The No-Prep Gamemaster

Train Your Brain to Run Tabletop Roleplaying Games

Second Edition

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Matt Davids

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For old friends long gone...

"Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos… It can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself."

— Mary Shelley

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EXTRAS

Preface to the New Edition

The state—and even the nature—of tabletop role-playing games has changed so fundamentally since I wrote the first edition, I knew it was time to return to *The No-Prep Gamemaster*.

We passed through the fire of a pandemic and the stumbles of the owners of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Now, a new edition of the world's most popular tabletop role-playing game has led numerous designers and smaller companies to release their own tabletop role-playing games.

The proliferation of online play and the rise of artificial intelligence are altering the experience of tabletop RPGs in ways I couldn't have imagined when I wrote the first edition. Expectations placed on gamemasters by bloggers and YouTubers have only grown in the last six years.

Taking all of this into account, it is still my mission to reduce the workload of gamemasters. I want as many people as possible to experience the joy of tabletop role-playing games, and that means we need more gamemasters.

The first edition contained many errors and grammatical mistakes—for that, I am regretful. It was the first book of prose I had ever written and completed. However, that is not an excuse. I have endeavored to be more thorough with this edition.

I have also attempted to address the major criticisms of the book that I received over the years. Here are some examples:

- "The book is too short." – I have made it longer.
- "The book is too long." – All I can say is sorry.
- "The book begins with a long-winded introduction." – As I noted in the first edition, the Arcana section can be skipped if a reader wants more actionable GM tips.

- "The book is bitter." – It was never my intention to be bitter. However, I can see some of that in the text. I have tried to be more hopeful in this edition. (I did name a sub-heading "*The Bitterness of the GM's Soul,"* which was unfortunate.)
- "The book was written by a lazy person." – Too true.
- "The book adds more work to the gamemaster." – I'm not sure exactly how readers drew that conclusion, but I have attempted to be clearer in this edition that I'm taking things off the GM's plate.
- "No-prep sessions are always bad." – Simply not true. I've planned out sessions months in advance, and they have been terrible. Does that mean all no-prep sessions are awesome? No, they can be terrible as well. It's more complicated than that.

The most egregious error in the book was an unforced one, and the full responsibility rests squarely on my shoulders. The *"Don't Set Dungeons in Stone"* principle was placed in the *Three Keys* section.

That was a huge mistake. *"Don't Set Dungeons in Stone"* is a tactic and should be placed in the Arrows in the Quiver section. It has now been moved to its proper place. Replacing it is a foundational key that most people overlook—including me. That key is experience, as I lay out in this new edition.

I've added two new subsections under the *Use Technology or Not* section, since the world has completely changed since the first edition was published. Now, I address playing online and AI.

Several of the topics included in *Arrows in the Quiver* may contain repetitive information because they were published elsewhere and have been gathered here. I hope the slight repetitions serve as reinforcements of the principles of a no-prep gamemaster.

In addition to the other changes, the *Extras* section was added. It is comprised of a glossary, something to lighten the mood, and reading and watching recommendations.

I transcribed the books listed in the *Dungeon Master's Guide (1979)* and the ones from the *Player's Handbook (2014)* and *Dungeon Master's Guide (2014)*. I added more popular works and my favorites. Plus, I included an eclectic range of movies and TV shows for reference.

Any errors or omissions in this edition are completely my own—a flawed gamemaster and an even more flawed human being.

It is my sincere hope that this slim volume will help people across the globe and in all walks of life to have countless adventures with their friends and family while playing tabletop role-playing games.

Matt Davids
5-13-2025

Introduction (1st Ed.)

My intention with this small volume is to relieve the massive amount of pressure that is often placed upon gamemasters. It began as articles that I posted on my website, dicegeeks.com.

I gathered them here, expanded, and added to the content so the information and advice I share would be convenient for any who wish to improve their role-playing.

The book is organized into three sections: *Arcana*, *Three Keys*, and *Arrows in the Quiver.*

The *Arcana* section deals with my history and struggles with learning how to gamemaster, and why I decided to stop preparing for sessions. If you are looking only for practical tips, this section can be skipped.

The *Three Keys* section is the heart of *The No-Prep Gamemaster*. These short chapters provide the framework on which anyone can begin to gamemaster without preparation.

Arrows in the Quiver is a selection of tips and tricks that a GM can use at any time to cut down preparation time.

I hope that whoever reads this book will be inspired and empowered to run better campaigns. The advice contained here, coupled with the experience of running games, should make every gamemaster a No-Prep Gamemaster.

Matt Davids
8-5-2019

ARCANA

Gamemaster Evolution

The first tabletop roleplaying game session I ever GMed came the day after I played *Dungeons & Dragons* for the first time. I ran my mom through a simple dungeon. I didn't know what I was doing. I only knew that *D&D* was the greatest game ever, and I had to play as much as possible.

Rules? I didn't know the rules. Other than a few I had just learned (and distorted) from the night before. I decided any roll over a fourteen hit, but I didn't have a d20. I wrote one through twenty on scraps of paper and had my mom draw them from my baseball cap.

I didn't know how to lay out a dungeon. I didn't know how to build tension. I didn't know how to balance encounters. I didn't know that being the gamemaster was a hard job that required hours of preparation, stress, and anxiety.

I was nine years old, and all I knew was that tabletop role-playing games were awesome. (I still have my childhood characters.)

Needless to say, role-playing games stirred something within me, and I took to them as if they had always been a part of me. I couldn't stop thinking about *D&D*. I instantly became a dice goblin wishing to possess as many polyhedral dice as I could. I soon realized that there were other RPGs.

TABLETOP RPGS I'VE PLAYED

From the beginning, I began branching out. I wanted to be the hero in my favorite genres, and RPGs let me do that. Before long, I had played many different RPGs.

I continue to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, but I have also played *Pathfinder 1E, Marvel Super Heroes, Star Frontiers, FASA Star Trek, West End Games Star Wars, Fantasy Flight Star Wars, Stars Without Number, Shadowrun, 13th Age, Avatar: The Last Airbender, G.I. Joe, Cyberpunk RED*, most of the Palladium games, and more.

BECOMING A FOREVER GM

When I was young, I quickly found that if I wanted my friends to role-play, I needed to be the gamemaster. Why? Most of them had never even heard of a role-playing game. They had no clue how they worked. Little did they know I didn't either—though I could draw on one or two experiences they didn't have.

The problem became clear: I wanted to play more than they did. I was obsessed with RPGs, and they had just heard about them for the first time, so I needed to show them how the games were played.

Also, I had the books. One of the unwritten rules of tabletop role-playing games is that he who owns the books is the GM. Why, I'm not sure. I guess because if you own the books, it's assumed you've read them. However, in elementary school, I struggled with reading, and even though I owned the books, I hadn't read them either.

I wanted to role-play, and my friends didn't know anything about the games, so I became a gamemaster. I had no burning desire to be a gamemaster. I just wanted to play, and being the gamemaster meant I could play.

My initial naivety helped me in some ways and hurt me in others. Running a game right after I played for the first time taught me a valuable lesson: **GMing doesn't have to be a big deal.**

I didn't have a plan. I didn't have encounters mapped out. I just started playing. I thought anyone could be a GM.

At the same time, this hurt me because I thought GMing wasn't a big deal. I believed anyone could run a game—and that they would have fun doing it. Of course, this isn't always the case. The world works differently than my childlike mind could understand.

What happened was that I would run a game for a few of my friends. They would love it and heap praise on me—praise I didn't deserve—and I would eat it up like cake. They would ask when we were playing next.

But over time, a deeper problem began to show itself. I would ask if anyone else wanted to run a game. They would say they didn't know how. I would come back with, "I didn't know how either." I'd tell them they could try it out and learn how to GM.

I'd get the standard responses: they wanted to play more before running a game, or they wanted to play a certain character for a while. I kept hoping someone else would step up—but no one did. I was starving to play, so I ran the next session… and the next… and the next.

INSIDE THE GM'S SOUL

My first forays into GMing were certainly disastrous. However, I wouldn't change them. They were creative learning experiences with low stakes—exactly what I needed to learn the art of gamemastering. In that sense, they were not failures.

You may be wondering why I said my friends thought the sessions were awesome, but now I'm saying they were disasters.

First, kids have lower standards than adults. They haven't experienced great stories or seen a skilled gamemaster at work.

Second, dungeons are hard to mess up. *D&D* at that time was simple dungeon crawls. The characters went into room after room, and the players had fun.

It wasn't until I started running *Marvel Super Heroes*, *Star Frontiers*, or *Star Trek* that things turned sour. Again, I didn't know what I didn't know. I just started playing, and soon I experienced something new.

My first taste of that bitter fruit: *player frustration*.

ALL ABOARD

When I first started gamemastering sessions that required a story, I tended to railroad my players quite extensively. I'm being too kind to myself.

I would jam my player characters into the story I wanted and demand set outcomes. I created situations that could only be solved in the way I wanted them to be solved.

I would wait—sometimes for hours—for my players to discover what I had planned. If they didn't, I would intervene to save them. This was usually accomplished through a GMPC (Game Master Player Character) I secretly wanted to be playing.

During one session of Star Frontiers, after my player couldn't do anything, I had a mysterious figure show up and offer him the solution. My friend became angry and said I always had a character like that show up—and he was sick of it. He demanded to run a session and warned that he would kill my favorite character.

All I heard was that he was going to GM.

He did—and he tried killing my character at every turn. The session ended in a rules dispute, even though neither of us knew the rules.

But I was happy. I believe that was the first time I had ever played *Star Frontiers* without being the gamemaster.

As for *D&D*, I have a clear memory of planning out a dungeon one time. I remember thinking, "Okay, at this fork in the passage, my players will go right first." So I planned for something to happen if they went right first—and then left.

But as soon as my players encountered that dungeon, they went left first, and I nearly lost my mind. I believe I even told them they couldn't go that way yet. The session was a nightmare—and it was all my doing.

After a few disastrous attempts at railroading, I decided I would only run sandbox campaigns. Of course, at the time, I had never heard that term. I just thought I'd let the players do whatever they wanted.

It didn't go smoothly. I fell into a trap the size of the Great Pit of Carkoon.

YOU CAN DO ANYTHING

I swung completely in the opposite direction from when I was railroading my players. With my newly discovered sandbox sessions, I attempted to create everything in the entire world.

And I mean everything—continents, planets, towns, cities, rivers, oceans, villages—anything the players could interact with had lore, encounters, and NPCs attached to it.

These sessions proved to be very popular. My players loved them. As I was getting older, so were my players. They enjoyed the freedom and the agency. However, these sessions drained the life out of me. I created so many things that no one would ever see or touch.

Players can only do so much, after all. Entire planets, empires, and rich storylines went abandoned. Cleverly crafted NPCs were never encountered.

I worked myself so hard that if a session was canceled or if nobody showed up, I would become angry and bitter. I remember being so enraged once that I swore I'd never run a game again.

After rewatching *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* for the umpteenth time, I cooled off and started planning another world for a session.

Honestly, I didn't know what I was supposed to do as a gamemaster.

I thought the gamemaster was supposed to have amazingly huge campaigns and great adventures waiting for the players. I don't know where I picked that up—maybe from issues of *Dragon* magazine, or stories of *D&D* folklore passed through high school halls.

At this point in my life, I had only played ten or so times without being the GM—and that's being generous. I didn't know what I was doing, and there was no YouTube actual play show for me to watch and emulate.

SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE

As I got older, there were more demands on my time. Jobs, college, girlfriends, and the like crowded out my time to play role-playing games.

Gone were the days of watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* alone and preparing for a session without worrying about how I was going to feed myself.

I realized there was no way I could keep preparing gigantic campaigns with heaps of backstory and volumes of lore. I had already been burned by people not showing up—but now, I simply didn't have the time.

On many occasions, I didn't have time to do any prep at all, let alone craft the massive sandboxes I was trying to build.

Something had to change. I loved tabletop role-playing games and couldn't imagine giving up the hobby for long. I had to reevaluate what it meant to be a gamemaster.

Reader Reflection: Your GM Origin Story

Take a moment to think about how you became a gamemaster. Was it by choice or necessity?

Ask yourself:

- What drew me to the GM's seat in the first place?
- What did I think a GM had to do?
- What parts of GMing energize me and which ones burn me out?

True Role of the Gamemaster

The dirty little secret in the role-playing game community is that very few people actually want to be a gamemaster. Even fewer want to be the gamemaster for long stretches of time—or exclusively.

I had a friend hand me a Dragonlance box set once and say, "Could you please run this for me?" I said yes, because I was foolish and obsessed with RPGs.

Another time, I asked if I could play Star Trek instead of running it for once, and a player got so angry he sabotaged the whole night. We didn't get to play at all.

Very few people want to be a gamemaster because the role is often misunderstood.

Let's look at the role of the gamemaster and how I—and others—have misunderstood it. Once we understand the true role of the GM, we can begin to master the craft. And, of course, run fun games for our friends and family.

WHY IS RUNNING A TABLETOP RPG A BIG DEAL?

Being the gamemaster is usually made out to be a huge deal. It's like being the GM means you have no fun while making sure everyone else does.

The GM has to own all the books. The GM has to know all the rules. The GM has to help everyone make characters. The GM has to plan an epic story. The GM has to balance encounters (whatever the heck that means).

The GM has to schedule the session. The GM has to check throughout the week who's coming. The GM has to provide food. And the list goes on and on, right?

Tons of pressure is put on the gamemaster to create an entire world—from the cow in the field, to the random hunters on a hillside, to the raven flying on the wing, to the pretty barmaid, to the elf prince, to the surly innkeeper.

And it doesn't end there. Gamemasters are expected to be professional-grade actors too, right?

Now, some GMs eat this stuff up. Gamemasters can have an air of mystery and mystique. No one else could ever do what I do, they might think. After years of being picked last for sports teams and sitting alone in the library, now they get to be the cool kid for once.

I'm not making fun of anyone—I totally did this. I milked the power of the gamemaster for all it was worth more than once. I know I got a perverse enjoyment out of it. It was like I was James Bond, and all my friends looked up to me.

Players, on the other hand, often use that same mystique as a shield. It takes so much creativity and hard work, they'll say. I could never GM. Only those special people who can channel the spirit of Tolkien or Heinlein can run a game.

I can't tell you how many times I asked one of my players to GM, and they said no because I "did it better." Then I'd say, "How are you going to get better if you never run a game?"

But here's the truth: you don't have to put that much pressure on yourself if you're the gamemaster. A person should be able to pick up a gamebook and run a session on a moment's notice—just like a player can jump in and play if they've got a character ready. There shouldn't be a huge divide between GMs and players.

There's no reason to make GMing into some kind of massive production. It's unnecessary. If you keep things simple and stay calm, you can run amazing RPG sessions without working yourself to the bone.

THE GAMEMASTER IS JUST ANOTHER PLAYER

Ah, the old lie...

Now, for all my insistence that you can GM on a moment's notice, the gamemaster is not just another player in the game. Don't get me wrong—they should be. But in reality, they're not. No one ever treats being the gamemaster that way, and that's part of the problem.

This insidious truth is proved to me every time I hear someone say, "I want to play more before I GM."

Oh, isn't that sweet? You'd like to play more. Wouldn't we all. If I had waited to "play more" before I ran a session, I would have only played a few times in my entire life.

Some of us never get a chance to "play" our favorite games. We're always the gamemaster. We want to play so badly that we take up the mantle of GM even when we don't know the rules or what we're doing.

I've GMed some role-playing games for years and never once been a player. Does that mean I never played the game?

Do you want to play more? **GMing is playing.** So why don't you do that?

It's because the GM isn't seen as a player. They're seen as something other. I know people who would play a role-playing game any day of the week—but would never GM. Why?

Because no one treats GMing like it's just being another player at the table. It's always viewed as a task, not as fun.

Here are some reasons people don't want to be the gamemaster:

- Players are afraid to be the gamemaster because it looks like a huge investment.
- GMs make it a huge production by taking hours to prepare.
- Players are afraid of making mistakes or doing a poor job.
- Players are afraid of conflict that may arise while being the referee.

These reasons are just excuses—and they can be dealt with.

If you love RPGs, why wouldn't you want to experience half of the hobby? Maybe you won't be the best gamemaster right away. So what? We all have to start somewhere. So why not give it a try?

RELAX

The first step is to relax. Don't put a ton of pressure on yourself—and don't let other people put pressure on you either. Yes, you'll have to answer a lot of questions and make a lot of decisions when you're the gamemaster.

That's just the nature of the beast. But that doesn't mean you have to know all the answers ahead of time—or stress out about them. Don't get overwhelmed. Break things down and take them step by step.

Take a deep breath and remember: you're here to have fun. We're playing a game, after all. Games should be fun for everyone involved.

Just remember—whether you GM well or poorly, if you and your players had fun, then you're doing it right.

Having fun is the golden rule of RPGs.

REFEREE

The main focus of a gamemaster should be as a referee—between the players, the game system's rules, and the NPCs, monsters, or villains. Referees make calls. They should be impartial and not favor the players or the villains.

That's it, right there: **Gamemasters make rulings.**

Sometimes they roll dice. Sometimes they determine the difficulty of a task a character is attempting. You can keep GMing that simple.

If you're hanging out with a bunch of friends and someone says, "Hey, let's play D&D," no one should be afraid to GM.

No session prep is necessary. You just need to be ready to make rulings and describe the setting.

STYLE

Everyone plays role-playing games differently. It's important to remember that every GM runs a game differently as well. Every RPG group has its own way of playing, and every GM has their own style.

This is perfectly fine. This is normal.

You may find that some of my advice doesn't fit your style—that's cool and to be expected. You may find some of it very helpful—and that's cool as well.

It all depends on how you run games and what your group enjoys.

My goal is to take some of the weight off the gamemaster's shoulders. If some of these tips don't suit you, that's fine. If some do, then I'm glad I could help a fellow role-player.

WHAT GAMEMASTERS ARE NOT

Before we dive headfirst into my no-prep strategies, we need to be clear on what a gamemaster is—and what a gamemaster isn't.

Mr. Spock, when confronted with a mystery he couldn't define, would often outline what the thing wasn't in order to understand what it was.

Fortunately for us, gamemastering isn't a giant space amoeba or a time-space distortion. We can quickly outline a few things the gamemaster is not. Clearing away common tropes, misconceptions, and false narratives helps us run the game—even before we start.

Gamemasters are not tyrants

GMs don't get to lord their authority over the players. They're not kings or dictators. Players should never be afraid to ask the GM for something during a session or to offer clarity on the rules.

There should be no crazed rantings of "It's my way or the highway" from the gamemaster. There should be no "That's not the story I want to tell" moments, either.

You sometimes hear directors say things like that in movie interviews—it's usually a way to justify throwing out someone else's script. But in RPGs, the GM doesn't decide the story.

The story in *D&D*—or any RPG—emerges. It's created in concert between the players and the GM. The GM is not the sole storyteller at the table.

The gamemaster is the referee and arbiter of the rules—not a lawgiver descended from the heavens. They control NPCs and monsters, but not the outcomes. Players and dice do that.

Gamemasters are not the players' servant

The flip side of the tyrant GM is the doormat GM—the one who lets players walk all over them. Making a session easy or giving in to every demand doesn't make the game more fun. It waters down the experience and makes it a sham.

We need rules to give the game structure and make it enjoyable. A player may not like that their attack missed, but if every attack hit, there'd be no tension—and no interest.

Some players might still complain when their character fails a roll, but that's just another way of trying to control the story. And that's just as wrong as the GM doing it.

If you make a rules decision, players should be allowed to reasonably appeal—but you're the referee. There comes a point when discussion ends and your call stands. GMs are also allowed to make mistakes, and that's okay.

Making a ruling and asking players to move on isn't being mean. It's part of the job. In baseball, umpires call balls and strikes. In football, referees call penalties. Players don't do that—the refs do. GMs are the referees in tabletop RPGs.

Gamemasters are not supposed to be miserable

Gamemasters are not long-suffering souls who begrudgingly run games so their friends can have fun while they slog through dry rulebooks, spend a bunch of money, and take abuse from players with (toxic) personalities.

Believe it or not, some people actually think this is true. Some people enjoy the greatest hobby in the world while believing they're torturing a friend. Some gamemasters believe this about themselves.

No, no, no.

GMs should be having just as much fun as the players. If you're not enjoying the game, talk to your players. Take a break. Let someone else GM. Try a different game or system. You don't have to be sad to be the gamemaster.

Gamemasters are not mythic figures that bestride the game table like a colossus

Frankly, there's nothing special about being a gamemaster. Anyone can be a gamemaster—and everyone who enjoys RPGs should try it.

I know that's not how people often see it, as I explained above. But it's true. Any role-player should be able to run a game—and run one at a moment's notice if they want to.

Gamemasters are not rules experts

You don't need to memorize every rule to run a game. If you go into a session thinking you need to know everything, you'll overwhelm yourself. GMing will seem like a herculean task.

Knowing the rules is helpful—but it's not necessary. Players need to know the rules too. It's their responsibility to understand how their character works and what dice to roll.

Of course, if you have a new player who's never played a TTRPG before, you'll help them. But the other players should help too. It's a shared responsibility.

Sometimes, no one at the table knows the rules. That's okay! These sessions can actually be a lot of fun because you're all learning the game together. It's a great way to try out new games and systems.

GM confession: I've run games without reading the rules. It's a little crazy and not something I recommend often—but it's totally doable.

Gamemasters are not permanent GMs

The only valid reason to be a forever GM is by your own choice. Even if you prefer GMing over playing, you should still get to take breaks and play occasionally.

For many years, I was the "forever GM." Don't get me wrong—I enjoy GMing. I often come up with sessions and campaigns I can't wait to run.

But I love playing characters too. I wasn't a forever GM by choice—I had to be, or I wouldn't have gotten to play at all. That lack of choice led to frustration.

Case in point: I was 11 years old when I got FASA's Star Trek RPG. I loved Star Trek—both The Original Series and The Next Generation. When I say I loved it, I mean really loved it. At least, back in the day when I was a teenager and in my early twenties.

I love running *Star Trek* games. I've enjoyed many sessions throwing awesome situations at players and seeing how they react in a Trek universe. But I always wanted to be the captain of the Enterprise (who doesn't?).

I got the game when I was 11. Besides one or two abbreviated sessions, the first time I played without being the GM was when I was 36. I had numerous friends who loved playing *Star Trek*, but none of them would ever GM.

Gamemasters are not the sole worldbuilder

It's often true that the GM plants the seed for a campaign or session. That's fine—and expected. It's one of the perks of being the GM. It's like a player creating their own character—you get to create the setting.

But you don't *have* to create everything.

Remember the trap I fell into? Don't repeat that mistake. Trying to build the whole world by yourself is overwhelming—and it leads to burnout.

Players are a valuable resource when it comes to worldbuilding. They should have a hand in creating the world too, especially if the GM is feeling overworked or overwhelmed with questions.

Don't worry that they're encroaching on your domain. They aren't—unless they're steamrolling you. Don't let that happen, but remember: they're storytellers too.

Use your creative players to fill the world with interesting details. And since you're the gamemaster, you can always put your own spin on what they create.

Note: I've encountered players who say that helping build the world is "doing the GM's job," and they don't want to do that. They say they came to play, not to GM.

These players are confused about what it means to be a role-player. Don't give in to that mindset—it's not good for the game or the group.

GOING NO PREP

After much reflection—evaluating my failures as a gamemaster and trying to understand the true role of a GM—I came to a conclusion.

Maybe a startling one for many role-players: I decided I would no longer prep for sessions.

I know—it sounds crazy. When I tell people this, they often think I've just given up on life. That I've resigned myself to run awful games.

That I'm tired, burnt out, and my sessions will now be sloppy messes—just a reflection of my ruined soul. But that's not true.

I looked back at all the games I had run and asked myself:

- When did I run my best sessions?
- When did my players have the most fun?
- When did I have the most fun?

That reflection led to several important changes in how I run games. And as I kept asking those questions, one pattern came up over and over again. It wasn't the system. It wasn't the players. It wasn't my mood (though those can be difference-makers).

There was one consistent thing I couldn't ignore or explain away:

Every single time I did my best GMing—and everyone had the most fun—was when I didn't prep.

I'm absolutely serious.

I compared sessions run a week apart, with the same players and the same system. The session I prepared for? It went poorly. The one I ran on the spot? Amazing.

These examples just kept popping up in my mind. So I made a conscious decision: *I would go completely no-prep—or prep as little as possible.*

Yes, it was scary at first. But it taught me valuable lessons—about GMing, about handling players, about improvising, and about not stressing out.

Now, I could be wrong—but I don't think the original intent of tabletop role-playing games was to have the gamemaster spend 20 to 40 hours preparing for a session that lasts 2 to 4 hours… especially when players just have to show up.

It just doesn't make sense.

And it's truly impractical once a person has a family, a job, and other responsibilities. I want more role-playing in the world—not less. I want more players to feel they can run games—so more people can play.

Another element I noticed? I was bored during the sessions I had prepared beforehand. I was tired of knowing the ending. I missed the discovery of RPGs—the excitement players feel when something unexpected happens. I wanted that back. (And I'll cover this more later.)

D&D, Pathfinder, and etc.

To be clear, I'm talking about no-prep gamemastering for games like Dungeons & Dragons and Pathfinder. Some games today are designed to be run with little or no prep, but I want to make sure it's understood: I mean *D&D*.

I can't tell you how many times I've seen a post online that says something like, "Hey guys, I've been running *D&D*, but the GM prep is killing me. What system can I run that doesn't require GM prep?"

When I respond that *D&D* can be run with no prep, I'm often met with a legion of downvotes. Then come the comments trashing *D&D* and Pathfinder, calling them terrible.

But here's the truth: of course *D&D* can be run without prep—or with just fifteen minutes of prep instead of hours and hours.

There's no reason why these specific rule systems require more session prep than others like *Dungeon World* or *Fate Core*. Yes, you'll need a few stat blocks and tools to help, and we'll discuss that later.

Reader Reflection: Rewiring the Role of the GM

What have you believed about the role of gamemaster?

Take a moment to consider:

- Do I think of GMing as a burden?
- Have I avoided GMing because I wasn't prepared?
- Am I putting too much pressure on myself or letting others do so?
- What part of GMing is actually fun for me?

The No-Prep Approach

No-prep GMing comes down to mindset—how you approach the game. The way you think about role-playing games is incredibly important. It can determine whether you're having fun or burning out.

If you approach role-playing as a gamemaster who has to know everything and control everything, you're putting a ton of pressure on yourself. That mindset leads to anger and frustration—and sometimes even broken friendships. We don't want that.

But if your mindset is that you're here to have fun—if you see your role as offering options and arbitrating rules—then you'll start to see how not preparing can actually help during sessions.

Mindset is key.

I'M ALWAYS PREPARING TO GM

No-prep GMing is a bit of a misnomer. I call myself the no-prep gamemaster—***but I'm always prepping.*** Just like Bruce Banner is always angry so he can turn into the Incredible Hulk whenever he wants to.

What we're actually doing is moving prep into the theater of the mind. We're not filling notebooks with mad scribbles. We're not spending twenty hours at a desk preparing for a session that might get canceled. We're going to train our minds to think of prep differently.

I'm constantly thinking of ideas. Dozens and dozens of them. When I'm in the shower. When I'm driving to work. When I'm eating a sandwich on my lunch break. When I'm reading a book. Watching a movie. Listening to a podcast. Watching the news.

Scenarios I could run and awesome settings I want my players to encounter are always racing through my mind. I think of so many, I could never run even a fraction of them in a lifetime.

If your mind works like that, you should never have a problem sitting down and starting an RPG session. Encounters flow. Epic stories burst to life at the gaming table.

And if your mind doesn't work like that—it can be trained. I'll go into more detail on how to train your brain to become an idea machine later, so get ready.

But first, I have a warning.

IDEAS CAN BE A TRAP

Having a premise for an adventure or campaign before you talk to your players—or before you start a session—can be helpful. This is one of the perks of being the gamemaster. However, it can also create a trap. We have to be careful how we frame that idea.

There should never be any thought that the story has to progress in a certain way or the game will be a failure. You can think of story hooks, situations, locations, and NPCs—but not plot.

Avoid plotting.

If you're thinking of things like a spooky cottage in the woods, a castle that appears abandoned but shelters a coven of evil clerics, a bounty on a notorious bandit leader, or a caravan that needs guarding—you're in safe territory.

With just a bit of material to work from, you can allow the story to unfold based on the players' actions and choices. Maybe it's *Mad Max*, but with samurai and magic. Maybe the queen needs a rare medicine to save her daughter. These ideas provide a framework, but they don't tell the players what to do.

Great set pieces and locations are helpful as well. A sheer glacier cliff. A space station casino. A crime lord's river barge. A hidden elven city. These are springboards for the players—allowing the story and the adventure to emerge organically.

But if you're thinking in terms of plot points or events that must happen during the session to trigger something else, you're walking on unstable ground. If players have to do something before you even start playing, you're asking for trouble.

More on this later. First, we must discover the three keys of no-prep GMing.

Reader Reflection: What's Your GM Mindset?

Are you putting too much weight on your shoulders?

Take a moment to ask yourself:

- Do I feel like I have to know everything before I run a session?
- Do I treat prep as a mental habit or a chore with notebooks?
- Am I flexible when players do the unexpected or does it throw me off?
- Have I ever trapped myself with too much plot?

THREE KEYS

Fill Yourself with Stories

No-prep gamemastering is all about freeing ourselves to have more fun and run better games. I don't want to heap more work onto a GM. That was never the purpose of this book.

We're already swamped with the responsibilities of life, so I'm not putting something else on your plate—I'm taking things off.

However, I am going to suggest some actions that will replace traditional role-playing prep. These actions, while they take time and effort, are not the same as writing out adventures, filling notebooks with pages of lore, or constructing and balancing encounters before we play.

GAMEMASTERS ARE STORYTELLERS

Gamemasters are, at the core, storytellers. But don't mistake me—while gamemasters are storytellers, they are not authors, screenwriters, directors, bards, or even Savannah Nix from *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*.

Gamemasters are storytellers—but so are the players.

Playing a tabletop role-playing game is a collaborative storytelling event. The gamemaster may bring the setting and the antagonists.

The players bring the protagonists and their backstories. The two sides then weave together to create a beautiful tapestry—with the aid of rules and the randomness of dice.

No one is simply born a good storyteller. Aristotle argues in his *Poetics* that practice and study are involved. Learning how to tell stories takes effort.

But don't panic—I'm not suggesting that gamemasters need the kind of intense practice a professional storyteller would need.

Familiarity with stories helps us understand what makes a good one. And if you're drawn to tabletop role-playing games as a hobby, you probably already love stories. So this next suggestion shouldn't be a problem.

What I'm saying is simple:

- Read or listen to as many books and stories as you can.
- Watch as many TV shows and movies as you can.

This doesn't add more to our already full plates—we're probably doing it anyway. And since books and movies are awesome, your gamemaster prep just got fun again.

Stories—whether read, watched, or heard—can teach us important lessons that will directly benefit our gamemastering. The key is reflection. Don't just consume media passively.

Start asking yourself questions like:

- Why did that scene follow the one before it?
- Why did the character make that choice?
- What do those actions say about who they are?

Train your mind to think about how stories are made and what makes them exciting.

Remember: the deeper the well, the sweeter the water.

Read, watch, and listen to a wide range of stories—and then take a little time to reflect. Your games will improve, and your prep time will shrink.

THE BEST STORYTELLERS READ EVERYTHING

The greatest storytellers have experienced tremendous amounts of stories, whether by reading, watching, or hearing them. Great writers are great readers. And great storytellers have heard countless stories. So there is nothing new with this technique—in fact, it is millennia-old.

A blacksmith needs iron, hammers, an anvil, and fire. The storyteller needs other stories. Stories are the materials they work with, so they need to have as many of those materials at their disposal as possible. And the only way to do that is to engage with them through reading or viewing.

You'll notice that famous novelists, screenwriters, and movie directors have consumed vast numbers of stories and screened enormous amounts of films. As they read, listen, or watch, they're learning story structure, allowing them to better create their own original narratives.

Take Rafael Sabatini, author of *Scaramouche* and *Captain Blood*. He read widely in six languages—and produced some of the finest adventure fiction of the early 20th century. Would he have been able to write such stories without consuming so many himself? The answer is no.

The novelist and essayist C.S. Lewis read every extant English work from the 16th century. Yes, seriously—he did. This backcloth of story enabled him to write beloved classics like *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In the screenwriting world, Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio of *Aladdin, Shrek*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean* fame also consume tons of stories. On their website, Wordplayer, Rossio mentions reading all of Robert Heinlein's, Theodore Sturgeon's, and Alan Moore's published works, just for starters. Do you think those works influenced their ability to tell great stories? Of course.

Michael Crichton (*Jurassic Park, Congo, Twister*) was famously well-read. He quoted obscure books in interviews, wrote across genres, and directed films like *Westworld, Looker, The Great Train Robbery*, and *Runaway* (a guilty pleasure from my childhood). His range came from relentless curiosity and reading a wide variety of subjects.

Film directors Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese will often watch entire catalogs of films from a director or time period they are studying. The knowledge they gain from immersing themselves in those stories helps them shape their own.

In the tabletop role-playing game space, examples would be Ken Hite and Robin D. Laws. They are professional RPG designers behind *Trail of Cthulhu* and *Hillfolk*, among many others. If you listen to their podcast, *Ken and Robin Talk About Stuff*, you'll be amazed by how much media they consume.

Without this catalog of stories in their memories, storytellers are limited to only what they have personally experienced. We need the experiences of others to help us grow and learn. If the last book you read was in high school, or the last movie you watched was *Weekend at Bernie's* (actually good ideas in there), then your ability to weave stories with your players will be limited.

We don't need to—or can't, in a lifetime—consume as much as the creators mentioned above. **I'm not suggesting you try.** My point is that, in order to tell good stories, we need to have experienced many of them.

As gamemasters, we must fill ourselves with stories. The stories we engage with give us a catalog of situations and elements we can draw from when running tabletop role-playing games.

A CATALOG OF SITUATIONS FOR YOUR SESSIONS

If you fill yourself with stories, you'll build a catalog of ideas and situations you can pull from at a moment's notice. This is essential for a gamemaster—especially a no-prep gamemaster.

If you read books, watch movies and TV shows, or listen to radio dramas and audiobooks, you start building a mental library of situations and story elements. These live in your imagination, ready to be used when you sit down to run a game.

For example, I remember watching a movie about a group of adventurers protecting a dragon egg. That idea stuck with me. Now I can take the "protect the dragon egg" situation and drop it right into one of my games.

If I had never seen that movie, I may never have thought about protecting a dragon egg as an adventure hook. But now that scenario is embedded in my memory—ready to be used when it fits the story.

I once read a book where there was a secret tunnel at the bottom of a lake. Not the most original or groundbreaking concept, but it's mine now. It's part of my imagination now, and I can adapt it for one of my campaigns in any number of ways.

I've read multiple books where an army lands its ships, leaves them lightly guarded, and marches inland—only for the enemy to discover the vessels, overwhelm the few guards, and burn the fleet. Now that I've seen that idea play out, I can use it to kick off a session or even an entire campaign.

I could simply start with: *Your enemy's ships are beached and lightly guarded. The main force is advancing on your city, and you're leading a scouting team. The ships are right in front of you. What do you do?*

Just like that, a session is born—and possibly a campaign.

Of course, the players might not burn the ships. They might try to hide in them, sail away, or retreat and report it to the king. All of those outcomes are great. They're building the story too. I've provided the fuel—they're providing the match.

The more stories you experience, the more material you'll have in your imagination. And that means you'll be ready to respond to your players at a moment's notice. When the world you've created—or the actions of your players—open a door, you'll have something right there, waiting.

But you need to keep consuming stories, in whatever form you enjoy, to stock your creative shelves with useful ideas and situations.

BRANCH OUT AND EXPLORE STORIES

In your reading and watching, you need to build a breadth of different stories. Focusing on only one type of story limits your imagination. Inspiration for role-playing games comes from everywhere. I've been amazed at how reading biographies has helped my GMing.

Watching Marvel movies is fine, but try expanding a bit. Watch the films of Akira Kurosawa or other masters of cinema. And not just masterworks—watching bad films can teach us just as much as good ones. Understanding why a story is boring or told poorly is a powerful tool to have in your GM toolbox.

Reading new fantasy authors is very helpful. Reading someone like Patrick Rothfuss is a fantastic way to prepare for running a game session. But it's also incredibly useful to read the so-called "boy books" by Robert Heinlein—even though they're science fiction—or the *Conan* stories by Robert E. Howard. Delving into the famous "Appendix N" of *D&D* is also excellent preparation (see EXTRAS).

Expanding the sources where you get your stories is eye-opening and gives you more tools to work with. The No-Prep Gamemaster needs all the tools they can get their hands on.

One thing I didn't mention in the first edition is that video games can be a great source of narrative inspiration as well.

MAKE TIME TO READ MORE

I know what you're thinking—how can I do all of this? I thought no-prep GMing was about not preparing for games.

I don't want to give you more work. You already have a ton on your plate, as I mentioned before. Everyone has family obligations, work obligations, school obligations, and more. However, there are ways to overcome the problem of consuming more stories.

First, I'll assume watching movies and TV shows isn't too much of a problem. Everybody loves movies. Everybody loves TV shows. You're probably doing okay in that area with Netflix and Amazon Prime—not to mention YouTube, HBO Max, Disney+, Hulu, or Tubi.

The real challenge is reading more books—or buying more of them, especially when cost is a factor.

Remember, classic literature is completely free. The copyright has expired on many works, and they're now in the public domain. Websites like Project Gutenberg offer tens of thousands of novels, nonfiction books, and more—at no cost.

Now, some people read voraciously and can devour a 200,000-word novel in a matter of days. That's mind-blowing, and I'm not one of those people. Many of us read slowly. But there are still ways we can make sure we're getting books into our heads.

In this day and age, you can listen to books. There's almost always a way to find audiobooks and a moment in your day to listen to them. I get it—listening might mean you retain a little less—but that's still better than not absorbing the stories at all.

Even if you can't afford—or don't want—an audiobook service, just go to YouTube. Type in whatever kind of audiobook you want: sci-fi, fantasy, mystery, whatever genre you're into. You'll likely find something surprising and worth your time. It won't be a bestseller, but you'll find a wide range of older, copyright-free works.

There's also a website called LibriVox, which offers free audiobook recordings of public domain texts. The readers can be hit or miss, since most aren't professional voice talent, but you can find some gems. It's easy to use, and the audio files can be downloaded so you can take them with you on the go.

Also, there are some excellent storytelling podcasts out there, often performed by professional actors. Podcasts about myths and legends are great too, since they're built around some of the oldest stories in the world.

In the first edition of this book, I provided a list of podcasts, but I'm not including one this time—because podcasts live and die so fast. Just go to Spotify or your podcast app and search for mythology or fiction podcasts.

And of course, don't forget your local library.

In many cases, you can check out just about any audiobook you want—completely free. If you live near a well-stocked library, take advantage of it. There's also a digital service called Hoopla, which is fantastic for borrowing audiobooks. Most major libraries in the United States are partnered with them now.

So yes—try listening to books. Just try it. For example, if you're running an *Eberron* campaign in *Dungeons & Dragons*, you could find novels that match its science fiction–steampunk flavor.

Try a couple of Jules Verne novels. They'll spark ideas for situations, complications, and scenarios that drop right into that kind of setting. Recordings of Verne's works are widely available, in the public domain, and completely legal to listen to for free. You listen to a couple of those, and then you run your game.

If the campaign falls apart or never gets off the ground, the only thing you've done is listen to a few classics of world literature. That's not a waste of time.

Again, the goal here is to absorb more stories so you're more familiar with how stories work. Each book you read (or hear) gives you more tools as a storyteller—and helps you prepare to run RPGs on the fly.

REDEEM THE TIME

"Who has time for this?" I hear you say. But there are always ways to redeem time and experience more stories—without pulling your hair out.

- Do you have a commute to work or school? Stop listening to morning radio and listen to audiobooks.
- Do you have a job where you can listen to music? Trade the music for an audiobook.
- Do you mow the lawn or walk the dog? That's audiobook time too.

Truth be told, most of us do have the time—we just need to think about how to use it better. And please, don't think I'm on your case. I waste spectacular amounts of time. Learning a few of these tricks is what finally helped me read more books.

STORIES MAKE YOU A BETTER RPG PLAYER

Having a catalog of stories in your imagination helps you be a better gamemaster, as I've argued. But it also helps you become a better role-player.

Stories give you the ability to anticipate situations the gamemaster presents to you. You gain more options for how to deal with problems, because you've seen them before—in fiction.

The town guard throws your character into a cell. You can ask yourself: *How would Captain Kirk escape? How did Bill and Ted get out of that cell? How did Captain Jack Sparrow slip away?*

The dungeon floor just fell away, revealing a deep pit. *How would Indiana Jones get across? What would MacGyver do?*

You've just gained control of a powerful but dangerous magic item. *What would Master Samwise do? How would Captain Picard handle the responsibility?*

Author's Note: Have you ever realized there are dozens of books about how to be a better gamemaster—but almost none about how to be a better player? Why are more than half the people in the hobby ignored?

It goes back to what I've been saying: for all my insistence that gamemasters are just other players at the table… they're not really treated that way.

I may write a book for players someday—because if the players step up their game, it makes the gamemaster's job much easier.

STORY STRUCTURE FOR GM'S

I've moved this section lower than it appeared in the first edition, as I've backed off some of these claims. I studied screenwriting in college, and I became overzealous in preaching story structure.

In the first edition, I said, *"I think it is critical for any gamemaster or dungeon master to understand story structure. To understand how stories work and how they are told."*

Gamemasters do not need to know technical story terms in order to run great sessions. Simply absorbing enough stories can give a person an intuitive feel for pacing, climax, and other story elements.

I've included the original passage with some updates, but keep in mind: these are optional ideas and thoughts. You don't have to memorize story terms to be a great GM.

That said, understanding story structure can make a story more satisfying. Knowing when to slow down or speed up is essential in good storytelling.

Story Structure Basics

- Beginning – Stories usually begin with a status quo.
- Inciting Incident – This breaks the status quo.
- Rising Action – Events begin to stack up, and tension builds.
- Complications – The heroes face more—and newer—problems.
- Raise the Stakes – The consequences increase: something the heroes value is in jeopardy, then their lives, then the town, then the world.
- Climax – The central problem is resolved. The villain is defeated.
- Resolution – The action slows, and a new status quo emerges.

The more stories you read, the more you learn how to start a story and how to inject complications. Stories where nothing happens are boring. Things need to happen.

You learn how to make things look bleak for your players. In good stories, the protagonists often face the most extreme threat of their lives.

The same can be true for your player characters—especially in an epic campaign. Think about what could push them to the point of becoming true heroes... or to the edge of despair. Their actions will shape the story.

If you've been GMing for a while, you probably already know when to toss in a complication or drop a problem in front of your players. Stories thrive on conflict and events.

In the first edition, I said, "*...and how you can pull the action to a climax,"* but I didn't really explain it. If you know that stories have a climax—where the heroes save the day, or where the ring is destroyed—you can start looking for opportunities in your sessions for similar moments.

I also said, "*Then how you can let the tension go down into a resolution or denouement."* Stories that try to be nonstop action don't work well. The original *Gone in 60 Seconds* is a good example. It's a cool cult classic, but the pacing feels flat because there's no breathing room.

People need a break in the action. Think of *The Terminator* (1984). There's a big action sequence, then a quiet moment where Reese explains things to Sarah while they hide in a parked car.

The moment is slow—but loaded with tension as Reese reloads his shotgun. Then it explodes back into action again.

After a huge boss fight or climactic battle, you'll know to give your players a resolution phase—a chance to talk about what they accomplished and regroup. How will you know that? Because you've read or watched great stories where this happens.

For example: *The Octagon*, a Chuck Norris movie, ends right after the villain is killed. There's no resolution. It's a fun watch, but the ending feels flat because nothing is resolved afterward.

Knowing story structure can add a layer to your gamemastering—without requiring any extra prep. Just from reading or watching great stories, you'll know how to tell one more effectively.

We're not writing anything down—we're just going to the well in our imagination.

THE BETTER PERSON BIT

This sentence from the first edition got some blowback: *"Okay, this is the woo-woo section where I tell you to be a better person. Just hang with me for a bit."*

Most likely, the pushback was because I didn't explain what I meant at all. What I meant was that reading great literature doesn't just make us better gamemasters—it deepens our imagination, engages our empathy, and sharpens our thinking.

Now, I don't mean "better" in a moral or ethical sense, or that it gives us any kind of superiority. The Marquis de Sade was well-read—and still evil. I'm also not saying that someone who hasn't read Dante's *Divine Comedy* is somehow lesser.

What I meant is that reading great literature makes us better than we were before. Experiencing great literature (and I'll include films within that term for now) influences us and changes our thinking.

It opens up new worlds and emotional ranges, and it gives us frameworks for understanding the world—and ourselves.

Reader Reflection: What's in Your Story Well?

Ours imaginations are built from what we feed it. We all need a well of ideas and stories.

Take a moment to reflect:

- What kinds of stories do I usually watch, read, or listen to?
- Am I exploring new genres or staying in my comfort zone?
- Could I swap 20 minutes of scrolling for 20 minutes of story every day?

Random Tables

The best tool for the no-prep gamemaster is the random table—and lots of them.

A random table is simply a list of items, objects, people, places, situations, or complications, each assigned a number so that dice can be rolled to choose a result.

The role-playing community seems split on random tables. Some believe they are indispensable tools that help gamemasters run awesome adventures. Needless to say, I'm in that camp.

I've heard people, on occasion, say that a gamemaster using random tables is "cheating," or that nothing important comes from them. I'd explain these views better—but I can't. I don't understand the logic.

Random tables, while not a panacea, are the gamemaster's most faithful and helpful friend. Let's discover why.

WHY RANDOM TABLES MATTER

We've all heard the horror stories about gamemasters who spent 20, 30, even 40 hours a week preparing for a session—only for their players to cancel at the last minute. Or worse: not only was the session canceled, but the campaign fell apart and was never played again.

I don't need to hear those stories secondhand. I've lived them—many times throughout my life. Hours, days, weeks, and even months of planning, only for the session never to happen… or for someone to casually say they'd rather play a video game than role-play.

It's disheartening, to say the least.

It is my mission to stop this from happening to gamemasters ever again. While we can't control our friends or stop them from canceling, we can control our prep time—or eliminate it entirely.

Random tables can eliminate the need for the vast majority of session preparation. There. I said it. I know some gamemasters will argue with me about that, and that's okay. It's a bold proclamation—but I'm planting my flag.

As I mentioned before, the no-prep gamemaster philosophy is about shifting our prep into the theater of the mind. We're thinking about cool stories as we go about our normal lives. We're not missing family events or skipping our kid's baseball games. If a session is canceled?

No problem. I'll catch up on that show I've been meaning to watch, or finish the book I started.

Random tables can answer almost every question a player might ask. They can provide settings and locations, spark NPCs, and even generate adventure ideas on the fly. Random tables can supercharge gamemasters' and players' creativity.

LET THE DICE TELL THE STORY

Using random tables allows the dice to tell the story. Some players will cry foul. They want the story to be *The Lord of the Rings* in complexity—and obviously Tolkien didn't roll dice.

But the dice always drive the story in role-playing games.

For example, if the barbarian swings his two-handed sword and the roll says he missed, that's going to affect the story in some way. If the barbarian had hit, the story would be different. The dice changed the story.

If the diplomat character rolls well and convinces the queen to let the party dig up the sacred tree in the middle of her garden—that's the story being shaped by a die roll. And no player complains about that.

Why shouldn't the dice tell the story in other ways too?

Maybe it's been a tough week. Family, work, or school demands made it impossible for the gamemaster to sit down and map out a scenario. At the beginning of the session, why not just roll on a random jobs or rumors table?

The gamemaster could give players a few options to choose from—or let them roll on the table themselves. The session could start with the characters hearing rumors at an inn. Players get agency, and the gamemaster doesn't have to prep. The dice just told the story—like they always do.

Now, many gamemasters will cry out in one voice: *"But I don't know what to do! I don't know what 'guard a caravan' means! I don't have anything planned!"*

This is where the fun begins.

You use your mental catalog of stories and respond to the players. Rolling on the random table allows you to think on your feet. It also allows you to not know what's going to happen. You get to be surprised. You get caught up in the story along with your players. Isn't that half the fun?

DON'T WASTE TIME FILLING DUNGEON ROOMS

One of the worst things a GM can do is fill every single room in a dungeon or building with cool and interesting objects or encounters. That may sound counterintuitive. Isn't that the gamemaster's job? Shouldn't dungeon rooms be stocked with items and encounters?

Of course they should be.

You want interesting things for your players to discover as they explore the dungeon, a corporate tower, or a space station. Stumbling onto the lost Crown of Tyrasilen or finding zombies in the cargo hold makes the game fun and memorable.

But here's where the problem begins: if you create something for every room in the dungeon before the session, and then your players skip rooms—or decide not to enter the dungeon at all—you've just wasted your time. Frustration sets in, and GMs are left dejected and burnt out.

Fortunately, there's a simple solution: **don't fill the rooms beforehand.**

Instead, use a random table during the session to populate rooms with encounters or objects as they're needed. That's the key—as they are needed. Don't waste time filling out rooms before the session starts.

If you've got a great idea for a specific room, use it. But don't feel like you need to fill every nook and cranny. Let room-filling happen during play. If players enter the room, roll on a table—or better yet, let the players roll.

Situations, complications, and treasure come to life in the moment, right when they're needed, not hours before on a prep sheet. That way, none of your best ideas are wasted—and none of your time is either.
I love random tables. They revolutionized my GMing.

I love them so much that I created a whole series of books called The Books of Random Tables. They are my best friends during a session. In fact, if I had to choose, I'd rather have a book of random tables at the table than a rulebook for the system.

PLAYERS WANT TO SEARCH EVERYTHING

Using random tables also comes in handy because players want to search everything. And I mean everything. The pile of rocks by the side of the road. The clay pots in the temple. Every bandit's or goblin's corpse. If it's there, players will search it.

If you've played tabletop role-playing games for any length of time, you know this is true. The gamemaster can describe the room as completely empty—but the players will still want to search it. Does empty really mean empty?

Random tables save gamemasters loads of time. They also prevent the dreaded, "You find nothing," response we've all had to say a hundred times. A player wants to look behind the drapes? Roll on a table.

Discover fun story hooks and objects on the fly, so you don't have to think about them until they're needed. Don't overload your mind with pre-written encounters and story beats that end up forgotten or unused. Roll on a random table instead—and improvise.

Using random search tables really connects players to the game. It gives them more agency and avoids feelings of GM bias or unfairness. I've seen players get genuinely excited when the search table comes out.

Why? Because it adds mystery. They don't know what they'll get—and neither does the gamemaster. Their fate hangs in the balance, rests on a coin toss, a spin of the wheel, or the roll of the dice.

Players also hope for specific results. It becomes part of the fun. Some get to know certain numbers on the table and cheer when they're rolled.

The anticipation of finding a specific object sparks imagination. For example, if they know that result #74 is a map to an ancient library, they may want to roll a 74—so they can sell the map, or go searching for the ruins.

One concern gamemasters have is that random tables will unduly enrich characters or "break" the game. But there are plenty of random tables that don't reward loot. They offer mundane items that challenge players to think creatively.

A table might contain items like scraps of leather, pieces of metal, canvas, hides, or bits of rope. These may seem worthless at first glance—but clever players will find ways to use them. Never underestimate a crafty role-player.

SEARCHING IS IMPORTANT FOR THE GAME

Why do players love searching everything? Because searching gives them a sense of reward for their actions. It's the icing on the cake of an encounter.

After defeating the evil guards, searching the crime lord's warehouse becomes an exciting moment—not just because the players might gain money or useful items, but because they're also striking a blow against the crime lord's operation.

If your players win a hard-fought battle and then walk into the warehouse to search it—what happens next?

If you don't have random tables, then you either have to know everything that's in that warehouse before the session begins... or say there's nothing in it.

Who's got time for that?

If you have a set of random tables, you can fill the warehouse with interesting items quickly and easily—just by having your players roll. It turns a simple search into an exciting little vignette in the game.

RANDOM TABLES ANSWER QUESTIONS

Random tables can also help gamemasters answer questions they didn't prepare for—because players always ask about things the GM could never have imagined.

- A player asks, "What's the waitress's name?"
- Another one asks, "What kind of booths are in the marketplace?"
- "Does the blacksmith have a horse for sale?"
- "Is the guard asleep?"
- "Is the door locked?"
- "Where's the potion shop?"
- "What's on the ceiling?"
- "Are there any chickens?"

Pull out a random table and roll. The answers are there when needed—not before.

Even if you use the table or the dice for a simple yes-or-no answer, you've already made your job as gamemaster easier.

Just think about it—what if you spent time planning for the blacksmith to have a horse for sale, but your players never asked? You wasted your time.

HOW TO USE RANDOM TABLES

It goes without saying that random tables can be used in a variety of ways. There are certainly better ways to use them—but there's no truly wrong way to use a random table… except not using them at all.

Here are some common ways a gamemaster might use random tables to run better sessions:

Gamemaster Rolls Before the Session

One method is for the gamemaster to roll before the session begins. This is a fairly common method—one I wish wasn't so common.

Say there's an old hermit's cabin that will feature prominently in the next RPG session. The GM grabs a random table and rolls to fill the cabin with objects, items, and story hooks a few days before game night.

I don't like this method, as you might have guessed.

First, it's session prep—and I don't have time for that. Second, it opens the door to wasted effort. What if the players never see what you created? What if they don't enter the cabin at all? What if they burn it down from a distance?

You just spent your limited free time—time you could've used hanging out with your significant other, watching that show you're behind on, or reading that book gathering dust on your shelf—for nothing.

Gamemaster Rolls During the Session

This is a method I use on occasion, and it can be very effective. Whether I use it depends on the situation and what kind of table I'm rolling on. Context matters.

Two quick tips:

- *Speed* – If I need a result fast and don't want to break the flow, I'll roll. If asking the players to roll would distract them or slow down a tense moment, I'll roll it myself.
- *Limit player knowledge* – If the result needs to be secret—like if a player asks, "Are we being followed?"—I'll roll in secret to decide. Then I'll have the player roll Perception (or a similar skill). Based on the result, I'll tell them what they sense—if anything.

Players Roll

Having the players roll on the random tables is my preferred method. Here's why:

Players Control Their Fate

If the roll is bad, and something terrible happens—well, they rolled the dice. There's no arguing with that.

If I roll behind the screen and announce, "The worst thing just happened to your character," I have to defend whether or not I'm being fair. And the last thing I want to do during a game is argue with someone about how I'm treating their precious rogue.

There's already enough tension between players and GMs. Letting the players roll eliminates that conflict from the start.

Why does Sarah get six gold pieces while Andy gets a dead rat? Because she rolled differently—not because the gamemaster made a judgment call.

Greater Player Agency

Letting the players roll gives them more agency. Even if it's a random result, they're shaping the story in real time. They're holding fate in their hands—and that's a powerful feeling at the table and, frankly, in life.

I'm not a fan of the so-called "illusion of agency" that some gamemastering experts promote. I want my players to have real agency—or at least as much as a game allows.

Less Work for the Gamemaster

It also takes pressure off me. Gamemasters already have a ton to think about during every session. Anything that removes decisions from my plate is a win.

I'd rather focus on what's over the next hill, or where the missing ring is hidden, than worry about what's in a merchant's backpack or how many copper pieces are under the bar.

Self-Reward

When a player rolls on a random table and the result is a valuable item or clue, there's a sense of earned accomplishment.

If I just hand it to them, it's less exciting. But if they rolled it? That moment is electric.

There's something magical about the tension of rolling dice—about not knowing what will happen next. Let your players feel it.

THE RANDOM TABLE IS YOUR SERVANT

Always remember: the table is your servant. You can do whatever you want with it. Random tables are tools—and true masters can use tools in ways never dreamed of by beginners.

Some gamemasters prefer not to roll at all. They just pick items or outcomes from the table that they think are interesting or that they know they can run. That's totally fine—if it helps you run a better game, go for it.

However, I do think that method misses something. Something important.

The pure randomness of a dice roll is magical. That shouldn't be discounted. We need more magic in our games. We need the curveball out of nowhere to push our games to the next level.

I don't like the idea of gamemasters avoiding certain results on a table just because they think it won't work or that they can't run that kind of situation.

Some of the most memorable and engaging sessions I've ever run came from unexpected random rolls. Pause and consider before you throw something out.

That said, if the table gives you something that's clearly unworkable, ignore it. That happens sometimes—random tables can't be perfectly tailored to every campaign, session, or setting. If a result truly doesn't fit, just roll again—or let the player roll again.

But always think carefully before you reject a result. You might be throwing magic in the trash can.

Reader Reflection: Let the Dice Decide

Random tables inject real magic into sessions.

Ask yourself:

- Have I avoided random tables, if so why?
- Do I trust the dice to help shape the story?
- Have I ever missed out on a great moment by over-preparing?
- How could I give my players greater agency?

Experience

"Excellence is an art won by training and habituation." - Arsistotle

Years ago, I spoke with a friend who is a pilot for a major airline. I asked him what had prepared him most to fly planes with dozens—if not hundreds—of passengers.

He told me that his first job out of flight school was flying a regional cargo plane. He did that for four or five years. Flying that cargo plane, he said, gave him more experience than flight school ever could.

He was practicing. He was gaining real experience.

Gamemasters need practice and experience as well. And we can only get that experience by running games—not from books, not from blog posts.

We need firsthand experience running games.

DECADES OF RUNNING RPGs

I picked up dice at the tender age of nine and have been a gamemaster ever since. I've been the bad GM, the bitter GM, the pushover GM, the angry GM, the tired GM, the sad GM, the reluctant GM—and, yes, occasionally the good GM.

I've run fantasy, science fiction, cyberpunk, and more. I've run huge campaigns. I've run one-shots. I've run games without knowing the rules. I've run games while making up the rules. I've run games I hated and games I loved.

I've run concept games like "everyone must play a bard," or "you're a team of assassins who've just taken out your target—now don't get caught."

I've run games in person, online, and—believe it or not—over the telephone. I've run games with one player, and I've run games with fourteen. I've spent countless hours prepping sessions that never happened. I've run impromptu games that friends still talk about years later.

I've made players angry. I've made players happy. I've caused one or two people to never want to role-play again. I've inspired many more to love the hobby—and many of them are gamemasters now.

In the first edition of this book, I neglected to mention how vital experience is to becoming a no-prep gamemaster—or any kind of gamemaster, for that matter.

If you want to be a gamemaster, you need experience. And that means you'll run bad games. That's normal. Don't be afraid of it. We all start somewhere.

Just jump in. Run lots of sessions and campaigns. Try different game systems if you can. Don't overthink it. Run a simple tavern brawl. Run run a straight up oldschool dungeon crawl. Run anything you can think of or let your players decide how the session begins.

Use the mental catalog you've built through reading and watching stories. Keep random tables nearby. Then unleash your players—and react to them using your imagination and the tools you've collected.

PURPOSEFUL PRACTICE

Practice is a cornerstone of gamemastering. Aristotle was right. Practice and experience are sorely underrated—and often completely overlooked—when people give GMing advice.

We need to learn from every session we run. We're not doing the same thing over and over—we're adjusting. We're learning what worked and what didn't.

Purposeful practice matters. Even if you do nothing else— Even if you don't read loads of books. Even if you don't use random tables.

Practice will reduce your prep time and improve your sessions in the long run.

Here's one simple strategy: After each session, reflect. *What went right? What went wrong? Did the players like that moment? What didn't they like? What did you like? What didn't work for you?*

In the next session, do more of what worked—and less of what didn't. Practice, practice, practice.

I'm not saying you have to write everything down or take a day off work to contemplate the session. Just do the thinking in your head—while mowing the lawn, commuting, folding laundry.

Gamemastering is not flying planes. You can make mistakes. It's okay. Just make sure you learn from them.

THE THREE KEYS

I remember once, years ago, several people wanted to play a role-playing game and asked me to be the gamemaster. I told them I wasn't prepared.

You know what they said? They didn't care. I was free. I had fun running that game. And frankly, I've never looked back.

I didn't have anything prepared. I used the ideas in my head, some random tables, and my years of experience as a gamemaster.

Please don't cancel sessions because you feel unprepared.

You're robbing yourself of experience and practice. Run the game—and learn from the experience. It is the best teacher.

Reader Reflection: Run the Game Anyway

The only way to become a better gamemaster is to run more games. Don't wait to be perfect.

Ask yourself:

- What's holding me back from running more games?
- What's one thing I learned from my last session?
- Am I giving myself permission to learn through practice?

RECAP:
The Three Keys to No-Prep GMing

Before the Session
- Read, watch, and listen to stories
- Think about the session throughout the week

During the Session
- Use your imagination
- Use your players' imaginations
- Use dice and random tables to add twists and turns
- React to your players' choices

After the Session
- Reflect on what worked and what didn't
- Repeat

ARROWS IN THE QUIVER

Don't Set Dungeons in Stone

Aren't all dungeons made of stone? Finely worked marble or roughly hewn granite? Maybe sandstone or limestone? Perhaps a high-grade chert? Sure, there could be a wooden or earthen dungeon—but that's not what I mean.

Let's think about it this way. How many times have gamemasters and roleplayers seen or prepared a dungeon map, a town map, or a forest map with numbered locations and matching descriptions?

We've all seen them a million times. These maps are classics, and they're very helpful. Everything is right in front of you and easy to spot. In fact, it's the most common method of annotating maps in tabletop role-playing games.

NUMBERED DUNGEON MAPS

I've prepped numerous sessions by placing numbers with specific encounters on a map. I'd put the mummy lord in room 12 and the umber hulk in room 24. The treasure chest goes in room 4, and the goblin den is in room 18.

Published adventures (modules) often come with maps like this—and they should. Since it's a published adventure, the gamemaster needs to know where things are so they can inform the players and run the encounters smoothly.

It's a great organizational tool and makes running the dungeon easier. The GM knows exactly what to do in each room. A city map might even be handed to players, with numbers marking the inn, general store, blacksmith, etc.

THE PROBLEM WITH NUMBERS

There's a serious drawback to numbering locations—if you're the one creating the map and the dungeon.

For published adventures, this is understandable. But when you're drawing your own map and filling in details and encounters, you run into a big problem.

What if your players don't go into room 14, 2, 12, 8, or 5? What if they take a different route and skip several rooms? What if they get distracted by a cool magic item? What if they pause to care for an injured party member? What if they find a map to a legendary library and abandon all other objectives?

If you're running a published adventure, skipping rooms is no big deal. The players miss some stuff—but they're having fun, and you got to share a great adventure you didn't spend hours writing.

But if you spent hours building a custom dungeon with 20 or 30 numbered encounters—and your players skip those rooms? That's time and effort wasted.

What if you spent two hours designing a dramatic encounter with an ogre at an underground waterfall in room 13? If your players never enter room 13, that moment is gone. It never happens.

What if that was your centerpiece encounter? What if it was tied to a character's backstory? What if it was going to change the entire direction of the campaign?

But the players turned left instead of right. Or they didn't find the hidden tunnel that led to room 13.

This is how bitterness sets in. And trust me—GM bitterness is real. I've been there. It's not pretty.

DON'T MARRY LOCATION AND ENCOUNTER

What's the solution? Simple: **don't set your encounters in stone.**

Have your ideas. Have your encounters. But don't tie them to specific room numbers. Don't link them so tightly that it's a nightmare to separate them.

Keep your prep flexible, and you'll get to run your best material—even when the players go "off course."

Did your players skip room 13? No problem—put the ogre and the waterfall in room 7. You'll still get to run your big encounter. And your players won't miss a thing.

CONTROL THE FLOW OF THE RPG SESSION

This method gives you more control over the flow of the session. You can shape the pacing and build momentum in satisfying ways.

Need a climax? Drop the climactic encounter into the next room. Need to reveal a secret map? Put it in the next chest they open. Need to introduce a key NPC?

Let them walk into the room the players just entered. You're flexible. The gamemaster should be railroaded anymore than the players.

This approach removes frustration and keeps your options open. Best of all, it helps players experience your favorite ideas—without feeling like the story was rigged. Everyone wins.

IS THE GAMEMASTER CHEATING?

I've heard some players claim that changing rooms or moving encounters is cheating. "The GM is just making things up!" "They're changing the dungeon to suit their whims!"

Players can't do that—so isn't it unfair?

My response? Run some sessions yourself. Then decide how you want to do it. You don't have to use my tips—but don't knock what works.

TRY IT IN YOUR NEXT SESSION

Any tool that helps the gamemaster and the players have more fun should be used—even if it means un-marrying rooms from numbers.

Next time you prep a session, come up with a few key encounters or ideas—but don't assign them to specific rooms ahead of time. Place them where they're needed, in the moment.

If it's not time for your big encounter yet, use a random table to fill the room instead.

And if you're running a published adventure or module, don't be afraid to move things around. Change where the encounters take place. Adjust the flow.

Whatever helps you run better sessions—that's what matters.

Know the Beginning, Not the End

Knowing the beginning, not the end, is a quick DMing trick that can get your sessions up and running while keeping your players engaged. Are there other ways to run a session?

Sure. But this method will help if you don't have time to prep but still want to play *D&D*. Let me set it up for you.

There's no time for a Session Zero because scheduling is a nightmare, and we all have jobs and families. So what you're going to do is tell your players to make characters on their own time.

Give them guidelines if you wish: Level one, no Goliaths. Or level five, no multiclassing. Or all your characters have to know each other. Or the only class allowed is Bards. Whatever suits your fancy.

When you gather for the first session—hang with me now—you're going to railroad the heck out of it for the first 10 to 20 minutes. You're going to tell the players where their characters are, what they're doing, and then you're going to throw combat at them.

Combat is the key.

Doing this cuts out tons of wasted time and kicks the session off with a bang.

The beauty of the technique is that the gamemaster doesn't have to know what comes after the combat. This is the point where we open things up and player agency comes into play. Most likely, players will want to search the monsters they just killed.

Using random tables to place items on the bodies can lead to campaign seeds: a map to a legendary silver mine, a sealed letter addressed to the queen, and so on.

Of course, there will probably be at least a couple of players who want to search for their character's long-lost sister or start their mercantile empire. Roll with it.

A ring found among the goblin's belongings seems to bear a resemblance to the character's long-lost sister's ring. The crate in the ogre's lair is marked with the emblem of a famed merchant house.

All these are clues for active players to seize on. Then we, as gamemasters, react to our players.

NOT KNOWING THE END

The gamemaster should know the beginning, but not the end. Who wants to know the end before the beginning? Who wants to know the end of the movie before you see it? Who wants to know who the murderer is before you read a mystery novel? No one.

I got bored knowing the end of sessions and campaigns, so I don't anymore. Let the players decide where the story goes, and gamemasters can interject NPCs, locations, situations, and twists as needed—all just by reacting to our players.

EXAMPLES

I'll give you a few concrete examples of how to set these up, as if talking to players:

Example One: Your characters just completed a job for the miller who helps keep the village safe. You each get three gold pieces. You're relaxing in the inn and enjoying a meal when flaming debris crashes through a window, followed by four goblins. Roll initiative.

Example Two: A wizard hired you to get several leaves of a plant that only grows on the rim of a volcano. As you make the arduous climb up the side of the volcano, you reach a resting spot. While resting, a huge boulder rolls out of the way, revealing an angry stone giant. Roll initiative.

Example Three: While you're walking in the forest, traveling from one town to another, six bandits appear and demand your gold. Roll initiative.

As you can see, each of these examples kicks off play instantly and doesn't require hours of prep. All you need is something to draw vague battle positions on—like scrap paper or a small whiteboard—plus a few different monster or NPC stat blocks.

Once your players start asking questions, you can fill in the blanks with your imagination.

Say one of the players in Example Two asks about the wizard—only when the question is asked should you think of something to say about the wizard. Don't think about what the wizard is like before the question. What if the players don't ask and want to do something completely different?

Don't waste time creating what the players don't need.

LET STORY EMERGE

Story hooks based on clues and player questions that emerge in the aftermath of the encounter will fill out the rest of the session. Then start making stuff up—that's what gamemasters do.

If session two never comes, you still had fun and didn't waste days or weeks planning a huge campaign that didn't happen.

Hopefully, this gives you a sense of how to just jump into a session without tons of planning.

Best Case/Worst Case

It's easy for a person to get overwhelmed with all the decisions a gamemaster has to make during a session. However, there is a quick way to solve that issue in the no-prep GM model.

It's what I like to call the **best-case/worst-case roll**. (Yes, I need a better name for this, but this will do for now. *Author's Note: I still haven't come up with a better name.*)

Simply take a six-sided die. Have the six represent the best-case scenario for the player and the one represent the worst-case scenario. The numbers in between represent degrees. Five is good. Four is okay. Three is bad. Two is really bad.

Use this whenever a player asks you a question that you do not know the answer to. Since we're not prepping, we don't know the answers to many questions players can ask during the session. This simple, quick roll answers those questions.

When RPG Players Ask Questions

Players always ask tons of questions. Of course they do—and great players will ask tons. It's impossible to prepare for every question a player might ask. Here are a few quick examples:

- Does the innkeeper have a brother?
- Do I recognize the captain of the guard?
- Who's the noble family in this land?
- Is there an active black market in this town?
- What's over the next ridge?
- Where is the nearest apothecary shop?

All of these are valid questions. The player needs to know the answer so they can take action. But if you haven't prepared anything, you most likely do not know the answers to any of them.

Heck, players always stumped me even when I did prepare for sessions. Even published adventure modules won't have answers to loads of questions players will ask.

Maybe with experience, you can just make up an answer on the spot. However, the BC/WC roll is a helpful tool in letting the dice tell the story.

HAVE THE PLAYER ROLL

It's especially engaging to have the player roll the best-case/worst-case. For example, a player asks if they know the captain of the guard because their character is from the city they're visiting. Call for a BC/WC roll. Have them pick up a six-sided die and roll.

A six would be the best-case scenario: yes, they know the captain of the guard, and he was their childhood friend—or she is their aunt.

A one could mean they don't know the captain of the guard, and he's antagonistic toward them because of something that happened in the past.

The point here is to take some of the burden or strain off the gamemaster. The gamemaster is not the only storyteller at the gaming table.

THE PLAYER SHOULD DECIDE

Go ahead and have the player decide what the consequences of the roll are. Seriously, I mean this. Don't let them break the game or wander too far from the situation at hand, but let the player craft the result of the roll.

If they roll a best-case, ask what their best-case is. Maybe their best-case is that they don't know the captain of the guard. Maybe their best-case is that the captain once imprisoned them. You, as the gamemaster, may never have thought of something like that.

Also, this means the gamemaster should ask the player what the worst-case would be. They know their character better than you do. Trust your players.

The player should be honest about their intentions—but of course, you are the judge, so you can override as you see fit. Or better yet, add caveats, twists, and complications to what they created.

THE DICE ARE TELLING THE STORY

This one simple die roll helps you answer questions during the game quickly and efficiently. Don't make it into a big production—just roll and keep moving.

I've found in my games that these best-case/worst-case rolls actually take the story in interesting directions that would never have come about through a prepped session—or even one I was improvising. Why? Because the players are injecting creativity.

The key here is to take the pressure off the gamemaster. They do not need to create every little detail of the world or spend hours in preparation.

Roll dice and have fun.

Don't Create Everything

Creating your setting to run *Dungeons & Dragons* or another tabletop roleplaying game is exciting. However, it's easy to slip into a spiral where you could lose your mind.

Let me say that worldbuilding can be a wonderful experience. It's easy for incredibly creative gamemasters to get out of hand. Worldbuilding is a fantastic outlet for our creativity and makes an excellent playground for our imaginations.

None of us can afford to waste time, though. If we are creating a campaign that we will publish, of course we should spend time on it. But if we want an original world for our players to experience—something that lets us explore ideas—we don't need to create everything in that world.

DON'T CREATE WHAT PLAYERS WON'T SEE

Go light on the lore sauce until your players are invested in the setting. Don't create things your players won't see, touch, or interact with.

Once, I created twelve star systems—each with multiple planets and moons—for a Star Wars campaign. My players visited only two or three of the planets. Not star systems, mind you—two or three planets.

I created tons of material that was never seen or enjoyed by my players. A couple of the gas giants had 75 or more moons. I named them all and placed possible encounters on each one. I wasted a lot of time. Sure, it was fun creating the lore, but I still wasted my time.

I actually broke a couple of my own rules. Of course, it was this experience—combined with many others—that helped me start putting these key ideas together.

Notice I broke the *"Don't Set Dungeons in Stone"* principle. I created encounters and cultures specific to certain planets and moons. I couldn't move them elsewhere—I was stuck.

I also broke the "don't fill every room before the session" approach. I placed items, story hooks, and plot pieces on planets no player character ever visited.

Author's Note: I keep saying I wasted my time. While that's true, I was in a sense training myself to be a writer and a novelist, so I did gain something from the experience.

CREATE A FRAMEWORK

If you're pressed for time—and who isn't—think in terms of a framework for your world. Come up with some general concepts to help steer your players in certain directions or to create a particular mood for your campaign.

Thinking in broad strokes while worldbuilding helps you avoid getting bogged down in the details of every single culture or location.

If your world is mostly desert, that's going to affect character culture, the design of cities, and the types of adventures you'll run. Knowing that the world is a desert is important. Knowing every culture in that world? Not so much.

Ask yourself questions about the world—in your mind, to yourself. Don't write down tons of ideas. Save note-taking for during a session, as a result of play. Think of ideas you want to explore or situations that spark stories.

LOCATIONS AND NAMES BUT LITTLE ELSE

Having some locations and names is a good starting point, and you don't really need much else. Honestly, you can even wait on names if you have some random tables. You could even wait on locations until the beginning of the session, if you wanted to.

You only have to be one step ahead of your players. You don't need to be 10, 15, or 20 steps ahead. In all honesty, you don't even have to be ahead. You just have to assess the situation and inject more complications and fun as needed.

For example, if your players are traveling down the road and they already know they're going to reach a town, start thinking of what they'll encounter there. Don't worry about what comes after. The players may decide to stay. They may travel north instead of east. They may explore a dungeon under the town and decide to make it their base.

Creating encounters or cities farther down the road would be a waste of time—unless you can use those ideas elsewhere. But again, you could just wait until the characters reach the town to make up anything about it.

DO NOT BUILD EVERY CONTINENT

f you're creating a world, don't worry about designing every continent. Focus on the few areas where your player characters will be adventuring. This gives you the freedom to come up with other storylines later, and it keeps your world from becoming too rigid before you even know what the players will do.

If you've created every continent and fleshed them all out, you lose the ability to respond to interesting quirks or cool ideas your players bring up. You can't follow where the story leads.

If your players are mainly operating on one continent, there's no need to build others. If they're not traveling there, they'll never see it. Your cool ideas will be wasted. Take some of those ideas and work them into the areas where your players are spending time.

Also, there's usually one player who'll want their character to be from another continent. That'll help you create it. I don't know why this happens, but one player always wants to be from somewhere else.

DON'T CREATE EVERY CITY

Also, don't create every city in your world—or even all the cities on one continent. I've made this mistake, and you can learn from it.

Allow room for freeform play. A time may come when you just need a small village or a large city—maybe the player characters need to complete a story arc, finish a conflict, or chase a lead.

If everything is completely mapped out, it can actually limit your creativity. You're creating a box for you and your players to operate within. It might feel good at first—because it's a big box—but it's still a box.

The gamemaster ends up railroading themselves and the players.

If you create 50 cities on a map, each with its own unique culture and ruler, you leave no room for growth or change. You're trapped by your own awesome creativity.

A huge part of the fun in tabletop role-playing games is the meandering of the story—the discovery, the improvisation, the randomness of dice.

What if your players only visit three of those cities? What just happened? You wasted a lot of time—unless you publish your setting material or reuse it in another campaign. But for a home game, it's too much work.

List of Names

No-prep gamemastering is very rewarding. However, there are some pitfalls. One of the biggest is inventing names on the spot. Players love to ask for the names of random NPCs all the time.

Coming up with exciting people and place names on a whim can be the death of even the best gamemasters. We tend to have certain names in our minds like a cistern we draw from over and over again. This leads to repetition and staleness.

HAVE A LIST OF NAMES

A simple solution is to print out a list of names and keep it nearby while running the session. Just slip it into your notes or papers at the table. You could also use a PDF of names if you run your game from a laptop or computer.

A better solution is to have a random table of names. A random table allows you to roll for a name and move on. Again, the randomness of the dice can create interesting twists and turns—even when rolling for a name.

YOU ALWAYS NEED NAMES

Players always ask for names. Let me repeat: players always ask for names. It's important to be prepared, even when you're not preparing. Not having a name ready can break the mood or disrupt the flow of the session. And having a name that doesn't fit the world or time period can do the same.

I remember a Star Trek session where I ended up with an NPC named "Bob the Nerf-Herding Vulcan." My player characters had traveled back in time to ancient Vulcan.

They wanted to talk to one of the locals. I couldn't think of a name, so I blurted out "Bob." Then they asked the name of the animals he was herding. I couldn't think of one, so I blurted out "Nerfs" (mixing the two franchises I was obsessed with).

It turned into a funny moment, but it would have been better if I'd had some appropriate names on hand.

DO NOT HAVE NPCS NAMED BOB

I've run many sessions where I was caught without a name, and the NPC always ended up being "Bob." Don't do this.

A random table of names not only gives you names that fit the culture or setting of your RPG, but it can lead to fun coincidences and twists you'd never think of on your own.

For example, years ago my group and I were playing my post-apocalyptic game Anarchy. I was running the session, and a player met an insane man raving in the street.

What did the player do? He asked the man his name—he didn't want a fight. The man was clearly disturbed, but not violent. The player wanted to help him and defuse the situation.

This was a random encounter in a session I hadn't prepared. I'd rolled it from a random table just minutes before the interaction. When the player asked for the NPC's name, I had no idea. What did I do?

I pulled out a random name table and rolled. The name was James. Since Anarchy is a near-future setting, the names are fairly common, modern names.

Here's the interesting part: the player character's name was also James.

If I had tried to come up with something on the spot, I probably would have picked Bob (again), or maybe Peter, Michael, Charles, or Travis.

I never would have picked James—because it was already the PC's name.

Of course, meeting someone with the same name is incredibly common in real life. But it took a random table to make it happen in-game.

That small moment led to some amazing interactions and excellent role-playing, all sparked by a simple random name roll.

DON'T FORGET TOWN NAMES

Many books and RPG resources have name lists for people. But there are very few random table books with good town names. In *The Book of Random Tables 2*, I included 500 town names.

If you need a town name quickly, it's best to have a random table on hand. A dumb town name can stick around for the entire campaign and ruin the mood. Let's not let that happen.

Simply add a list of names—or better yet, random name tables—to your gamemaster toolkit. You'll never be sorry you did.

Listen to the Table

There's another important resource at the gamemaster's disposal that usually goes overlooked. It's so simple, it's right in front of every gamemaster: listening to the table.

As your players talk, listen to what they say.

Players tend to talk about everything. They indulge in endless speculation about the game. They discuss their characters' plans. They mull over bits of information their characters discovered. They think aloud about situations or things that happened sessions ago.

This is a gold mine of information. Gamemasters can use it in nearly any situation—especially when running a session without preparation.

AS YOUR RPG PLAYERS TALK, STEAL FROM THEM

As your players talk, go ahead and steal from what they say. Players might say things like:

- I think the innkeeper is the murderer.
- That bard is shady.
- Where did the orphan boy go?
- When we entered this dungeon, it felt like we entered a new world.
- Why is the river flooded?
- That old beggar was more than she seemed.
- Why did the mayor want us out of town so fast?
- Was the old man a wizard?

These kinds of statements are precious gems. Gamemasters can take them and rework them into story jewels.

For example, the party finds a strange note in a dungeon. All it says is, "I need help." It was just a result from a random table roll, and the gamemaster has no idea what it means or how it fits into the session.

But a player might say something like, "Didn't the innkeeper back in town ask for help?" or "Maybe someone's trapped deeper in the dungeon."

Now the gamemaster has something to work with. They can use that idea as a springboard. They didn't need to plan for it—it just emerged from the table talk.

GIVE IT A TWIST

You don't have to slavishly follow what the players say—and you shouldn't. Use their ideas to introduce red herrings or twists.

Let's say your players think the shady NPC at the inn is the bandit leader they're hunting. You, as the gamemaster, can feed them details that make the NPC seem more suspicious—only to reveal later that he's not the bandit leader at all.

Or, possibly even better: you had no intention of making that NPC the bandit leader. But now that the players are focusing on him, you decide he is the bandit leader after all.

This approach engages your players and makes your sessions more memorable.

PLAYERS WILL FEEL LIKE THEY GOT IT

By listening to the table, you're actually including your players more in the session—hopefully without them even realizing it.

They'll feel like they're putting things together and figuring out the story. And when the twist comes, they'll be surprised. They get the satisfaction of feeling clever and the thrill of a good twist.

As an added bonus? You look like a genius. All you did was take the best of what your players said and tweak it.

Counting Down

1d8 rounds until 1d12 angry minotaurs arrive, wielding greataxes. Are you ready?

A ticking clock always adds urgency and drama. A time deadline is a classic storytelling device that can be used effectively in *Dungeons & Dragons* and other tabletop role-playing games.

The classic film *High Noon* frequently features a clock in the background of scenes, reminding the audience that time is running out. This enhances the tension without saying a word.

In *Escape from New York*, Snake is given only 24 hours to save the president. The deadline constantly forces him to move forward. Anytime he's delayed or prevented from reaching his goal, the audience tenses—because they feel he won't succeed.

TIME LIMITS IN SESSIONS

Putting a time limit on certain tasks during your sessions can keep your players focused and add twists to keep things interesting. For example:

- The alchemist's lab will explode in ten rounds. The players need to grab the potion and get out fast—but fighting the guards slows them down.
- In six rounds, the golem will awaken and attack. The party may not want to linger to search the chest, knowing there will be consequences.
- The characters have until dawn to help the princess. Every complication slows them down, creating the dread of failure.

TYPES OF DEADLINES

In the examples above, I used a few common ways of adding time limits or deadlines. Let's break them down:

- Roll a die to determine how long until something happens—this could be measured in rounds, hours, or even days of in-game time.
- Set a fixed deadline based on in-game events: the sunset, sunrise, when the king returns from the hunt, or "one week until the eclipse."
- Use a timer—either a stopwatch or a dice-based mechanic (e.g., rolling to increase the chance of an event happening each round)—to track real-world time and build tension.

Think of ideas that fit your sessions and try them out. Practice using stopwatches or countdown timers, or roll to determine how many rounds until reinforcements arrive. Any time limit can make your sessions move faster and become more memorable.

Players Can Help Create

Creating a world for a role-playing game campaign does not have to be a solitary experience. We love the tortured artist narrative, though.

A lonely gamemaster sitting at a computer desk, creating reams of material. His waking dreams are filled with friends who actually want to play role-playing games as desperately as he does. This is not a healthy state of being.

Have your players help you create the world you'll all be playing in. This makes your players more engaged in the campaign and also cuts down your prep time. Plus, it creates more vibrant worlds than you could build by yourself.

ASK YOUR PLAYERS QUESTIONS

Start by asking your players simple questions about the world. They will fill in the details for you:

- What's the countryside like here?
- Are we near the ocean?
- How big is the nearby town?

They can be leading questions if you have definite ideas of what kind of world or setting you'd like. In that case, you might ask:

- Why have all the dwarves disappeared?
- Why has no one seen an elf for 300 years?
- How did the great empire of man fall?

You can also ask questions on a smaller scale:

- Who founded this village?
- Who owns the inn?
- Why does your character wear a simple brass ring?

If a player tells you their character is from a certain city, land, or continent—have them explain it to you. Why would you, as the gamemaster, take the time to create a city that they wanted in the world? Let them do it.

This goes for other situations, too. If a player says her character is from a circus family, why would you create the details of that circus? Let the player do it.

This allows players to be more engaged in the campaign while also saving the gamemaster time. You've got other things to do besides preparing game sessions constantly, right? Then let your players help.

ROLL DICE

Here's a neat trick: number your players. If you have six players, number them one through six.

Then roll a six-sided die. Whatever number comes up, ask that player a question. It's a fun exercise—especially during session zero. But it works great during regular play, too.

THE DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS QUESTION

There's a school of thought in the role-playing game community that says *Dungeons & Dragons* doesn't allow players to help create. That all the burden falls squarely on the gamemaster. It's viewed as being "traditional" or "foundational" to the hobby.

Therefore, they say, if you want your players to help create the campaign world, you need an entirely different RPG system. You can't do that in *D&D*.

So how do other systems "solve" the problem of the GM creating everything? In the few I've seen, they introduce a new "game mechanic" that says…

Wait for it… Ask your players questions about the game world.

Seriously?

Do we need to throw the greatest role-playing game ever made under a bus just to give the gamemaster permission to ask a few questions?

Do we need to switch to a whole new system just to say, "Hey, what's this town called?" or "Why did the orcs abandon their temple?"

No. We don't.

Just play *Dungeons & Dragons*—and ask your players questions. That's it. You don't have to create everything.

Author's Note: I'm not telling you not to play other games. Please play as many different role-playing games as you can. The point I'm making is that if you're playing *D&D*—and I love *D&D*—but you want to change how you run the game, you don't need a new system to do that.

How to Prep for Sessions When You Have No Time

Author's Note: *As I mentioned before, I'm the no-prep gamemaster because I'm always prepping. Here are a few tips to help gamemasters get used to the idea of not preparing huge amounts of material before running a game. This was originally the script for a YouTube video I created, so it incorporates some ideas I talk about elsewhere in the book. However, I do introduce some helpful tips here.*

One thing I never want to hear from fellow role-players is, "We had to cancel this week." That makes me sad because I want more role-playing in the world. Though I completely understand—after all, we all have lives and responsibilities—what I hate hearing is, "We had to cancel because our GM wasn't prepared."

This drives me crazy. I never want *D&D* to be canceled for that reason. It's one of the driving forces behind why I create role-playing resources. I simply never want a gamemaster to cancel because they feel unprepared.

Frankly, there's no reason to cancel just because you feel unprepared. Players show up unprepared all the time, so you shouldn't feel guilty or like you're letting anyone down. Plus, there are strategies you can use to drastically cut down the need for prep.

EVALUATE HOW YOU SPEND YOUR TIME

You'll probably find that you waste a lot of time on things that don't matter, aren't necessary, or that you don't even enjoy. I know I certainly waste so much of my time—it's insane.

Are you doomscrolling? If so, stop it. Do your nights disappear in a YouTube death spiral? Stop it. I'm not saying you should stop following the news or watching videos, but those things can take control of your time if you're not careful.

Facebook has quick and deadly talons—seriously. If you become intentional with your time, you'll likely find more of it to spend on things you enjoy—like role-playing.

LEAN INTO CHARACTER BACKSTORIES & GOALS

If your PCs have goals and interesting backstories, use those as instant adventure hooks. You already know your players will enjoy these hooks because they created them. This naturally cuts down prep, since you can react to your players' actions instead of over-preparing. Reacting is always easier.

- One character wants to search for their grandfather's sword that was stolen decades ago by goblins.
- One character is the sole survivor of their mercenary unit and is searching for the corrupt commander who led them into an ambush.
- One character wishes to scale the tallest mountain in search of the Chalice of Wisdom.
- One character wants to open a trade route through unexplored territory.

Take those ideas and run with them. If all these characters were in one party, the gamemaster would have a wealth of situations to pull from to create exciting adventures—all by reacting to the players who made awesome characters.

Also, if you didn't notice something important from the above examples: if a gamemaster has active players who craft characters with goals, running games becomes easy and super fun.

PULL IDEAS FROM FICTION & HISTORY

Did you recently watch a movie with a cool scene? Scratch off the serial numbers and throw it into your game. Read a great book with an interesting premise? Adapt it for your session and see how your players react.

Interested in history? Pull real-world events into your campaign. Historical conflicts, betrayals, and legendary figures make fantastic story elements for your role-playing scenarios.

THINK ABOUT YOUR SESSION DURING DOWNTIME

Whenever you're cutting the grass, washing dishes, or doing other menial tasks, think about your session. Mull over cool ideas, complications, and encounters that would make your players earn their victories.

Consider fun NPCs, quirky accents, or unexpected challenges. You don't have to write anything down—just get into the habit of mentally prepping. The more you do this, the less actual prep you'll need.

USE THE 15 MINUTES BEFORE THE SESSION WISELY

Since *Dungeons & Dragons* is monster-heavy, you'll need stat blocks. Use the 15 minutes before your session to:

- Pick out a few monsters or look over stat blocks.
- Review notes on NPCs, locations, or plot points.
- Get your head in the game. Push life's worries aside and get ready to have fun.

FINAL THOUGHT: STOP CANCELLING—START PLAYING

Please, don't cancel your session just because you feel unprepared. Use these tips to slash your prep time so you can have more fun playing RPGs. Move your prep into your mind more and more.

The REAL Truth About Being a Gamemaster

Author's Note: *This article was the script for a YouTube video. I was distilling some of my ideas and thoughts on running games into a short piece. There may be some duplicate information here, but also some other nuggets not explained before.*

The internet heaps tons of pressure on gamemasters. The chatter is all about balancing encounters, creating massive worlds, crafting villains, planning epic plots, and developing stories that rival the greatest literature in the world.

Let's be clear: if the gamemaster is supposed to be Shakespeare, then the players had better be Patrick Stewart, Michael Caine, Denzel Washington, and Michelle Yeoh. However, no one ever tells players to up their game.

That was a side quest. Back to the main point.

The truth is that people have been putting pressure on gamemasters for decades. They just haven't been on YouTube until recently. Though they do have something in common: *the vast majority of what they say isn't needed to run tabletop role-playing games.*

There is no reason to spend hours planning for a session unless you enjoy it.

If life punched you in the face this week and you're thinking about canceling your session because you're not prepared, stop. Take a deep breath and remember: you're playing a game with friends. You don't need huge stories and tons of planned-out encounters.

You need your mind, your players' imaginations, and the willingness to go with the flow.

It took me more than 35 years of running games to learn the real truth about what gamemasters need to do. Here are three things that will help you run games.

NUMBER ONE: NEVER PLOT

I know that "never" is a long word—even for Treebeard. There may be occasions where DMs need some sort of defined outcome. Those situations would usually be a convention game or another type of one-shot. Or perhaps if you are a paid gamemaster.

Plot, by definition, is what happens when the protagonist of a story acts. In a tabletop role-playing game, it is impossible for the gamemaster to create a plot because we have no idea how our characters (the protagonists) will act.

Lawrence Kasdan was able to write the famous truck chase scene in Raiders of the Lost Ark because he knew what Indiana Jones was going to do. Gamemasters never know what players are going to do—especially when there are four to six of them.

For example: a gamemaster comes up with a scenario. The party hears rumors that a kindly old innkeeper is struggling with out-of-control patrons who are damaging the inn. The characters go to the inn, get into fistfights with the rowdy patrons, and clean up the inn. The innkeeper wants to thank them but has no money to pay them.

The innkeeper gives the party a map to an ancient ruin that her great-grandfather found. Supposedly, there was treasure in the dungeon beneath the ruin, but no one in the family was ever able to explore it. The party accepts the map from the innkeeper, explores the dungeon, and finds treasure, magic items, and a hook to the next leg of the campaign.

A fun adventure hook. Great. Did you see the problems, though? The gamemaster can introduce the idea that the inn is having trouble with rowdy patrons. But how do they know the players will act on it and go there? Even if the players go there, how do you know they'll scare the patrons off instead of joining them—and then burning down the inn?

If you spent hours prepping that session with that plot, you wasted your time. You could have spent time with family, watched your favorite show, or watched my videos on D&D tips from Star Trek episodes.

You see, it is impossible for a gamemaster to create a plot. You can have ideas. You can introduce situations. But not plot. Plot can only emerge during play because of the actions players have their characters take. Don't waste your time with plot.

I can't tell you how many times I got frustrated that my players didn't follow my plot. If you have an awesome plot in mind, write a novel like I did. The ideas and situations you need for D&D sessions can simply be drawn from movies, TV shows, books, and podcasts—held only in your mind until needed. The example I gave is from the movie Roadhouse.

NUMBER TWO: USE CHARACTER BACKSTORIES

Have you ever planned out a huge epic campaign, got all your players together, and they ignored your "save the world" plot to rob a merchant caravan? No? I have. I'd tell you how many times that happened, but it's too painful.

Or have you tried to run a published adventure module, but your players ignored the story to rob a merchant caravan? You get the idea. But why does that happen?

Gamemaster and player expectations of the game are not on the same page. The gamemaster comes to the table with their plan, and the players come to the table with their plans.

The gamemaster thinks this is their chance to act out their epic Lord of the Rings-like tale, and the players think this is their chance to be bounty hunters or petty criminals.

This can be solved by gamemaster fiat, like requiring players to make characters that will want to save the world or defeat Strahd. However, there is an easier way—and it doesn't require any planning.

When the players create their characters, we need them to have a backstory. I'm not talking about the 19-page backstory or the level-one character's backstory that begins, "Legends are told…"

Three to five interesting bits are good enough. Searching for their long-lost brother. Looking for the con man who stole their family heirloom. Found in a river as a baby. Village burned by orcs. Sailed around the world as a child.

Once we have these, we can start thinking of situations that tie into those backstories. When we do that, player engagement increases by leaps and bounds.

For example: the long-lost brother is now a thrall of a lich king. The con man just left the town the party entered. A story says a queen placed her baby in a river to save them, and the date seems to match the character's age. A troop of vile orcs is burning nearby villages. The ship the character sailed around the world on just docked at port.

Mention those things to players, and they'll have their characters spring into action. You don't need to plan—you just need to react to your players.

NUMBER THREE: COMPLICATION MACHINE

If you don't create a plot and you use bits from character backstories, then your job is to create complications. Gamemasters are complication machines.

Once your players start acting and making choices, you are going to place stumbling blocks and obstacles all along the way. Not to be mean or to antagonize the players—but to have fun. You don't have a story without complications.

If Indiana Jones could fly to Egypt, pick up the Ark, and fly home, there's no story. If James Bond could just call in a SWAT team to invade a supervillain's lair, there's no story. We need to complicate the characters' journey to make the rewards at the end feel hard-fought.

Again, we're not planning these out ahead of time. If you think of a few possible complications, keep them in your back pocket. Use them only if they feel right at the right time. Let's go back to the inn example from Roadhouse.

Let's say the characters head to the inn to rid it of rowdy patrons. One fistfight is probably not enough to make the situation feel engaging. If the party runs off a small group of rowdy patrons, a larger force could return later, spoiling for an all-out brawl.

The choice to give the rowdy patrons spells or weapons is a powerful complication. But so is the choice to have them be peasants with no powers or weapons. Your party will have to make serious decisions about how to deal with them. Also, the rowdy patrons could have been hired by an evil noble who wants to steal the land the inn is located on. (Cliché? Sure. But classic.)

All of those complications enrich the situation and make it feel like real effort was needed to overcome them. Always be on the lookout for places to add complications. They can be small, like slippery rocks, or huge, like an undead army—but whatever it is, complications need to be there.

Once your players start making decisions and taking actions, test their resourcefulness with complications. Remember, in literature and mythic tales, the greater the obstacle, the greater the hero. Challenge your players, and they may surprise you with cunning and creativity.

GAMEMASTER TIPS

Those three things took me 35 years to learn. I hope I saved you time—and the heartache of broken games.

RPG Modules

Published role-playing game adventures, often called "modules," can help the gamemaster who doesn't have time to prepare. These are ready-to-go scenarios that can be run by anyone and often contain incredible stories and ideas.

However, there are some drawbacks. Let's discuss the pros and cons of adventure modules.

THE DOWNSIDE OF RPG MODULES

The first drawback is cost. If you've already spent hundreds of dollars on role-playing game books, materials, and resources, buying a published adventure every month (or week) can get very expensive.

Second, published adventures need to be read. I know this sounds terribly lazy, but I barely have time to keep up with a full-time job, a family, and other real-world responsibilities—let alone reading books and doing things unrelated to RPGs.

Now I have to read a published adventure every week before my friends come over? In some cases, the module is several hundred pages. It may be awesome, but I just don't have the time.

I don't usually enjoy running modules, and I find that a lot of people feel the same way. Why is this? For me, a published adventure often feels too restrictive, and I find myself railroading the players.

There's always interesting lore and story information, but it can be difficult to deliver it naturally. *One example:* how am I supposed to tell my players that Madam Eva is Strahd's half-sister without a huge exposition dump?

THE UPSIDE OF PUBLISHED RPG ADVENTURES

However, don't despair. There are many helpful aspects to published adventures—especially for the busy gamemaster. The quality of some published adventures is outstanding. *Curse of Strahd* is a case in point.

Professional writers—and possibly millions of dollars—were spent making some of these adventures the best they could be. There's no way I could sit at the table and create that level of quality on the fly.

If we pick up a module and read just a little, we can always glean powerful concepts, situations, or set pieces from it. Doing this has helped me run great role-playing sessions many times.

MINE THE MODULE

Don't discount published adventures outright. I wouldn't rely on buying one every week—it's just not sustainable. But know that you can mine a published adventure for useful bits again and again.

Use modules to find new and useful material. In many published adventures, you'll find maps, creatures, or NPCs that can be lifted and dropped into your campaign as needed.

Even if you're not using the adventure as written, you can still take the city map or the villain and plop them directly into your world.

For example, when I was a teenager, I ran a lot of West End Games' Star Wars Roleplaying Game. My players enjoyed bounty hunting and smuggling adventures (so did I). I bought a published adventure called Tatooine Manhunt. The only reason I bought that module was that it came with a map of Mos Eisley—yes, that wretched hive of scum and villainy.

The city center was on one side, and an incredible map of the iconic Cantina was on the other.

That map became the centerpiece for a number of memorable sessions. I've actually never run the adventure as written, but the value I got from that map alone was vastly greater than the seven dollars I paid for the entire module. In fact, I still use that map to this day.

More than 30 years of good gaming out of one map. Now that is a valuable role-playing game resource.

Pro Gamemaster Tip: Maps don't care what game edition or system you use them for.

I can use that same Mos Eisley map for WEG's system, Star Wars Saga, Fantasy Flight's version, or even a non–Star Wars game. The same goes for a lot of older edition *D&D* maps—they work great in 5e or any fantasy tabletop RPG.

SHOULD YOU USE RPG MODULES?

Sure, they're great tools for a gamemaster. But don't feel like you need a new one for every session, or that you have to follow them to the letter.

Always know you can go off the tracks and create your own experience. When I ran *Curse of Strahd*, a kraken emerged from the lake and fought my player characters.

Is that in the book? Heck, no. Was it fun? Absolutely.

Run "Blank" as a Dungeon

In *Dungeons & Dragons*, one of the staples of gameplay is running your players through dungeons. I mean, it's right there in the name—the first "D" in *D&D*.

Experience running dungeons is critical for gamemasters. Plus, dungeons are great fun. They provide a contained environment, constant mystery or peril, a drag on resources, a common goal, and the promise of reward.

CUT YOUR TEETH ON DUNGEONS

First-time or beginning gamemasters can cut their teeth on running dungeons because dungeons focus gameplay on situations the rules handle quite well.

The scope is limited, yet you get to experience game mechanics through both combat and non-combat encounters. This controlled scope gives you experience before you start gamemastering a giant sandbox world.

Worried about the player characters wandering aimlessly through a huge city that you need to create for your first session as a gamemaster?

Don't be. Just run the characters through a dungeon crawl.

Gamemasters can use dungeons to explore the larger world of the setting and deepen character development. But there's also a trick: run "blank" as a dungeon. Let's break this down.

SOMETHING NEW? RUN IT AS A DUNGEON

If you come across something you don't know how to run, run it as a dungeon. Let me explain.

If your player characters need to go on a long journey, break the journey down into sections, with encounters that happen in different sections. Essentially, the long journey just became a dungeon.

Playing *Eberron* for the first time? Do your characters need to pull off a train heist? Never GMed an adventure involving a train before? No worries. Run it like a dungeon. Each train car becomes a room in the dungeon.

There can be a puzzle, a non-combat encounter, or a combat encounter in each train car. Add scene dressing and details to give each car its own unique feel. Sure, your players are on a train—but you're running a dungeon. Think of the movie *Snowpiercer* for inspiration.

Castles, manor houses, haunted houses, cellars, forests, swamps, deserts, and mountains can all be run as dungeons. Break down the area into sections and run it like a dungeon.

RUNNING SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Here's another example: say you're running a science fiction campaign. Your intrepid adventurers are hired to search an abandoned research facility. When they arrive, they discover an experiment has gone horribly wrong.

As the gamemaster, you can run the facility just like you would a dungeon in *D&D*. There are rooms and hallways, just like in a dungeon—they just contain different kinds of things. Even outdoor areas like courtyards or open docking bays can be treated like dungeon rooms.

This method can be applied to many, many things. Are your characters bounty hunting, hauling cargo, or exploring a derelict vessel? Don't stress. Run it like a dungeon.

Retcon

Running a role-playing session without prepping can certainly lead to mistakes. Although, I made a ton of mistakes even when I spent hours prepping.

There are so many moving parts to running a game that we are bound to forget something here or there—or completely botch a rule.

A gamemaster should never be afraid to retcon. Backtracking a bit to set something right is perfectly acceptable, and players should understand that even the best gamemasters make mistakes.

Of course, players make mistakes as well. Retconning their mistakes is perfectly fine, especially if it hurt the game.

IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE, CORRECT IT

If you make a mistake, always feel like you can correct it. Stepping back a turn or fixing something in the narration is always acceptable to correct a mistake you've made. Don't be shy. Admit the mistake and fix it.

That said, use your judgment. Retconning can cause confusion and delay a session, wasting precious playtime.

MAKE SURE IT REALLY SHAFTED A PLAYER

If the mistake really shafted a player, broke a scene, or was a blatant misuse of a rule, then by all means stop the session and do it over.

This will help you learn the rules better and give you a chance to grow as a gamemaster.

IF IT WAS MINOR, MOVE FORWARD

If the mistake was minor and didn't seriously affect gameplay, just move forward. Then make sure to correct the issue during the rest of the session or campaign. This could be small rules like encumbrance or forgetting minor modifiers.

RETCON TIPS DURING RPG SESSION

Here are some tips on how to handle retconning during play:

- Do a simple do-over if the mistake is discovered quickly.
- Don't let pride or ego keep you from fixing a mistake.
- Listen to your players, but you make the final call on how to fix it.
- If the mistake happened in a previous session, fix it through narration.
- If the mistake led to a character death or something extremely detrimental to the party, fix it—even if it means retconning a whole session or more.
- If the mistake gave the party an unreasonable benefit, retcon it—even if they object.

Always use your judgment to decide how bad the mistake was and whether retconning or living with it is the better option. Most of the time, fixing the mistake or learning to live with it will be a valuable learning experience.

Run the Movie

The heart of the advice I give about absorbing media is taking only elements or using concepts as a springboard to your own creativity. However, there is a shortcut.

While you're consuming stories—reading books, watching TV shows or movies—you can actually just take the scenario and story of the book or movie and run it as an adventure or campaign.

Simply take the movie or book, lift the whole thing, and drop it into your campaign. Run the story exactly the way the movie or book does it, only changing or departing from it as necessary due to the limitations or nature of a tabletop role-playing game.

GOOD EXAMPLE

Here's an example of when this is done correctly. When I was a teenager, I had created a post-apocalyptic role-playing game that I called *Anarchy*.

Decades later, it would be the first book I self-published, and it started my career in self-publishing role-playing game books. But I let it sit for a long time and didn't do much with it.

When I was playtesting in my early twenties, I had one playtester who was pretty much always there. He was my best playtester and one of my really good friends.

As we played *Anarchy*, I experimented with different combat systems, different skill systems, and everything else. He was a great sport and loved the post-apocalyptic genre, so we had a blast.

However, I had never been able to play my game as a player. I was always the GM. I never got to just make a character and play it myself.

So I begged my friend. I begged him to gamemaster and run me through some adventure. He didn't want to. He said he was not a good gamemaster. He gave me all the standard excuses.

So what could I do? I begged him and begged him until finally, he agreed. That's what I did.

He started off a session—and to tell you the truth, it blew my mind. It was amazing. The session was incredible. He had a full story, situations, NPCs, locations, and villains. He had everything. In the end, I was like, "Man, you are such a great gamemaster. Why don't you do this all the time?"

He sheepishly said he ran me through a movie.

The movie was *World Gone Wild*. It was something he'd picked up at a video store on a whim a few years earlier. He just used that movie and ran me through it. I hadn't seen the movie at the time, so it was all fresh and new to me.

This trick—running somebody through a movie, book, or TV show—is perfectly valid, can save you a ton of prep time, and can be a great experience for your players.

By the way, I watched the movie years later and it was awesome. If you're into 1980s post-apocalyptic cinema, check it out. As a bonus, the song played over the end credits is amazing.

DANGER!

However, there is a danger here. Make sure the movie, TV show, or book is obscure enough that your players haven't seen it or even heard of it.

If someone at the table knows the source material very well, the situation I described above likely won't happen.

Case in point:

One time I was about 20 minutes into a session as a player, and I realized the gamemaster was running *Star Trek VI*. I'm a *Star Trek* fan. A pretty big *Star Trek* fan—at least back in the day. I've seen *Star Trek VI* more times than probably any person should ever see *Star Trek VI*.

I know the story. I know the scenes. I know some of the dialogue by heart. I've seen the making-of videos and behind-the-scenes documentaries. I've read articles about the production. So when I realized we were running through *Star Trek VI*, I was concerned.

I thought, *"Maybe it's just a scenario or a situation from Star Trek VI."* Maybe the GM was going to use it just as a setup. No, that was not the case. The entire session was *Star Trek VI* with no deviations. Everything was the same. Everything. I was very sad for the next three or four hours.

So, make sure if you're running a story from a movie or book, pick one that's obscure or that you're confident your players haven't seen or read. Or rub the serial numbers off so thoroughly that they'll never figure it out.

BORROWING FROM POPULAR MEDIA

Using popular books or movies for sessions or campaigns can be done—and I truly think it should be done. Anything that helps gamemasters cut down prep is usually cool with me. However, keep a couple of things in mind:

If you're going to borrow from *Black Panther, Game of Thrones*, or popular books like *Ready Player One* or *Shield of Sparrows*, make sure you're only taking snippets or little pieces of the scenario. Use them as starting points or setups.

Then let the campaign or scenario bloom and go its own way. Do not slavishly force your players to follow the exact plot of the book or movie.

If you're going to take a concept from a book that's well-known or widely loved, **get player buy-in first**. This is an often-overlooked step at the beginning of many role-playing campaigns.

Say to your players, *"Hey, I was thinking about doing something like Ready Player One. Or how about running The Trojan War as a cyberpunk game?"* Listen to their responses. Ask them questions. Take their feedback into consideration.

As long as the players have agency and the session isn't just a march through a familiar story, many players will be excited to play.

Session Zero

The Session Zero is a helpful tool in the gamemaster's toolkit.

It's a relatively new development in tabletop role-playing games (well, not anymore), and it has gone kind of mainstream within the gaming community. I wish I would've thought of it when I was a teenager.

If you're beginning an RPG campaign, it's wise to take the first session and simply call it a Session Zero. You use this session to lay a lot of the groundwork for your campaign and to get player buy-in.

A Session Zero is basically a time when the gamemaster and players discuss their characters, the world, the game system, and all kinds of meta-setting material. This allows everyone to be on the same page when the game begins.

There usually isn't any role-playing per se, but there's planning and getting ready to start the campaign.

Session Zero can be put to great use by a no-prep GM. It helps build out details that are needed, but it doesn't weigh down the gamemaster. You're just helping people make characters and develop the setting, while setting the stage for conflicts.

CAMPAIGN STARTING POINT

A Session Zero is a great starting point for a campaign. The gamemaster and players can discuss the world, the rules of the system, and get a feel for how the group wants to play.

If you don't know your players, you can get to know them—and set expectations (or lower them, as the case may be).

CREATE PLAYER CHARACTERS

Session Zeros are perfect for character creation. If you know you've got three hours, that's plenty of time to create characters for everybody without worrying about playing that same night.

It takes a lot of pressure off you as the gamemaster. Plus, it allows everyone to be together while creating characters, which is important for building a cohesive team.

You'll be surprised by how many interesting situations are created just through this kind of collaborative process.

PLANT CAMPAIGN WORLD SEEDS

As a gamemaster, you can use this time to learn what types of characters the players are creating. This lets you create situations and embed them into the world in a very organic way.

For example, one of your players says their character comes from a faraway land (as usual). That gives you a perfect opportunity to add that land into your campaign—while the player does the heavy lifting of creating customs, history, and details.

Also, bits of character background can become part of your world's story. A player says their character's father was a low-level politician who was assassinated when they were a child? Great. You can use that later as a plot hook or twist.

It makes your world feel alive and tailored—and players get more emotionally invested.

LEARN WHAT PLAYERS WANT IN THE GAME

Session Zero is also the time to learn what people want to see in the campaign.

Do they want time travel? Dinosaurs? Lots of combat? Court intrigue? Treasure hunting? Just by asking simple questions, you'll learn what kinds of concepts they're excited about.

Once you know, you can work those ideas in—and you already know the players will enjoy it, because they asked for it.

GAMEMASTER IDEAS

Gamemasters get to have fun too. You don't have to bow to every player whim.

Session Zero is the time for you to share what you want to see in the game. Be clear. Is the tone comedic or serious? Do you want dinosaurs? Do you want time travel? This is when you get buy-in on your campaign concept.

SET BOUNDARIES

Another important aspect of Session Zero is setting boundaries for behavior and content. If you're playing with strangers—or people you don't know well—it's important to find out what kind of game they want to play.

You also need to gauge what they don't want to see in the game. And the reverse is true: you don't have to run anything you're uncomfortable with.

For example, you might simply say, *"We're keeping this campaign PG-13."* Hopefully, everyone understands the tone, the content level, and the boundaries.

No further discussion should be needed.

META CAMPAIGN DETAILS

Session Zero is also a great time to work out meta-details: scheduling, who's hosting, food, cleanup, and other logistics. These are often overlooked—but they're necessary and can help prevent conflict.

It's also the right time to introduce house rules, especially if you're homebrewing D&D or using a custom system. No resurrection? Custom gods? New initiative system? Lay it all out now.

NO-PREP GMING

Session Zero slashes the amount of prep a gamemaster has to do. The players do the work while you take notes and interject when you want. What could be better than a gathering of friends talking about role-playing games?

Author's Note: *You may not have time for a Session Zero—and that's understandable. You can still accomplish a lot of what's mentioned here quickly if you know your players well.*

Situations Not Plot

Author's Note: *This was one of the most criticized sections in the first edition. I've already covered this concept briefly in this edition. I think most of the criticism stems from confusion surrounding the word "plot." Most people, including writers, don't know what it really is.*

A gamemaster needs situations and complications, not huge epic stories and plotlines. For the no-prep gamemaster, this is where that catalog of stories we talked about comes into play.

We don't need to know the plot of movies and books. We need to know the situations that caused the protagonists to act. The larger our mental library of situations, the more we can introduce into our campaigns.

DON'T THINK OF A PLOT

Plot, very simply, is the sequence of events from beginning to end of a story. Do you see the problem? Gamemasters can't know the sequence of events. They are not the only storytellers at the table.

Let's take a look at Star Wars: A young farm boy joins a rebellion and helps destroy a giant space station.

How do I know there will be a farm boy player character in the game? How do I know if the player will have their character join a rebellion or help destroy the space station?

The gamemasterI can introduce situations, but the players decide what to do with those situations.

Don't think of events that must follow one another or of events that have to be triggered by specific actions. Once your players begin interacting with the game world, they will make decisions and take actions you never dreamed of.

If you force them to stick to a plot, you're railroading. Actually, that's the worst type of railroading—the dreaded "gamemaster novel session."

This is where the gamemaster kills all player agency and forces players to follow a predetermined course—usually a kind of Lord of the Rings-style fantasy where the gamemaster's character is the real hero.

Also, gamemasters on this dark path grow frustrated when their beautifully constructed plot doesn't come together. Trust me, I've done this, and it's awful. I've forced players through my pseudo-novels, and it was a disaster every time.

You've created an amazing world, and the characters are supposed to reach the Shimmering Pool in the Lost Wood so the Elf Queen can give them the Crystal Shard. Once they have the Shard, a gamemaster character will lead the party to the World Tree so the GMPC can talk to it.

Once the World Tree is convinced to help, the portal will open that leads to the Dungeons of the Mad King. This is where the GMPC must defeat the Mad King.

Do you see the problem with this?

Let's say the players, on their way to the Shimmering Pool, decide to stay at the inn for several weeks or check out that pile of stones by the road.

It's at this point the railroading gamemaster begins to lament spending hours in prep and starts hating their friends. The solution is simple: don't worry about the plot. Let the players' actions drive the plot.

You can still use the Shimmering Pool, the Elf Queen, the Dungeons of the Mad King, and all the rest—but you can't force players to interact with them the exact way you want.

THINK OF SITUATIONS

What a gamemaster should do is think of situations that create conflict, then allow the plot to flow out of those situations. Give the players a situation, then let them give you the plot. The plot of a story happens when the protagonist acts. The player characters are the protagonists.

For example, think of situations like a kidnapping, a raid on the town, someone hiring a group of adventurers to explore a dungeon, or someone needing a spacecraft to transport cargo to a neighboring star system.

If you think in terms of situations, you simply present those situations to your players and let them act. Out of the players' actions will flow story and plot—as well as opportunities for more situations you can use to weave an interesting session or campaign.

THINK OF COMPLICATIONS

Gamemasters also need to think of complications. Complications are a critical part of dramatic structure and storytelling. Once you have a situation, think about what could complicate it.

Complications force players to use their minds and their characters' abilities to overcome obstacles. The easiest example is a dungeon.

The situation is to explore a dungeon. Once the players enter, they face locked doors, traps, monsters, rooms that fill with water, pits, and all manner of complications. The same goes for any setting in any situation.

If you're playing a science fiction game and your players have their own ship, give them the situation of transporting cargo. There are many complications you can throw in to drive conflict and create an interesting plot.

To continue the sci-fi example: The faster-than-light drive on the characters' ship can malfunction. The ship might collide with an asteroid. Pirates can attack. The cargo they're carrying could spill, explode, or be damaged. All of these complications add to the story and give players opportunities to react.

If you're thinking of situations and complications, you'll quickly realize that a session—and even an entire campaign—can spring up organically from them.

Looking Up Rules at the Table

Looking up rules during an RPG session can be tricky. It can be a huge waste of time. It can also lead to a better gaming experience.

You have to keep in mind the balance between rules and fun at the table. Fun usually trumps everything else, but we need some principles to work from as gamemasters.

NEVER LOOK UP RULES AT THE TABLE

"Never look up rules at the table" is a common piece of gamemaster advice you can find online almost everywhere. I don't agree with it.

Okay, I'll be blunt: most of the time, it's bad advice.

The real problem is the word *never*. GMs are expected to run everything correctly by both players and YouTube, but apparently we're not allowed to double-check a rule? Meanwhile, players can look things up freely? That doesn't make sense.

Sometimes, looking up a rule is exactly what's needed.

Yes, it's tricky. But tricky doesn't mean *forbidden*. Here's how to do it well.

ONLY AT KEY TIMES

A good rule of thumb is to only crack open the rulebook during key moments. If something major is on the line—like a character's death, a lasting campaign consequence, or a pivotal moment—then take the time to get it right.

But keep it short. Nobody wants to sit through thirty minutes of page-flipping unless it really matters.

MAKE A SUMMARY RULING ON THE SPOT

This is the go-to solution: make a call and move on.

Say, "I don't know this rule right now, so I'm going to rule this way for now." Then, look it up between sessions and make a note to correct it going forward if necessary.

This keeps the game flowing and the players engaged. Most players will respect a gamemaster who makes quick, fair calls and keeps the action moving.

USE YOUR PLAYERS AS A RESOURCE

Don't be too proud to ask your players. Some of them have the rulebook memorized. If someone knows the rule, go with it.

Now, the caveat: some players bend the rules or conveniently forget them when it hurts their character. That's a problem. Ideally, everyone at the table should care about fair and fun play, even when it doesn't benefit them.

HAVE A PLAYER LOOK IT UP

You're juggling a lot as the GM—combat, narration, pacing, NPCs, story hooks. You don't always have time to dig through a rulebook.

Instead, ask a player to look it up while others are taking their turn. By the time it's their turn again, they'll have the answer. Problem solved.

I've used this trick dozens of times. I haven't had a player push back on it.

BY AGREEMENT

If everyone at the table is new to a game system, it's perfectly fine to agree ahead of time that rules will be looked up as needed.

I hate hearing, "We're not playing that game because we don't know the rules." Just dive in. Learn together. You'll probably have a blast.

Yes, the first session might be a little clunky. But so what? It's role-playing. I've done this many times, and players were on board because we all wanted to try something new.

THOUGHTS

Looking up rules isn't a sin. It's a tool. Use it when it helps. Skip it when it hurts.

If you're unsure, go with your gut and keep things moving. That's what good gamemasters do. And remember: if everyone's having fun, you're doing it right.

Use Combat to Stall

Author's Note: *Welcome to the most reviled advice from the first edition. It's funny, because I thought this was one of the least controversial pieces of advice. Apparently, it is controversial after all. However it may be perceived, it's still viable—and an actually helpful tip for gamemasters.*

Gamemasters sometimes need time to think during a session, and they need that time quickly. Other times, they need a place to start their campaign or session.

If you're playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, or another combat-heavy tabletop role-playing game, you're in luck. Combat is a great stalling tactic as well as a great way to kick off a session or campaign.

Plus, there's an added bonus: players usually love combat. This shouldn't be hard—and it should be fun.

STALL FOR TIME DURING THE SESSION

Combat is the no-prep GM's old friend. Just think about these scenarios: Your players' characters are walking along a road, and you as the gamemaster have no idea where they're going.

- Your players stop searching for the Well of Souls so they can take a swim.
- Your players say they want to cut across-country instead of taking the road.
- Your players enter the dungeon quicker than you expected.
- Your players decide to crash at the inn for too long.
- What should the GM do? Time for combat!

You can just grab a few monsters or bandits and throw them right at the characters. And look at that—the players are occupied for at least a half-hour to an hour. You've got some time to think while crunching numbers for the creatures.

Also, some adventure hooks may appear during the combat, giving you the ideas you need to fill the rest of the session. The players will search the bodies, and items like maps or scrolls could be found that give you a direction for what comes next.

STARTING AN RPG SESSION IN COMBAT

Starting a session or campaign in combat can be a tremendous asset to a gamemaster who isn't prepping. Let's say your players are all set up with characters, and you've got a premise, but you're not sure how to begin the first session.

Don't waste time in a tavern or an inn. Don't force role-playing before everyone is comfortable at the table. Throw them right into the middle of combat. I've seen this work many times.

If your players are a group of bounty hunters, just narrate a scene where they're in the middle of a fight trying to capture or kill a bounty. During combat, the session can get underway, and different story hooks and items will emerge. You can use them to build a story and fill out your session or campaign.

You can use random tables to reveal the items on dead bodies. Those items will lead to story hooks and interesting tidbits your players will want to explore. You react to your players' decisions—and the story is born.

If your players are treasure hunters or just dungeon crawlers, then start them in the middle of a fight in a dungeon. The results of combat will lead right into story beats your players can act on. Then, once again, you start reacting to your players.

Once your players become active and are making decisions about where they want to go or what they want to do, your job as GM becomes incredibly easy.

Remember—even though it seems like the players are controlling everything, you as the gamemaster are still interjecting ideas, concepts, and situations that shape the gameplay in powerful ways. This isn't their story any more than it's your story.

The story belongs to everyone at the gaming table.

Use Technology or Not

Technology has obviously become a huge part of our modern lives. We can't avoid it at our jobs or at home. It is everywhere. Gamemasters should embrace it—especially if you're not prepping for sessions.

Technology provides role-players with a lot of helpful options at the gaming table. Let's use everything at our disposal to help create better sessions and campaigns.

POWERPOINT

Using PowerPoint is more useful if you are preparing for sessions. I used to do this. Now that I've gone no-prep, I don't. But there are those who can benefit from the tip, so I'll mention how I used to use it.

If you have access to a TV or large monitor during your sessions, you can create a PowerPoint deck with interesting locations, city images, NPC portraits, and show your players exactly what you're describing.

For example, if your players are on a long journey, gather beautiful pictures of landscapes, waterfalls, forests, mountains, deserts—whatever you need. This can really enhance the experience for more visually oriented players.

I created massive slide decks for an epic Jedi campaign years ago, and my players loved it. I spent evenings and weekends searching the internet for images or creating slides with character info.

Sadly, it was too much work. I can't do that anymore. However, there are other technologies that can be used to cut down GM prep rather than add to it.

LAPTOP OR TABLET DURING SESSIONS

If you have a laptop or tablet at the table while GMing, you have a world of resources at your fingertips. You can look up random tables, rules, or maps as needed—without any prior prep.

Need a creature? Search "D&D OGL monster stats." Need a map? Search "dungeon maps." You'll find amazing resources you can use on the spot.

For example, I was running a post-apocalyptic session. I rolled on a random table and my players found a half-buried submarine. Of course, they wanted to explore it. I needed a map—fast.

Instead of sketching something, I used my laptop and quickly found a real submarine interior online. I described it on the fly as they searched it for loot.

Having PDFs of rules or tables also helps a lot. You can search the whole document instantly and find what you need. This is one of the reasons I created my Books of Random Tables.

The biggest criticism of using a computer at the table is that you can get distracted looking things up, and your players end up sitting there bored. Don't do that.

Only use the computer while players are engaged—planning, in combat, or even during a bathroom break.

USE GOOGLE MAPS

Depending on your game's time period, Google Maps can be incredibly useful—especially for modern or near-future settings.

You can zoom in on buildings and terrain in real-time. Show your players what their surroundings look like, and move along with them as they travel.

For example, in my post-apocalyptic game Anarchy, a core feature is using Google Maps during play. The game is set in the near future, and I cast Google Maps to a TV screen.

Players see exactly where they are—real-world cities and roads, damaged and twisted by nuclear war. I just describe what has changed. It's quick, immersive, and requires zero drawing.

Some people have criticized this method, calling it cheap or unrealistic. But every time I've used Google Maps in a session, the players loved it. That's why I included this tip in the first edition.

OTHER TECH USES

There are countless ways to use technology at the table. Here are a few more:

- Send secret text messages to certain players.
- Show pictures of NPCs (usually celebrities).
- Let players choose pictures of their PCs.
- Use a group message thread to discuss the game between sessions.
- Display a map where everyone can see it.
- Email digital handouts to all players.

And the list goes on. Your only limits are your preferences.

In short, use technology to cut down your GM prep and enhance your sessions. But if you're burned out from staring at screens all day—don't. Go old school. That's perfectly fine. The goal is always to have fun.

Author's Note: *The above tech section may seem quaint by today's standards. I updated it for this edition but left it mostly as-is. The two world-shattering and epoch-making changes came after I published the first edition. I'll address them below.*

Playing Online

Playing role-playing games online was growing when I published the first edition, but it was still in its infancy. I discovered Roll20 in 2013 and used it to make maps, but I never used it to actually play online until...

The pandemic.

Of course, you knew I was going to say that. The pandemic took online gaming from niche to mainstream in a matter of weeks. My group was no different. We began playing online once restrictions and COVID-19 protocols went into place.

Frankly, we haven't looked back. Even though my gaming group lives within driving distance of each other, we've kept playing online. Why, you may ask? There are some very good reasons.

BENEFITS OF PLAYING ONLINE

First, cutting out drive time means fewer cancellations. Some people have to work late—they can now come home and just turn on their computer. People who do manual labor jobs need time to eat and shower after work. Eliminating a 25-minute drive is a huge time-saver.

Second, the host doesn't have to clean their house. This might sound lazy, but let's be honest—getting your home ready for six visitors can be a burden. That's completely gone when playing online.

Third, the gaming group doesn't take over the whole house. Non-players in the household don't have to give up their privacy or favorite chair. The person playing can go to a secluded corner and join the session without inconveniencing anyone.

Fourth, maps and resources are built into the virtual tabletop. Playing with a grid or even supplementing theater-of-the-mind play is easy and enhances the experience.

And the best benefit of all: playing online allowed us to keep gaming when we otherwise couldn't have.

DOWNSIDES OF PLAYING ONLINE

As with everything, there are trade-offs. Online play has its downsides too.

First and foremost, we lose the personal connection of having people in our homes. That human interaction—the small talk, the shared snacks, the laughs—is hard to replicate through a screen. The simple act of having people in our home is special and helps build relationships.

Henry David Thoreau is surely spinning in his grave.

Second, we lose the little things that make in-person play special. It may seem like mindless chatter, but asking someone how their day was shows you care. Hopping online and jumping right into the session gives us more game time, but it takes away from that human connection.

Third, it nearly kills my advice about listening to the table. In person, players chat during breaks and speculate out loud. The GM can overhear and weave those ideas into the story. Online, players mute themselves. There's still some table talk, but not like around a physical table.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There's no right answer. You need to do what works best for you and your group. If that's online, go for it. If it's in person, fantastic.

We just need to be aware of the limitations of each. When playing online makes sense, do that. When playing in person makes sense, do that.

Artificial Intelligence

I'm not even sure I know what to say about AI. It's here. It's not going away. And it changes everything. It changes everything about role-playing, and it changes everything about the entire world.

We are living through an upheaval not unlike the invention of the electric lightbulb or the advent of human flight—except this is changing things faster than we can comprehend.

Everything is different now. We can't make AI go away, and we can't change how it works. It's been thrown in our laps, and we're left—largely on our own—to figure out what to do with it.

I can't, in any fashion, address the complexities of AI in this little book. Nor do I understand the full range of impacts it will have on gaming or our lives moving forward.

HOW I USE AI IN WRITING

I am constantly being accused of using generative AI—nearly every day of my life. People say I use it to create my *Books of Random Tables* series. They say I use AI art for the covers.

Those accusations are false.

I've posted my full AI policy on my website, dicegeeks.com. I use AI for **grammar correction, research,** and **text formatting,** mainly. I **do not** use AI-generated art in any of my books.

Why do I use it at all? Because I can't escape it. Google is AI. Grammarly is AI. Any online research I do now comes in the form of an AI summary. As I'm typing these very words in a Google Doc, it suggests ways to finish almost every sentence—and Word does the same thing.

I am very careful with both my fiction and non-fiction writing. I want to write. I want to learn how to write better. I want tools to help—but I don't want a crutch I become dependent on.

HOW I USE AI IN PLAYING RPGs

The biggest change so far has been with character portraits. My players used to find pictures online—of celebrities, models, or fantasy art—and use those to represent their characters. Now, they'll often use an AI-generated image.

I did this for the first time last year. I used ChatGPT to generate portraits of my minotaur eldritch knight and my lizardfolk bard.

I figured this was an acceptable use because it wasn't commercial—we would've just used found images online anyway. Maybe that's not right. I'm open to that conversation. But I don't know.

AI GAME RESOURCES

I haven't used AI to generate traps, story elements, or anything like that. The main reason is simple: **that's what I do.** I make role-playing game resources.

Can someone just use ChatGPT to replace my books? In a certain sense, probably. That concerns me. This is my livelihood, and I've worked hard to make my books better and better.

To that end, I haven't used AI to plan sessions. And even if I wanted to, it still feels like too much work. I'd have to read what it generated and figure out how to use it. I'd rather just sit down and run a game—with my mind, my imagination, and my players.

AI GAMEMASTERS

Besides generative art, this has been one of the most controversial proposed uses of AI: Can we replace gamemasters with AI? Probably.

Should we? That's a different—and more important—question.

Why shouldn't we just use a machine to run our games? I've spent a lot of time in this book talking about how no one ever wants to GM. I've often felt I had no choice. So why not just have a computer do all the heavy lifting so we can play more?

But using an AI GM makes the tabletop role-playing game experience more like a video game. And while there's nothing wrong with video games, role-playing with live people is completely different.

AI gamemasters take a unique hobby—different from anything else—and make it sterile. I don't like that. But I also can't answer the questions I'm raising. I don't know what AI means for the hobby, let alone for my life or the world.

EXTRAS

Glossary

Adventure – A series of encounters linked together by a theme or goal.

Alignment – A way to describe a player character's moral outlook. Usually only used in *D&D* or derivative games.

Backstory – A short description of a player character's life before the game starts.

Campaign – A series of linked sessions played by the GM and players, which can last months or even years.

Character – A fictitious individual created for an RPG. Also called a player character.

Check – A roll to see if a character succeeds at something difficult or risky.

Class – A character's role and abilities in the game, like fighter or wizard. Not all games use classes, but *D&D* and similar games do.

Crunch – Game mechanics, rules, and numbers. A game is "crunchy" if players need to do a lot of math or deal with complicated rules.

Encounter – A scene or event in a session where something happens. Usually a combat sequence, a puzzle, or a roleplay moment.

Fluff – The story, lore, and setting of the game. (*Author's Note: I hate this term, by the way.*)

Gamemaster – The player who runs a role-playing game session or campaign.

GM – Noun: Abbreviation for Gamemaster. Verb: The act of running an RPG.

GMPC (Gamemaster Player Character) – A character controlled by the gamemaster who acts as a party member alongside the players' characters. Usually preceded by the word "dreaded" in most RPG circles.

Homebrew – Any rules, classes, or settings made up by the GM or players.

Improvisation – Making up rules, encounters, or dialogue on the spot.

Initiative – The order in which characters and NPCs act during combat. This is primarily a *D&D* term.

NPC – Abbreviation for Non-Player Character.

Non-Player Character – Any character controlled by the GM.

OGL – Abbreviation for Open Game License.

One Shot – One session with a complete beginning, middle, and end.

Player – Any person playing an RPG who is not the gamemaster.

Player Character – Any character controlled by a player.

Prep – Anything the GM does to get ready for a session.

Railroad – When a GM takes away player agency and forces a specific outcome.

Race – A character's fantasy species, like elf or dwarf. Also called ancestry or species in some games.

RPG – Abbreviation for Role-Playing Game.

Roll – Using dice to determine an outcome.

Sandbox – A game style where players choose what to do and where to go with little GM direction.

Session – A block of time spent playing an RPG in one sitting, usually two to four hours.

Session Zero – A pre-game meeting where players and the GM talk about expectations, characters, and rules.

SRD – Abbreviation for System Reference Document. A collection of game rules released under the OGL or in Creative Commons.

Stat Block – A summary of stats and traits used to run a creature or NPC. Common and important in D&D.

TTRPG – Abbreviation for Tabletop Role-Playing Game.

Third-Party Content – RPG material created by publishers or individuals who are not the original creator of the game.

Example of Play – A Light-Hearted Take

GM: The fog unspools like a serpent. The night is cold. The loneliness of this place weaves into your bones. It's about the witching hour when you first glimpse the—

Player One: Did you say twitching?

GM: Umm… no. When you first glimpse the mouth of the cave—

Player Two: The show I watched last night had a cave in it.

GM: Ok, great… The mouth of the cave opens before you like the very pit of hell. The darkness seems even darker than the cloud-packed sky. As—

Player Three: What was that? My boyfriend texted.

GM: Umm… You're at the mouth of the cave. As—

Player Two: I hope we get some gold because I need to buy a ton of stuff at the next town.

Player Three: Yeah, me too. The new supplement that just dropped has a ton of new magic items.

Player One: It does? Awesome.

GM: Ok, focus up. As you stand at the cave entrance—

Player One: Does it look like the Genesis cave?

Players Two and Three laugh wildly.

GM: It does not look like the Genesis cave. I was describing it.
Player Three: Yeah, it's cool.

GM: Ok. Three goblins leap out of the darkness and surprise you.

Player One: What?!?

Player Three: Surprised? My character would have seen them.

Player Two: What happened? My wife was texting me.

GM: Three goblins surprise attack you.

Player Three: I would have seen them.

GM: You didn't. They attack and… all three miss.

Player One: Oh, thank goodness.

GM: Roll initiative.

Player Two: What is that again? Is it a d20?

GM: Yes, it's a d20.

Player Three: Is it plus Dex or…?

GM: In D&D Beyond, just click where it says "initiative."

Player Three: I don't see it. Oh, there it is.

GM: Grogoroth del Vorodus, the Destroyer of a Thousand Worlds and Warlord of the Seven Kingdoms, what do you do?

Player One: Ok, well, umm… I wasn't expecting combat… I… umm… well… I could… but would he actually do that?

Player Three: My character would have seen the goblins.

GM: It's not your turn. (pause) Grogoroth?

Player One: I mean, umm... oh gosh, what? Ummm... ok... there's nothing really I can do... I guess I just attack with my greatsword?

GM: Ok, roll it.

Player One: How does that work again?

Questions for Reflective Watching & Reading

What caused a scene to follow the previous one?

What does the main character want?

What obstacle is standing in the main character's way?

What motivates the character's decision here?

What do the characters' actions reveal about their personality?

How are the stakes being raised in this scene?

What marks the turning point of certain scenes or chapters?

What is the tone, and how is it established?

How is tension built and then released?

What details give scenes emotional impact?

What type of conflict is used—internal, external, social, or moral?

How is exposition being delivered—through dialogue, narration, or action?

What makes the villain or antagonist memorable?

How is the worldbuilding shown rather than explained?

How does the main character change over the course of the story?

How could scenes or chapters be adapted into a TTRPG session?

What kind of complications disrupt the main character?

What new choices or consequences are introduced as the story progresses?

What did a scene withhold to keep the audience engaged?

What details made the world feel more real?

How did secondary characters influence the main character's journey?

Recommended Reading

Appendix N from the AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide (1979)

- Anderson, Poul: *Three Hearts And Three Lions; The High Crusade; The Broken Sword*
- Bellairs, John: *The Face In The Frost*
- Brackett, Leigh
- Brown, Frederic
- Burroughs, Edgar Rice: *Pellucidar* series; *Mars* series; *Venus* series
- Carter, Lin: *World's End* series
- de Camp, L. Sprague: *Lest Darkness Fall; The Fallible Fiend*
- de Camp & Pratt: *Harold Shea* series; *The Carnelian Cube*
- Derleth, August
- Dunsany, Lord
- Farmer, P. J.: *The World Of The Tiers* series
- Fox, Gardner: *Kothar* series; *Kyrik* series
- Howard, R. E.: *Conan* series
- Lanier, Sterling: *Hiero's Journey*
- Leiber, Fritz: *Fafhrd & Gray Mouser* series
- Lovecraft, H. P.
- Merritt, A.: *Creep, Shadow, Creep; Moon Pool; Dwellers In The Mirage*
- Moorcock, Michael: *Stormbringer; Stealer Of Souls; Hawkmoon series* [esp. the first three books]
- Norton, Andre
- Offutt, Andrew J.: editor of *Swords Against Darkness III*
- Pratt, Fletcher: *Blue Star*
- Saberhagen, Fred: *Changeling Earth*
- St. Clair, Margaret: *The Shadow People; Sign Of The Labrys*
- Tolkien, J. R. R.: *The Hobbit; The Lord of the Rings*
- Vance, Jack: *The Eyes Of The Overworld; The Dying Earth*
- Weinbaum, Stanley
- Wellman, Manly Wade
- Williamson, Jack
- Zelazny, Roger: *Jack Of Shadows; Amber* series

Appendix E from the D&D 5E Player's Handbook (2014)

- Saladin Ahmed, *Throne of the Crescent Moon*
- Lloyd Alexander, *Chronicles of Prydain* series
- Piers Anthony, *Apprentice Adept* series
- Lady Gregory Augusta, *Gods and Fighting Men*
- Elizabeth Bear, *Eternal Sky* trilogy
- Terry Brooks, *Shannara* series
- Thomas Bullfinch, *Bullfinch's Mythology*

- Glen Cook, *Black Company* series
- Brian Froud and Alan Lee, *Faeries*
- Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis, *Dragonlance Chronicles* series
- William Hope Hodgson, *The Night Land*
- N.K. Jemisin, *Inheritance* series, *The Killing Moon, and The Shadowed Sun*
- Robert Jordan, *Wheel of Time* series
- Guy Gavriel Kay, *Tigana*
- Stephen King, *The Eyes of the Dragon*
- Ursula LeGuin, *Earthsea* series
- Scott Lynch, *Gentlemen Bastards* series
- George R.R. Martin, *Song of Ice and Fire* series
- Patricia McKillip, *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*
- China Mieville, *Bas-Lag* series
- Mervyn Peake, *Gormenghast* series
- Terry Pratchett, *Discworld* series
- Patrick Rothfuss, *Kingkiller* series
- R.A. Salvatore, *The Legend of Drizzt* series
- Brandon Sanderson, *Mistborn* trilogy
- Clark Ashton Smith, *The Return of the Sorcerer*
- Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Coming of the King*
- Gene Wolfe, *The Book of the New Sun* series

Appendix D from the D&D 5E Dungeon Master's Guide (2014)

History and Myth

- *A Magical Medieval Society: Western Europe*, by Joseph Browning and Suzi Yee
- *The Encyclopedia of Things That Never Were*, by Robert Ingpen
- *The Medieval Fortress*, by J.E. Kaufmann and H.W. Kaufmann
- *Castles*, by Alan Lee and David Day
- *Castle*, by David Macaulay
- *Le Morte d'Arthur*, by Sir Thomas Malory
- *The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England*, by Ian Mortimer
- *Cities of the Renaissance World*, by Michael Swift and Angus Konstam
- *The Mapmakers*, by John Noble Wilford
- *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, by E.D. Hirsh Jr.
- *Under the Black Flag*, by David Cordingly

Writing Advice

- *Writing Fiction*, by Janet Burroway
- *Immediate Fiction*, by Jerry Cleaver
- *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, by Lajos Egri
- *Creating Character: Bringing Your Story to Life*, by William Bernhardt
- *Perfecting Plot: Charting the Hero's Journey*, by William Bernhardt
- *Story Structure: The Key to Successful Fiction*, by William Bernhardt
- *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, by Stephen King
- *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, by Robert McKee
- *The Anatomy of Story*, by John Truby
- *Save the Cat*, by Blake Snyder
- *The Writer's Complete Fantasy Reference*, by Writers Digest

Role-Playing Game Design

- *Variety Puzzles and Games* series, by PennyPress
- *Things We Think About Games*, by Will Hindmarch and Jeff Tidball
- *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, by Raph Koster
- *Hamlet's Hit Points*, by Robin D. Laws
- *Game Design: A Book of Lenses*, by Jesse Schell

The Art of GMing

- *Master of the Game*, by Gary Gygax
- *Role-Playing Mastery*, by Gary Gygax
- *Play Unsafe: How Improvisation Can Change the Way You Roleplay*, by Graham Walmsley

Games and Sourcebooks

- *Once Upon a Time: The Storytelling Card Game*, by Atlas Games
- *Microscope*, by Ben Robbins
- *Gary Gygax's Extraordinary Book of Names*, by Malcolm Bowers
- *Gary Gygax's Living Fantasy and the rest of the Gygaxian Fantasy Worlds* series, by Gary Gygax
- *Grimtooth's Traps*, by Paul Ryan O'Connor
- *DMGR1 Campaign Sourcebook & Catacomb Guide* (1990)
- *DMGR2 The Castle Guide* (1990)
- *DMGR3 Arms and Equipment Guide* (2e) (1991)

History of Gaming

- *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It*, by David M. Ewalt
- *The Bones: Us and Our Dice*, by Will Hindmarch
- *Playing at the World*, by Jon Peterson

Note: *Dungeons and Dragons 2024* does not include any reading recommendations.

Other Works

- Addison, Katherine: *The Goblin Emperor*
- Abraham, Daniel: *The Long Price Quartet*
- Bancroft, Josiah: *The Tower of Babel* Series
- Barker, R.J.: *The Bone Ships*
- Bennett, Robert Jackson: *City of Stairs*
- Bennett, Robert Jackson: *Foundryside*
- Catling, Brian: *The Vorrh*
- Clarke, Susanna: *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*
- Dickinson, Seth: *The Traitor Baru Cormorant*
- Hawkins, Scott: *The Library at Mount Char*
- Hughart, Barry: *The Chronicles of Master Li and Number Ten Ox*
- Johansen, Erika: *The Queen of the Tearling*
- Kuang, R.F.: *The Poppy War*
- Lawrence, Mark: *Red Sister*
- McClellan, Brian: *The Powder Mage Trilogy*
- Riddell, Chris & Stewart, Paul: *The Edge Chronicles*
- Ruocchio, Christopher: *Empire of Silence*
- Smylie, Mark: *The Barrow*
- Tchaikovsky, Adrian: *Children of Time*
- Williams, Jen: *The Copper Promise*

The Author's Favorites

- Apollonius of Rhodes: *Argonautica*
- Aristotle: *Poetics*
- Bradbury, Ray: *Something Wicked This Way Comes; The Martian Chronicles*
- Burroughs, Edgar Rice: *Tarzan* series
- Cervantes, Miguel de: *Don Quixote*
- Conan Doyle, Arthur: *The Lost World; The Ring of Thoth*
- Deaver, Joe: *Freeway Warrior* series

- Dumas, Alexandre: *The Three Musketeers; The Count of Monte Cristo*
- Haggard, H. Rider: *King Solomon's Mines; She*
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel: *Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne*
- Herbert, Frank: *Dune*
- Herodotus: *The Histories*
- Homer: *The Iliad; The Odyssey*
- Julius Caesar: *The Gallic War*
- Kipling, Rudyard: *The Jungle Book*
- Kurosawa, Akira: *Something Like an Autobiography*
- Lamour, Louis: *Law of the Desert*
- Lewis, C.S.: *The Chronicles of Narnia; The Space Trilogy*
- Lichtenfeld, Eric: *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie*
- Lönnrot, Elias (compiler): *The Kalevala*
- Moore, Alan: *Swamp Thing* (comic books)
- Norton, Mary: *The Borrowers*
- O'Brien, Robert C.: *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*
- Ovid: *Metamorphoses*
- Pierre, Boulle: *Planet of the Apes*
- Stevenson, Robert Louis: *Treasure Island*
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord: *Idylls of the King*
- Twain, Mark: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*
- Various authors: *Anglo-Saxon Elegies*
- Various authors: *Norse Sagas* (e.g., *Saga of Erik the Red*)
- Various authors: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
- Various authors: *The Nibelungenlied*
- Various authors: *The Poetic Edda*
- Verne, Jules: *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*
- Wells, H.G.: *The Island of Doctor Moreau; The Time Machine; The War of the Worlds*
- White, T.H.: *The Once and Future King*
- Wilde, Oscar: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Recommended Watching

Movies

- *The Haunted Castle (Le Manoir du diable) (1896)*
- *The Astronomer's Dream (La Lune à un mètre) (1898)*
- *A Trip to the Moon (Le Voyage dans la Lune) (1902)*
- *The Kingdom of the Fairies (Le Royaume des fées) (1903)*
- *The Impossible Voyage (Le Voyage à travers l'impossible) (1904)*
- *The Merry Frolics of Satan (Les Quat'Cents farces du diable) (1906)*
- *The Eclipse: Courtship of the Sun and Moon (L'éclipse du soleil en pleine lune) (1907)*
- *The Adventures of Prince Achmed (1926)*
- *Just Imagine (1930)*
- *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1931)*
- *The Mummy (1932)*
- *The Invisible Man (1933)*
- *King Kong (1933)*
- *The Lost Patrol (1934)*
- *Treasure Island (1934)*
- *Captain Blood (1935)*
- *The Tunnel (1935)*
- *Transatlantic Tunnel (1935)*
- *Things to Come (1936)*
- *Flash Gordon (1936)*
- *The Man Who Changed His Mind (1936)*
- *Lost Horizon (1937)*
- *The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938)*
- *Gunga Din (1939)*
- *Dr. Cyclops (1940)*
- *Northwest Passage (1940)*
- *One Million B.C. (1940)*
- *The Sea Hawk (1940)*
- *The Thief of Bagdad (1940)*
- *The Devil Commands (1941)*
- *The Wolf Man (1941)*

- *Arabian Nights (1942)*
- *Cat People (1942)*
- *Jungle Book (1942)*
- *Sahara (1943)*
- *The Curse of the Cat People (1944)*
- *Mademoiselle Fifi (1944)*
- *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo (1944)*
- *The Story of G.I. Joe (1945)*
- *They Were Expendable (1945)*
- *The Body Snatcher (1945)*
- *The Ghost Ship (1943)*
- *I Walked with a Zombie (1943)*
- *The Leopard Man (1943)*
- *The Seventh Victim (1943)*
- *Isle of the Dead (1945)*
- *Bedlam (1946)*
- *The Flying Serpent (1946)*
- *Sinbad the Sailor (1947)*
- *Battleground (1949)*
- *King of the Rocket Men (1949)*
- *Mighty Joe Young (1949)*
- *Rocketship X-M (1949)*
- *Twelve O'Clock High (1949)*
- *Destination Moon (1950)*
- *King Solomon's Mines (1950)*
- *Rashomon (1950)*
- *The African Queen (1951)*
- *The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951)*
- *When Worlds Collide (1951)*
- *Captive Women (1952)*
- *The Crimson Pirate (1952)*
- *High Noon (1952)*
- *The Magnetic Monster (1953)*
- *The War of the Worlds (1953)*

- *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (1953)*
- *The Cruel Sea (1953)*
- *Stalag 17 (1953)*
- *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1954)*
- *Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954)*
- *Them! (1954)*
- *The Naked Jungle (1954)*
- *Conquest of Space (1955)*
- *It Came from Beneath the Sea (1955)*
- *This Island Earth (1955)*
- *Tarantula (1955)*
- *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers (1956)*
- *Forbidden Planet (1956)*
- *Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)*
- *World Without End (1956)*
- *The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957)*
- *The 27th Day (1957)*
- *Throne of Blood (1957)*
- *20 Million Miles to Earth (1957)*
- *The Abominable Snowman (1957)*
- *The Black Scorpion (1957)*
- *The Deadly Mantis (1957)*
- *The Giant Claw (1957)*
- *Attack of the Crab Monsters (1957)*
- *The Monster That Challenged the World (1957)*
- *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad (1958)*
- *The Hidden Fortress (1958)*
- *The Queen of Outer Space (1958)*
- *The Vikings (1958)*
- *Journey to the Center of the Earth (1959)*
- *Pork Chop Hill (1959)*
- *The Time Machine (1960)*
- *The Sword and the Dragon (1960)*
- *The 3 Worlds of Gulliver (1960)*

- *Atlantis, the Lost Continent (1961)*
- *The Day the Earth Caught Fire (1961)*
- *The Magic Sword (1962)*
- *Yojimbo (1961)*
- *Mysterious Island (1961)*
- *Battle of the Worlds (1961)*
- *Jason and the Argonauts (1963)*
- *Sanjuro (1962)*
- *Lawrence of Arabia (1962)*
- *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm (1962)*
- *The Day of the Triffids (1962)*
- *7 Faces of Dr. Lao (1964)*
- *Zulu (1964)*
- *First Men in the Moon (1964)*
- *A Fistful of Dollars (1964)*
- *The Time Travelers (1964)*
- *For a Few Dollars More (1965)*
- *The Man Who Would Be King (1965)*
- *Lord Jim (1965)*
- *Alphaville (1965)*
- *Khartoum (1966)*
- *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)*
- *Planet of the Apes (1968)*
- *Barbarella (1968)*
- *Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)*
- *The Valley of Gwangi (1969)*
- *2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)*
- *Vanishing Point (1971)*
- *Two-Lane Blacktop (1971)*
- *The Omega Man (1971)*
- *Gone in 60 Seconds (1974)*
- *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad (1973)*
- *Fantastic Planet (1973)*
- *Phase IV (1974)*
- *Zardoz (1974)*

- *Death Race 2000 (1975)*
- *Doc Savage: The Man of Bronze (1975)*
- *The Wind and the Lion (1975)*
- *A Boy and His Dog (1975)*
- *Logan's Run (1976)*
- *The Man Who Fell to Earth (1976)*
- *At the Earth's Core (1976)*
- *Empire of the Ants (1977)*
- *Damnation Alley (1977)*
- *The Last Dinosaur (1977)*
- *Sorcerer (1977)*
- *Smokey and the Bandit (1977)*
- *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger (1977)*
- *The Driver (1978)*
- *The Lord of the Rings (animated) (1978)*
- *Piranha (1978)*
- *Quintet (1979)*
- *Mad Max (1979)*
- *Battle Beyond the Stars (1980)*
- *Saturn 3 (1980)*
- *The Octagon (1980)*
- *Outland (1981)*
- *Excalibur (1981)*
- *Clash of the Titans (1981)*
- *The Road Warrior (1981)*
- *The Cannonball Run (1981)*
- *The Beastmaster (1982)*
- *The Dark Crystal (1982)*
- *Conan the Barbarian (1982)*
- *The Sword and the Sorcerer (1982)*
- *Warlords of the 21st Century (a.k.a. Battletruck) (1982)*
- *The Last Unicorn (1982)*
- *Megaforce (1982)*
- *Fire and Ice (1983)*
- *Rock & Rule (1983)*

- *High Road to China (1983)*
- *Krull (1983)*
- *Lone Wolf McQuade (1983)*
- *Metalstorm: The Destruction of Jared-Syn (1983)*
- *The Last Starfighter (1984)*
- *Romancing the Stone (1984)*
- *Night of the Comet (1984)*
- *Trancers (1984)*
- *Ladyhawke (1985)*
- *Ran (1985)*
- *Starchaser: The Legend of Orin (1985)*
- *Invasion U.S.A. (1985)*
- *The Quiet Earth (1985)*
- *Radioactive Dreams (1985)*
- *The Eliminators (1985)*
- *Delta Force (1986)*
- *Firewalker (1986)*
- *Highlander (1986)*
- *Cherry 2000 (1987)*
- *The Princess Bride (1987)*
- *Slipstream (1989)*
- *Navy Seals (1990)*
- *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey (1990)*
- *Army of Darkness (1992)*
- *Split Second (1992)*
- *No Escape (1994)*
- *Stargate (1994)*
- *The City of Lost Children (1995)*
- *Dragonheart (1996)*
- *The Ghost and the Darkness (1996)*
- *The Phantom (1996)*
- *The Fifth Element (1997)*
- *The Postman (1997)*
- *The Road to El Dorado (2000)*

TV Shows

- *The Twilight Zone (1959–1964)*
- *The Outer Limits (1963–1965)*
- *Star Trek: The Original Series (1966–1969)*
- *The Prisoner (1967–1968)*
- *Land of the Giants (1968–1970)*
- *Land of the Lost (1974–1976)*
- *The Powers of Matthew Star (1982–1983)*
- *Knight Rider (1982–1986)*
- *The Phoenix (1982)*
- *Automan (1983–1984)*
- *Manimal (1983)*
- *V (1983–1985)*
- *Airwolf (1984–1987)*
- *Street Hawk (1985)*
- *Misfits of Science (1985–1986)*
- *Otherworld (1985)*
- *The Highwayman (1987–1988)*
- *Max Headroom (1987–1988)*
- *Red Dwarf (1988–present)*
- *Quantum Leap (1989–1993)*
- *Hard Time on Planet Earth (1989)*
- *The Odyssey (1992–1994)*
- *Highlander: The Series (1992–1998)*
- *Space Rangers (1993)*
- *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (1993–1999)*
- *The X-Files (1993–2002)*
- *TekWar (1994–1996)*
- *Babylon 5 (1994–1998)*
- *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys (1995–1999)*
- *Xena: Warrior Princess (1995–2001)*
- *Space: Above and Beyond (1995–1996)*
- *Sliders (1995–2000)*

- *The Outer Limits (1995–2002)*
- *VR.5 (1995)*
- *Nowhere Man (1995–1996)*
- *Strange Luck (1995–1996)*
- *The Burning Zone (1996–1997)*
- *The Adventures of Sinbad (1996–1998)*
- *Kindred: The Embraced (1996)*
- *Roar (1997)*
- *Stargate SG-1 (1997–2007)*
- *Lexx (1997–2002)*
- *Earth: Final Conflict (1997–2002)*
- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003)*
- *Brimstone (1998–1999)*
- *Prey (1998)*
- *Farscape (1999–2003)*
- *Crusade (1999)*
- *Now and Again (1999–2000)*
- *Relic Hunter (1999–2002)*
- *Angel (1999–2004)*
- *Star Trek: Voyager (1995–2001)*
- *The Secret Adventures of Jules Verne (2000)*
- *The 10th Kingdom (2000)*
- *The Invisible Man (2000–2002)*
- *The Others (2000)*
- *Dark Angel (2000–2002)*
- *The Mists of Avalon (2001)*
- *The Chronicle (2001–2002)*
- *Night Visions (2001)*
- *Firefly (2002–2003)*
- *Andromeda (2000–2005)*
- *The 4400 (2004–2007)*
- *Stargate Atlantis (2004–2009)*

www.dicegeeks.com