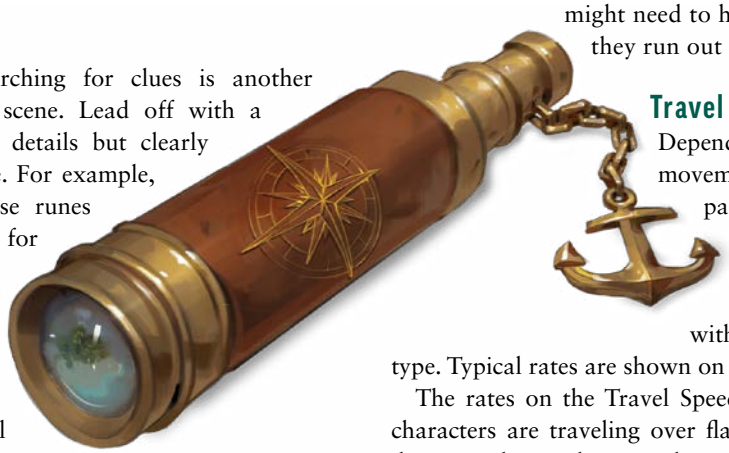
When a complex hazard triggers, move to encounter mode. Simple hazards are usually dealt with in exploration mode, but that doesn't mean that they should be glossed over. Clearly depict what action by a PC sets off the hazard and what happens as the hazard activates, and illustrate any aftereffects. PCs have many ways to heal themselves, so keep in mind that a damaging hazard won't always have a huge effect. They tend to work best if their activation might alert creatures in the area, lock the PCs out of an area, or cause a similar narrative setback beyond just damage or another condition easily removed outside of the pressure of combat.

Searching for Traps

PCs usually have a better chance to detect hazards while exploring if they're using the Search activity (and the Detect Magic activity, in the case of some magic traps). If a PC detects a hazard and wants to disable it, slow down a bit. Ask the player to describe what the PC is doing and provide concrete details about how their efforts pan out to make it feel more real. It's good if the player sweats a little bit! It's supposed to be a tense situation, after all. If a hazard requires multiple checks to disable, it's good to describe what happens with each success to show incremental progress.

Investigations

Investigating and searching for clues is another common exploration scene. Lead off with a definite clue that has details but clearly isn't the whole picture. For example, you might say: "These runes look like ones used for arcane magic but are some kind of variant form," "As you assess the architecture of the room, you see that the pillar caps are all made of granite, except for one that appears to be painted plaster," or "Each of the stained glass windows shows scenes of one of the god Norgorber's aspects, but there are only three of them, whereas Norgorber has four aspects."



If these details pique a player's interest, you can go into a more detailed investigation. They might look at the runes more closely, chip away at the plaster, or search around for a representation of Norgorber's fourth aspect. Avoid calling for checks if it's not necessary. In the last example, you'd likely tell them which of the deity's aspects is missing without another Religion check, and if the aspect is represented as a statue in the room, asking for a Perception check to find it might short-circuit the investigation in an uninteresting way.

Though one person starts the investigation, getting others involved can help them become more interested and bring different skills to bear to get other types of information. Reward collaboration and clever ideas.

Roleplaying Investigations

To make the investigation feel real, it helps to talk a player through their character's thought processes by saying what clue inspired them to think of an important detail, explaining what the detail is, and possibly mentioning further questions that this detail raises. Let the player extrapolate their own conclusion rather than giving them the answers outright. Even if the investigation doesn't lead to an unambiguous conclusion, the players should feel they're more informed than when they started.

Travel

Long journeys are staples of the fantasy genre, but they take work to be fun in play, especially if the timeline the PCs are on isn't urgent. Use encounters and special scenes only if there's something compelling to cover. It's perfectly fine to fast-forward through exploration to get to the next stage of an adventure. That said, you should keep in mind that if any players have invested in exploration-themed abilities for their characters, those abilities should still matter.

You can usually move through a travel scene pretty quickly. For a journey that takes multiple days, you might need to have the group Subsist if they run out of food.

Travel Speed

Depending on how you track movement, the adventuring party might track the distance they travel in feet or miles based on the characters' Speeds with the relevant movement type. Typical rates are shown on the Travel Speed table.

The rates on the Travel Speed table assume that the characters are traveling over flat and clear terrain at a determined pace, but one that's not exhausting. Moving through difficult terrain halves the listed movement rate. Greater difficult terrain reduces the distance traveled to one-third the listed amount. If the travel requires a skill check to accomplish, such as mountain climbing or swimming, you might call for a check once per hour, referencing the resulting distance on the Travel Speed table to determine the group's progress.

TRAVEL SPEED

Speed	Feet per Minute	Miles per Hour	Miles per Day
10 feet	100	1	8
15 feet	150	1-1/2	12
20 feet	200	2	16
25 feet	250	2-1/2	20
30 feet	300	3	24
35 feet	350	3-1/2	28
40 feet	400	4	32
50 feet	500	5	40
60 feet	600	6	48

Navigating

The Sense Direction activity uses Survival to find which way is north. You can combine this with Recalling Knowledge about the area—typically using Nature or Society—for the PCs to get their initial bearings. The DCs for these checks are normally trained or expert if the group is still fairly close to settlements or established nations but might be higher the deeper they are in the

wilderness. As the PCs try to find their path forward, think of ways to include notable landmarks they can seek out or stumble upon. Some of these might be useful, such as a great tree off in the distance that they can climb to get a better vantage point or a mountain slope where multiple plumes of smoke billow up, which might lead them toward a settlement. Others might be mysterious or dangerous, such as haunted glades or an animal's hunting grounds. When the PCs first look around or scout, pick two or three landmarks to point out. Let the group decide on their course from there.

Getting Lost

When PCs are exploring the wilderness or navigating twisting dungeon corridors, they might get lost. This is most likely as a consequence for failing at Survival or similar checks, but it can also happen based on the story, such as if they drop out of a portal in some strange land or come up from an underground passageway into a forest. Playing through the process of wandering in the wilderness and trying to find their way can be fun for a party, provided they do so for a fairly short interval. If a party is lost at the start of a session, they should usually have found their way and reached a significant destination by the end.

If the PCs get unlucky or are just awful at Survival, they might end up stuck with no way to reorient themselves. In these cases, have someone come to them! They might get captured by local humanoids or monsters or even stumble upon a dangerous location. They've figured out where they are, even if it's not where they wanted to be!

Encounters During Travel

You might want to include some encounters if the PCs are in a dangerous area, especially if they travel for a long time. For these encounters, choose creatures that live in that type of environment. Remember that not all creatures attack on sight. Friendly or cautious creatures might approach the characters, resulting in more interactive scenes that might even help the PCs.

Adverse Weather and Terrain

Exploration gets slower when the party faces dense jungles, deep snow, sandstorms, extreme heat, or similar difficult conditions. You decide how much these factors impact the characters' progress. The specific effects of certain types of terrain and weather are described starting on page 90.

Difficult Terrain

Difficult terrain such as thick undergrowth usually slows down progress. Unless it's important how far the group gets in a particular time frame, this can be covered with

a quick description of chopping through the vines or trudging through a bog. If the characters are on a deadline, adjust their progress on the Travel Speed table (page 36), typically by cutting it in half if almost all of the land is difficult terrain or to one-third for greater difficult terrain.

Hazardous Terrain

Hazardous terrain, such as the caldera of an active volcano, might physically harm the player characters. The group might have the option to travel directly through or to go around by spending more time. You can transition into a more detailed scene while the characters move through hazardous terrain and attempt to mitigate the damage with spells or skill checks. If they endure hazardous terrain, consider giving the PCs a minor or moderate XP reward at the end of their exploration, with slightly more XP if they took smart precautions to avoid damage.

Environmental Hazards

Dangerous crevasses, swampy bogs, quicksand, and similar dangers are environmental hazards, which are described beginning on page 90.

Surprise Attacks

Surprise attacks should be used sparingly, even in dangerous areas. The fact that PCs are usually in a group scares away most animals, and setting a watch can deter even more attackers. Surprise attacks are most likely if the PCs did something in advance that would lead to the ambush. For instance, they might be ambushed by bandits if they were flaunting their wealth or showing off expensive items earlier in the session, or they might be counterattacked by enemies if they attack the enemies first, only to retreat to rest. If the PCs set up camp hastily and decide not to set a watch, they might be in trouble if they're attacked. This should happen only in cases of extreme sloppiness, since if you take advantage of minor lapses, you might end up with a group that repeatedly spends an inordinate amount of time describing all their camping preparation to keep it from happening again. It's usually better to ask the PCs if they're setting up watches (page 43), rather than assume that their silence on the issue means they aren't.

Starting Encounters

If an encounter begins, you'll need to shift to encounter mode by having everyone roll initiative, as described on page 24. Call for initiative once a trap is triggered, as soon as two opposing groups come into contact, or when a creature on one side decides to take action against the other. In some cases, a trap or a foe has a reaction that tells you to roll initiative. For instance, a complex trap that's triggered might make an attack with its reaction before the initiative order begins. In these cases, resolve all the results of the reaction before calling for initiative rolls.

Fleshing out Exploration

The more narrative pace of exploration mode means that you, as the GM, have a lot of freedom to emphasize important parts of the adventure to your players through evocative language and dramatic timing.

Evocative Environments

As the PCs explore, convey their surroundings by appealing to the players' senses. This sets the scene, gives them a better sense of their environment, and can be used to foreshadow what they might find ahead. When determining which details to cover, think about what's familiar versus novel. A new dungeon might have similar architecture to previous ones but feature ancient structures that set it apart. You can use the PCs' familiarity as a tool to single out what's new. When preparing for a game, imagine yourself in the environment and jot down a few notes about what you would sense. Conveying these details keeps the players on the same page about what they sense, even if each character responds to it differently.

Keep in mind that the more you explain something, the more important it seems. This is valuable for you to drive interest, but can also be a mixed blessing, since describing something inconsequential to set the mood can lead players off on a tangent. Sometimes, the best solution is to find a way to make that unimportant thing as important as the players think it is!

Flow of Time

Exploration mode is rarely measured down to the second or minute. If someone asks how long something takes, the nearest 10-minute increment typically does the job. (For long voyages or similar activities, the nearest hour might be more appropriate.) You convey the passage of time through your descriptions, but not just by addressing it outright. In a roleplaying game, information and time are linked. Time will seem to slow down the more detail you give. Think cinematically! A long voyage through a series of tunnels works well as a montage, whereas progress searching a statue for traps could be relayed as a series of distressing details in quick succession and would feel more tense due to that precision.

With that in mind, when is it best to speed up or slow down the passage of game time? Usually, you'll slow down and give more description when you're establishing something or progressing the story. When the PCs enter a dungeon or a new area, describe how it feels, slowing down to give the players a sense of what's ahead. When a PC stops to do something important or makes a key decision, slowing down gives that moment its desired weight. You can also adjust the flow of time to reflect PCs' mental states. As a PC returns home after decades away, you might pause to ask the player what their PC is feeling, matching time to the rush of memories and emotions filling that PC's thoughts.

Quick Environmental Details

Aquatic

Sights choppy water, rolling waves, sunlight glinting, the curve of the horizon, driftwood
Sounds waves lapping against a ship, seabirds' cries, fluttering sails, creatures breaching the surface
Smells salt water, crisp fresh air, dead fish
Textures frigid water, slimy seaweed, crusty salt collecting on surfaces
Weather powerful winds, oncoming storms

Arctic

Sights blinding reflected sunlight, snowy plains, distant glaciers, deep crevasses, rocky cliffs, ice floes and bergs, animal tracks in snow
Sounds howling winds, drips of melting ice, utter quiet
Smells clean air, half-frozen bog, lichen, seaweed
Textures crunching snow, hard ice
Weather frigid gales, light snowfall, pounding blizzards

Forest

Sights towering trees, dense undergrowth, verdant canopies, colorful wildlife, dappled sunlight through the trees, mossy tree trunks, twisted roots
Sounds rustling leaves, snapping branches, animal calls
Smells decomposing vegetation, flowering plants, pine trees, earthy mushrooms
Textures leaves crunching underfoot, scraping branches, water dripping from above, rough bark
Weather still air, cool shade, sporadic breeze, rain on the canopy, branches coated in thick snow

Mountain

Sights bare cliffs, snow caps, hardy trees, slopes littered with scree, birds flying on currents, fog among the peaks
Sounds howling wind, falling rocks, clear echoes, crunch of rocks underfoot, distant avalanche
Smells blowing dust, pine trees, fresh snow
Textures rough stone, powdery snow, unstable rubble
Weather swirling clouds, chill of high altitude, direct sunlight, powerful wind and rain

Plains

Sights grass waving gently, scattered wildflowers, rocky outcroppings or boulders, the curve of the horizon
Sounds rustling wind, birdsong, distant sounds carried far
Smells fresh air, earthy soil, distant carcasses
Textures touch of tall grass, rasp of scrub brush, crunch of dry dirt
Weather cooling of gentle wind, heat of direct sunlight, massive black thunderclouds

Swamp

Sights lush leaves, clouds of gnats, algae-coated water, shacks on stilts, darting fish
Sounds croaking frogs, chirping insects, bubbling, splashing
Smells rich moss and algae, pungent swamp gases
Textures pushing through floating detritus, tangling creepers, thick mud
Weather oppressive humidity, still air, pouring rain, rays of sunlight

Underground

Sights winding passages, sputtering yellow torchlight, uneven or cracked floors, ancient writings or architecture, stalagmites and stalactites
Sounds dripping condensation, scurrying rats or insects, distant clunks of machinery, tinny echoes of your voices and footsteps
Smells staleness of still air, sulfur, tang of metal deposits
Textures rough rock walls, erosion-smoothed stone, cobwebs
Weather chill of underground air, geothermal heat

Exploration Activities

In exploration mode, each player who wants to do something beyond just traveling chooses an exploration activity for their character. The most common activities are Avoid Notice, Detect Magic, Hustle, and Search, though there are many other options available (detailed on page 438 of *Player Core*). The purpose of these activities within the game is to clarify what a PC focuses on as they explore rather than unrealistically allowing them do all things simultaneously. This adds variety within the group's behavior and can show you where players want the story to go. For example, a player whose PC is Investigating carvings on the walls shows you that the player wants those to be informative.

Exploration activities that happen continually as the group explores are meant to be narrative first and foremost, with the player describing to you what they're doing, and then you determining which activity applies and describing any details or alterations for the situation. If a player says, "I'm Avoiding Notice," add more detail by asking what precautions they're taking or by telling them which passages they think are least guarded. Likewise, if a player says they're looking for traps *and* keeping their shield raised *and* covering the group's tracks, ask them which of these they are prioritizing to narrow down the activity. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of an activity given current circumstances. For instance, someone Scouting might encounter thin ice and fall through before their group can reach them, or someone Investigating ancient hieroglyphs might critically fail and lead the party in the wrong direction. This does not apply for exploration activities that are discrete and occur when the group is

taking a pause or zooming in on a particular action, such as Treat Wounds. Characters can always drop out of a continual exploration activity to perform a discrete one (even if they are fatigued and can't sustain an exploration activity as they travel), and they can change activities at any time.

The main exploration activities described in *Player Core* (pages 438–439) and what PCs can use them to accomplish are as follows.

- **Avoid Notice (Stealth):** Sneak around without being found (*Player Core* 438).
- **Defend:** Keep a shield raised (*Player Core* 438).
- **Detect Magic:** Repeat the *detect magic* spell (*Player Core* 323, advice on page 41).
- **Follow the Expert:** Improve your bonus with another tactic by following an ally's example (*Player Core* 438, advice on page 41).
- **Hustle:** Travel faster (*Player Core* 438).
- **Investigate:** Recall Knowledge of your surroundings (*Player Core* 439, advice on page 41).
- **Repeat a Spell:** Cast or sustain a spell over and over (*Player Core* 439).
- **Scout:** Look ahead for danger (*Player Core* 439).
- **Search (Perception):** Seek out hidden things as you travel (*Player Core* 439, advice on page 42).

Skills also have exploration activities linked to them.

- **Borrow an Arcane Spell (Arcana):** Prepare a spell from someone else's spellbook (*Player Core* 234).
- **Coerce (Intimidation):** Threaten a creature so it does what you want (*Player Core* 240).
- **Cover Tracks (Survival):** Obscure the PC's passing (*Player Core* 246).
- **Decipher Writing (Varies):** Understand archaic, esoteric, or obscure texts (*Player Core* 228).
- **Gather Information (Diplomacy):** Canvass the area to learn about a specific individual or topic (*Player Core* 239, DCs page 54).
- **Identify Alchemy (Crafting):** Using an alchemist's toolkit, identify an alchemical item (*Player Core* 237, DCs page 54).
- **Identify Magic (Varies):** Learn about a magic item, location, or ongoing effect (*Player Core* 230, DCs page 54).
- **Impersonate (Deception):** Using a disguise kit, create a disguise (*Player Core* 238).
- **Learn a Spell (Varies):** Use the skill corresponding to the spell's tradition to gain access to a new spell (*Player Core* 230–231, DCs page 54).
- **Make an Impression (Diplomacy):** Make a good impression on someone (*Player Core* 239).
- **Repair (Crafting):** Using a repair kit, fix a damaged item (*Player Core* 236).

- **Sense Direction (Survival):** Get a sense of where the PC is or determine the cardinal directions (*Player Core* 246, DCs page 54).
- **Squeeze (Acrobatics):** Squeeze through very tight spaces (*Player Core* 233).
- **Track (Survival):** Find and follow creatures' tracks (*Player Core* 246, DCs page 55).
- **Treat Wounds (Medicine):** Treat a living creature's wounds (*Player Core* 242).

Here are some useful things to keep in mind when adjudicating a few specific exploration activities.

Detect Magic

This activity doesn't enable characters to automatically find every single magical aura or object during travel. Hazards that require a minimum proficiency can't be found with *detect magic*, nor can illusions of equal or higher rank than the spell.

When characters find something magical using this activity, let them know and give them the option to stop and explore further or continue on. Stopping brings you into a more roleplay-heavy scene in which players can search through an area, assess different items, or otherwise try to figure out the source of the magic and what it does. Continuing on might cause the group to miss out on beneficial magic items or trigger a magic trap.

Follow the Expert

Follow the Expert is a truly versatile activity that lets a PC who's lacking at a skill or exploration activity have a better chance to succeed. It provides a good way to help a character with a low Stealth modifier sneak around, to get a character with poor Athletics up a steep cliff, and so on. Usually, a character who is Following the Expert can't perform other exploration activities or follow more than one person at a time.

It's important that this doesn't become too rote. Let the players decide how one of them is helping out the other. The description can give you more to work with and add fun color to the exploration beyond just the mechanics. Also, if one PC helps another in the same way over and over, that could be a sign of the character being helped growing in a particular way. If the rogue has been helping the fighter Avoid Notice over and over, the fighter is essentially receiving training in Stealth at that point and might want to consider taking or retraining a skill increase to make that true. Connections like these can breathe life into the characters and their relationships, and it can help promote camaraderie and interactions between characters.

Investigate

As with Searching or Detecting Magic, the initial result of Investigating is usually enough to give the investigator a clue that leads into a more thorough examination, but it rarely gives all possible information. For instance, a character might note that the walls of a dungeon are covered with Chthonian writing, but they would need to stop to read the text or even determine that it's written in blood.

MONITORING SPELL DURATIONS

Spell durations are approximate values that codify the vagaries and eccentricities of magic into a convenient number. However, that doesn't mean you can set your watch by a spell with a 1-hour duration. This is one of the reasons the passage of time outside of encounters is in your hands and isn't as precise as encounter rounds. If a question arises about whether a spell has expired, you make the call. You shouldn't be punitive, but you also shouldn't treat characters like they move with clockwork precision and perfect efficiency between encounters.

There are two times these durations matter most: when players try to fit multiple encounters within the duration of a spell, and when they want to use a spell before a fight and keep it in effect during the encounter.

Multiple Encounters

A 1-minute spell should last for multiple encounters only if the encounters happen in very close proximity (usually in two adjoining rooms) and if the PCs go directly from one fight to the next without leaving encounter mode. If they want to stop and heal, or if the party debates whether to go on, the process takes enough time that the spell runs out.

Be more generous with spells lasting 10 minutes or more. A 10-minute spell easily lasts for one encounter and could continue for another if the locations are close. A 1-hour spell usually lasts for several encounters.

Before a Fight

Casting advantageous spells before a fight (sometimes called "pre-buffing") gives the characters a big advantage, since they can spend more combat rounds on offensive actions instead of preparatory ones. If the players have the drop on their foes, you usually can let each character cast one spell or prepare in some similar way, then roll initiative.

Casting preparatory spells before combat becomes a problem when it feels rote and the players assume it will always work—that sort of planning can't hold up in every situation! In many cases, the act of casting spells gives away the party's presence. In cases where the PCs' preparations could give them away, you might roll for initiative before everyone can complete their preparations.

Search

With a successful Perception check while Searching, a character notices the presence or absence of something

unusual in the area, but this doesn't provide a comprehensive catalog of everything there. Instead, it gives a jumping-off point for closer inspection or an encounter. For instance, if an area has both a DC 30 secret door and a DC 25 trap, and a Searching character got a 28 on their Perception check, you would tell the player that their character noticed a trap in the area, and you'd give a rough idea of the trap's location and nature. The party needs to examine the area more closely to learn specifics about the trap, and someone would need to Search again to get another chance to find the secret door.

If an area contains many objects or something that will take a while to search (such as a cabinet full of papers), Searching would reveal the cabinet, but the PCs would have to examine it more thoroughly to check the papers. This usually requires the party to stop for a complete search.

You roll a secret Perception check for a Searching character to detect any secrets they pass that are hidden in a place that stands out (such as near a door or a turn in a corridor), but not one that's in a more inconspicuous place (like a random point in a long hallway) unless they are searching particularly slowly and meticulously.

The rules for Searching deliberately avoid giving intricate detail on how long a search takes. That's left in your hands because the circumstances of a search can vary widely. If the group isn't in any danger and has time for a really thorough search, that's a good time to allow them to automatically succeed, rather than bothering to roll, or you might have them roll to see how long it takes before they find what they're looking for, ultimately finding it eventually no matter the result. Conversely, if they stop for a thorough search in the middle of a dungeon, that's a good time for their efforts to draw unwanted attention!

PCs might get to attempt another check if their initial search is a bust. But when do you allow them to try again? It's best to tie this to taking a different tactic. Just saying "I search it again" isn't enough, but if a PC tries a different method or has other tools at their disposal, it could work. Be generous with what you allow, as long as the player puts thought into it! If you know a search isn't going to turn up anything useful, make that clear early on so the group doesn't waste too much time on it. If they're determined to keep going—which they often are—you might have them find something useful but minor in the search.

Improvising New Activities

The list of exploration activities isn't exhaustive. More appear in special subsystems and adventures, and you'll often need to create your own. When making your own, it's usually fine to just consider whether the amount of effort the PC has to put in is comparable to the other exploration activities and go from there. If you're having trouble, try finding a comparable activity. For example, if the PC are Swimming as they explore, consider that travel speeds are based on the equivalent of 1 action per 6 seconds, and that other exploration activities the PCs can keep up without getting tired are generally based on alternating between 2 actions per 12 seconds, averaging to 1 action per 6 seconds. (Defend, for example, is based on using 1 action to Stride then 1 to Raise your Shield, which is why the PC moves at half Speed.) Hustle is a good example of an activity that can't be done indefinitely, so you can use it as a model for strenuous activities where the PCs are using the equivalent of 2 actions every 6 seconds.

When improvising an exploration activity, have in mind some advantages and disadvantages of that activity to inspire you. What else might the PC be neglecting while doing this activity? How does it interplay with activities that the rest of the party uses? If the new activity seems like it's a better option than other activities all or nearly all the time, chances are you might want to adjust it so it's more balanced. Eventually, you'll start to find which exploration activities your group enjoys the most.

Setting a Party Order

In exploration mode, it often matters which characters are in the front or back of the party formation. Let the players decide among themselves where in the group their characters are while exploring. This order can determine who gets attacked first when enemies or traps threaten from various directions. It's up to you to determine the specifics of who gets targeted based on the situation.

When you come out of exploration mode, the group usually remains in the same general formation. Decide the PCs' exact positions, with their input, if you're moving to a grid (as usually happens at the start of a combat encounter). If they come out of exploration mode on their own terms, they can move around as they see fit. For example, if they detect a trap and the rogue starts attempting to disarm it, the other characters can move to whatever locations they think are safe.

Resting

Characters require 8 hours of sleep each day. Though resting typically happens at night, a group gains the same benefits for resting during the day. Either way, they can gain the benefits of resting only once every 24 hours. A character who rests for 8 hours recovers in the following ways.

- The character regains Hit Points equal to their Constitution modifier (minimum 1) multiplied by their level. If they rest without any shelter or comfort, you might reduce this healing by half (to a minimum of 1 HP).
- The character loses the fatigued condition.
- The character reduces the severity of the doomed and drained conditions by 1.
- Most spellcasters need to rest before they regain their spells for the day.

A group in exploration mode can attempt to rest, but they aren't entirely safe from danger, and their rest might be interrupted. The 8 hours of rest do not need to be consecutive, however, and after an interruption, characters can go back to sleep.

Sleeping in armor results in poor rest and causes a character to wake up fatigued. If a character would have recovered from fatigue, sleeping in armor prevents it.

If a character goes more than 16 hours without going to sleep, they become fatigued.

Taking long-term rest for faster recovery is part of downtime and can't be done during exploration. See page 50 for these rules.

Watches and Surprise Attacks

Adventuring parties usually put a few people on guard to watch out for danger while the others rest. Spending time on watch also interrupts sleep, so a night's schedule needs to account for everyone's time on guard duty. The Watches and Rest table indicates how long the group needs to set aside for rest, assuming everyone gets a rotating watch assignment of equal length.

If a surprise encounter would occur during rest, you can roll a die to randomly determine which character is on watch at the time. All characters roll initiative; sleeping characters typically roll Perception with a –4 status penalty for being unconscious. They don't automatically wake up when rolling initiative, but they might roll a Perception check to wake up at the start of their turn due to noise. If a savvy enemy waits for a particularly vulnerable character to take watch before attacking, the attack can happen on that character's watch automatically. However, you might have the ambusher attempt a Stealth check against the Perception DCs of all characters to see if anyone noticed its approach.

WATCHES AND REST

Group Size	Total Time	Duration of Each Watch
2	16 hours	8 hours
3	12 hours	4 hours
4	10 hours, 40 minutes	2 hours, 40 minutes
5	10 hours	2 hours
6	9 hours, 36 minutes	1 hour, 36 minutes

Starvation and Thirst

Typically characters eat and drink enough to survive comfortably. When they can't, they're fatigued until they do. After a number of days without water equal to a creature's Constitution modifier + 1, the creature takes 1d4 damage each hour that can't be healed until it quenches its thirst. After the same amount of time without food, it takes 1 damage each day that can't be healed until it eats.

Running Downtime

There's more to life than fighting monsters and looting treasure. What happens when a PC wins a deed to a tavern in a game of cards, crafts a magical item, builds a home, or pursues a relationship? All these goals and more are resolved by running downtime. Downtime is the space between adventures, where your PCs take a step back before the next chapter starts. In downtime, you can sum up the important events of a whole day with just one roll. Use this mode when the characters return home or otherwise aren't adventuring.

Usually, downtime is a few minutes at the start of a session or a break between major chapters of an adventure. On rare occasions, you might have a whole session of downtime to play out a specific story. As with exploration, you might punctuate downtime with roleplaying or encounters when it's natural to do so.

Stakes: None to low. Downtime is the counterpart to adventuring and covers low-risk activities.

Time Scale: Downtime can last days, weeks, months, or years in the game world in just a few minutes of real time at your game table.

Actions and Reactions: If you need to use actions and reactions, switch to exploration or encounter mode. A creature that can't act is unable to perform most downtime activities, but it can take long-term rest.

Depth of Downtime

Determine how involved your group wants downtime to be at the start of the game. If your players vary greatly in preference, you might need to find a middle ground, or some way to give the players least interested in downtime something they would find compelling. You can adjust downtime depth as the game goes along, and you might find it becomes more important to the players as their connection to the setting grows stronger.

Pay attention to the amount of real-world time you spend in downtime and the level of detail. Downtime should rarely last a whole session. Usually, a half hour between significant adventures is about right, and 15 minutes for shorter lulls in the action, such as when PCs return to a town briefly in the middle of an adventure.

You can extend this time as needed for more detailed roleplaying scenes.

For the level of detail, it's important to give more than just an overview, but often the basics will do. "A fleet of merchant ships arrives in the port, and an officer puts you to work unloading cargo" might do for using Sailing Lore to Earn Income, and "Your shipment of iron arrives late, but you're able to complete the armor" could be enough for Crafting. Go deeper if the player sets out to do something specific or asks questions you think have potential for an interesting story, but be careful with too much detail, as you run the risk of boring most of the table with minutiae.

Group Engagement

One major challenge of downtime is keeping the whole group involved. When you can, combine multiple people's tasks into one. For instance, if one PC wants to Earn Income with Performance and another wants to offer their services as a medic, you might say that a traveling caravan is stopping briefly, seeking entertainment and treatment for diseases and injuries their group suffered on the road. That means you can put both PCs in the same scene. You can also look for downtime activities that affect multiple characters' interests. For instance, if the rogue's contact at the thieves' guild wants a special magical cloak, a different PC might Craft that cloak. This lets those PCs help each other more directly. If the barbarian's player doesn't plan to do anything in downtime, you might let the barbarian Aid another character in crafting weapons—feeding the forge and working the bellows, for instance.

If a player really isn't interested in downtime, they might not want to engage at all. In that case, it's best to shorten the time you spend on downtime and give their actions a one-sentence description. If other players want a deeper downtime experience, consider extending game sessions or running side sessions for just those players.

Campaigns without Downtime

There are two ways you might end up with a game that has no downtime: no time and no interest. In the first, the story moves along so quickly that the PCs don't really have time to engage with downtime. Think of it like a breakneck action movie, where the characters barely have time to breathe before they're on to the next challenge, and even the end of an adventure is a cliffhanger.

In the second, you and the other players just don't care about downtime at all. It doesn't interest you. In this case, just summarize what happens between adventures and skip using any downtime rules.

If you skip downtime, you might not need to adjust your game. The money PCs can earn during downtime is minor compared to what they can gain through adventures. However, the PCs will have less choice in what items they get if they don't Craft or earn extra money to buy items.

GM PRIORITIES

Just because your PCs aren't exploring lost ruins or defeating villains during downtime mode doesn't mean it shouldn't be interesting or advance the story. The following tips might come in handy for running downtime mode.

- Demonstrate changes to the setting that result from the PCs' previous achievements, giving them time to breathe and appreciate what they've accomplished.
- Emphasize the PCs' planning and the fruit it bears.
- Avoid bogging the game down, even if a great deal of time passes. Keep the number of rolls small.
- Bring back compelling NPCs or plot threads established in previous downtime or adventures.
- Interject interesting events and scenes related to what the PCs do to make the world feel more alive.
- Switch to encounter or exploration mode as needed when actions spur a new scene or adventure.

Long-Term Goals

Downtime is more satisfying when the PCs work toward long-term goals rather than perform disconnected tasks. You can ask players what their PCs' goals are, and also look for storylines they're interested in that you can use as seeds for long-term goals. Long-term goals might include running a business, creating a guild, establishing an arcane academy, returning a despoiled land to its natural splendor, reforming local politics, or rebuilding a ruin. Goals involving organizations are a good opportunity to use the leadership subsystem on page 204. If players don't have clear ideas for their goals, look at their backgrounds, NPCs they know, and things they've expressed interest in during adventures to develop some suggestions. Remember that you're not trying to get them to accept your exact suggestions but to pick a goal they really like.

Long-term goals should shape the game, and reinforcing their progress is key. Show changes, good and bad, that result from the PCs' efforts, both in downtime and on their adventures if applicable. This doesn't have to be subtle! You can directly say, "You've been trying to get the magistrate to allow you to buy this plot of land, but the fact that you entered the wizard's tower illegally seems to have soured him toward you."

Think ahead in stages. For instance, if a PC wants to run a business, you might have them...

- Start with a simple stand to sell their wares.
- Show they're drawing big crowds and need to expand.
- Build a storefront.
- Open to modest success.
- Get a small but loyal following.
- Hire employees to keep up with demand.
- Deal with supply issues or competition.
- Get enough interest in a nearby settlement that they might want to expand their business.

And so on. You can deliver each of these details through a little vignette. For example, if you use the second bullet point, you might describe the throng of people crowded around the PCs' stand and say they sold out of goods before half the people were served. Downtime goals are a great way to weave the PCs' agency into the story.

Success and Failure

Success at a reasonable long-term goal should be likely, but not guaranteed. Give the player an expectation of how likely their goal is to work out based on how ambitious it is. Be clear about how much downtime it will take compared to the amount of downtime you expect the party will get during your campaign. Then, let the player decide how to commit their downtime and to which tasks.

Repeated failures or outside problems could lead to the whole goal failing. It happens! But give the player a fair chance. Even if their goal is really hard to achieve—like driving the undead out of Ustalav—they might find a way. Don't undermine their efforts or ideas, but *do* make clear the magnitude of the task they've chosen. Remember that even if a goal fails, the effort was worthwhile, and the PCs might still achieve smaller successes along the way that open up new goals. For instance, the PCs might not succeed at driving the undead out of Ustalav, but in the process, they might discover part of a powerful holy spell that might be able to, if it can somehow be reassembled.

A failure or a success at a long-term goal can be a major emotional beat for the character. They've changed the world, after all! Don't shortchange it just because it happened in downtime. In fact, because it might have taken place over multiple sessions, the player might have been looking forward to the results for a really long time!

Playing Out a Downtime Day

At the start of a given day of downtime, have all the players declare what their characters are trying to accomplish that day. You can then resolve one character's efforts at a time (or group some characters together, if they're cooperating on a single project). Some activities, such as Earning Income, require only a simple roll and some embellishment from you and the player. Other activities are more involved, incorporating encounters or exploration. You can call on the players to play out their downtime activities in any order, though it's often best to do the simplest ones first. Players who aren't part of a more involved activity might have time to take a break from the table while the more complex activities are played out.

Characters can undertake their daily preparations if they want, just as they would on a day of exploration. Ask players to establish a standard set of preparations, and you can assume the characters go through the same routine every day unless their players say otherwise.

Cooperation

Multiple characters can cooperate on the same downtime task. If it's a simple task that requires just one check, such as a party Subsisting as they await rescue on a desert island, one character rolls the necessary check while everyone else Aids that character. If it's a complex task, assume all of them are working on different parts of it at one time, so all their efforts count toward its completion. For example, a party might collaborate to build a theater, with one character drawing up architectural plans, one doing manual labor, and one talking to local politicians and guilds.

Checks

Some downtime activities require rolls, typically skill checks. Because these rolls represent the culmination of a series of tasks over a long period, players can't use most abilities or spells that manipulate die rolls, such as activating a magic item to gain a bonus or casting a fortune spell to roll twice. Constant benefits still apply, though, so someone might invest a magic item that gives them a bonus without requiring activation. You might make specific exceptions to this rule. If something could apply constantly, or so often that it might as well be constant, it's more likely to be used for downtime checks; for instance, Assurance could apply.

Longer Periods of Downtime

Running downtime during a long time off—like several weeks, months, or even years—can be more challenging. However, it's also an opportunity for the characters to progress toward long-term plans rather than worrying about day-to-day activities. Because so much time is involved, characters don't roll a check for each day. Instead, they deal with a few special events, average out the rest of the downtime, and expend any resources, such as their general cost of living.

Events

After the characters state what they want to achieve in their downtime, select a few standout events for each of them—usually one event for a period of a week or a month, or four events for a year or longer. These events should be tailored to each character and their goals, and they can serve as hooks for adventures or plot development. A character using Perform to Earn Income could produce a commanding performance of a new play for visiting nobility (who end up so impressed that they give the party their next quest). Someone using Crafting might get a lucrative commission to craft a special item (that must be recovered from a renowned master thief in the next session). A character with Lore might have to research a difficult problem (uncovering signs of an impending cataclysm that will need the PCs to act in order to avert it).

PCs who want to do things that don't correspond to a specific downtime activity should still experience

downtime events; you just choose the relevant skill and DC. For example, if a character intends to build their own library to house their books on magic, you might decide setting the foundation and organizing the library once construction is finished are major events. The first could be a Crafting check, and the second an Arcana or Library Lore check.

Average Progress

For long periods of downtime, you might not want to roll for every week, or even every month. Instead, set the level for one task using the lowest level the character can reliably find in the place where they spend their downtime (see Difficulty Classes on page 52 for more on setting task levels). If the character fails this check, you might allow them to try again after a week (or a month, if you're dealing with years of downtime). Don't allow them to roll again if they succeeded but want to try for a critical success, unless they do something in the story of the game that you think makes it reasonable to allow a new roll.

The events you include during a long stretch of downtime should typically feature higher-level tasks than the baseline. For instance, a character Earning Income with Sailing Lore for 4 months might work at a port doing 1st-level tasks most of the time, but have 1 week of 3rd-level tasks to account for busy periods. You'll normally have the player roll once for the time they spent at 1st-level tasks and once for the week of 3rd-level tasks.

Tasks and Events

Players will often look to you for tasks they might take on during downtime, especially if they're looking to Earn Income. You should also interject special events to surprise your players and add interesting scenes. If you need some quick ideas for tasks characters might offer a PC, look at the tables below for inspiration. The Earn Income tasks are arranged with tasks appropriate for low-level PCs first, but most can be adapted to the level you need. For the events, you might need to "zoom in" to focus on a special scene or even a short encounter or adventure.

EARN INCOME TASKS

Academia, Library, Other Educational Lore
Work at a school or library
Compile information on a distant land for an expedition
Serve as administrator for a school or library
Acquire a rare book on dragons for a local noble
Crafting
Make tools for local farmers
Brew a crate of healing potions for a local church or hospital
Sew a dress for a noble's debutante ball
Supply magical weapons for the palace guard corps
Engineering Lore
Assess the fortifications built to protect a town
Plan the mechanism for a drawbridge
Create schematics for a new mill
Food or Drink Lore
Brew simple ale or cook an ordinary dish for the local inn
Identify a dozen bottles of wine
Create a showpiece dish for an upcoming festival
Create a nine-course meal for a noble banquet
Genealogy Lore
Compile a family tree for a minor noble family
Determine next of kin to settle an inheritance dispute
Map the web of intermarriages of a sprawling royal family
Determine the lineages of an ancient civilization
Trace the lost heir of an ancient empire
Guild Lore
Recruit initiates for a guild
Identify symbols of an ancient guild in a tome
Consult on rearranging a guild's hierarchy
Oversee the merger of two guilds or one guild splitting into two
Herbalism Lore
Supply poultices to a physician
Prepare herbs for a small restaurant
Identify the poisonous plant eaten by a local lord
Legal Lore
Clear some minor red tape
Defend someone charged with theft
Bring a corrupt noble to justice through the legal system
Find loopholes in a contract made with a devil
Mercantile Lore
Price a crate of imported textiles
Find the best trade route for a pirate crew to raid
Set exchange rates for a trade consortium
Mining Lore
Work a shift in a coal mine
Determine where a raw ingot was mined
Prospect to find a site for a new mine
Performance
Busk for townsfolk at a street fair
Play in the orchestra at an opera
Attend a society figure's salon
Perform for visiting nobles
Impress a visiting maestro to bring glory to your hometown
Put on a performance for a patron from another plane
Politics Lore
Lobby for a vote or decision to go a certain way
Smear a noble to lower their station
Sailing Lore
Crew a ship on a short voyage
Render a ship in dry-dock seaworthy
Pilot a ship through monster-infested waters
Underworld Lore
Find out where a stolen item ended up
Get someone an audience with the head of a thieves' guild
Smuggle a shipment of valuables out of the city
Warfare Lore
Teach a spear fighting class at a dojo
Instruct an officer in various military stratagems
Advise a general in planning a battlefield offensive

Downtime Events

Craft or Earn Income (Crafting)
A shipment of important materials is delayed, and the PC must find out why.
The PC creates a superlative work, which draws the attention of a collector or museum.
The PC discovers a more efficient technique to work a material and must decide to share it or keep it secret.
Create a Forgery (Society)
The format for paperwork the PC is attempting to mimic gets changed, and they must adjust.
The paperwork is spoiled by a freak accident, such as a leaky roof above the workshop or a clumsy assistant knocking over beakers of chemicals.
A mysterious benefactor provides the PC with special tools or a source document the PC didn't have but suggests they'll ask for a favor later to reciprocate.
Earn Income (General)
A fussy client demands multiple rounds of changes throughout the process.
An accident at a work site puts someone in danger.
Something the PC is working on becomes a fad or hit—demand skyrockets!
A visitor is impressed with the PC's work and offers them a more lucrative task in a distant location.
Conditions on the job site are abysmal, and other workers ask the PC to join them in confronting the bosses.
The bosses or guildmasters are doing something illegal and attempt to bribe the PC to look the other way.
The PC returns to their work one day to find someone has tampered with what they've done.
Earn Income (Performance)
Due to the performance's success, more shows are added, running the PC ragged.
A competing show across town draws away customers.
A powerful noble finances a special performance but demands some changes to the contents.
One of the PC's fellow performers doesn't show up, but the show must go on!
Subsist (Survival)
Over a long time subsisting in a single area, the PC finds an unknown berry or herb that could be useful for making a new medicine.
The PC finds signs indicating some large creature has been foraging as well—possibly a monster.
Buy and Sell Items
The PC sells an item of interest to members of a particular group, who pursue the PC.
A merchant sells the PC a fraudulent item.
A shop the PCs frequent is in trouble and about to go out of business without help.
Someone else offers a higher bid for an item a PC wants, resulting in a negotiation or in the NPC offering a job the PC must perform to claim the item.
Retrain
The PC sustains an injury in physical training.
Tapping into new magical powers inflicts a magical curse or creates an odd phenomenon.
A retraining instructor falls ill or goes missing.
Someone witnesses the PC retraining and asks to join them as they study or practice.
The PC's training comes to a halt, and they need to acquire a rare book or something similar to continue.

Buying and Selling Items

After an adventure yields a windfall, the characters might have a number of items they want to sell. Likewise, when they're flush with currency, they might want to stock up on gear. It usually takes 1 day of downtime to sell off a few goods or shop around to buy a couple items. It can take longer to sell off a large number of goods, expensive items, or items that aren't in high demand.

An item can usually be purchased at its full Price and sold for half its Price. Supply and demand can affect these numbers, but only occasionally. However, the game leaves it up to you to determine what items the PCs can and can't purchase and the final market Price for them. Settlements the size of a town or bigger typically have at least one vendor for basic, common gear, and even magic and alchemical items of 1st level. Beyond that, it all depends on how much you want to allow the players to determine their abilities and how much verisimilitude you want in your game. You can set the specifics where you need, but let's look at three possibilities.

PCs can buy what they want where they want. You gloss over the details of markets. PCs can sell whatever they want for half the Price and buy any item to which they have access at full Price. This approach is focused on expediency over verisimilitude and is likely to reduce the number of unusual or distinctive items the PCs have, as many players seek out the ones that most directly support their characters' strengths. This still means there's a limit on purchasing uncommon or rarer items, but you could even do away with rarity if your group wants, or add a surcharge instead (depending on your group's play style, that could be anywhere from 10% to 100% for uncommon items, and 25% to 500% if you also want to open up all rare items).

PCs can buy what they want but must put in additional effort. If they want to sell or buy items, PCs must be in a location where the markets can support that. They can usually sell a single item for half its Price, but the Price for something already plentiful on the market could drop lower, typically to 25% or 10%, or be refused entirely if there's a glut. Buying an item usually costs the full Price; buying higher-level items (or uncommon items if they're available at all) requires seeking out a special vendor or NPC and can take extra time, representing a real investment by the PCs. They might be unable to find the item at all even after their time investment, based on the settlement's parameters. This approach allows PCs

to determine some of their items, but it forces them to really work to get more powerful items and discourages looting every enemy to sell off fairly ordinary armor. This can be the most work for you but can make the world feel diverse and complex.

Magical markets are rare or nonexistent. PCs get what they find in adventures and can Craft their own items, if you allow them to get formulas in some way. If you have magical marketplaces at all, their selections are small. They sell items at full Price and have difficulty attaining the funds to buy more items. They might purchase items for half of the Price but are far more selective about what they take. If you use this approach, PCs are far more likely to use strange items they find but might be dissatisfied or even underpowered depending on what items you give them. Even in this style of game, you might want to allow them to get weapons and armor with fundamental runes fairly easily or make sure you award those on a regular basis.

Money in Downtime

While the amount of money the PCs can earn during short periods of downtime is significantly less than the value of the loot they gain while adventuring, it can still serve as a satisfying bonus. The PCs might use their money to outfit themselves better, donate it toward a good cause, or pool it together to save for a major purchase. If you find that a PC tends to forget about their money or save it up more cautiously than they really need to, offer them rewarding opportunities to spend it. For instance, they might be approached to contribute to a charity in desperate need or sponsor an artist looking for a patron.

Investments

The downtime system isn't meant to deal with investing money, receiving interest, or the like just to make more money. Rather, investing should result in changes in the world. PCs might invest in founding a museum and find on their return that the collection has grown. If they fund an expedition, they might get access to interesting trade goods later on.

When characters are investing in a major endeavor, the amount of in-world time invested often matters more than the money. While spending additional money greatly increases the efficiency of Crafting an item, you can't build a fort in a day just because you have enough money to pay for the whole process. Downtime is a good opportunity for characters to start long processes that can continue in the background as the PCs adventure, provided they can find a trustworthy, competent person to run things in their stead.

Money during Long Periods of Downtime

If the PCs have a very long time between adventures, especially years, they have the opportunity to collect a great deal of money through downtime. Use the guidelines for average progress (page 247) and cost of living on page 295 of *Player Core* to figure out how much they get. Because you're trying to convey that a long time has passed, have them spend it before you jump to the end of downtime. What did they invest in during those years? What drew their interest? Did their fortunes rise or fall? Did they acquire interesting objects or hire compelling people? Consider this expenditure another way to show how the PCs impact the world.

Cost of Living

Tracking cost of living is usually best reserved for months or years of downtime since that's when someone might earn a substantial amount of money from downtime activities and find that costs really add up. You can usually ignore it if there are only a few days of downtime, though if a PC is roleplaying a fine or extravagant lifestyle, you might charge them during even short periods of downtime to reinforce the story they're telling. For short periods of downtime, characters are usually just passing through a settlement or spending a bit of time there. They can use the prices for inn stays and meals found on page 294 of *Player Core*. For long stretches of downtime, use the values on the Cost of Living table, repeated below for convenience. Deduct these costs from a character's funds after they gain any money from their other downtime activities.

A character can live off the land instead, but each day they do, they typically use the Subsist activity (*Player Core* 232) to the exclusion of any other downtime activity.

COST OF LIVING

Standard of Living	Week	Month	Year
Subsistence*	4 sp	2 gp	24 gp
Comfortable	1 gp	4 gp	52 gp
Fine	30 gp	130 gp	1,600 gp
Extravagant	100 gp	430 gp	5,200 gp

* You can attempt to Subsist using Society or Survival for free.

Long-Term Rest

Each full 24-hour period a character spends resting during downtime allows them to recover double what they would for an 8-hour rest. They must spend this time resting in a comfortable and secure location, typically in bed.

If they spend significantly longer in bed rest—usually from a few days to a week of downtime—they recover from all damage and most nonpermanent conditions. Characters affected by diseases, long-lasting poisons, or similar afflictions might need to continue attempting saves during downtime. Some curses, permanent injuries, and other situations that require magic or special care to remove don't end automatically during long-term rest.

Retraining

The retraining rules on page 440 of the *Player Core* allow a player to change some character choices, but they rely on you, as the GM, to decide whether the retraining requires a teacher, how long it takes, if it has any associated costs, and if the ability can be retrained at all. It's reasonable for a character to retrain most choices, and you should allow them. Only choices that are truly intrinsic to the character, like a sorcerer's bloodline, should be off limits without extraordinary circumstances. Consider what effort each PC puts forth as they retrain, so you can describe how they feel their abilities change. What kind of research and practice do they do? If they have a teacher, what advice does that teacher give?

You can run a campaign without retraining if you want the PCs to be more bound by their decisions or are running a game without downtime. However, if your campaign doesn't use downtime rules but a player really regrets a decision made while building or leveling up their character, you might make an exception for them, either by letting them simply change the decision or by finding a rare in-story element to justify the decision, such as a rare potion or a magical nexus that alters time.

Try to make retraining into a story. Use NPCs the character already knows as teachers, have a character undertake intense research in a mysterious old library, or ground the retraining in the game's narrative by making it the consequence of something that happened to the character in a previous session.

Time

Retraining a feat or skill increase typically takes a week. Class features that require a choice can also be retrained but take longer: at least a month, possibly more. Retraining might take even longer if it would be especially physically demanding or require travel, lengthy experimentation, or in-depth research, but usually, you won't want to require more than a month for a feat or skill, or 4 months for a class feature.

A character might need to retrain several options at once. For instance, retraining a skill increase might mean they have skill feats they can no longer use, and so they'll need to retrain those as well. You can add all this retraining time together, then reduce the total a bit to represent the cohesive nature of the retraining.

Instruction and Costs

The rules abstract the process of learning new things as you level up—you're learning on the job—but retraining suggests that the character works with a teacher or undergoes specific practice to retrain. If you want, you can entirely ignore this aspect of retraining, but it does give an opportunity to introduce (or reintroduce) NPCs and further the game's story. You can even have one player character mentor another, particularly when it comes to retraining skills.

You don't have to use teachers, but it gives you a great way to introduce a new NPC or bring back an existing one in a new role. The role of a teacher could also be filled by communing with nature for a druid, poring through a massive grimoire for a wizard, and so on. The important part is the guidance gained from that source. The following list includes sample teachers.

- Archwizard Koda Mohanz, wizard academy proctor
- Bagra Redforge, aged artisan
- Baroness Ivestia II, tutor in etiquette and social maneuvering
- Byren Effestos, Esquire, advisor in matters of law, politics, and finance
- Dr. Phinella Albor, professor of medicine and surgery
- Dr. Revis Enzerrad, mystic versed in the occult
- Grita the Swamp Sage, purveyor of strange draughts and cryptic riddles
- Jeballewn Leastfire, expert and tutor in alchemical experimentation
- Kpunde Neverlost, retired veteran adventurer
- Lyra, teller of legends and master of handicrafts
- Major Venaeus, instructor of military tactics
- Mother Elizia, high priest and religious scholar
- Professor Kurid Yamarrupan, senior university lector
- Quintari Solvar, coach for fitness and healthy living
- Ragged Sanden, hermit and speaker for nature
- Silent Flame, Master of the Seventeen Forms
- Tembly the Daring, veteran acrobat and circus performer
- Twelve Fingers, experienced thief and spy
- Wen Hardfoot, well-traveled scout and naturalist
- Zuleri Gan, conductor, playwright, and music scholar

Any costs to retraining should be pretty minor—about as much as a PC could gain by Earning Income over the same period of time. The costs are mostly there to make the training feel appropriate within the context of the story, not to consume significant amounts of the character's earnings. A teacher might volunteer to work without pay as a reward for something the character has already done or simply ask for a favor in return.

Extreme Retraining

By the default rules, PCs can't retrain their class, ancestry, background, attribute modifiers, or anything else intrinsic to their character. However, you might be able to find a way to make this happen in the story, going beyond the realm of retraining and into deeper, story-based quests. Class and attribute modifiers are the simplest of these changes to justify, as they could come about solely through intense retraining. Especially at low levels, you might let a player rebuild their character as a different class, perhaps starting by retraining into a multiclass dedication for their new class and swapping into more feats from that dedication as partial progress toward the class change. Just be mindful that they aren't swapping over to switch out a class they think is great at low levels for one they think is stronger at high levels. Retraining a class or ability modifiers should take a long time, typically months or years.

Changing an ancestry or heritage requires some kind of magic, such as reincarnation into a new form. This might take a complex ritual, exposure to bizarre and rare magic, or the intervention of a deity. For instance, you might require an elf who wants to be a halfling to first become trained in Halfling Lore, worship the halfling pantheon, and eventually do a great service for halflings to get a divine blessing of transformation.

Retraining a background requires altering the game's story so that the events the PC thought happened didn't. That can be pretty tricky to justify! One easy scenario is that they had their memory altered and need to get it magically restored to reveal their "true" background—the new retrained background.

Of course, in all these cases you could make an exception and just let the player make the change without explanation. This effectively acknowledges that you're playing a game and don't need an in-world justification to make certain retroactive changes. For some groups, it might be easier, or require less suspension of disbelief, to ask the group to adjust their ideas of what previously happened in the game—retconning events—than to create an in-world justification for something like an elf turning into a halfling via magic.

Difficulty Classes

As the Game Master, it's up to you to set the difficulty classes (DCs) for checks that don't use a predefined DC. The following sections offer advice on how to set appropriate DCs and tweak them as needed to feel natural for your story. Picking a simple DC and using a level-based DC each work well in certain circumstances, and you can adjust both types of DC using the advice on adjusting difficulty.

Simple DCs

Sometimes you need to quickly set a difficulty class. The easiest method is to select a simple DC from the Simple DCs table on page 53 by estimating which proficiency rank best matches the task (that rank is usually not required to succeed at the task). If it's something pretty much anyone would have a decent chance at, use the untrained DC. If it would require a degree of training, use the DC listed for trained, expert, master, or legendary proficiency, as appropriate to the complexity of the task. For example, say a PC was trying to uncover the true history behind a fable. You determine this requires a check to Recall Knowledge, and that only someone with master proficiency in Folktale Lore would know the information, so you'd set the DC at 30—the simple master DC.

Simple DCs work well when you need a DC on the fly and there's no level associated with the task. They're most useful for skill checks. Because there isn't much gradation between the simple DCs, they don't work as well for hazards or combats where the PCs' lives are on the line; you're better off using level-based DCs for such challenges.

Level-Based DCs

When you're determining a skill DC based on something that has a level, use the table below to set the DC. Find the level of the subject, and assign the corresponding DC. Since spells use a 1–10 scale, use the Spell Rank column for them.

Use these DCs when a PC needs to Identify a Spell or Recall Knowledge about a creature, attempts to Earn Income by performing a task of a certain level, and so on. You can also use the level-based DCs for obstacles instead of assigning a simple DC. For example, you might determine that a wall in a high-level dungeon was constructed of smooth metal and is hard to climb. You could simply say only someone with master proficiency could climb it and use the simple DC of 30. Or you might decide that the 15th-level villain who created the dungeon crafted the wall and use the 15th-level DC of 34. Either approach is reasonable!

Note that PCs who invest in a skill become more likely to succeed at a DC of their level as they increase in level, and the listed DCs eventually pose very little challenge for them.

Adjusting Difficulty

You might decide a DC should differ from the baseline, whether to account for PCs' areas of expertise or to represent the rarity of spells or items. A DC adjustment represents an essential difference in the difficulty of a task and applies to anyone attempting a specific check for it. Adjustments happen most often with tasks whose DCs are based on their level. You'll often apply the adjustments for uncommon, rare, or unique subjects.

The DC Adjustments table lists the categories of adjustments. The adjustments' names are relative to the base difficulty of the task itself—a very hard 2nd-level task will not be "very hard" for a 10th-level PC to accomplish! PCs who invest in a skill will become better and better at that skill as they increase in level. For example, even the best 1st-level PC has grim odds against an incredibly hard 1st-level DC, with a huge chance of critical failure, but by 20th level, an optimized character with a modicum of magic or assistance can take down incredibly hard 20th-level DCs over half the time, critically failing only on a 1. At higher levels, many groups will find that the very hard DC is more like standard for them; keep that in mind if you need a check that presents a true challenge to a high-level group.

You might use different DCs for a task based on the particular skill or statistic used for the check. Let's say your PCs encounter a magical tome about dragons. The tome is 4th-level and has the arcane trait, so you set the DC of an Arcana check to Identify the Magic to 19. As noted in Identify Magic, other magic-related skills can typically be used at a higher DC, so you might decide the check is very hard for a character using Occultism instead and set the DC at 24 for characters using that skill. If a character in your group had Dragon Lore, you might determine that it would be easy or very easy for them to use that skill and adjust the DC to 17 or 14. These adjustments aren't taking the place of characters' bonuses, modifiers, and penalties—they are due to the applicability of the skills being used.

Group Attempts

The DCs in this chapter give an individual character a strong and increasing chance of success if they have some proficiency. On occasion, though, you'll have a task that only one person in the group needs to succeed at, but that everyone can attempt. The number of dice being rolled