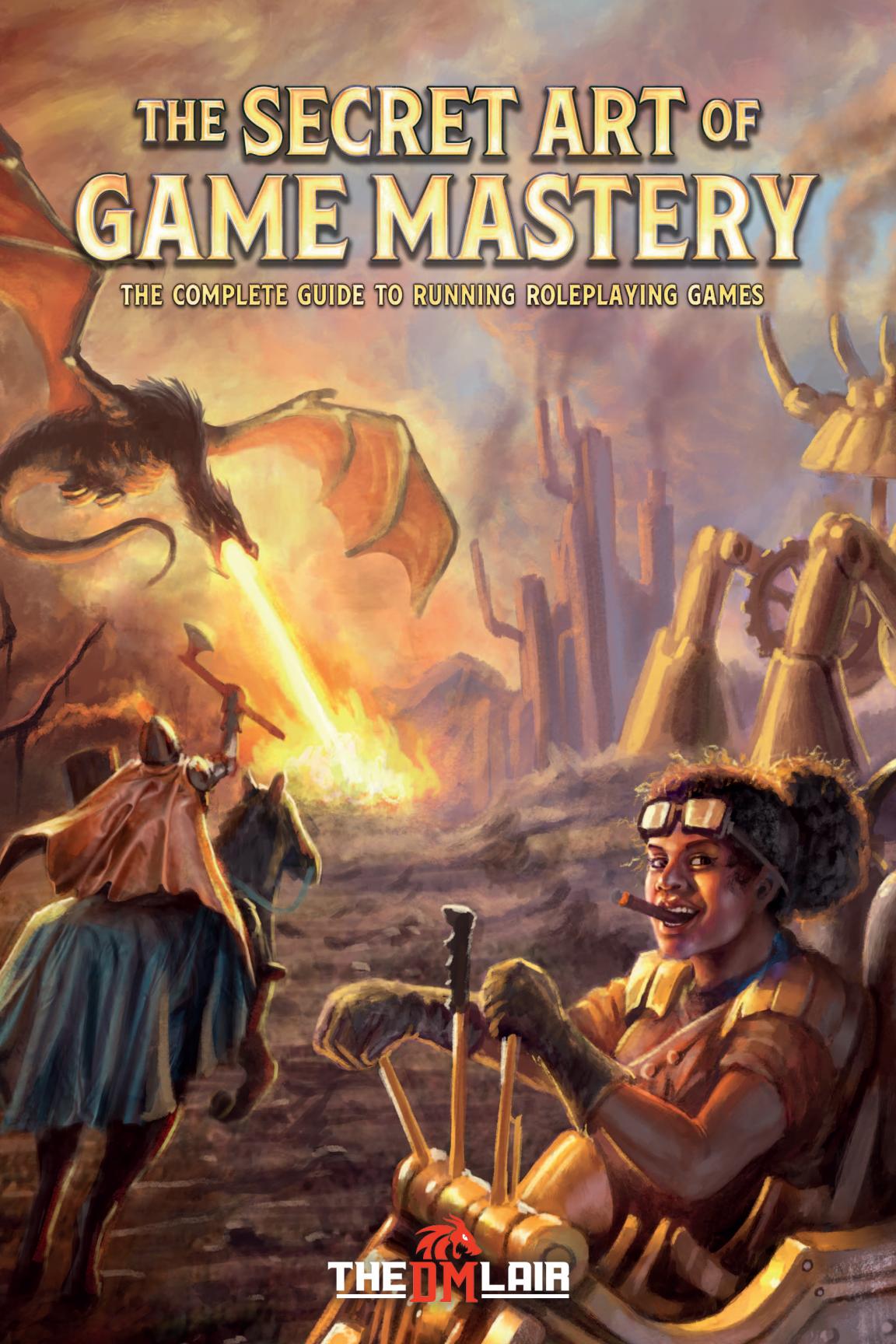


THE SECRET ART OF GAME MASTERY

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO RUNNING ROLEPLAYING GAMES



THE DM LAIR

CREDITS

Lead Designers: Zac Chaney, Luke Hart, Ed Robinson

Lead Writer: Trevar Fracchiolla

Contributors: Zac Chaney, Ed Robinson, Rye Clarke, Luke Hart

Editors: Zac Chaney, Ashley “Sunny” Jones, Thomas Townsend, Janay Zeilstra

Project Management: Zac Chaney

Art Direction: Luke Hart, Ashley “Sunny” Jones

Cover Illustrator: Brendan Lancaster

Special Edition Cover Illustrator: Danni Arriaga

Interior Illustrators: Danni Arriaga, Isiah Bradley, Al Firdausi, Pamela Gardea, Nicole Jimenez, Kaion Luong, Mitch Mueller, Fabian Parente, Scott Purdy, Edit Mehlmann

Foreword Written By: Will Earl, host of D&D Shorts

Publisher: Luke Hart

Graphic Designer and Layout: Handiwork Games

www.thedmlair.com

ISBN: 978-1-7370518-6-2

© 2023 The DM Lair

info@thedmlair.com

The Secret Art of Game Mastery: The Complete Guide to Running Roleplaying Games, Copyright © 2023, Luke Hart, The DM Lair, LLC. All rights reserved.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the many amazing game masters I've had the privilege of knowing and whose games I've played in. Each and every one of you has played a role in the creation of this book, either indirectly by helping me hone my own Game Mastery over the years or by directly contributing to this book's content. I'm deeply appreciative of you all.

In this volume, my team and I have attempted to forever capture your collective wisdom and experience on the written page so that it may serve as guidance for our fellow game masters for decades to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Zuhra".

CONTENTS

Preface	9
Foreword	10
PART 1	
Introduction.....	13
Chapter 1: What Is Roleplaying?	16
What is Roleplaying?	16
Why People Equate Roleplaying with Social Interactions	17
What Is Social Interaction (If It Is Not Roleplaying)?.....	17
How Roleplay Encompasses All Aspects of the Game	17
Everything Is Roleplay.....	20
A Final Thought.....	21
Chapter 2: What is a Story?	24
Types of Game Masters	25
Which Game Master Should You Be?	26
Moving Forward	28
Chapter 3: What Is a Game Master?	31
Game Masters Run the Game.....	31
Game Masters Are Players	32
Game Masters Are More Than Players	33
Some Final Thoughts.....	34
Chapter 4: Be Your Own Game Master.....	37
The Matt Mercer Effect.....	37
What Should You Take Away From Famous Game Masters?.....	39
What Should You Not Take Away From Famous Game Masters?	40
Be Inspired, Don't Impersonate	40
Chapter 5: Why Should You Be a Game Master?.....	44
You Are the Heart of the Hobby	44
GM s Are Always in Demand	45
You Can Play When You Want	46
Unfettered Creativity	47
Let Yourself Give It a Chance	47
Final Thoughts	48
PART 2	
Introduction.....	51
Chapter 6: The Game Master's Role at the Table	54
Establishing Your Game Master Identity.....	54
Game Master Vs. Player Mentality	55
The Social Contract.....	59

Chapter 7: Tools of the Trade.....	63
Dice	63
Books.....	64
Maps.....	65
Minis or Tokens	65
Virtual Tabletop (VTT).....	68
Dice Trays and Dice Towers	69
Other Tools	70
Chapter 8: The Time and Place.....	73
How Do You Schedule a Session?	73
How Do Players Find Game Masters?.....	74
How Do You Find Your Players?	75
How Do You Find Where to Play?	75
What Do You Do When Someone Is Missing?.....	76
It's a Group Game	78
Some Final Thoughts	78
Chapter 9: Choosing a Playstyle.....	81
Session 0.....	81
Choosing Between Prewritten and Homebrew Material.....	83
Choosing a Playstyle	85
Who Makes These Decisions?	88
Setting Expectations	88
Final Thoughts	89
Chapter 10: What Does a Game Master Think About During the Game?	92
Player Agency	92
Narration.....	94
Maintaining a Cooperative Atmosphere	96
Taking Notes	97
Final Thoughts	97
Chapter 11: Post-Game Organization	100
Get Organized	100
You're Organized, Now What?	103
Reflection	104
Chapter 12: Improving as a Game Master.....	107
Getting Feedback.....	107
Applying Feedback	109
Following Up on Feedback	111
Avoiding Burnout	113
Final Thoughts	113
Chapter 13: Problems in the Game	116
Metagaming.....	116
Problem Game Masters	117
Problem Players.....	120
The Path Ahead.....	123

PART 3

Introduction.....	126
Chapter 14: Getting Ready to Create the Game	129
What Happens If the Game Master Isn't Prepared?.....	129
What Does It Mean to Create a Roleplaying Game?.....	129
Make Sure the Game Has Choice.....	130
The Three Pillars.....	132
Putting Theory into Practice	134
Chapter 15: Building Your World	137
The Three Faces of Worldbuilding	137
The SUPREME Method	138
A Collaborative Art	140
Chapter 16: Using a Prewritten World	148
What Are Prewritten Worlds	148
Modifying Prewritten Worlds.....	149
Bringing Your Creations into the World	150
Integrating Characters into an Existing World	152
Finding Pre-Existing Worlds.....	153
Chapter 17: Populating Your World.....	156
What Are NPCs?.....	156
Further Development and Uses	160
Chapter 18: Map Design.....	163
Using Maps in Your Game	163
Map Types.....	163
Mapmaking Mediums	167
Do I Need to Use Maps?	168
Looking at the Bigger Picture.....	168
Chapter 19: What Does a Campaign Look Like?	174
What Is a Campaign?	174
What Is the Campaign's Premise?	174
What Drives the Campaign?	176
Breaking up the Monotony.....	179
Chapter 20: Components of an Adventure	182
Hooked from the Beginning.....	182
The Meat of the Adventure.....	184
The Resolution	187
Chapter 21: Creating an Adventure	190
The Concept.....	190
So, Where Do You Start?.....	191
What's Next?.....	195
Event Based Adventures	196
Is Your Adventure Ready?	198

Chapter 22: Encounter Design	202
Okay, but What IS an Encounter?.....	202
The Pillar of Combat	204
The Pillar of Social Interaction	205
The Pillar of Exploration.....	206
Combining the Elements into an Encounter	210
Chapter 23: One-Shots.....	214
So, What Are the Differences?	214
Starting a One-Shot	216
Encounters	216
Scope	218
What If Things Don't Go as Planned?	219
Chapter 24: What If You're Not Prepared?	222
Understanding Unpreparedness.....	222
What to Do When Unprepared	223
How to Prepare for the Unexpected	226
Take a Deep Breath.....	227
Chapter 25: Things Can (and Will) Go Wrong.....	230
But Did It Actually Go Wrong?.....	230
Where Things May Go Wrong.....	231
What To Do When Something Goes Wrong.....	234
Moving On	235
Chapter 26: Using a Module as a Campaign	240
What Is a Module?	240
How to Prepare a Module.....	242
Setting Proper Expectations	246
Chapter 27: Mixing Modules and Homebrew	251
Approaches to Integration	251
How to Integrate Modules and Homebrew	253
The End Result	256
Index.....	259



PREFACE

Why write this book? Well, in the spring of 2022, right on the back of our Lairs & Legends Kickstarter, I was thinking about something that seemed to come up in the comments of my videos and elsewhere: folks wanted to know if the game master information I shared in my videos was available in written form for easier reference. And, unfortunately, it really wasn't.

It was in that desire that the idea for this book was born. I said to myself, “What if my team and I *did* take all the GM information from my videos and put it into a book? Wouldn’t that be cool?” So, I took this idea to my team, and they responded with, “That’s cool, Luke, but we’re all game masters, too, with tons of experience... What if we *combined* all our GM experience into that one book? Then it would be even better.” And, of course, they were right.

However, we didn’t want to make a “GM advice book” that was only good for one game system or genre. We really wanted game masters from all walks of life – from D&D to Call of Cthulhu and from fantasy to horror to sci-fi – to find the information useful.

So, that’s what we did. We crammed everything we knew about game mastering into one book and made sure that it was both system- and genre-agnostic. Stuff that *everyone* would be able to use and benefit from!

And that, of course, is the book you now hold in your hands. My team and I truly hope it helps you run amazing games, and that you and your players will have amazing moments and memories for years to come.

- Luke Hart

FOREWORD

When I announced my intention to begin running roleplaying games, my own game master (a veteran of many years) gave me the following advice:

“Don’t.”

To his great credit, it was the most succinct tabletop roleplaying advice I’ve ever been given. I ignored it nonetheless and forged ahead with the blind optimism of a typical TTRPG adventurer.

It went badly.

Determined to make a spectacular entrance into the GMing sphere, I invited my friends to roll up level 20 characters and face down three Demon Lords. After five hours of brutal, grinding combat, the players and I had exhausted all spell slots, healing items, magical resources, and much of the will to live.

I learned three lessons from my first session as a GM:

1. High-level combat takes an extremely long time.
2. There may have been some wisdom in my GMs word of advice.
3. Trying to do a gravelly demon voice for five hours hurts.

At that time, there was no Secret Art of Game Mastery. Online resources for game masters were scattered and unreliable at best. My gamer master’s succinct council had been all I needed. I wasn’t ready to be a GM.

Back then, all our lessons had to be earned through painful trial and error. Every mistake, every bad session, and every TPK was a grinding step forward. Old-school GMs stand atop a mountain of failures, exhausted and proud. We had to claw our way to the position of a “decent GM”.

Thankfully, there are now far more efficient paths to mastering TTRPGs, and you’re holding one of them in your hands.

The Secret Art of Game Mastery contains over a century of collective game master experience. Each contributor draws from their own perspective, distilling their knowledge into simple, actionable advice.

Luke's time as a publisher and content creator places him in a unique position to educate. As a YouTuber, he has the unique privilege of interacting with hundreds of thousands of players and game masters on a monthly basis. As such, his instruction is refined to meet the exact needs of the community. The questions, ideas, suggestions, stories, and inspiration of millions are distilled and presented in this guide, a claim no other GM guide can boast.

Zac, Ed, and Trevar also lend their voice to this material, their experience gathered across every game system, era, and playing style imaginable.

In short, you hold something of value. It is 50% a love letter to the TTRPG community and 50% a desperate warning to those beginning to fall in love. Do not repeat our mistakes!

GMing is complex, nuanced, and takes practice. It is also fun, inspiring, and, when all the gears are flowing, almost effortless.

It is the aim of this book to minimize the frustration and challenge that comes with running games and maximize the joy you will find in playing them.

To that end, you will find no better guide out there.

I recommend you engage with this book as it suits you. Do not feel obligated to read from cover to cover as you would a novel. Keep it close to hand; flick through it at times you feel open to new perspectives and inspired to develop your skills.

Use it to analyze your games. Celebrate the experiences where you succeed and challenge yourself to find new ways to improve where you need to.

And above all, may it inspire you to take a seat behind the GM screen and love the time you spend and the stories you shape there.

For yourself and for your players, enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Will, DnD Shorts".

Will, DnD Shorts



• PART 1 •

INTRODUCTION

Everyone sits down around the table. The game master is at the head of the table, surrounded by their books and screen and dice. The players have taken their seats around the side, eagerly taking out their character sheets and arranging their dice according to superstitions as old as the game itself. Snacks have been placed on the table and a cooler has ice and drinks inside.

With a deep, almost pensive breath, the game master asks everyone if they're ready. It's their first session, their nervousness is almost palpable. Unanimously, the players respond with an enthusiastic "YES!"

"You have been contacted by the burly smith Al to help him figure out why his iron deliveries have stopped. Your reasons for agreeing to help are your own but you each realize that Al has contacted several people who are to accompany you as a party. Your means and methods are your choice, Al has little time to worry about how adventurers handle this task."

Of course, this was the synopsis of the quest that was given to the players before they started making their characters, but the game master had to start somewhere.

"Can you tell us anything about what you think might have happened to your iron?" asks one of the players, speaking in the high-pitched voice they chose for their character.

"I don't know much. Over the last couple of months, the cost of iron has been steadily climbing, day after day. At first, it was manageable but gradually it became harder and harder. Still, I had no choice but to pay it or my family would soon starve. Then one day, it just stopped. No warning, no explanation," the game master said using a voice that was probably a full octave deeper than the game master had practiced.

The players mutter between each other for a moment, trying to draw any conclusions they can. After a little bit, they decide they're going to track down the owner of the mine and see if they can find out any more information from them.

The game master narrates a brief travel scene through the village before stopping. “A small group of thugs clammers out of the shadows, beckoning to you.”

In a raspy voice, the game master continues, “we saw ya talkin’ ta tha smith. Ya need to back off before ya *get* backed off.”

The players announce their characters are drawing their weapons, ready for a scuffle but hoping to scare them off. The game master narrates the thugs responding in an all to predictable way, thinking they’ll quickly and easily win this fight.

“Roll for initiative,” the game master announces.

After everyone gets situated for the impending combat, the first player takes their turn. “I charge in and try to take the leader to the ground, holding my dagger to their throat,” they declare. The game master announces that it will require a couple of rolls, some of which might be contested.

After the dice are rolled and the results are declared, the game master narrates the character now sitting on top of the leader’s chest with a knife to his throat.

However, that’s not the end of it. The next player decides they wish to bludgeon one of the thugs over the head, knocking him out cold. It’s a simpler situation, and the die is rolled. MISS! The thug ducked out of the way.

Around the table the combat continues to go, until eventually the players emerge victorious and prepare to interrogate their captives.



CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS ROLEPLAYING?

A group of adventurers walks into the dark, delving deep underground toward their objective. They know the path is dangerous; their enemy is ready and waiting. One of the characters slips ahead, intending to scout for traps and see where their enemies might be hiding. They go around a corner, just out of sight of the rest of the party. Unfortunately, that character makes a mistake and detonates an explosive hidden under the floor. The other characters cry out to their friend, hoping to discover they're still alive. When the party catches up, they find an enemy standing over their friend's body, half buried under the rubble. Their friend isn't moving—they are dead. The rest of the party draws their weapons and calls out for battle, swearing revenge upon their enemies for his death.

The above scene has played out many, many times over the years in various forms across countless games. In essence, it's a cinematic experience that each player and game master (GM) has contributed to through the characters' and non-player characters' (NPCs) choices and actions. It's a gritty tale, but one where everyone gets to play their characters and make their own choices. In short, it demonstrates the essence of roleplaying.

WHAT IS ROLEPLAYING?

This quintessential question defines tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), yet one can answer it in several ways. At its most basic core, roleplaying is taking on the mannerisms, background, thoughts, and feelings of someone else with the intent of personifying it—it's the act of pretending to be someone else.

This definition immediately brings to mind how actors portray a character. Whether for a theater production or a film set, these performers embody their roles, interacting with others through dialogue and actions to build a scene. Other professions, such as psychology, use it to help people gain a deeper understanding of others' feelings by having conversations from someone else's point of view.

While these examples are an element of roleplaying, much more goes into roleplaying than meets the eye. As an audience member at a theater or movie, you're watching the result of a project and connecting to the actors on a visual and auditory level. Unfortunately, this may create a false understanding that one can only roleplay through social interactions, which cannot be further from the truth.

WHY PEOPLE EQUATE ROLEPLAYING WITH SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Roleplaying is a fundamental aspect of TTRPGs; it's in the name itself, which shows how essential it is to the experience. Tabletop games (TTGs) generally involve conversing with fellow players or NPCs the GM introduces, making social interaction a core feature of these games. You represent your character by how you speak and depict it in these social situations; therefore, it is roleplaying.

That, in essence, would be correct—but also wrong.

Associating roleplaying to only how you depict your character during game dialogue limits its true scope. Yes, you are portraying your character during play, pretending to be a different person by what you say and how you say it. This is an element of what it means to take on a role at the game table.

However, limiting the definition of character portrayal only to what happens during social interactions between characters barely scratches the surface of what “roleplaying” truly means. We must unpack roleplay from social interaction and expand on it for a better understanding.

WHAT IS SOCIAL INTERACTION (IF IT IS NOT ROLEPLAYING)?

So, what are social interactions since they're not roleplaying? They are the talky-talky portions of the game, which transpire between the player characters and NPCs or monsters. Anytime a character engages in a conversation, forming a relationship through discussion, it's a social interaction wherein players roleplay their characters' dialogue.

Now, before everyone points out, “But didn't you just say that roleplaying isn't social interaction,” we want to clarify that this isn't quite what we said. Earlier, we stated not to use social situations to define roleplaying, but this doesn't mean there's no roleplaying in social interactions—far from it! Dialogue involves much roleplaying, but it's not the be-all and end-all. Because of this, it's essential to consider other situations that evoke roleplay.

HOW ROLEPLAY ENCOMPASSES ALL ASPECTS OF THE GAME

A thief sneaks into a room, searching for valuables. Their eyes catch upon a small chest set atop a side table, the gilded chassis of the box gleaming in the feeble candlelight. The thief resists the allure of treasure momentarily, crouching and squinting in the

dim light to check for a tripwire that may trigger a mechanism to catch a brazen thief. Seeing no traps waiting for unwary feet, the thief pulls out their lockpicks and cautiously approaches the container...

Elsewhere, a warrior steps into the path of a rampaging monster. The creature growls menacingly, then lumbers forward in an uneven lop. Planting their feet, the warrior unsheathes the longsword at their side. The blue-tinted steel flashes in the sunlight, and the ancestral blade seems to hum with anticipation of blood. With a mighty roar, the warrior lunges forward to satiate the blade's unquenchable thirst...

These examples incorporate roleplaying beyond the spoken word to hint at what drives the character. Notice that the scenes above don't include dialogue; instead, they use elements from other critical gaming aspects: exploration and combat.

These two elements and social interactions are at the core of the TTRPG experience, collectively called the three pillars of gameplay. We'll elaborate on these at various points later, but because they're integral to the roleplaying experience, it's worth touching on how they can enhance player engagement.

THE FIRST PILLAR: SOCIAL INTERACTION

So far, we've spent considerable time chipping away at the social interaction pillar, so what it contains should be pretty self-explanatory. But since our focus has been to distance the full responsibility of roleplaying from weighing upon this one aspect, let's now delve deeper into explaining how to use it for roleplaying.

Roleplaying in these situations will generally be between the players and NPCs or between the players. In these moments, the players will explore how the characters speak and react to what is said. Much character can be revealed in these moments by what everyone says to each other; however, for roleplay, it's more critical *why* they say something than *what*.

For instance, if a player character is conversing with an NPC about a potential quest to track down the bandits who slaughtered several villagers and made off with all the treasure, players might agree to track down the bandits and reclaim the wealth, approaching it as a typical quest. But a player whose past involves a bandit raid that destroyed their family may take it further and swear to avenge the villagers.

This elevates roleplaying to a higher level. The player's dialogue and motivation at this moment tie directly to their character's experience and how it affects them

now. The words they say are vital to this moment; why they felt driven to vow vengeance is the heart of social roleplaying. Taking everything one step further and exploring the inspiration behind the words is where a player’s approach to portraying their character truly shines.

THE SECOND PILLAR: COMBAT

The combat pillar is more subtle than social interaction but no less prevalent—its name already epitomizes what it involves. At first glance, it doesn’t seem to leave much room for roleplaying. With the game’s combat mechanics as foundations, there appears to be nothing left to add. If the game has established mechanics, how much can a player contribute to roleplaying?

Quite a bit, actually.

Consider what happens during combat: The players and the GM roll dice to determine the outcomes of their characters’ actions. This is the *what* that happens, similar to how dialogue relates to social interaction roleplay. Like social interaction, motivation (the *why*) underlies the actions taken in battle; however, combat also prioritizes an additional question that impacts roleplaying: *how*.

How a character completes the action they choose refers to how they present it to the table. “I walk forward and attack the monster” doesn’t offer much roleplay value. However, “I leap forward, rushing to put myself between the monster and my companions as I bring my staff down in a two-handed blow” brings much more dynamism to the moment. We would know from this description that they’re rushing into the fight and attacking with their staff (*how*) and adding a subtle reason for *why* (to protect their companions).

Another way to incorporate roleplay into combat is to intersperse short bits of dialogue into the battle where it makes sense. A player may land a devastating blow against one of the villains. The villain reacts by offering some grudging respect, only to have the player throw a quip back at them. A fast-paced conversation like this can keep the flow of combat rolling smoothly while breaking up the standard pattern of attacks. While it is dialogue and related to the game’s social aspect, a different intent differentiates these elements.

These ideas bring a dynamic roleplaying element into the mix to enhance gameplay. By building more into combat than just the attack rolls and results, you can infuse new life and energy into this segment so everyone is fully engaged.

THE THIRD PILLAR: EXPLORATION

The third and final pillar regarding how to incorporate roleplay is the hardest to quantify. Both previous pillars work with a why motivator to expand the situation and enhance roleplay. However, exploration doesn't have this same need; it happens whenever players arrive in a new location. So how do we include roleplay in this part of our tabletop games?

The answer is simple: It's already there.

Surprisingly, the easiest way to approach roleplay during exploration is to let it happen organically by focusing on *how* players discover things. As players enter a new space, their initial instinct will be to familiarize themselves with the location. When they investigate—asking what their characters see, hear, touch, or smell but also sometimes taste—they put themselves more in tune with their character and learn about the area through their perspective.

Expanding on this roleplay is very easy, but the steps to take for it will improve the quality of the experience. The key to doing this is not requiring players to ask to make a specific check or roll; instead, they should specify what they hope to accomplish. “Can I roll for Perception” becomes “Can I see anything unusual about this tapestry?” “I check for traps” becomes “I crouch on the ground and feel along the stones for anything loose or out of place.”

This straightforward adjustment truly enhances the game’s exploration elements. Focusing more on what the character is doing rather than the mechanic the player is using builds a clearer understanding of how the character sees the world, which is the most integral part of any roleplaying situation.

EVERYTHING IS ROLEPLAY

So now that we’ve walked amongst the three pillars and gleaned some ideas, let’s return to our original question: What is roleplaying?

Based on the foundations we established throughout this conversation, *everything* is roleplaying. Roleplaying should be considered all of the choices and actions a character makes based on their knowledge, personality, skills, and backstories. You can have a character do and say things, but you’re barely scratching the surface without considering the motivation or method for their actions.

Why a character says something, how they fight in a battle, and what they do when they arrive in a new environment encompasses the most authentic essence of what drives that character. Once you combine all of these and weave the details throughout each of the Pillars of Gameplay, the characters will come alive—not just to the person portraying their actions and words, but to everyone else experiencing them with you.

A FINAL THOUGHT

As a brief final thought before we move on, let's consider the different ways that we might see roleplay represented in a live game. This is most often seen in social interaction, though it can be found in many other aspects of the game as well, but not all players or game masters will want to roleplay in the same ways. For example, some players may not feel entirely comfortable with—or be able to, for that matter—put themselves into the headspace of their character and speak each word as they would. In short, they might roleplay from the third person.

There's nothing wrong or inferior with such a method nor is there anything wrong or inferior about roleplaying from first person. They're simply different styles that feel more comfortable for different players. At the end of the day, it's all roleplaying, and should be celebrated for the place it holds in the hobby, rather than avoided or torn down.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Roleplaying Is More than Social Interaction. One of the most common and basic errors people make is the idea that roleplaying is solely social interactions. However, we have discussed that this idea falls short and does a disservice to both the idea of roleplaying and social interactions themselves.

The Three Pillars. The three pillars of tabletop games are combat, exploration, and social interaction. Each one makes up a third of the game and serves as an integral component to the experience as a whole. Everything – or at least, very nearly everything – that happens in the game falls into one of these pillars. In fact, things will often fall into multiple pillars at a time.

Everything Is Roleplaying. With the previous points considered, we can confidently say that everything we do in the game is roleplaying. Whether it's a player choosing which weapon their character will use, the characters deciding how they're going to break into the castle, or even one of the characters' companions scouting up ahead for the party, it is all roleplaying.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What does it mean to you to play/run a roleplaying game?

How do you like to roleplay at the table? How do your players like to roleplay?

Is there a pillar of the game that you or your players gravitate towards more than others?



CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS A STORY?

Two groups gather around their respective game tables. At one table, a young man stands behind a cardboard screen and describes a harrowing journey through a mountain pass. The journey takes a group of adventurers out of the wind-swept, amber-waving grasslands below and places them, in stark contrast, into a ferocious blizzard. Frigid gusts freeze their hair as they try to reach a lonely tower at the nearly inaccessible mountain peak. Eventually, the man describes the characters reaching the summit and working their way into the tower toward their unsuspecting quarry.

At the other table, a young woman stands and describes a scene. A massive mountain looms over the serene grasslands, a swirling blizzard nearly obscuring an ominous tower at its peak. She asks, “What do you want to do?” Those sharing the table with her each briefly describe what their characters do and resolve a couple of dice rolls. Then, with flourish and drama, the young lady proceeds to paint a picture of how each of their actions unfolds and the consequences—or benefits—of their choices until, with icicles dripping from their hair and beards, they reach the lonely tower embedded in the snow-covered summit and head towards their unsuspecting quarry.

Both of these groups have ultimately told the same story, but they’ve arrived there in very different ways. The first GM has narrated and described to the others at the table what is unfolding as they ascend the mountain, and the second has taken contributions—and dice rolls—from their players to weave their shared narrative. While both told the same story, only one of those groups has actually engaged in roleplaying.

While roleplaying has had its fair share of mistaken associations, the way in which a game’s story develops—and the GM’s role in crafting it—can also be misunderstood. While we can summarize roleplaying as everything your players do at the game table, the plot is often the GM’s way of conceptualizing ways to progress players from event to event. We’re the grand architects of an edifice that progresses the story the players interact within each session.

To an extent, this is true. However, a deeper dive into this idea reveals much more is going on beneath the surface than meets the eye.

TYPES OF GAME MASTERS

As the GM, it falls upon you to manage how you present the story to your players. As events unfold, you conduct the action and orchestrate the progression of events. But how do we do this in a way that is effective for a tabletop roleplaying game? The best way to answer this is to describe two approaches to a GM's role in developing the story: the author GM and the player GM.

A QUICK PREFACE

Over the next couple of pages, we're going to be discussing things in broad generalities. However, it should be understood that there are shades of gray between the two extremes that we're going to discuss. We'll be drawing conclusions based on the extremes, but the truth of the matter will likely lie somewhere in between and is something that you will need to evaluate on your own based on your own experience. As with everything, but particularly in this case, make sure you carefully reflect on where you fall on the spectrum between these extremes and where you would like to be and find ways to get to that point.

AUTHOR GAME MASTERS

An author is responsible for creating a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Think of a traditional fantasy following the hero's journey described by Carl Jung: To over-simplify the concept, the main character accepts a call to adventure, crossing into the wondrous world to be tested and face great ordeals before returning to the ordinary world as a changed person. While quite a bit more goes into this story structure, each main element is preordained and planned according to the story's plot.

In terms of a written novel, the steps involved in this standardized character arc are expected to be preordained to develop a satisfying narrative. However, applying this same concept to a tabletop RPG plot may lead to structuring everything in a way that guarantees the storyline progresses as planned. Take the following example of an author GM's plot:

The players will sneak into the manor of Lord Haestan to find evidence of the noble's illegal dealings with a smuggling ring. A servant has told the party that they can find the documents in the lord's study. However, loyal henchmen guard all of the entrances, save for the cellar door. Players must sneak through the cellar door and find the secret passage leading into Haestan's study, where they quickly discover the signed contracts implicating him in the ring's activities.

This scenario leaves little room for player spontaneity, changing the course of the story. As established, there is only one method of gaining entry to the manor, and any deviation will result in a failed outcome. Preparing for this adventure leads to a well-structured plot and lays out the expected process the players must embark upon to reach their end goal.

PLAYER GAME MASTERS

The other side of this spectrum is a GM who places themselves in a player's position to progress the game's plot. Based on this, rather than planning a plot from Point A to Point B, the GM would create a situation that ties into the current event the players are engaging with and let it develop based on how they address the problem. For example, here's how the same description might look in a player GM's plot:

The players must find a way to enter Lord Haestan's manor to discover evidence of the noble's illegal dealings with a smuggling ring. Henchmen patrol the grounds at regular intervals, and there are several doors and windows on the ground floor, as well as a door leading into a cellar.

Most surprisingly, this method doesn't predetermine details beyond the players' goals. Instead, it provides an open-ended framework that allows them to make decisions that truly impact the plot's direction. Maybe after observing the henchmen for a time, they discover a pattern that will enable them to sneak into the manor undetected. Perhaps they disguise themselves as servants and slip through one of the doors. Or do the players just channel their inner murderhobo and kill everyone in their path?

This method has endless possibilities due to the players' allowed creative freedom. For one, this enables them to make decisions that truly impact the plot's direction. For another, the GM is taking a more reactive stance to events as they happen, which allows more opportunities to adjust to events and the players' unexpected choices—make no mistake, they will make choices no sane person would ever predict!

WHICH GAME MASTER SHOULD YOU BE?

Both author and player GMs direct the game's plot, but the approaches are extremely different. On the one hand, you have a rigorous story laid out and ready to be admired; on the other, you are supplied with only a barebones skeleton to introduce

the situation; everything else comes together as it happens. Between the author and player GM approach, which one provides the best quality experience?

The answer is simple: the player GM.

As GMs, it's our goal to develop an interesting situation that engages players in its development, and the best way to do this is to let player choices be impactful and have a purpose. Think back to the earlier examples of how one might prepare a plot. Between the two of them, which sounds like more fun for all members?

Forcing a predetermined narrative isn't conducive to building a collaborative storytelling experience. As the plot's director, you may feel that the only way to preserve the storyline's integrity is to fill the plot with outcomes that will happen despite player choices. This prevents your players from derailing the campaign with a poor decision. Simultaneously, it reduces your players to "guests" acting out the roles you've prepared for them, letting them watch every masterful plot thread as your story's tapestry unfolds and weaves into the main narrative.

The bottom line is this: Tabletop gaming is a collaborative story experience. The GM shouldn't dictate the only solution but guide players to find their own answers—which, in many cases, are much more interesting than the ones initially expected! This concept is critical to player agency, which we'll discuss in greater detail later in this book. The quick version is that while the GM develops the situations for the players, they must allow the players to choose how they respond.

STORIES HAVE A PURPOSE

This isn't to say that you should avoid an author GM's process at all costs. This plot development style does have a place, just not at the game table. If you have a masterfully developed plot that you want to develop, go for it! However, ask yourself, "Which medium is ideal for this: a tabletop RPG or a novel?"

This is a critical question to ask yourself because there is a danger of becoming too attached to the narrative you wish to tell. We'll discuss it more in-depth later, but the risk of the game becoming a railroad that relies on specific choices being made—in short, a loss of player agency—is significantly heightened with a predefined plot from beginning to end.

That said, there is a market for a hybrid approach to RPG gaming and books. Many people are avid fans of book adventures that allow them to interact with specific choices to develop the story. These “Choose Your Own Adventure” books were particularly popular during the ‘80s, ‘90s, and early 2000s, bridging the gap between video games and print media’s rising popularity and offering a structured freedom to determine the narrative’s outcome.

In fact, some players and GMs choose to turn their campaigns into a book, video, or other forms of media for others to enjoy! Once the story is complete, there’s no reason you can’t put what you and your players have created into print, especially if you take good notes throughout the campaign. (We’ll elaborate on how to stay organized in Chapter 11!)

While these books do have a place, as the GM, you aren’t looking to create a story; it’s a secondary element created during the game and informed by the players’ choices. At their core, these choices form a roleplaying game’s plot. The difference is that the plot is developed through collaborative storytelling with your players in a way that creates fun for everyone involved. The GM may be the architect of the idea, but the players determine how to build it.

MOVING FORWARD

We’ve thoroughly explored what it means to play a roleplaying game rather than tell a story and discussed what the GM should be doing and how they should be involved in the game’s resulting story. However, what *is* a GM? Do they simply get to decide all the outcomes? Or is there more to it? In the next chapter, we’ll discuss at length what makes someone a GM.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Types of Game Masters. We discussed in broad generalities two types of game masters: those who act as authors and those who act as players. We differentiated between the two by the way they approach their goals as a game master and, more specifically, how they curate the story that is found within the game, with author game masters placing the story first and player game masters placing the game first.

Desirable Traits. We discussed what traits are generally most desirable from game masters and came to the conclusion that acting more like a player is generally preferable. It avoids the core pitfalls of placing the story first and instead places the game above everything else. Finally, it hits on the core idea of tabletop games: it is a *collaborative* story experience.

Stories Have a Place. In the end, we want to strongly emphasize that there is a place for stories and that creative process. Generally, it's not going to be as the core way you design your campaign, but instead, thought about as the product of what you create with your players.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What's the difference between a story and a game to you?

Do you ever plan that certain events must happen, no matter what?



CHAPTER 3: WHAT IS A GAME MASTER?

Game master—this term has sat just beneath the surface these last few chapters, but it has yet to break through into the open air. Addressing this distinctive title was inevitable, especially since we have thoroughly intertwined it with the points discussed and everything thereafter. For that matter, it's also the central component in the title of this book, further cementing its importance to every element within.

Whether referred to as the game master (GM) or by another name, their fingerprints are left all over the game. More than anyone, GMs shape their group's tabletop world and define RPGs. Although there are far fewer GMs than players, they are truly iconic figures—even those unfortunate people who have never even purchased a set of dice, let alone played a TTG, can still recognize a GM at their table. They are integral to TTRPGs, working closely with players to experience the story as it develops. We've touched very lightly on what GMs do for the game, yet we've not explained their role during play. So, it's worth asking ourselves: What is a GM?

GAME MASTERS RUN THE GAME

If all the players had a copy of the game rules and did whatever they desired, utter mayhem would ensue. For instance, while one player defends a settlement from monsters, another goes off to seek treasure in dragon caves, and a third spends their time in a tavern. Everything becomes unrestrained chaos without focus when no one provides feedback on their actions.

This is where the GM steps in. They are the player within the group responsible for adding structure to the session and running the game. Whether drawing from a module or an original idea, the GM prepares the scenario and presents it to the rest of the players. However, the GM's duties don't end there. Besides the preparations, they actively engage with the rest of the group at every step, interpret rules, develop the game world, and ensure the tone and atmosphere provide a fun experience for the players.

Beyond getting the game ready, the GM has many active tasks on their plate throughout each session. It's no exaggeration to state that a GM balances dozens of spinning plates simultaneously and bears the bulk of the responsibility for the game. They have to play every character in the game world aside from those that the players control; usually, this means that out of the millions of inhabitants in any

given world, the GM is responsible for all but five. They're the ultimate arbiter of the rules with no authority above them—not even those who designed the rules to begin with. Realistically, they have unmatched power within the game world.

This is why merch defines GMs almost everywhere as “literally god” and why popular figures such as Puffin Forest describe GMs as being “so powerful, you don’t have stats.” Despite this, a GM does more than just direct everything that happens in the game.

GAME MASTERS ARE PLAYERS

If we had to choose one of the most critical takeaways from the last section, it would be this: The GM is a player within the group. They still get to roll dice, hang out with their friends, and enjoy the game. They’re not relegated to another place or forced away from doing what they love. This is rarely enumerated so transparently; instead, it’s a permanent part of the role’s core definition. This critical concept is fundamental to defining what a GM is in TTRPGs. It’s also at the center of what brings GMs back to the table session after session—the joy of the game for everyone at the table.

That said, it’s true that the GM is involved in many extra tasks beyond the other players. If they weren’t, this book would be wholly unnecessary. However, they sit at the same table (or virtual tabletop) as everyone else. They are still participating in the events that unfold. They’re just a unique type of player with more responsibilities.

While most players at the table will control a few characters (usually their main character), the GM portrays every other character in the world. There are some exceptions to this, like a sidekick controlled during combat by players, yet not during roleplay situations; however, the GM generally manages everyone else in the game, from friendly NPCs to threatening monsters.

It’s also pertinent to clarify that although the GM portrays antagonists in the game world, they don’t seek to “beat” the players. Some GMs with competitive board game experience may think there needs to be a winner and a loser. This is incorrect in collaborative tabletop gaming, and the idea of “player vs. game master” contradicts this type of gameplay. We should portray our villains as seeking to win while enabling the players to succeed, but we’ll dive deeper into this concept later.

Most importantly, the GM should endeavor to have fun with everyone at the table. You're coming in to play a game; there's little point in playing if you're not having fun! Some people may believe it's the GM's job to ensure the game is enjoyable for everyone, but this is inaccurate. Instead, the GM creates the atmosphere and scenarios that allow everyone to have fun; collectively, the entire group ensures the game is fun.

GAME MASTERS ARE MORE THAN PLAYERS

We have spent some time explaining how a GM is a player. However, we should still clarify how the GM's additional responsibilities elevate them into something more. Essentially, the players invest a special trust in the GM to help bring the game world to life. The GM is responsible for preparing a fantastic world to the best of their abilities to facilitate the game's progress.

Some claim minimal preparation allows for a more organic and natural session, enhancing the game. We'd argue *strongly* against this. While preparing for every eventuality is impossible, having many details like critical events and characters in mind helps us run a better game. This information gives the GM a better idea of the scenario's tone, thus making it easier to maintain.

Knowing these details is also vital to managing the session's pace. The most crucial point is that pace is fluid. If a GM knows the players are supposed to go from Point A to Point B by the end of the session, they can adjust their plans to facilitate that. However, the GM needs to be aware if everyone is enjoying the planned event so they can adapt their prepared notes to ensure everyone's continued fun.

Keeping the spirit of fun is also essential when GMs interpret and apply the game rules to situations during the session. They should be the only playgroup member allowed to modify rules—and only in the spirit of improving the game. Sometimes game systems have less defined gray areas; in other cases, a GM may alter some rules to fix an oversight in the game's design or to make them more enjoyable to enforce. These instances are ideal for adjusting a rule, but other cases may also arise during play requiring this approach.

Of course, that doesn't mean they shouldn't listen to their fellow players when they argue for interpreting the rules a certain way—far from it. A GM balances listening to players to ensure everyone feels heard and keeping the game session moving. However, it's understood that rule changes and interpretations happen at the GM's

discretion and should be used to enhance the group's enjoyment as a whole, never take it away. As a general rule, if a change or additional rule won't *double* the group's fun, then it likely shouldn't be implemented.

By and large, the GM is an essential participant because they wear the most hats. They switch from playing NPCs and monsters to narrating and describing everything, adjudicating rules, and preparing the game in a continuous balancing act. Conversely, the players have one role: showing up ready to play with a character they are familiar with. When they can't make the session, they are the only ones who can't play; if the GM is missing, no one can play.

After reading this, it might sound like a lot is resting on the GM's shoulders—and that's true! Running a session as a GM involves much extra work, and anyone who's watched professional shows like *Critical Role* or *Dimension 20* may find it daunting to match their commitment. However, the advice in upcoming chapters will help you bring the most fun to your game with minimal stress, starting with one of the most critical points.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

As one final thought, since we are discussing what a game master is, it's important to remember that these are just aspects that make a GM what they are. At the end of the day, you are the only one who can determine what it means for you to be a game master. You're going to need to experiment with different aspects of the game, sometimes acting more as a player and sometimes acting as more than that, so you can find what works for you and when. There's no right or wrong answer, only the answer that works for you.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Game Masters Run the Game. Ultimately, the game master is the one that is in charge of the rules. The degree of flexibility in the rules will vary from system to system, but the game master is always the final interpreter of them. That isn't to say you should be dismissive of your players and not listen to them. But in the end, not even the designers of the game can overrule the game master at their own table.

You're Still a Player. This is a point that is often glossed over when it shouldn't be. The game master is still at the table, playing the game. The role is different, and the characters being played are different, but at the end of the day, the game master is still playing the game, rolling dice, and having fun with everyone else. Bonus points if there are snacks available.

Your Role is Unique. Even though the game master is still a player, the uniqueness of their role should not and cannot be forgotten. The game master prepares the game in whatever detail is needed for their session (though we encourage always preparing SOMETHING!), ensures that everything continues moving, and adjudicates rules. In short, while every player is valuable, the game master is essential.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What does it mean to you to be a game master?

What hats do you enjoy wearing at the table? Which do you not enjoy?



CHAPTER 4: BE YOUR OWN GAME MASTER

Unfortunately, the following scenario is not fiction, and it happens too often. Somewhere, a GM folds up their screen, puts away their dice, and lets out a heavy sigh. They wonder to themselves why they even bother; after all, they can't possibly compete with the sorts of GMs people ogle during their live shows online. There must be no point if they can't come up with a hundred different voices on the spot or get accolades as though they're a professional voice actor. Why even bother if you can't stack up to the very best?

It's not uncommon for GMs to suffer from a case of imposter syndrome from time to time. With everything that goes into preparing a session, let alone running it, concerns about how the players are receiving the game can wriggle into our minds. Sometimes it's caused not just by our internal doubts but also by our players' feedback if the game doesn't live up to the quality standards they've set after watching professional streams of TTGs.

If you or your players have had these feelings, you are likely experiencing something colloquially called the "Matt Mercer Effect."

THE MATT MERCER EFFECT

The term "Matt Mercer Effect" may sound familiar because it includes the name of a prominent tabletop GM from *Critical Role*. Its name originates from players entering tabletop gaming with the false expectations that their GM would approach things like the professional GM they've watched. It creates an impossible standard to meet since few GMs have all the advantages that those of *Critical Role* enjoy—advantages that have led to their success but are not necessary for the at-home GM.

Overall, this has led to GMs complaining about players, who are complaining about the game not being run the same way as famous GMs. Because these online shows gather such large followings and create larger-than-life personas, many believe it represents what should be expected. The Effect began with player expectations, but it has since evolved; today, some GMs believe they must emulate professional production quality.

One thing must be absolutely clear regarding this Effect: Not a single scrap of the blame belongs to Matt Mercer. His style of running the game is singular to him, and he probably never intended that others follow in his footsteps. Further, his

players deserve equal credit; there wouldn't be a Matt Mercer without a Sam Riegel or a Laura Bailey. And even beyond that, a massive, dedicated crew has made that game's success their full-time job. That this term bears his or anybody's name is unfortunate and distasteful, but it's become engrained within common parlance due to *Critical Role*'s explosive popularity.

Also, in all fairness, it's not just Matt Mercer. Many professional GMs contribute to this situation. Brennan Lee Mulligan of *Dimension 20*, *High Rollers*' Mark Hulmes, and countless other GMs have cultivated a following through their shows. In fact, much like the everlasting debate over Kirk or Picard, there's equal debate as to who is the best professional GM. There are solid arguments on all sides, but it's an utterly meaningless debate. With this in mind, a more ideal name would be the "Pro GM Effect." Because of this, we try to avoid calling it the "Matt Mercer Effect" whenever possible.

Regardless of what it's called, the Effect boils down to the simple act of a tabletop group attempting to mirror the professional GMs' efforts at their own tables. Extravagant sets, intricate miniatures, immersive audio and lighting, in-depth characters with unique voices—whatever catches a player or GM's imagination initially, they expect to see it at their tables.

However, approaching tabletop gaming with this mindset changes our hobby from an enjoyable escape into a TV production. If a new player comes into our hobby with the perspective that every GM is supposed to host a show like their favorite professional GM or that the game will unfold like their favorite show, they will be disappointed. The fundamental difference is that professional shows are designed to entertain the audience, while most GMs focus solely on enabling a fun experience for their players.

The good news is that there is a way to combat the Effect in our games: communication. Being open about how you run your game and what everyone should expect goes a long way to preventing unattainable expectations. If we communicate with our players beforehand, we ensure that everyone comes to the table with a realistic idea of how to have fun when the game begins.

JUST TO REITERATE

Just to reiterate our point above, we are in absolutely no way disparaging nor blaming Matt Mercer or any other professional GM for the public having a skewed

perception. The games they run are wonderfully entertaining, and they are experts at the craft. More than that, their games are designed to pull the audience in and keep their attention. . . basically, their goals are different from those of most home games. To blame them for the public's expectations of people who have nothing to do with Matt Mercer or any other professional game master is simply unreasonable.

WHAT SHOULD YOU TAKE AWAY FROM FAMOUS GAME MASTERS?

Now, this is not to say that you should cut anything from your game that even remotely resembles an element from these professional shows; aside from lofty expectations, they develop a lot of exciting ideas and techniques. At the end of the day, the GMs you see on these popular shows are still masters of their craft and excellent resources. If you have observed something in particular and thought it was a brilliant concept, you should feel free to add it to your game.

This doesn't even have to be restricted to how the GM runs their game. Some professional shows like *Critical Role* have published multiple books that dive into the lore and setting, which are excellent sources of inspiration. Particularly for tables that are heavily inspired by or look up to these GMs, players, and shows, it can be quite exciting to play a campaign in the same world they do!

Did a GM introduce an NPC that would be fun for your players to interact with? Or did a magic item the GM created spark your imagination? Feel free to add them to your own game! There is no reason in the world that you can't use what you see on those shows and adapt it into your games; in fact, based on how most of them talk about it, they would probably feel honored if you did!

The main caveat we would add is that it's the GM's responsibility to find a way to incorporate ideas organically. Just because these shows use a rule or technique, it doesn't make that the definitive way to apply it, and you, as the GM, shouldn't be afraid to experiment!

That said, sometimes these additions, while a perfect fit in the source campaign, aren't ideal for your own because they impact gameplay balance or don't mesh with your setting—that's to be expected. What works at one table may work differently at another. If it doesn't enhance the gameplay, don't be afraid to stop using what you've borrowed, or feel free to modify the ideas to make them mesh better with your table. Remember: What they have designed and what they do is about entertainment; by and large, the game comes secondary to entertainment.

WHAT SHOULD YOU *NOT* TAKE AWAY FROM FAMOUS GAME MASTERS?

While some elements that famous GMs employ can be great additions to your table, many others are less helpful. Many of the things these GMs do will immerse the players—and, by proxy, the audience they stream for—deeper into the game. And while this is effective, that doesn’t mean your table will benefit from them.

Professional GMs often incorporate unique voices in their characters’ interactions. Only some people feel comfortable doing this, though, and it’s by no means required; everyone at the table will still have fun even if you voice every character the same. However, these can be a fun addition to a game, as it provides flavor to each NPC the players encounter. Therefore, if you want to include unique voices because you enjoy it and not just because you saw someone else do it, go ahead and add some spice to your character portrayals!

Similarly, professional GMs stream their games for others to watch, often creating a lavish production for show. After seeing this, you may feel drawn to build your own audience by putting on a grand show. However, at what point does this evolve beyond building an enjoyable story with your fellow players into crafting something the audiences will tune into? While this is always an option if you and your table want to pursue it, this should only be the goal if everyone wants to and not because you feel it’s expected.

The crucial thing to recognize is that the GM and the players use the above factors to immerse the players and audience. For your games, these aren’t requirements for a good time, and they may impede your table’s enjoyment. Before you feel compelled to incorporate any of these elements into your game, it’s critical that you recognize if you’re pursuing them because you think your game will benefit . . . or because you saw another GM doing it. And even more so, never feel as though you’re obligated to try to act or deliver a performance like a professional GM. As we’ve said, they have substantial production teams of competent professionals whose only job is facilitating their shows’ success. It’s not a sustainable possibility for most GMs—no matter how talented they may be.

BE INSPIRED, DON’T IMPERSONATE

Once all the dice are rolled, the most integral point to take to heart is that you are your own GM. No matter how often you watch others run a game in a stream, you run your table. How you and your tabletop group play the game will be your

own, and you should feel free to develop a personalized method to run the game independent of influencers.

Professional GMs like Matt Mercer and Brennan Lee Mulligan have a singular style that belongs to them, which may not be compatible with your approach. They are wonders to behold and deserve all the respect and accolades they receive for the fantastic games and shows they run. Nevertheless, one must remember that their style is their own, and support from many other dedicated and equally talented people has helped them on their way to success. These wonderful games are video productions to be *watched* for mass audiences' consumption, whereas your amazing table hosts a dynamic game to be *played* for your and your players' unique enjoyment.

While drawing aspects from their performance as inspiration may be helpful, realize that not everything they do will work the same for you. And that's okay! Taking inspiration from others and understanding what will and won't work for your particular style is a skill all its own and one that has incredibly understated value. Once you can do this, you free yourself to become something truly extraordinary: a GM with a table of your own.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Matt Mercer Effect. This is a poorly named term that assigns blame for a problem to the wrong person. Matt Mercer may be iconic in his role as a game master, along with many other amazing professional game masters, and there are many things you can learn by watching them. However, the belief that all game masters should be like them and that their games are inferior if they aren't is an unrealistic expectation, and assigning blame for this to Matt Mercer is equally incorrect.

You Can Learn from Them! The truth is, there's a reason that people like Matt Mercer are so successful. Yes, part of that is because they have unique talents. And part of it is also that they have a fantastic team with them. But they're also skilled game masters that are worth watching and observing.

Be Careful. While there is much to learn from professional game masters, there is still a risk of taking things to heart that you shouldn't. Remember, professional game masters like Matt Mercer are putting on a show for an audience, which is generally not what most game masters are trying to do.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Have you suffered from the Matt Mercer Effect? What did it do to your games?

What do you feel you can learn from professional game masters? What do you feel you shouldn't?



CHAPTER 5: WHY SHOULD YOU BE A GAME MASTER?

You've erected the screen, shielding your top-secret notes from prying eyes. Miniatures form rank upon rank atop shelves around the room, their resin forms awaiting your command to enter battle. The dice have been tested and separated, the worthiest arranged before you, while the most wicked are locked in prison to rethink their traitorous rolls. Character sheets, fresh from the printer, lay before your players as they take their seats and eagerly wait for you to set the scene.

It's a new dawn, the start of a new challenge, and your heart is racing. You may be thinking, "What have I gotten myself into?" You may even be about to pass out from anxiety. Questions about whether you've prepped enough, whether you're ready, and a million other things are probably flying by at a million miles per hour. However, everyone at the table looks to you and admires your courage for taking on the task when nobody else would.

Running a game at your table for players can be exhilarating and, in many cases, more exciting than experiencing the events as a player. But why should you take it upon yourself to be the GM of your group? Whether you've undertaken this great task on your own or had it thrust upon you, there are many reasons to be excited about the opportunity.

YOU ARE THE HEART OF THE HOBBY

Participating in game systems that don't require GMs is possible. Most of these games fall into two camps: collective storytelling directed by the game's prompts or dungeon crawls that are limited to core mechanics without creative flexibility, which can be fun in their own right. They allow a player to dip their toes into tabletop gaming for the first time with little required (in fact, they may not even need other players!). It's a very easy, very soft introduction that relies on nothing more than a desire to give it a try.

However, these are outliers in the gaming space. The hobby was born when a bunch of friends wanted to turn the war games they enjoyed into something else, which required somebody to act as the arbiter of the rules. Most TTRPGs require a GM to run the game, making it vital to have one at the table.

Of the players, the GM is the authority on how to run the game. They adjudicate the rules and determine the outcomes of player actions. The scenario they prepare and present to the players guides everyone's game experience, especially if it's a homebrew creation of the GM's devising.

But beyond these tacit tasks, the GM is also the group's de facto leader. Whether the group officially recognizes this is often irrelevant; the GM's involvement in so many aspects makes them the go-to person to make overall decisions for the group, such as the session schedule and who to invite to the table. This is in no way a detriment to being a GM—far from it! Instead, it's an empowering opportunity that helps you manage the group in a way that makes it easier to maximize everyone's fun.

In short, as the GM, you form the cornerstone of nearly every gaming group. In many ways, you're the glue that holds the game, the group, and even the hobby together. This truth is never to be overlooked—quite the contrary. Every GM should wear it proudly!

GMs ARE ALWAYS IN DEMAND

Because of the GM's additional involvement in the game, it's normal for most people to be less keen to take on the extra responsibilities. However, for those willing to take up the mantle and run games, the rewards are endless. One could say that players will always have a much harder time finding a game to play than GMs will in finding a group. Given that many GMs run more than one game at a time, it wouldn't be unreasonable to estimate that there are at least five times as many players as there are GMs. There are likely even more if we only include those who run ongoing campaigns instead of the occasional one-shot.

Now, because of that disparity, there's never a lack of players seeking new ways to play within our hobby—in fact, with tabletop gaming becoming increasingly mainstream, their number is growing. There are hundreds of thousands or even millions of people out there watching clips and shots of people playing TTGs and deciding to give it a go.

Because of the overwhelming number of players seeking games, there has never been a better time for new GMs to step up. An everlasting demand is only growing over time, and that trend doesn't seem to be slowing down.

That said, deciding to become a GM is often the first, most challenging step, but the second can seem just as daunting: finding a group to play with. It's certainly more straightforward for a GM to find players than the other way around, but they still need to find a group. Luckily, this process has become considerably more manageable in recent years. Countless sites and LFG ("Looking For Group") forums now exist with the expressed intention of helping match GMs with players or vice versa. Physical game stores also often provide opportunities for tabletop gamers to establish session schedules and even play on their premises. The more popular the game system, the easier this process becomes.

You Can Play When You Want

With how convenient it is to form a group now, it's significantly more likely that you can find a group in person or online and be ready to play immediately. However, the high number of players in our tabletop gaming circle also allows more freedom for the GM to determine the cadence of their games. Ultimately, where, when, and how you play depend on your preference, which is one reason many players transition into the role of GMs.

In fact, beyond just having the flexibility available if you want it, we strongly encourage you to make full use of it! It's often said, quite accurately, that scheduling is the ultimate challenge for any TTG. Trying to find a time that accommodates everyone is often nearly impossible. This is becoming truer every day as people's lives become busier, work becomes time-consuming, and in general, society speeds up. By declaring a game schedule and looking for players that can play then, you get a group that can play when you do.

Does the players' availability matter in this? Only if there are specific people that you want to play with. This is why having some flexibility is encouraged; often, you'll want at least one or two specific people in the group you're running. It's only natural; TTGs are enjoyed among friends. By leaving a little wiggle room, you give yourself the best of both worlds. Always remember that your schedule has to come first; after all, without you, there is no game.

That said, if you're open to gaming with anyone and everyone, then only your schedule truly matters. The laws of supply and demand hold true even in tabletop gaming; because GMs are scarce and nearly all games require one, the market allows you to decide when or if a game is happening.

UNFETTERED CREATIVITY

Perhaps one of the best reasons to become a GM is to have control over the game. In a homebrew game where the GM crafts everything from scratch, the GM has complete freedom to develop the scenarios entirely or base them on other sources. Your creativity is limited only by what you decide are the boundaries of imagination.

The freedom to craft, create, and concoct anything you want is an incredible feeling, only surpassed by the joy of watching the players you have made the session for erupt into cheers and laughter because they enjoyed your creativity. We could go on about this for many pages—likely enough to fill the rest of this book—but in reality, words alone fall far short of the actual feeling.

This holds true even when running a module or prewritten adventure. In these instances, the author has already created the scenarios and details that help you run the game. But this doesn't restrict a GM from adjusting things as needed. If there are monsters or other items you feel are a better fit for your scenario, feel free to bring them into your plan as needed.

Indeed, many of the best and most enjoyable games originate from a prewritten adventure that inspires the GM to turn it into something all their own. The GM might even use the “bones” of the adventure as written and insert their own devices, making it entirely unique.

But even more liberating is that a GM can apply their creativity whenever they want. There are countless NPCs, organizations, traps, puzzles, and more that they can develop, even when the game isn't running. In essence, this means that the GM can play whenever and wherever they like through their preparations.

LET YOURSELF GIVE IT A CHANCE

In all honesty, there is one main reason why GMs exist in our hobby: We genuinely enjoy it. Despite all the blood, sweat, and tears we shed pursuing our hobby (some of it literally), it's a rewarding yet challenging experience. Most of us wouldn't trade it for anything, and it's something that helps us get up in the morning and drives us through the day. If nothing else, many of us enjoy the humble reprieve it offers when we can let all our other life problems fall to the wayside and just focus on what makes us happy.

Does everything involved with being a GM sound daunting if it's your first step on this path? Beyond a doubt, yes! But it's crucial to remember that even the most perfect GM has started just where you are. Everyone who steps up to their first game-mastering role does so without experience. Even those running their 6th, 50th, or even 100th session might feel there is far more to learn.

Whatever our skill level as GMs, numerous resources are available to help us refine our skills. Even the most experienced expert GMs still seek ideas, inspiration, and help where and when they can. Draw from the tabletop community and the countless GMs who can share pearls of wisdom with you. Watch actual plays for ideas and inspiration. And if you're ready to begin (or continue) your journey to becoming a GM, we invite you to turn the page and read on.

FINAL THOUGHTS

If you're on the fence, have been thinking about becoming a GM, or have a faint inkling you might enjoy it, we encourage you to give it a shot! It's a rewarding experience but one that you need to experience for yourself to truly understand. While we can muster great flowery detail to describe how amazing GMing actually is, it's impossible for us to do it justice. However, fair warning: Most who get a taste for the role behind the screen rarely want to stop . . .

KEY TAKEAWAYS

You Are the Heart of the Hobby. Look, at the end of the day, game masters are the heart of the hobby. There are few game systems out there that do not require a game master. Even as we go into a time where AI has increasingly powerful capabilities, game masters are still going to be essential. Without game masters, there would be no games.

You Are Always in Demand. Game masters are always in demand. For every one game master, there are half a dozen or more players looking for a game to play in. The simple truth of the matter is that there are always going to be more players than game masters, so game masters will never have a hard time playing when they want to.

Giving It a Chance. Ultimately, game mastering is a passion. It opens doors to interact with the hobby and lets you have unlimited creativity in doing so. It's also a lot of work. In the end, there's no real way to know if you will enjoy it or not without giving it a chance. And if you're anything like us, you'll have the time of your life when you get behind that screen.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Why do you want to be a game master?

Are there any reasons you don't want to be a game master?

If there are, is there anything you can do to lessen them?



• PART 2 •

INTRODUCTION

“You all creep deeper down the dungeon’s corridor,” the game master says, shifting their gaze to meet each player’s eyes as they wait with bated breath, “your nostrils stinging with the coppery stink of fresh blood. Through the open archway, you hear a haunting chant echoed by multiple voices.”

The Paladin clears their throat. “Would I be able to recognize what the intention of the chant is? Like, is it for a dark ritual or just a typical religious service?”

The game master hesitates. *Technically this would be Arcana because of the nature of the ritual . . . but Religion would be more to the Paladin’s strengths.* “Go ahead and roll a Religion check.”

Paladin rolls a die, and everyone groans as it comes to rest on a two. “That’s a nine, so probably not,” the Paladin grumbles, and the game master nods sympathetically.

“I would like to move ahead of everyone else stealthily,” the Rogue says. The game master nods; there’s a pause as the die is rolled. “That’s an 18.”

The game master consults a stat block; the tension filling the momentary pause is palpable. “You inch forward to the opening . . . and as you reach the doorway—”

“I’d also like to approach and see who is chanting,” the Cleric pipes up. “I’m not going to bother being stealthy. They probably already know we’re here.”

Huh . . . well, they’ll definitely know you’re there now. “As you reach the doorway, you peer into the darkness. Cleric, give me a Perception check to see if you can make out what is happening—with disadvantage since you don’t have darkvision.”

Two dice clatter in the tray, and the Cleric groans. “Come on! That’s a natural one.”

Okay, now let's tie that into the lack of stealth. "When you reach the doorway, Cleric, you manage to kick a stone loose as you try to peer into the dim room. Before you get a look at the arcane symbols, the lead cultist whirls to face you, their filed teeth bared in a triumphant snarl."

"Wait a minute," the Rogue says, mouth dropping. "Are they summoning a demon?" "It can't be," the Cleric assures the others. "This cult isn't nearly powerful enough to reach one of the Hells."

The game master holds up a finger. "You don't know because you didn't see it clearly enough. 'You're too late, adventurers,' the cultist tells you. 'The ritual is already complete.' He raises his hand triumphantly. At that moment, a flash of blinding light steals your vision, and searing heat blazes across your face. The heat dies away, and towering over the gathered cultists looms a red-skinned devil. Massive leathery wings unfurl as it throws back its head and roars in exultation. Then its horned head lowers, and where eyes should be, two pinpricks of blazing fire stare at you."

Picking up the pit fiend mini, the game master places it on the table in front of everyone. Pandemonium breaks out as everyone freaks out. "What!" the Paladin exclaims at the same time the Cleric shouts, "No!" The Rogue groans, "Oh, we are so dead!"

No longer trying to contain their satisfaction, the game master takes a deep breath. "Roll initiative."

* * *

A great GM has many tasks to consider during a session. Snap decisions, rebalancing originally planned elements, determining the successes and failures of actions, portraying NPCs, describing the setting—the list goes on! In the upcoming chapters, we'll share specifics about a GM's role at the table.



CHAPTER 6: THE GAME MASTER'S ROLE AT THE TABLE

Becoming a GM is often a multi-step journey that follows a logical process. A GM's first step is deciding to take on this mantle. The second is just as essential and often develops with experience and practice: finding your signature game-mastering style and determining your approach to managing your game table.

ESTABLISHING YOUR GAME MASTER IDENTITY

There are many examples of various play styles and how GMs approach their games. Some choose to present their world with intricate narratives, providing as much detail as possible. Others may keep their descriptions to a minimum and focus on adjudicating the players' actions. More often than not, GMs usually take a middle road, finding a balance between both approaches.

With so many influences and styles available, it's easy to get lost as to which method you should pursue. However, just because someone else has a specific style, it doesn't mean it needs to be *yours*. Wherever you are most comfortable and feel you can be the best GM possible, that's perfectly fine; one thing that becomes clear is that there's no one correct way to do something, just *your way*.

Along with choosing the ideal method to establish your style, something else a GM will need to do is ensure everyone at the table understands your role. Primarily, this means understanding that the GM is the ultimate arbiter of the game's rules. While this doesn't signify our decisions are always correct—while our power extends to godhood in managing games, we are undeniably human—everyone must acknowledge and accept these decisions as final.

This doesn't mean there should be no recourse for addressing questions or problematic rulings; it's vital that we ensure this is a simple process for players during and after the game. During the game, a more expedient ruling is ideal for maintaining pace, but deeper discussions after the session should provide ways for more conversations—or corrections if needed. Players need to respect rulings at the table in the meantime.

Similarly, the GM needs to respect player agency at the table. This means players have complete autonomy when controlling their characters during sessions. GMs should, under only extreme circumstances, take away a player's ability to make

decisions about their characters. This is crucial to keeping a clear divide in everyone's roles at the table—we have all the other characters and monsters under our control. In contrast, our players are responsible only for their specific character.

RESPONSIBILITIES AT THE TABLE

Once the players establish these concepts, everyone's responsibilities at the table become much clearer. The party expects the GM to prepare the game everyone will experience, including the adventures, world, and other characters that the players will interact with (all of which will be covered more in-depth in the second part of this book). In addition, we interpret the rules to help arbitrate, not dictate, the game's events. These are the core aspects that GMs need to focus on.

This also means you don't need to know every detail about the players' characters or abilities. While you should have a general understanding to ensure their actions make sense, preparing and running their player character is something they need to handle. There are exceptions to this: In prepared one-shots, it sometimes makes sense to have pre-made characters on hand for everyone to use.

Most importantly, just because you manage the session, it doesn't make it your responsibility to provide snacks and pizza for everyone. This must be handled by the players—how else can they bribe us for better rulings during the game? But in all seriousness, it's an excellent idea to share these game night duties with others if they're willing to contribute toward the evening's fun—that's why we're here.

Everyone is responsible for fun and enjoyment at the table elicit. This means everyone needs to show up to the actual game. While the GM is integral to having a game to play, it's a little hard to do so without players. We're all working toward building the story of the game together. To achieve that, we must ensure everyone, player or GM, is doing their part to develop the story.

GAME MASTER Vs. PLAYER MENTALITY

One pitfall that GMs may fall into is accepting the idea that there are opposite sides in the game. This often takes the form of expecting a GM to utterly destroy and beat players. However, anyone who approaches these games with this mindset is focusing on a toxic form of gameplay unaligned with the hobby's spirit.

It's important to clarify that this differs from roleplaying realistic villains. A GM should strive to portray intelligent and victory-driven foes and operate the monsters

and NPCs involved in ways that lead to the villain's victory. This goal-driven roleplaying isn't malicious. What would be malicious is creating a scenario wherein the GM establishes an unfair situation that allows them to destroy their players and, therefore, beat them.

The GM versus player mentality could have originated from a few different sources. On the one hand, video games have created an expectation of either crushing all foes or being crushed by superior enemies; on the other, it could also be as benign as experiences in competitive board games where the goal is to win. No matter the cause, a combative relationship between players and the GM is exceptionally unhealthy and affects the game overall.

A game with this approach quickly loses all traces of fun, making it less enjoyable for everyone at the table. Gone is the camaraderie of developing a collaborative narrative; instead, each turn is a grind with no hope for victory. This frustrates players who try to succeed in the presented situation but can't because the GM makes it impossible. These issues and the ideas that spawned them are all examples of toxic game mastering.

The ripple effect from an experience with this kind of mentality can affect players and GMs long after the incident. Some players may leave the hobby after such a campaign, traumatized by the negative experience and leery of trying again. GMs guilty of this approach will quickly find themselves sidelined and without games to play, which is why one must recognize the signs early to take preventive action.

How Does This Mentality Manifest?

GMs seeking to win often assume a few specific forms. One of the most common is developing an encounter that's too difficult for players to expect to overcome at their current level. When faced by a GM who, using their god-like powers of creation that exceed the limits of any stat block, drops a nigh-invincible foe into the midst of player characters who have only achieved a few levels and who cannot flee because the doors have locked behind them . . . there is no question about the GM's *intent*.

This last word is a crucial distinction when studying this topic. Having a challenging encounter is different from intentionally creating something unwinnable. This is acceptable in plenty of circumstances, such as players wandering into an area they shouldn't or choosing to antagonize a considerably more powerful foe.

HEALTHY

-  Roleplaying realistic opposition in the game world
-  Encounters are challenging but balanced to PC levels
-  NPCs react realistically and have varied alignments
-  Rolling the dice fairly and letting fate take its course

UNHEALTHY

-  Fudging dice rolls purely to beat the PCs
-  Skill checks and save DCs are unreasonably impossible
-  GM enjoys creating TPK scenarios to kill off PCs
-  Creating unusually hostile NPCs to antagonize the PCs

It's also possible the GM miscalculated how dangerous such a combat would be to the players' survival. The main differentiator between these cases and toxic GMing is the intent behind such an encounter and whether the GM means to be unfair to the players.

Another way this adversarial mentality manifests is through unfair rulings or fudged rolls. Suppose the GM continually judges a player's recommended actions as impossible or sets ridiculous checks to overcome; in that case, the player will eventually stop participating. For that matter, if a GM rolls for something and changes the die's result, it creates an immediate disparity between them and the players. Both actions can foster resentment if players feel deceived or unable to contribute to the game, severely affecting table morale.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT THIS?

The most crucial step a GM can take to combat a "GM vs. Player" mentality is to recognize its negative effect at your table. Once you realize it exists in your game, ask yourself this simple question: If you were sitting on the other side of the screen, would you find the game fun?

If the answer is no, then you should reevaluate your approach. Your goal as the GM is to facilitate a collaborative game that further develops the players' characters. Rather than seeking to tear the player characters apart, challenge them and build them up so their successes shine. In the end, you should be the characters' biggest fan, and their triumphs are a victory for the entire table.

One of the most common places that GMs may misstep in terms of game balance is combat. As a result, players in these games miss opportunities for victories. Most systems have guidelines for balancing this aspect of the game, and the suggestions provide a template to follow. Granted, the rules for creating encounters may only work in some situations, but you should be able to use them as a template before laying out how you plan to approach balancing the game. This will help identify if you're consistently making mistakes in your method, which is possible since GMs are indeed human.

When considering if human error is the culprit in the process, as can happen in combat or restrictive judgments during play, it's always best to err on the player's side when in doubt. If there is even a sliver of doubt that your decision or the battle is unfair for the players, open yourself to supporting their endeavors to succeed

instead. This doesn't mean you should always seek to minimize their risks; if it's unclear if something is fair, approach it from the players' side.

However, one key element of running the game and maintaining fairness is to adhere to a golden rule: You may adjust anything else in the game as needed for balance, but the random dice results should stand. It may be tempting to pretend a roll came out differently to change an outcome, but the GM shouldn't affect the dice, just as a player shouldn't affect their rolls.

Yes, not changing the dice rolls might make combat or situations more difficult than expected, even after taking some of the balancing measures suggested above. But in this case, that's okay. A GM can adjust an encounter on the fly in many other ways—modifying hit points, delaying the arrival of reinforcements, or other such levers. You shouldn't need to manipulate the only genuinely random facet of the game. Not to mention, if you never fudge your dice rolls, you never have to be concerned about your players catching you in the act and forever cheapening their experience at the table.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

GMs and players can mitigate many issues by adopting a social contract for their games. This is usually an informal agreement between everyone before sitting down to play, though sometimes it can be formally articulated and managed.

Most social contracts lay out a set of detailed expectations regarding game conduct. At its core, the agreement should have elements acknowledging that the GM will prepare and run the game. In return, the players will play the game by agreeing not to avoid or intentionally ignore the GM's plot hooks. There may also be some discussion about the GM making final rulings and players abiding by them, with the understanding that, as recommended earlier, they will handle discussions or further adjustments to rulings outside the game.

Some groups might include other elements. They may want to specify limits on conduct depending on the nature of the game, such as establishing boundaries in a campaign with evil player characters. Others may include restrictions on gratuitous language or intra-party romance. The group can often incorporate these additions less formally, but everyone involved should acknowledge them.

However, there's one rule all tables should include universally: It's absolutely unacceptable, in any way, shape, form, or circumstances, to touch someone else's

dice. This heinous crime of table etiquette must result in the player's immediate expulsion from the session, no matter the reason for such a vile act. We must all hold the line on this terrible offense, only providing forgiveness to the offending player if they bring suitable recompense in the form of scrumptious junk food for everyone to enjoy.

All joking aside, regardless of the amount of formality—or lack thereof—involved with the social contract, the group should approach this before or during session 0. Having this discussion together helps ensure everyone is on the same page and allows them to provide feedback on specific types of content that they are or aren't comfortable with *before* it comes up.

This social contract aims to help prevent a situation where a group member feels uncomfortable. Many games now include safety tools that help immediately communicate an issue with content so we can address it. Even if it's a situation never articulated during the original discussion, the social contract should be considered a living agreement that everyone can rely on to make the table a safe and welcoming place. When this pact is prepared and referred to correctly, it's a convenient tool to recall when considering if you have a balanced approach to game-master and player dynamics for everyone's enjoyment. Even if it's not physically present, it's just as important as all the other accouterments needed to run a successful game.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Game Master's Responsibilities. The game master wears many hats at the table, but at the core of everything, the role of a game master is one of responsibility. You are adjudicating rules, playing the NPCs, and narrating the game as the party navigates the adventure. However, that doesn't expand into being responsible for everything at the table. For example, your players are responsible for their characters (though you may check them to make sure they follow the rules!).

Game Master Vs. Player. This is a risky mentality that some game masters fall into. The idea that they're playing against the players. While this is true to a certain extent, the goal of the game master isn't to win. They are simply playing the antagonists, but the general expectation is that the characters will win at the end of the day. This can be a challenge for every game master (especially when the players destroy the super cool encounter in half a second...), but wise game masters take steps to avoid it.

The Social Contract. Every table has a social contract, whether it is spelled out or not. In fact, many only have informal social contracts that govern how the table behaves. However, especially for new groups, it can be helpful to actually discuss the social contract with the entire table. This allows everyone to have proper expectations of what is going to happen and gets everyone on the same page about the game.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Which game master responsibilities do you feel you need to improve? Which ones have you already become skilled at?

What does the social contract at your table sound like?

Is there anything about your social contract that you want to change or clarify with your players?



CHAPTER 7: TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The blacksmith shapes metal with a hammer and tongs; a mechanic returns sleeping motors to running condition with a screwdriver and wrench; artists caress a canvas with brushes, charcoals, or pencils. These professions have specialist tools that clearly define and distinguish them from the crowd. A GM is no different—employing dice, books, maps, tokens or minis, and virtual tabletops throughout their games.

Each of these tools, while individual in their purpose, is designed to be used concurrently with another. Minis look fine on their own, but their true purpose is to be set on a map to indicate character positions during combat. Dice, meanwhile, are designed to be rolled in conjunction with the rules found in the books. It's up to the GM to determine the best tools to make their games as exciting and engaging as possible.

However, the good news about these accessories is that they can often be as simple or complex as you like—simple plastic dice with no adornment work just as well as the most intricate and elaborate designs. An intricate digital or printed map serves the same function as a drawing on a whiteboard or butcher paper. And while some are essential, not all are necessary to run a compelling game, as we explain.

DICE

If you need one thing for your tabletop game, it is dice. These are the quintessential heart of the hobby. It is, beyond a doubt, no exaggeration to specify that these iconic tools immediately come to mind when thinking about tabletop games. With this in mind, most GMs and players make it their mission to gather as many dice as possible. Then look for more. And more. And still even more, until we have enough to roll one for each denizen of a city at once (with many more leftover)!

Maybe you don't need to be a dice goblin or dragon or whatever name we apply to this compulsion to make ourselves feel better about the quantities of dice we possess. However, it's important to remember one thing as we dig through our horde of pretty baubles: We must always choose wisely when selecting the one to roll. After all, the dice gods are malicious, and dice jails exist so we can rehabilitate the ones who betray us and reintegrate them into the rolling queue once they learn to behave.

All joking aside, some points are worth mentioning regarding the dice we use. Not all dice are created equal. Finding a genuinely balanced die is very challenging, whether because they have decorations inside them or their material (usually resin or metal) has imperfections in their design that affect how they roll. While these dice are works of art and pretty to look at, it's important to remember that they have an impact.

In addition, some game systems call for different types of dice whose purposes are outlined in their rulebooks. Many require a complete polyhedral set; others need only a set of six-sided dice, and some feature dice with unique faces with different meanings. In the latter case, the game often provides them in their purchase if it's a physical set. However, if you purchase them digitally or the dice aren't included, these are often standard polyhedral dice with unique faces, and you can substitute regular dice in a pinch.

Books

Including books as an integral tool can be controversial. Like how iconic and essential dice are to the hobby, rulebooks are a core element that you shouldn't overlook. However, completing your library can become expensive with each new book release that needs purchasing. No matter how you approach filling in the gaps in your library, the process can be painful to your pocketbook.

Part of the reason that this might be problematic is the general expectation (or misconception) that the GM, as the member of the group responsible for the game, is supposed to ensure rulebooks are available by providing them to everyone. But there is no reason why the players can't contribute. If a player wants to play a specific adventure at the table, they can provide it. Similarly, if they feel a character option in another book will be an exciting addition, perhaps they should consider purchasing the book so they can include it in the game.

There is no rule written anywhere that the GM needs to be the sole provider of books at the table. The only books that are truly necessary are the core books required to run the game effectively; everything else is optional. Luckily, accessibility is even easier now with online book services, although many still prefer to have physical books on hand. And this is perfectly fine as well since each gaming group has different preferences. Just make sure to share the financial burden with everyone else so the GM doesn't bear the brunt of the cost.

MAPS

Maps are a fantastic way to add a visual for everyone at the table, but they're mainly optional. They can be as simple or complex as the GM likes, making them a dynamic tool that GMs can include at the table if desired. Some tables will sketch the map on paper as players explore a location; others will feature elaborate 3D-printed terrain with intricately detailed features. Virtual tabletops often offer a way to project a map onto a computer or TV screen, which works well for in-person or online gaming.

Any of these map options can help players visualize the areas around them. This is particularly useful during combat, as it allows the players (and GM) to track the location of player characters and foes as the battle progresses. Nevertheless, it's important to remember that maps are optional; the effects that maps provide can also be achieved with simple narrative descriptions, if with a bit more imaginative envisioning by everyone.

MINIS OR TOKENS

When working with maps, most games will also include minis or tokens to represent the various creatures involved in the scene or combat. As with the maps they often come with, there are multiple ways to represent these tokens: They can be as intricate as a full 3D-printed resin figure or as simple as a bottlecap to indicate a specific character.

In addition, there are other options besides standard minis. Online games generally feature different styles, from top-down character depictions to a token with character or monster art. You can also print these tools to represent various creatures. Some companies design pawns (two-sided portraits printed and set on a stand as a 2D character representation) that can work for these same purposes. If all else fails, you can use standard household items just as effectively.

Other reasons exist for these accessories even outside the regular in-game use for physical minis. Curating a mini collection can be an entire side hobby for GMs. In addition to collecting those necessary for the game, people often paint them to create unique and stimulating visuals. Today, hobbyists have much greater access to 3D printers that they can use in their own homes, expanding the opportunities to make personalized minis more attainable.

GM NEEDS

All necessary dice or a digital dice roller

- ◆ You may not need every type of dice in a polyhedral set. There are plenty of free dice rollers online.

Descriptive narration or simple maps

- ◆ Theater of the mind and simple outline maps can work great as long as you describe areas to the players well.

Something to represent creatures and PCs

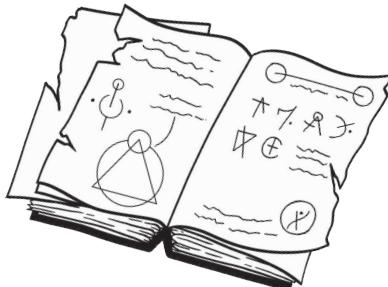
- ◆ Anything can be used as minis! Bottlecaps, erasers, paperclips, and different coins work just as well.

A way to take notes about the campaign

- ◆ You're going to want to track what the PCs are up to.
This can be a simple pencil and a piece of paper.

Core rulebooks

- ◆ Core rulebooks are essential for running the game.
Consider having the players pitch in if needed!



GM WANTS

Massive hoard of dice

- ◆ Most GMs only need one full set of dice, but it's nice to have multiple of some types like the d20 and d6.

Elaborate maps

- ◆ Upgraded maps can help the players visualize what is happening during combat. Plus, they're pretty to look at.

Fancy minis or tokens

- ◆ Minis and tokens can represent the PCs and monsters very accurately, and painting minis can be a fun hobby.

Laptop, tablet, or fancy journal for notetaking

- ◆ Using online programs and organized journals can help GMs keep their notes in order in a satisfying way.

Collection of published adventures

- ◆ Published adventures often save the GM from having to create an original world, but the cost can add up fast.

GM Accessories

- ◆ Things like GM screens and dice trays can make life easier on the GM but aren't essential to play the game.



However, just as with books, it isn't necessary to get each and every possible miniature that exists in your system of choice—unless you want to! "Good enough" is also fine, particularly if you're on a budget. Need something to look like an undead king? A paper clip can represent that just as effectively as a skeleton mini! Online or in person, these tools can be just as simple or complicated as you want as long as you can use them effectively during the game.

VIRTUAL TABLETOP (VTT)

Another controversial choice that has popped up in our discussion of tools is virtual tabletops or VTTs. These types of resources can be a significant part of your tabletop gaming or not included at all. On the one hand, they provide means for the GM to combine all tools digitally, such as dice rollers, basic rules, additional books, maps, and tokens. On the other hand, VTTs are often blamed for creating a rift between players, as it's more challenging to maintain players' attention or avoid speaking over each other.

Despite this potential drawback, there are many benefits to utilizing a VTT to play your game. The primary one is that they enhance the accessibility of your game, making it so that you can play across state or country lines with relative ease. In cases where the group can't meet in person, this can be a lifeline to keep the hobby alive. In addition, the automation that the VTT offers can help speed up many processes that generally progress slowly. And, in instances where the other trappings of the game are too expensive, a virtual tabletop's all-encompassing toolset can provide an alternative.

This isn't to suggest that a virtual tabletop is better or worse than playing in person. The experience that many groups have had, though, indicates that there is a strong preference for in-person games. Nothing beats the camaraderie and connection everyone feels as you sit around the table together, interacting in real-time without lag. However, if the options are to play online or not at all, the best choice is to, of course, find any way to play and find ways to make it work.

PLAYING IN-PERSON WITH VTTs

An alternate application for VTTs is to take the digital aspects of a VTT and implement them in their in-person games as well. Most often, the GM will connect their computer to a monitor or TV, projecting the game map so everyone can see. The group then sits together where they can view the screen, and the game begins as usual.

There is considerable flexibility with how much to rely on the VTT when gaming this way. Everyone can access the VTT to look at their character sheets or move their characters using their own digital devices, or the GM can control everything with feedback from the players while they refer to their printed character information. In addition, players can roll dice digitally or physically, while handouts can pop up on the screen or be passed across to the players. Interactions with the material are entirely within the GM's control, and they have full freedom to decide which digital elements to incorporate.

Despite these benefits, some issues will likely crop up with this method. For example, if the GM is projecting their screen and is the only one interacting with the VTT, it adds one more thing to keep track of. Also, players could get distracted if the GM encourages them to use their electronic devices for tracking character information. This method also doesn't consider the potential need for additional technology to make the table perfect for gameplay. However, this hybrid option is an excellent choice for some groups; it combines the in-person camaraderie and convenience of digital gaming with plenty of options on how simple or advanced to make the game.

DICE TRAYS AND DICE TOWERS

Many actual plays include a lot of paraphernalia on their tables, and their players display them prominently! These often manifest as dice trays and towers, both of which often look impressive and have some utility. Players often use dice trays to contain rolls, keeping dice from scattering across the floor after an exuberant roll. This added control is sometimes beneficial for determining which rolls are valid—no more questioning if a die reclaimed from under the table counts! In addition, anything that keeps dropped pyramid d4s from biding their time to stab unsuspecting feet is a blessing.

Dice towers lend more gravitas to a roll, increasing the suspense as dice clatter down the chute before tumbling to a stop in a tray. While the extra drama can build to an exciting moment, their true purpose is eliminating the potential of someone manipulating a die to land on the face they want. They inject an additional layer of randomness into the roll yet can slow the gameplay as everyone waits for the results.

In all honesty, using these tools boils down to personal preference. They can be exciting to break out for a session and look grand on the table; however, they are far

from essential. There should be trust that players aren't intentionally dropping dice to land on the face they want. With a little care during rolls, we can circumnavigate the need for dice trays altogether. If these tools work at your table, the inclusion won't do any harm, but players and GMs shouldn't consider them a necessity.

OTHER TOOLS

While the above categories are by no means a comprehensive list of every type of tool a GM has to call upon, these represent the most common necessities to include. Many players may desire to bring other items to sessions, such as laptops or tablets to access digital character sheets, spell slot trackers, or fancy writing utensils and journals for tracking events or quests. GMs might also elect to take along a gaming screen to arrange notes or hide things from the players' sight, flight platforms to help visualize characters at different heights, or even initiative trackers to arrange the order of combat. Alternatively, everyone can choose to forego these materials and instead only bring the barest essentials needed for their TTRPG: a pencil and some paper.

There's such a broad spectrum of tools for the game master to utilize that it's nearly impossible to chronicle them all and list their advantages and disadvantages. No matter which tools you choose to bring to the game, it's worth evaluating why you're including them. Are they a bit of flashy bling that looks nice, or do they enhance the game somehow? Once you approach your accouterments from this mindset and eliminate the least effective, you'll find more time to devote to other aspects of game mastering when the game time approaches, like finding a time and place to play.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Essential Tools. Every game master has some tools they're going to use. Some are more important than others, but a few are absolutely critical to the game. For example, it's nearly impossible to run a tabletop game without dice, and some game systems even use specialized dice for that particular game. Likewise, it's often hard to run a game if you don't have access to a copy of the rulebooks. However, not every tool is essential, so for things that don't actively impact your ability to run the game, you should evaluate whether you want to spend the money or time on it.

Non-Essential Tools. Some tools are simply not essential compared to the rest. Super fancy maps, pre-published adventures, and most accessories (like initiative trackers) are not essential. While they can have a place at the table and often help game masters run their games, these should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis for whether or not you truly need them and whether the investment is worth it for you.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What are your must have tools when you're running a game?

Do you have any tools that you use that seem to get in the way more than they help?

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

CHAPTER 8: THE TIME AND PLACE

You've stayed up late into the evening, fine-tuning your upcoming session. You've adjusted encounters to provide the right difficulty for players to overcome. The paint is barely dry on the minis you painstakingly worked on so late it became early. You've also curated copious notes on NPCs and monsters, and their essential details are highlighted, with additional post-it notes along the top to make them easy to find. After hours and hours of work, everything is ready to go once your players arrive.

That's why the last thing you want to receive when game day arrives is the dreaded text or call asking the worst question: Were you playing the game today or next week? Maybe the player has a wedding they forgot about until now, or perhaps family has shown up for a visit. Regardless, the lack of a consistent schedule leaves them unaware of your meticulous preparations for today's travails. Suddenly, all your work is for naught since the session gets pushed to a future date.

We've all had games fall through because something came up or slipped through the cracks. Whether this is because of player negligence or a GM's oversight, it's always frustrating. However, you can take some simple and significant steps to prevent continual deferments leading to a scheduling spiral of death.

How Do You SCHEDULE A SESSION?

Scheduling sessions is one of the most important things when starting a gaming group. Nothing can initiate the dreaded scheduling spiral of death better than a timetable that only works sporadically. Therefore, it's crucial to establish a day and time marked in permanent marker in everyone's calendar to prevent your games from suffering a premature death. While there are many ways to approach this (all of them valid), GMs with years of experience use specific methods first to accomplish this quest consistently.

The GM should decide the gaming cadence in advance to determine what works best with their schedule. This is because the GM is the most integral member of the group, and the game can't happen without them. However, they should also solicit advice from the other players, as this helps ensure the game occurs regularly. Whenever you establish nothing ahead of time, there's a greater risk that the time to play won't work for more people. When the group sets a time in advance and sticks to that plan, it prevents the constant rescheduling merry-go-round from adapting the session's date for those who can't attend.

This method works best for an established gaming group, but this might not work as well when no players have joined the table yet. If this is the case, a GM should avoid asking for the optimal timeslots of prospective players. Instead, they should choose a day, a time, and a reoccurring cadence; and then recruit players who can make the decided-upon time. If they follow these steps, then the GM can proceed with the assumption that they've recruited players whose available time aligns with the agreed-upon schedule.

How Do Players Find Game Masters?

In some cases, players band together for a game but still need a GM for their session. This shifts the onus of responsibility to create a schedule onto their shoulders instead of the GM's. They should seek a GM whose availability aligns with their schedules. Once the group chooses a GM and establishes the cadence, everyone should adhere to the standard scheduling expectations mentioned earlier.

While discussing their position in this process, the players shouldn't expect the GM to shift sessions to accommodate their busy schedules. It never hurts for players to ask for minor adjustments, and a GM can incorporate this by having a starting buffer to consider traffic or surprise life events. Still, a group should limit this and not leave it open to "whenever." Once a gaming group starts down this path, the spiral of death is often just around the bend.

Of course, this neglects the easiest (and often most fulfilling) solution to the group's problem: One of the players steps into the shoes of the GM. Without question, it can be a daunting proposition—after all, if it weren't, this book wouldn't exist—but it's nevertheless the most effective way to find a GM for the group. On top of that, many of the best GMs and those who enjoy it more than being a player started this way; they wanted to play the game but didn't have a GM, so they stepped up.

If you're in this situation, we highly encourage you to try it. Don't worry about what the other players may think of the game or set yourself unreasonable expectations; just give it a shot. Numerous resources like this book are available to help you along the way. The world is more connected than ever before, allowing you to get expert or peer advice whenever needed. The sneaky truth of the matter is that your group won't really care how amazing your game is or about any of your mistakes; at the end of the day, because you stepped up, they get to play the game you're running.

How Do You Find Your Players?

One of the critical changes our hobby has experienced is the onset of many new ways to find players. The internet has opened many ways to make potential connections, making it easier than ever for us to reach out to others half a world away. In this digital age, many would not be surprised to hear that a group found each other through various discussion forums, LFG sites, or even some VTTS that facilitate this search.¹

However, with new methods come new precautions. Since new tools can help anyone meet with strangers, everyone should follow common sense safety, like not giving out their home address or other personal information that isn't pertinent. Additionally, it's also a good idea to recognize that not everyone we meet online will stick through an entire campaign—or a session, for that matter. People drop in and out of a game much more regularly when no one knows each other, especially when the game is online or there's no personal investment to stay.

Because of this, the old recruitment methods often result in finding more reliable and consistent players. Local game shops are an excellent resource for sharing information about GMs or players seeking each other. Other organizations, such as libraries, conventions, and even some high school or college clubs, also often provide opportunities for tabletop gamers to meet. The best part about these organizations is that most have the added benefit of offering a place to play.

How Do You Find Where to Play?

The game now has its GM and players. The group of intrepid enthusiasts has also found a day and time that works for their session. The last step to sitting down for a fun time around a TTRPG with players is a crucial decision: Where will the group meet to play their session?

The most tried-and-true place to meet is, of course, one player's house. Let's face it—this is often the most accessible and comfortable place to settle in for a session. They can fill the cupboards with everyone's favorite snacks, players don't need to be concerned about an establishment's rules (with the exception being anything

¹ As this book is being written in 2022 and 2023, some of the most popular places to find players are Reddit, Discord, or Roll20. For the first two, their nature as public internet forums makes them ideal for many people to organize a great variety of groups, including a myriad for tabletop games. Likewise, Roll20 is the largest virtual tabletop in the world at present, and with its size comes an easier way of finding players.

required by the host), and the group has control over the amount of music or background noise in the area.

But there is an exception to the comforts of meeting at a group member's home. Anytime a GM meets strangers recruited online to play in person, they should keep basic safety in mind. The reverse case is also true since players might not feel comfortable meeting a bunch of strangers at someone's home, and it may cause them to lose interest in pursuing the hobby. Whichever the case, it will expose these strangers to more personal details about each other, such as addresses and other aspects of their life, than they may wish. While there may be no nefarious intent, this concern should sit in the back of their minds when looking to play in person after finding a group online.

If a GM is looking to play with strangers met online, there are ample alternatives to consider—and should be chosen—that will work as effectively. Many game stores set aside an area for tabletop gaming sessions, often at little to no charge. These are great places to meet with people from online forums and provide access to resources like dice and minis for anyone who needs them. A venue like this is also a more neutral location to grow comfortable with each other. The group can always shift locations when members become better acquainted.

Game stores are only one public place where a group can gather, though it's hit-or-miss at other sites. Libraries often allow people to meet for a session as long as they moderate their volume. Even bars and restaurants allow games but check with the establishment's owner first in case there are other rules to consider when playing there. An online session can do the trick for everyone when all else fails. Whichever way a group chooses to play, they can always find a place that meets their tabletop group's needs.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN SOMEONE IS MISSING?

The best-laid plans of mice and men have often burned away in a blaze of dramatic fire when the most feared, inevitable monster rears its ugly head. This unkillable creature is among the deadliest to challenge a gaming group, as its power increases each time a group stumbles across it. This monster is, of course, the dreaded, most-accursed bane of any game: player absence.

Now, that might be hyperbolizing the issue quite a bit. After all, someone not being able to attend is hardly the end of the world. Life sometimes gets in the way, and

other commitments come up; it may also be that a player just doesn't want to play that day and has made an excuse to justify their absence. Whatever the reason, this is usually how the scheduling spiral of death begins: one person cannot make it, so everyone reschedules.

So, what does a GM do when a player is missing? One of the most decisive choices a gaming group can make is to proceed with the session as usual. Having one person absent won't significantly impact the game. Besides, if the player seems to be making an excuse to avoid the game, there's no reason to cancel or reschedule since they don't plan to join, regardless. Rather than make a big deal about the missing player, the GM should hand-wave the character's absence and let everyone get on with the game. If everyone involved agrees ahead of time, another player can even run the character when necessary. The psychological fear of missing out because the session will happen whether they are there or not is often an incredibly effective incentive to prevent recurring absences. Using this as a tool to encourage attendance is a great way to ensure fewer players are missing at the game table.

This, of course, is fine if only one player is missing; if multiple people need to skip, then the GM needs to make a judgment call. Before the session, they should have in mind the minimum number of participants necessary to play. Anytime a GM has confirmed that the least number of essential players will join the game, they should plan to proceed. If fewer show up to the table, it might be time to consider canceling for the week—or doing an alternate activity, such as a competitive board game, to deepen the bonds of human connection we all need.

The alternate take on this is when someone is consistently gone. When this happens, the GM may need to consider if it's time to find another player. Before taking a drastic step like this, though, it's worth having a conversation to see why it's happening. The missing player might have something going on in their life that no one is aware of, or maybe they are just not as into the game anymore. Even worse, something said or done in a game session might have created misunderstandings or hard feelings. Literally thousands of unknown issues can pop up. Communication is the key to uncovering the source of the players' absences.

When this happens, a few different paths can be tread. On the one hand, a GM can provide some flexibility to let them pop in and out of the game like a guest character; if the issue is temporary, that's an acceptable solution. However, another good choice is considering finding a replacement player, especially if this is a

recurring problem with no apparent or resolvable reasons. Either way, it's crucial to know how to address this if it comes up, as the GM may need to plan for it before even sitting at the table.

IT'S A GROUP GAME

At the end of the day, TTGs are about the people you play with. Whether it's a group of friends you've known for decades, a few strangers you met at your friendly local game store, or even your children as a family bonding activity, it's all about the group. Finding a time that works for everyone is often a tall order, and the truth is that it won't always work out for everyone; sometimes, you just need to do what you can to make it available for as many people as possible.

However, that's not the end of the story when getting the group ready to play; there's still the question of what type of game you'll be playing. Will it be a module written by a professional game designer, or will it be a homebrew campaign that you personally created for your group to play through? Will you use your own world? Will you mix and match them together to create something that incorporates the best elements of everything? Ultimately, this decision is up to the GM; however, a wise GM will always get their group's input before deciding. In the next chapter, we'll discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each option so you can make the best decision for your group.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

When you're looking at the most difficult, most unconquerable foe in all of tabletop gaming, scheduling, it can be helpful to take a deep breath and a step back before getting ahead of yourself. It's often impossible to please everyone and find a time that works for everyone; likewise, it's usually impossible to accommodate everything that everyone wants out of a location. Some people may work when others do, and some people may not like a particular game store – or can't make it to the store in time to play but could if it were somewhere else.

The truth is that your goal needs to be to do the most good for the most people, rather than trying to please everyone. At the end of the day, if the group has to spend several months hunting for a time that works for everyone, then nobody is going to have a chance to play. It's a harsh, unfortunate truth that someone may have to be left out so everyone else can play the game. However, if you're the one that is left out, take comfort in knowing that there are many more games out there and there is sure to be one that you will be able to play.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Scheduling a Session. When we think about the time that we want our games to be, it's often said that you should try to find a time that works for everyone. Unfortunately, this often results in games never being played because that time doesn't exist. The best way to schedule a session is to look at your own schedule and decide what works best for you, and then find players who fit that schedule. Of course, if you want to make sure your friends can play, you can take that into account, but ultimately when you can run the game should be the first consideration (after all, if you can't run the game, then there is no game).

Finding Players. There are more avenues available now than ever before to find new players. Old-school methods still work wonders. Posting notices in game shops, libraries, or your school (if it has a place) are all great ways to find players. However, with the advent of the internet and the explosion of social media, there are myriad ways to find players online as well. Always remember prudent internet safety!

When Someone Is Missing. Players will miss sessions. That's just a fact of life and one that will need to be accepted. When this happens, our recommendation is that the game continues on without them. Of course, this only works up to a point, and there will eventually be a threshold at which the game will need to be canceled.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Have you ever run into problems with scheduling a session? What did you do about it?

What's your minimum number of players to run a game? What do you do if someone is missing?



CHAPTER 9: CHOOSING A PLAYSTYLE

After wandering into your friendly local game store one day, two tables are actively rolling their dice and cheering for each other. On one table, the GM has rolled out a mat with a grid on it; the players are shifting their minis around and using tactics to try to get the upper hand against their adversaries. The other table is conspicuously empty save for the dice trays. Suddenly someone rolls a die into the center of the table and screams, “It’s a crit!” It appears that both groups are doing combat, but the tables look as different as could be...

Tabletop RPGs are a versatile medium. Each group’s method of sitting down to enjoy this hobby is unique from table to table. Some may unpack a suitcase filled with minis and roll out grid paper; others will create a mental image of the world. One GM may have a copious library of books and adventures open while preparing a session, but another might create an entire world from their imagination. No method is wrong or right, but they affect how players experience the game.

Before sitting down to their first session, the GM should determine what game they’ll be running. Will they be designing materials from scratch or drawing from existing sources? Will the players have physical representations of the world to view, or will they need to create a mental image of everything? These crucial decisions will define the playstyle and ensure everyone’s prepared for the same type of game.

SESSION 0

Before we dive into the thick of some of the decisions you’ll need to make, let’s first touch on one of the most critical times to figure these matters out: session 0. It’s a common topic of discussion and many people say you should do one, but what is it exactly, and why does it matter? And, maybe most importantly, do you even need one?

WHAT IS A SESSION 0?

Session 0 is the colloquial term for getting the entire group together, sitting down, and discussing what everyone wants from the campaign. It often includes character creation, group introductions (particularly if the group hasn’t played together before), an explanation of house rules, and anything else that might impact the campaign as a whole. In an ideal world, it would be a cooperative and collective exercise that gathers everyone’s input and ideas without any fuss.

Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world. In practice, the GM generally guides the group through everything on the agenda that needs discussion. That means it's often helpful for the GM to have a checklist of the most important things they want to cover. Yours may vary a little, but here are a few key points to hit during your session 0:

- What kind of campaign do you and the group want to play?
- What house rules do you presently use? (Particularly those that will have a significant impact on the game.)
- Are there any campaign-specific rules to keep in mind, such as “no dwarves?”
- What should the players expect during the campaign?
- Is there anything that the players really want to have the chance to do during the campaign?
- What types of content are hard boundaries for everyone?

WHY DOES A SESSION 0 MATTER?

Session 0 plays several key roles in the early development of the campaign. First, it sets the stage for everything yet to come and ensures everyone has reasonable expectations. Basically, it avoids the disappointment that can occur if the players think they'll be playing through a high fantasy, heroic campaign, but it's actually a gritty noir investigative campaign. To be clear, there's nothing wrong with either of those styles, but it can be disappointing if your expectations differ from reality.

The next thing it does is it helps you know where to direct your attention. For example, if none of your players care about or even have any remote consideration to try foraging or crafting, then you know that's not something you need to prepare for them. On the other hand, if your players are gung-ho about being the leaders of the local military forces, then you know that you may need some rules for large-scale combat, and you may need to create them if they don't already exist in your chosen system.

Finally, it can help the group understand everyone's boundaries and how to respect them. While many might say that this doesn't matter and that the players need to play the game the GM creates, that simply isn't true. The truth is that certain types of content won't be appropriate for or appeal to everyone. This is particularly true for adult themes, gore, or phobias, but it can apply to just about anything in the game. Of course, this is a matter for the entire group, and there may be circumstances where a player isn't the right fit for a group based on their boundaries.

BUT DO YOU ACTUALLY NEED ONE?

As a final note on session 0, let's consider whether we actually need one. The short answer is not always. For established groups that have been playing together for a long time, you may not need a full session 0. After all, if you've been playing together for several years, everyone's likely to know what types of content are off-limits for each other and used many of your house rules hundreds of times.

However, for new groups or groups that might be adding a new player, it's usually wise to have a session 0. The insurance it offers against problems is simply too great to ignore, and there is genuinely little (if any) downside to running one. But now that we have talked about session 0 in the broadest sense, let's consider in more detail some of the considerations that will come up for the game as a whole.

CHOOSING BETWEEN PREWRITTEN AND HOMEBREW MATERIAL

While in the preliminary stages of planning the game, the GM should consider what type of campaign or adventure they want to run. This often means choosing between utilizing pre-made materials or creating their own from scratch, and this choice applies both to the adventures (also called modules) and the world setting. None of these approaches is inherently wrong, although each has benefits and drawbacks.

PRE-MADE ADVENTURES AND SETTINGS

The fundamental theory GMs have when working with pre-made adventures is that a well-written module or setting will make it easier for them to prepare for the game. The module will include challenging monsters designed for players' in-game level. Maps will consist of exciting elements to entice players as they explore. The adventure's flow will advance at the perfect rate and make logical sense. Meanwhile, the GM needs only to crack open the book and be ready to play.

This means the GM only needs to do the minimum in preparation to run a well-designed module. That's invaluable for GMs who are very busy outside the game or are new to running games for a given system and want to use them to learn the ropes. It also means that the group gets to enjoy the game with minimal stress for the GM, which almost always results in a better experience for everyone.

Unfortunately, the reality is that modules often require a wide range of prep times to run effectively, even with sources created by a professional or a seasoned amateur. The material typically serves as a guide, but the details may need to be

adjusted to improve the adventure's balance and interesting details. A GM might expect modules will be easier to run because of the prepared material, but there may be some surprising elements requiring more attention to improve the game experience.

The opposite side of the same coin is campaign setting books. These sometimes include an adventure or two to help everyone immerse themselves in the world and lore, but their primary focus is developing the world for your players to explore. GMs usually use these to reduce their prep time, as creating the details already included in these pages requires a prohibitive amount of time. However, the materials are more for context rather than developing a complete adventure for players to enjoy.

HOMEBREWED ADVENTURES AND SETTINGS

If prewritten modules and settings serve as a detail-filled guidebook for the GM, homebrewed adventures and worlds are more like maps with minimal directions. The GM develops most, if not all, of the game's information from the ground up, meaning they make a more significant contribution to the worldbuilding and scenario-creation processes.

The flip side of this is that the GM has infinite flexibility to develop a cohesive world with the adventure they want to run, unrestricted by a pre-existing framework. Many GMs thrive on the extra effort required to develop this unique world, as it's a way for them to immerse themselves in creating and building the game world between sessions and determining how player characters have altered the world state. Some GMs might consider it work, but others enjoy it.

A downside to this approach is that the game's balance and quality are determined by how much time the GM puts into it. A GM with endless hours to spend on worldbuilding can devote as much time as they need to craft a living, breathing world and its adventures. If there are constraints due to commitments, such as family or work, then the GM's world may not be as expansive as they would hope.

HYBRID ADVENTURES AND SETTINGS

A third option is to strike a balance between established material and the GM's created materials. Later in this book, we'll introduce ways to incorporate pre-made modules into a homebrew setting or to inject homebrew information into an existing module. For now, it's enough to know that GMs can mix and match homebrew and prewritten elements just like anything else—very often, this is what we do!

The decision to combine these two approaches brings along the best and worst of their individual designs. The GM needs to be ready to adjust elements to have everything align perfectly, which may involve additional work. However, this approach provides more flexibility since there are options for choosing which pieces to homebrew and which to draw from the prewritten material directly.

CHOOSING A PLAYSTYLE

While determining the source of the game material is a vital aspect of a GM's role, another crucial decision is how they'll run the game. In essence, this comes down to determining the playstyle of the game. Will the game be online or in person? Will there be a grid and minis for reference, or will the GM employ theater of the mind to set the scene?

ONLINE OR IN PERSON?

For most game tables, the group's needs determine whether they'll gather online or in person. Groups who can meet at a physical location will typically do so because it's easier to connect with fellow players. The camaraderie and enjoyment of an in-person game are hard to match in many ways. Online play falls short in nearly all of them, and there's simply no way to get them back. The act of sitting together at the table and rolling dice creates a feeling that one can't replicate in any other way.

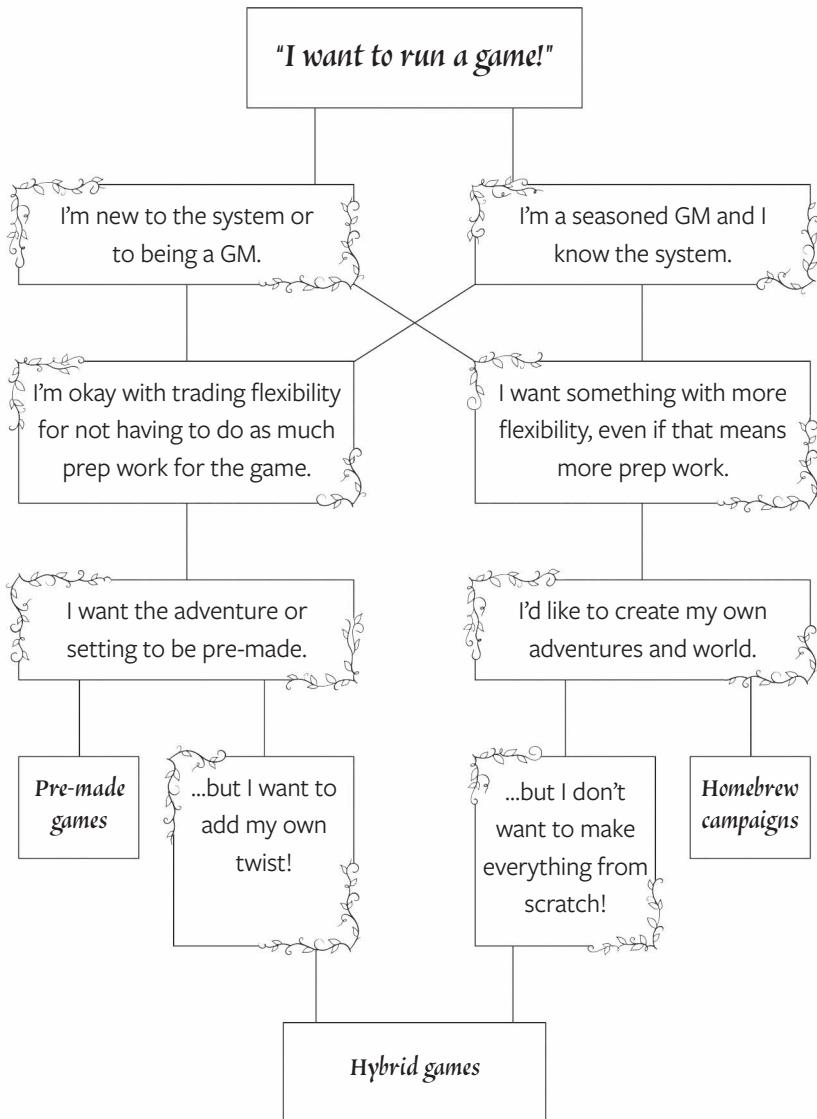
However, other groups enjoy the flexibility of online play; rather than traveling to one person's house or the local game store, everyone can gather from their own homes at the appointed time. And while these games can create a distance between players—literally and figuratively—they're still a source of fun and are better than no game at all. For some groups, there's little choice in the matter; when players are countries or even entire continents apart, there's simply no other way for the group to play.

THEATER OF THE MIND OR GRID AND MINIS?

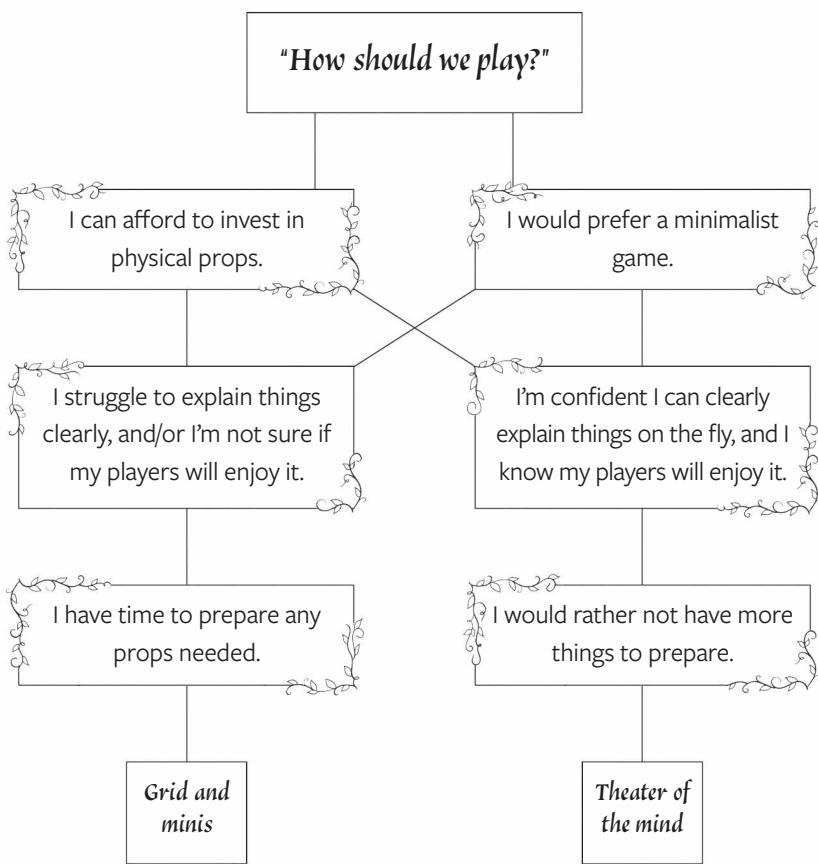
Theater of the mind consists of the GM painting a picture with words for the players, establishing the scene and situation without physical props as a reference. Conversely, a grid-and-minis game uses physical props to visually represent the situation (usually an encounter or dungeon). Deciding which of these methods works best varies by group and is often determined by their needs.

Theater of the mind may be less enjoyable for some players because it requires a strong visual understanding of the scene. Some GMs may also be less comfortable providing the requisite detail, particularly since one must describe much of it on the fly.

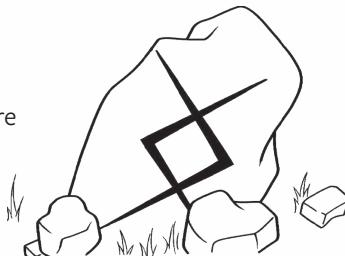
WHAT TO PLAY



HOW TO PLAY



Note: not all GMs and groups are the same! Use your best judgment to figure out what works well for your table.



That said, theater of the mind is cheap and affordable for everyone because there's nothing to purchase or make. It takes the material off the table and turns it into a more collaborative exercise between friends rather than a board game with pieces that get shuffled around. It's also often quick and easy to formulate on the fly; there's no need to create a map and have minis.

Using minis is virtually the exact opposite. Minis can become cost-prohibitive to purchase for some groups, and they may decide this is unnecessary for their enjoyment. However, there is pleasure in the art of painting minis and showing them off to your friends during the game.

Each method has its place, and the GM can use both to great effect. It comes down to them picking which method will be most suitable at their table for the given moment. These don't have to be mutually exclusive! You can employ both methods throughout your games. It's quite common—especially for social encounters, shopping scenes, or other impromptu scenarios—to use theater of the mind by necessity. After all, the GM can't prepare for every possibility, and even if they could, a map and minis will often get in the way.

WHO MAKES THESE DECISIONS?

Ultimately, the GM and the group will choose the playstyle(s), which should be agreed upon together before the game begins. Ironing this out before the game will help prevent confusion and missed expectations; otherwise, players are more likely to get frustrated and leave the group.

Of course, you shouldn't put undue weight on what the players are looking for. Your desires and capabilities should lead the conversation; after all, if the decision ends up being something you have no passion for and don't want to do, that puts significant stress on the group's stability. The GM's passion is a critical element that sustains a gaming group, especially one that stays together for many years.

That said, it can't be entirely about what the GM wants. The players' opinions and desires matter too. After all, you can't run a game without players. The key idea is that by using what you want to do to lead the conversation, you can effectively integrate your players' ideas and develop a solid idea of how to structure the game.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Just because the group reaches a consensus, it doesn't set these choices in stone. After playing for a while, the GM or the players may recognize that their chosen

playstyle is less enjoyable than expected. When this happens, it's beneficial for the group to revisit the conversation and see if there are ways to handle the issues or adjust their playstyle to improve everyone's satisfaction.

Also, as a corollary, these decisions aren't mutually exclusive. There's no reason you can't use a hybrid approach—in fact, almost all games do! Very few games, if any, exclusively rely on maps and minis, and equally, few rely solely on theater of the mind. While we've presented these as a dichotomy, it's only to convey the benefits and drawbacks of each more clearly, not that you must choose between them.

Ultimately, the key to this is setting proper expectations within the group. This happens naturally by having these conversations and figuring out what the group wants to do, but it shouldn't stop there. Once the group has made a decision, the GM should clearly outline what the group can expect from them as a result. Crucially, this should include how changes to this may play out or develop naturally.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Just like when you're thinking about the time and place for everyone to play, these decisions often come down to doing the most good for the most people. Many players struggle with theater of the mind encounters because they can be hard to envision. This fact is doubly true for game masters who have to keep track of everything! Naturally, there is always a time and place for it, but that time and place will vary from group to group depending on your needs. Even within a group, there are likely going to be different needs and not everyone's will always be met.

Don't be afraid to confront that unfortunate situation head-on, however. Sometimes, things aren't going to work for everyone, and people will tell you, whether you ask them to or not. Don't be afraid to listen to them! It can be a challenge, and it can be frustrating, but it will always be better to listen and handle the situation. And, at the end of the day, if things seem like they're way out of whack and you need to realign everyone, consider holding a mid-campaign session 0 so you can do exactly that.

The ideas in this chapter present a higher-level overview of which steps to take before starting a game. We'll tell you how to prepare in greater detail in Part Three of this book. These discussions should occur before the game starts, so addressing these concepts sooner rather than later makes sense. In the following chapters, we'll share additional ideas that build upon these foundations and will further develop the GM's role as more than the preparer of the session.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Session 0. Session 0 is a common feature of many brand-new campaigns. It's an opportunity for everyone to figure out what kind of game they want to play, what house rules will be used, create characters, and more. It lays the groundwork for a successful campaign. For groups that have been playing together for a long time, this may be more or less informal than for new groups, but there should always be time set aside to at least decide what will be played.

Prewritten or Homebrew Materials. This is an age-old debate and one that will continue for as long as there are people playing tabletop games. You will need to evaluate for yourself which is best for you and your group, as there are advantages and disadvantages to each. Of course, there's always the option of doing a hybrid of the two and mixing them together, an option that a great many game masters take full advantage of.

Playstyle. We lumped a great many things into this category, ranging from whether to play online and even whether to use minis. The main idea here is that everyone should be on board with and understand the expectations of the type of game that will be played. What everyone will need to do and contribute will be very different for an in-person, theater of the mind heavy game vs. an online, grid and mini game.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What does your session 0 look like?

How do you get input from your players to decide how the game will be run?



CHAPTER 10: WHAT DOES A GAME MASTER THINK ABOUT DURING THE GAME?

You sit down at the table, unfold your GM screen, and put a bag filled with a thousand dice on the table. You take a deep breath, look around the table, and ask if everyone is ready. Naturally, your players excitedly say yes. You begin narrating the start of the game, recapping the game before, or having one of your players do a recap for everyone instead. This is it, what you've been preparing for—game time! You guide your players and their characters through the game world, make judgment calls, and bring the entire game to life.

As soon as everyone sits at the table, all of the GM's pre-game prep comes into play. They've prepared for their playstyle as much as possible, and now it's time to put everything into practice. With everything in motion now, the GM's primary concern becomes running a compelling game for everyone.

During the session, the GM must determine when to set the scenes with scintillating details and step in to adjudicate the system's rules, as well as when to sit back and allow players to engage with the scene. In addition to these concepts, several other tasks delve deeper into building a better game environment for everyone to enjoy. A great GM's truest secret is being able to guide these intrinsic elements while still granting players the ability to influence the game's natural flow.

PLAYER AGENCY

One of the most crucial elements of tabletop roleplaying affecting the gaming experience is player agency, so it's worth defining again for clarity. As explained previously, player agency revolves around allowing the players to find solutions to the GM's scenarios. It also means letting players choose how their characters react to situations—without the GM or other players taking that choice away.

Here is one example of how a GM can wrongfully take away player agency: The players are about to infiltrate a castle to confront a wicked tyrant. One character, a skilled thief, attempts to gain access through a drain, but the GM informs them they can't pick the lock because it's enchanted, not letting them even attempt it with a roll. Another player suggests they climb over the wall, yet the GM replies that this is impossible. After shooting several other ideas down, the GM announces that the characters must enter the castle through the main gate and can't use any alternative means to gain access because this is the only option. This form of restriction prevents the players from deciding on methods that are just as (if not more) viable.

Players can diminish each other's agency as well. Selfishly "borrowing" items without permission, picking fights with other characters, or taking a different course of action than the group has agreed upon and forcing everyone else to follow are all examples of ignoring agency. While not quite the same as a GM seizing control, this anti-cooperative behavior is just as egregious in terms of player agency because it takes away others' opportunities to roleplay and will probably harm the player relationship in and out of the game.

The GM, therefore, needs to provide ways to ensure that player agency is constantly present while running the session. They can do much of this in advance when establishing a social contract by setting expectations for gameplay, like specifying there should be no PvP ("player versus player") activity that will affect enjoyment. In addition, the GM should ensure not to invest in what they assume a player's character will do in a specific situation. In contrast, a novelist might make that determination; only the player should make choices about their character.

Although player choice is integral to tabletop gaming, that doesn't mean everything should be permissible. That a player's character can leap over tall buildings in a single bound would be considered impossible—when not aided by supernatural abilities, at least. When a player suggests something along these lines, the GM should speak up and say it's impractical. There should be some planning on the GM's side on how to handle these types of unexpected things, as this will help address the situation at the moment.

TAKING AWAY PLAYER AGENCY

The question often arises about whether there are any cases when the GM should take away player agency. This is, after all, something that GMs should always grant their group and avoid violating. Since the GM controls everything else in the game world, they shouldn't need to seize control of a player's character and begin taking choices away.

So, are there any potential cases where the GM should strip agency from the players? Surprisingly, yes.

The group's primary goal is to build a fun atmosphere together. That means no group member should cross any of the lines they agreed upon during session 0—they should always consider these points off-limits during the game. Typical cases include certain types of objectionable violence or distressing situations that involve children, but countless other potential triggers may immediately dampen the game's enjoyment.

The moment they cross one of these lines, the group's fun quickly sours into bitter uncomfortableness. The GM may need to determine whether something is unacceptable, although another player may also speak up. When this happens, the GM must be ready to return the table to a safe place immediately to prevent irreparable harm to the group. We detail some methods for handling situations like this in Chapter 13.

Another case where it might become necessary for the GM to pull this lever is if a player is involved in PvP, whether consciously or unconsciously. To be clear, PvP isn't just about combat situations; it also refers to non-collaborative behavior or doing things in-game that intentionally undermine the group. The classic example is a thief archetype character that steals from their companions or a battle-hungry character that starts a fight when the party is trying to negotiate peacefully. This almost always stems from the mentality of "It's what my character would do," which is more of an abuse of the concept of player agency than an excuse.

Regardless of the reason, taking a drastic step toward removing player agency is never done lightly. Many groups consider it one of the most sacred elements in tabletop gaming, and rightly so! However, letting players have autonomy shouldn't extend to situations that reduce fun, so the GM should be mindful of this while the game unfolds.

NARRATION

When events occur in-game, describing them rests on the GM's shoulders. This narration usually holds the details that set the scene for everyone or an overview of the situation that the players experience. In addition, the GM also determines, decides, and presents what each NPC is doing. However, players should also take part—and many do—in describing their own characters' actions and feelings.

There are multiple styles to handle in-game narration. Many players will use a first-person approach, describing what their character is doing in a more personal way. GMs, however, might elect to explain something through a third-person filter, especially as they manage many more characters and monsters throughout the session. There are exceptions to this, of course. No specific rule says one form is preferable; the critical element in narration is choosing the method each person is most comfortable with.

Anyone at the table involved in the narration usually creates the details through improvisation. However, the GM may have some points prewritten (such as read-aloud text from modules or something they made themselves). These notes are often

vital for keeping details about the setting straight while players are exploring. It helps to anticipate what may be needed when the time comes. The GM can keep general descriptions of ordinary things on hand to help create engaging narration and prevent the game from bogging down as they look through their notes.

At the same time, it's also advisable to leave gaps in the prepared narration to prevent over-sharing. Most players are naturally inquisitive and will ask questions about what their characters are experiencing. Allowing this engagement keeps them more involved in the situation and provides them more freedom to decide what is essential to their character at that moment.

The cardinal sin of narration is using it to railroad players. Railroading, in this case, would use more directive than descriptive language. For example, a GM telling a player, "You recoil from a chill in the air that startles you," would be directive, informing them that their character feels a specific way, therefore removing their agency. This is avoidable by using a more open-ended approach like: "A chill fills the chamber, stirred by a subtle breeze." This more vivid description allows the players to interpret and envision the scene as their character would, further enhancing their ability to choose how their character will experience the situation.

WHERE IS THE LINE BETWEEN NARRATION AND RAILROADING EXACTLY?

This is a trickier division to find than it initially seems. There are certainly examples that clearly fall on one side or the other, as we described above, but what about less obvious cases? Consider the following way of describing a chill in the air and compare it to the options above: "You feel cold from a chill in the air." Is this railroading? Or is it narrating the effects of the chill? Is it *both*?

Let's consider this line's goal and effect. Our goal is to make the players understand that something is happening, in this case, likely something to do with the undead or another supernatural phenomenon. That's a perfectly reasonable goal and something likely to happen occasionally. But what's the effect? Well, the result is that we've told our players how their characters *feel* but without the player taking action to trigger that feeling (compare this to a character picking up a block of ice and discovering it feels cold). That's where we realize: We've just inadvertently railroaded our players.

Of course, this is naught but the most minor of circumstances that could be considered a railroad, and in truth, it's likely that nobody would even notice if this were to happen. However, it's always worth considering the effects of our narration and how they might impact the game; after all, an accumulation of this circumstance happening repeatedly may turn into something entirely different than just a one-off mistake.

Maintaining a Cooperative Atmosphere

By nature of the GM's role at the table, the group also looks to them as the de facto leader. That means that the responsibility of maintaining an atmosphere of cooperation for the group usually falls to the GM, whether or not associating them with this task is fair. However, players are responsible for this as well, as everyone is contributing to the process. Still, the GM may need to be ready to step in to prevent everyone's enjoyment from becoming fractured.

When the mood turns sour, it's time for some general conflict resolution. This isn't to say that the GM needs to determine who is right or wrong; instead, they mediate disagreements toward a peaceful solution. Very few people thrive on conflict, and a GM may not be in their comfort zone managing these issues, which is understandable. If they're uncomfortable with this leadership role, they can always delegate it to a trusted player. Regardless of who handles remediation, their goal should be to resolve issues in these early stages before they become major problems—this can help save a gaming group from falling apart.

Sometimes the GM must take preventive action before a minor concern explodes into an irreconcilable grievance. If necessary, they may need to take away player agency to undo some of the damage caused to the group's enjoyable atmosphere. Whether that means retconning a story element or changing what a player says or does, it's more important to ensure player enjoyment overall than forcing an unhealthy experience on anyone. However, this should only be done as a last resort and only to the minimum amount necessary after weighing the consequences.

Player vs. Player activity, while not the only case where this is necessary, is one of the primary examples of non-cooperation that requires the GM's intervention. Sometimes a quick discussion and undoing an action will resolve the issue quickly; in other circumstances, or if the problematic behavior persists, it may be time to consider if that player is the right fit for the group. In all instances, weigh the effects of the action taken and how it will affect the table's experience in the future.

What Happens if We're Timid about Intervention?

We've all known someone timid about intervening in a situation. Perhaps you've even been that person. There are many reasons that people could be this way, but often they all boil down to one underlying rationale: they don't want to hurt another person's feelings or cause discord in the group. And that's good! That means they have empathy and consider others before acting. However, in this case, by not intervening and risking hurting one person's feelings, the entire group is at risk of either falling apart or otherwise being unable to continue playing. In the worst-

case scenario, instead of one person being upset, everyone is upset, and the entire situation is overall worse.

Of course, one shouldn't be too gung-ho about jumping into things. That can lead to its own host of problems and trigger resentment and other negative feelings, ultimately leading to the same outcome as not intervening at all. It's a balancing act that you're sure to get wrong from time to time, but by developing conflict resolution skills, you'll be able to handle these issues with alacrity and grace.

TAKING NOTES

Keeping a record of what happens during a session is vital; with everything occurring during a session, it's often easy to lose track of every detail in the world and how the players have affected them. The last thing a GM wants to have to happen is for a player to turn to them and ask about a detail that happened several sessions ago, and their only response is a tentative "Yes?" because they don't recall.

To avoid this, many like to scribble a few notes as events occur for their reference. Others prefer to record what happened after the session has concluded. Still, others scribble brief notes during a game session and then dedicate time directly after it to expand on those notes, ensuring they're complete. Whichever method they use, focusing only on the major details that affect the game world, such as important character choices and changes or how NPCs will react to the characters' actions, is ideal.

Making note-taking a part of the GM's process is crucial to maintaining consistency and helping to recall information about NPCs or locations during the game. Ultimately, the notes the GM takes can be the first of many steps in keeping a game organized, which may lead to a hidden hoard of ways to improve your game further.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We know. It's a lot. GMs juggle many, many plates while running games and it's a lot to keep track of all at once. Don't let this intimidate you though! Many of these considerations aren't the sort of things that you need to devote active brain power to forever. Instead, with a little bit of practice and experience, they'll become considerations that you're always making but on a subconscious level. It's kind of like riding a bike (we know, it's a tired analogy, but we're using it differently, we promise!); a kid who's just starting to learn is going to be actively thinking about things like balance, how to point the wheel, and other important things. However, once you learn how to ride and get a little bit of experience with it, you stop thinking about those things, and instead, they become second nature.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Player Agency. There are a few things in tabletop gaming considered more sacred than player agency. Game masters should weigh their decisions against whether or not they will accidentally (or intentionally) take away player agency. There are times it is necessary to do so – such as in the case of problem players.

Narration. One of the core things that a game master does is narration. Whether it's through read-aloud text, describing an NPC's actions, or even describing how an attack looks, it's all narration. A common mistake, however, is to have too much narration pre-written. While it can be useful and has its place, one should be careful not to script every possible event.

Maintaining the Atmosphere. An atmosphere of cooperation is essential to any roleplaying game. At the end of the day, everyone is working together – even the game master – to create the story that unfolds throughout the game. Part of the game master's responsibilities is to uphold this atmosphere, and that sometimes means having hard conversations with players.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What does player agency mean to you?

When might you take away player agency?

How do you maintain an atmosphere of cooperation when things get tense?



CHAPTER 11: POST-GAME ORGANIZATION

The last die has been rolled, the minis stashed away, and the session finally concluded. Players depart for the night, promising, with the best of intentions, to be available to continue their adventure. A weary but satisfied GM settles into their chair, releasing a sigh of contentedness. And at this moment comes the wayward question: What should they do next?

An obvious answer is taking a well-deserved rest, as running a session is a gratifying but exhausting process. Yet while events are still fresh in your mind, there's a much more important step to take: getting organized and prepared for the next session.

GET ORGANIZED

If the GM chooses not to record their notes during the game, this is the ideal time to do so. These records should include the session's primary highlights, like significant character decisions and their outcomes—whether combat has happened, what meaningful conversations have occurred, and whether the results have been beneficial or counterproductive to the party's goals. The GM can also detail any other thoughts or ideas that arose during the session for future reference.

These notes are incredibly beneficial to the overarching narrative and might affect future plot points. If players have significantly impacted key NPCs and groups, jot down how they feel about the developments. Future adventures can be inspired by how the world reacts to player actions, even months down the road. Callbacks to these previous exploits are great for tables since trips down memory lane are enjoyable and show players they're affecting a living, breathing world.

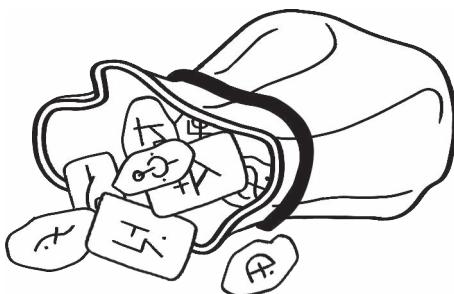
However, you likely won't use all the ideas you gather from session to session. Since there's only so much time in a game, not every idea can blossom into a full-blown adventure; however, keeping a record of them can lead to other uses. For example, if players get on the wrong side of an organization, an NPC they have worked with might try to distance themselves from the players. It may not lead to an adventure necessarily, but the players' actions still reverberate through the game.

WHAT SHOULD BE IN THE NOTES?

Before diving into the details about how to get organized, it's worth taking a brief moment to consider what we should even be taking notes on in the first place. Not everything that happens is worth noting, and we only have so much time, so let's prioritize the most important things we want to record.

POST GAME CHECKLIST

- Did the PCs do anything that would cause consequences in the game world?
- Were any of the NPCs affected by the events of the session?
- Did the PCs ally with or betray an NPC or group?
- Did the PCs have any meaningful conversations?
- Did the PCs get into any fights? If so, are there any consequences?
- Were the PCs productive towards their personal or group goals?
- Did the players love a new place or NPC?



First and foremost, we need to keep track of key decisions. Did the characters choose to ally with their patron despite the dark secrets revealed? Or did they betray their patron and are now supporting their former enemies? The GM needs to note these key decisions in as much detail as possible; after all, they find themselves at the forefront of many campaigns.

Second, note down what was meaningful to NPCs or the greater world, but not in a necessarily campaign-defining way. If an NPC or group of NPCs has shifted their disposition either for or against characters, they should note it; this is doubly true if characters have gained or lost access to useful merchants, NPCs, or locations. Typically, these notes won't turn into grand adventures; however, knowing that a particular NPC now regards the characters as a nuisance to ignore can make the players' choices feel particularly meaningful and immersive.

Finally, make sure you record things that seem meaningful to the characters. If the characters seem enthralled with the idea of a location that the GM only meant as a throwaway line, note it down. If the characters seem suspicious about a marking or picture, note it down. They can bring these elements back in the future to deepen a mystery—or debunk one—that the characters are considering.

HOW TO BE ORGANIZED

With all the moving parts involved in sessions, having a system to track everything related to the overall campaign is crucial to getting organized. Many GMs record everything in a physical or virtual journal; others use cloud-based notes and collaboration tools (both free and with subscriptions). Paid or unpaid, physical or digital, as long as something works for you, that's all that matters!

Players can be an excellent resource for tracking in-game events since some like to record important details for future reference; of course, this is a minority of players, though one that can be worth its weight in gold. If one of them is a meticulous note-taker, they may also be willing to share summaries of the sessions. However, while players' notes may be convenient for the GM, it's essential not to depend on their notes alone; what one player fixates on may not be necessary for the big scheme of things, or it may include misleading or incorrect information.

Relying on your personal recollections only is also inadvisable. Memories can be fickle, and remembering something from many sessions ago can be very challenging. Something important slipping through the cracks may affect the quality of the

game. Having notes on hand that allow you to look back on events that happened months or even years ago can be the key to tying up loose ends to player events. When the players return to them later in the campaign, it creates a much more satisfying conclusion to that storyline.

Is There a Best System?

It feels natural to ask if there's a best or perfect way to organize your notes and make sure that you've got everything important. However, it's going to be a matter of personal preference to decide exactly how you want to approach it. The ways that work for one GM – and the things they find important – are likely going to be different than another. However, we can offer some ideas to start with as you develop your own style.

First, start off with writing down the in-game date. This is the easiest thing to lose track of, but for certain things—particularly longer-term mechanics and goals—it can be incredibly important. Then write down the characters' key choices during the session, as well as anything unexpected. Jotting quick notes about how the characters acted towards people can be extremely helpful – after all, it wouldn't do to forget about the characters beheading someone in the middle of the town square! Finally, write down a couple of future adventure ideas that quickly arise from things that happened in a session. They don't need to be detailed but two or three ideas for new things that can happen as a result of the characters' choices (good and bad!) will help when you prepare for future game sessions.

You're Organized, Now What?

After compiling a collection of notes and thoughts, the GM's next step is to develop ideas for the players' next adventure! Take some time to get inspired by the last session's events; not every idea will reappear in the campaign, so consider ways to weave some intriguing elements into a future session.

Future sessions could reintroduce multiple plot points, but it often makes sense to pick just one or two to follow up on for now. This may cause the campaign to seem linear and give players little choice but remember: A linear campaign isn't necessarily bad. Even with fewer options on what quests to pursue, the players still have free rein to determine how to address the situation presented.

As mentioned before, it's improbable that every idea or note will make the cut to become a major arc in the campaign—and that's perfectly fine. Some ideas from

past sessions will appeal more to the players than other ideas, so it makes sense to let them choose between different quests. This, in turn, helps the GM provide scenarios and plot hooks that align with the story the players want to explore.

Also, consider how the game world changes because of the players' decisions in previous sessions. Character actions—the good, the bad, or the lack thereof—may alter how the next session goes, depending on which NPCs are affected. The GM should scale the benefits and consequences according to the situation. For example, rescuing a farmer will benefit the locals but won't impact the wider world as drastically; conversely, deposing an influential noble may bring disfavor on the characters, and the consequences could ripple across the land. The GM will need to decide if the characters have made a new friend or whether an unknown foe is sharpening their knives and waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Regardless, with this session complete, it's time to prepare for the next one! No matter how far in the future it may be, players will sit down for the next scenario before you know it, so the GM needs to prepare sooner rather than later. Part Three of this book will provide insights into how to prepare a campaign, adventure, and individual sessions in greater detail, so never fear being left adrift!

REFLECTION

After reviewing all that has happened in the session, there should be a clear list of successful elements. Often, these are times when the entire table fully engaged with the scenario or decided they wanted to pursue something that gripped them. While studying these, the GM should consider what led to the session's high points and how to nudge the game more in those directions.

One thing that doesn't help is dwelling on what went wrong. Recognizing areas for improvement is productive, but lingering on what you did incorrectly can spiral into a headspace that is less conducive to growth. Instead, when reflecting on less effective aspects, the GM should consider ways to turn their strengths into supportive tools to help improve those areas. Once the GM grasps how to enhance an aspect of the game that didn't hit all the right notes, they can take the next steps to transform those areas through constructive feedback.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Notes. Throughout your time as a game master, you will take a lot of notes. Whether you take those notes while the game is running or after the session ends is up to you and whatever works best for you. But you should make sure your notes always include the most important information that happened so you can reference back to it later.

How to Do It. Just like when you take your notes, the medium you use for it is up to you. Many game masters rely on simple notebooks and journals to do it, while others prefer using digital tools that let them map things out. There's no right or wrong option, but whichever option you choose should be up to the task of holding everything that you want to write down and be conducive to using it in the future.

Looking Back. In your notes, you're going to have all the key things that happened. This will be your bread and butter as you're preparing future sessions and when you're trying to keep track of all the moving pieces in your campaign. You're going to want to reference these things quite frequently, so be sure your system is easy for you to navigate!

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

How do you organize your notes?

What are the key things you will make sure to write down after each session?



CHAPTER 12: IMPROVING AS A GAME MASTER

Criticism, advice, and compliments are often challenging to parse. On the one hand, constant and overwhelming negativity can demoralize; on the other, glowing praise and platitudes can gloss over aspects that would benefit from some attention. Sometimes we are our worst critics; in other cases, we blind ourselves to shortcomings. How we respond to all the feedback we receive is crucial to self-improvement and tremendous success.

Like it or not, GMs are no exception to these rules. No one has ever run a flawless game; something can always be worked on and improved the next time. However, it is important to remember that the GM is running a game; the game table isn't where every decision is the difference between life and death for real, living people. Those may be two dramatic extremes, but the point is that the GM can take their time to make progress on crucial elements that need attention rather than improving everything at once. Building upon the process one step at a time makes it much easier for the GM to digest and steadily enhance their games bit by bit.

Approaching this as an incremental process rather than an end goal allows the GM more time to prioritize what needs the most attention for improvement. It may not be easy to consider which facet is most important, but any form of active betterment will benefit the game. In the meantime, GMs shouldn't be afraid of making mistakes at the table and should be open to constructive feedback that helps improve everyone's enjoyment.

GETTING FEEDBACK

Soliciting feedback on aspects you need to improve is one of the most challenging things a GM can undertake. The critiques and accolades the GM receives are crucial to developing better games in the future; however, the last thing anyone wants to hear is that something didn't land as intended. There are two primary sources for receiving constructive feedback: yourself and others.

GIVE YOURSELF FEEDBACK

Self-evaluation is one of the more challenging ways to receive feedback. It requires honest introspection from an impartial standpoint without taking an antagonistic approach to what went wrong. Avoiding such a tone is especially important because if the GM overwhelmingly dwells on mistakes in the session, they may heighten feelings of self-doubt, resulting in them dreading the game entirely. The goal should

be identifying areas for improvement and addressing them without sliding into this quagmire of despair.

A way to help maintain a healthier balance in this respect is to find more positive than negative elements. Include two positive notes for each negative, and approach them in a way that provides more encouraging feedback. For example: “My players enjoyed the combat involving the final boss and its minions (positive). However, they were all killed because I brought more enemies into the room at the end, which made the encounter too deadly (negative). Before those reinforcements showed up, though, the party was winning this challenging fight, so I chose the right foes for them to face (positive).”

Reviewing events this way gives clear paths to build on elements that worked in the game. There is recognition for what didn’t perform well, but devoting more attention to improving the beneficial aspects will help reduce the harshness of self-criticism.

GETTING FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS

GMs can also receive feedback by requesting it from players, which poses quite a few challenges. Players may bury their honest feedback beneath platitudes to avoid hurting the GM’s feelings, which makes gaining constructive criticism on specific elements difficult. On the other hand, players may also avoid delving into their opinions because they fear speaking up will make the GM target them—usually in-game via their character, but possibly outside of the game. There may not be a rational reason to feel this way, which makes this a psychological hurdle to overcome.

These two challenges impact feedback quality, even after ensuring players that anything game-related happens in a safe place. Luckily, many tools now offer anonymous surveys, enabling players to express themselves without revealing their identities. It is essential to remember that while these steps lessen the challenges, they aren’t a perfect solution. For example, if a player has a distinctive way of expressing themselves, it may be easier to match them to their feedback. While imperfect, the option for anonymity allows players to be more confident in providing feedback.

Another way to mitigate the problems for players while getting actionable feedback is to ask specific questions rather than offer open-ended fields with little direction. This doesn’t mean you should send players a massive 50-question, multiple-choice survey reminiscent of school; instead, choose a set of questions that focuses on

specifics or a sliding scale and captures the session's high and low points. A good set of core questions to ask your players are:

Overall, how satisfied are you with the game? The accompanying element to this question should be a scale of one to five, with the spectrum being "I didn't like the game" to "I loved the game." This question provides a convenient rating scale that quickly sums up the player's overall experience. It's simple, effective, and easy for everyone to use and review.

What do you enjoy about the game that I should keep doing? Questions should be open-ended to allow players to express what worked for them in greater detail. They can provide as much or as little detail as they prefer, but this still calls out specifics that will help the GM improve down the road.

What do you dislike about the game that I should change or improve? Like the elements enjoyed, asking what players disliked allows them to highlight any sections that need more attention. Anything called out here should receive special attention, as it may affect players' enjoyment.

What should I consider adding or doing to improve the game? Letting players provide their input for what they want to see in a game creates opportunities for them to enjoy it more. They may suggest concepts that aren't ideal, but granting players the forum to propose additions may open the door to ideas the GM can explore in future sessions.

These questions allow players to provide deeper insights into what stands out to them, encouraging them to provide feedback that affects their overall enjoyment. They may also lead the GM to discuss with the group whether the opinion resonates with everyone. Once the GM receives this information and a consensus from the group, the next step is determining what they can—or should—implement.

APPLYING FEEDBACK

Not all feedback is good feedback. That is the simple, unfortunate truth. Once the GM has gathered all the praise and criticism from themselves and their players, they must evaluate whether each point benefits their game. Sometimes, the information provides helpful ideas or suggestions; at other times, the feedback contains unactionable complaints that are just there for venting purposes. In either situation, the GM must make a case-by-case decision regarding the opinion's merits.

The best way to determine the comments' usefulness is to look for common trends. Are multiple people suggesting the same thing? Two people might describe identical issues differently; for example, one player might say, “I didn’t like it when the GM took control of my character,” while another may point out, “The enemies we fought were too challenging.” While these comments appear to address different scenarios, think back to what happened in the session: What might be a common thread between them? Considering this can help immensely in identifying improvement areas.

Once they sort between helpful and less helpful comments, the GM can consider where to apply the notes in their game. As mentioned earlier, this process can go slowly; adjusting one thing incrementally isn’t a problem, and the GM shouldn’t feel they need to address everything at once. Sometimes going slow to see how players receive gradual changes can lead to new ideas for approaching specific feedback.

In addition, sometimes, the GM won’t know how or where to implement feedback. For instance, a player might express frustration that the rest of the group relies too heavily on them in combat. Since players manage how their characters act in combat, there may be little the GM can do in these cases. They can consider ways to redesign encounters to highlight other characters’ abilities or alter the battles to see if the fights are too challenging for the other characters. Either of these steps may help address the feedback, but knowing which would work best may require more testing or information before settling on a solution.

The GM might also need to consider how the concerned player handles combat or their role in the party. Are they dedicated healers supporting the party? Do they leap into the thick of battle without hesitating? If the answer to either of these questions is “yes,” the issue may be more with how the frustrated player responds to the situation. In these cases, it may be less clear how to improve the game to address that feedback or if a meaningful change is warranted.

In the example above, the best solution is to wait until more evidence is available rather than take action. But this doesn’t just include ambiguous feedback; sometimes, criticism can be explicit yet have no ideal avenue for implementation. Despite some information not being immediately usable, don’t be discouraged! Even great feedback doesn’t always have an obvious place to be used. GMs can file these tidbits away for future use or follow up with players to gain more insight—just be sure to respect any anonymity promised.

DISCUSSING WITH THE GROUP

Often, it is helpful to discuss the survey and the GM's plan of action with the entire group. This can be helpful because it isn't always clear how to implement feedback, what was intended by the feedback, or because the feedback would influence play in a substantive way that the entire group needs to agree on.

It's also worth discussing the feedback the GM will NOT implement with the group, though not always for the same reasons. The primary goal of doing so is to ensure that everyone knows they are heard—regardless of whether the GM uses their feedback or not. However, it is common for players to raise points not previously considered; whether these points will change your mind is for you to consider on a case-by-case basis, though it's always wise to wait to pass judgment until you've evaluated the argument fairly.

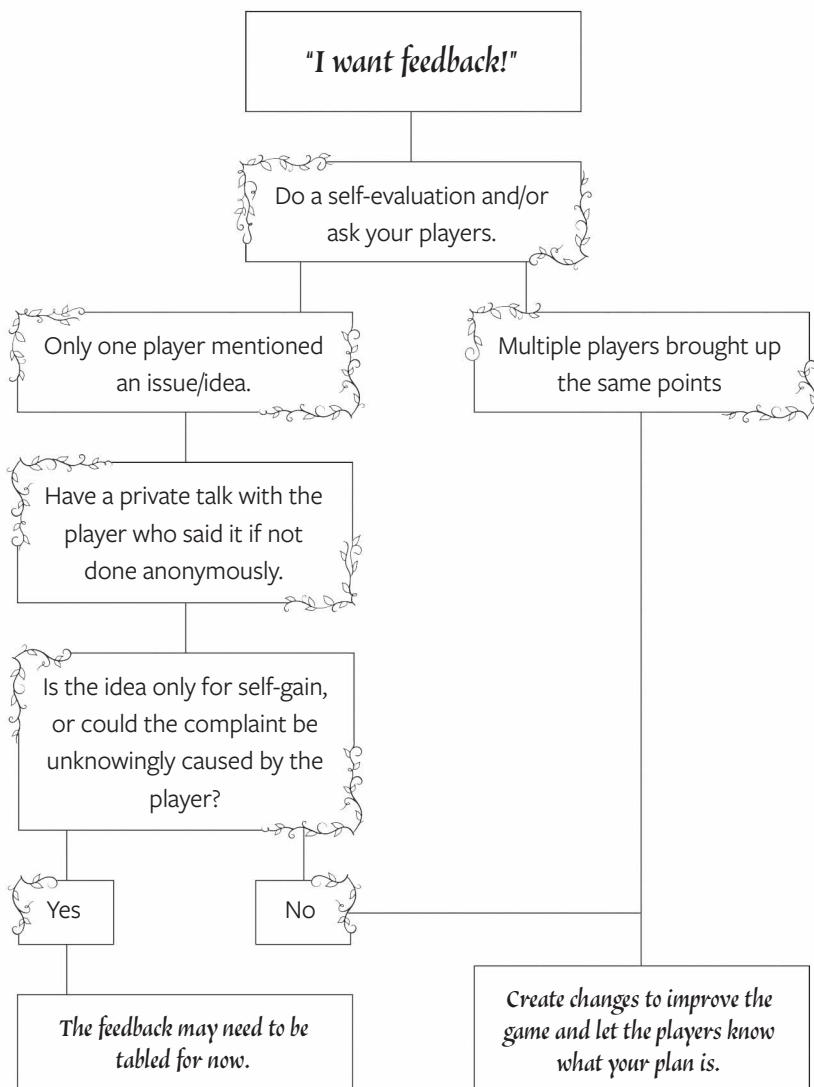
FOLLOWING UP ON FEEDBACK

After receiving actionable feedback and taking measured steps toward improvement, the GM shouldn't immediately follow up on those specific elements. This is for a couple of reasons: If the GM implements changes gradually, it may take time for the group to notice. Asking if someone sees improvement after one new session may not give players a perfect understanding of what they have changed yet. Therefore, it makes sense to allow the gradual changes to stand on their own before checking whether players have noticed adjustments.

The second reason to delay following up on improvements immediately is that they may receive tepid feedback for gradual adjustments. Receiving feedback is already challenging without the constant weight of feeling that something is inadequate. Similar to how self-evaluations that dwell on the negatives may amplify feelings of self-doubt, this can lead to bitterness and despair at ever doing better.

Therefore, the GM should confirm if the changes introduced are an improvement after some time has passed. Give the changes a chance to settle before asking the group if the adjustments have improved their experience with the game. Some players may even share that they noticed the differences before the official inquiry, saving the GM the follow-up. Either way, feedback could be positive or negative. Revisiting the feedback later allows the GM to continue growing in their role without feeling that incremental changes are wearing them down to the point of quitting.

FEEDBACK



Avoiding Burnout

While playing TTGs can be extremely fun, it's also clear that the GM's role is a bit more stressful due to the various game aspects they manage. Receiving critiques and working on improvements adds to this stress, especially if it feels like progress is slow in the latter. With all of this compounding upon itself, GMs can quickly feel overwhelmed or burned out by the experience.

Burnout can be a constant drain on GMs. Whether from negative feedback, the stress of trying to improve, or more negative feedback after making improvements, GMs may consider shrugging off their role due to its exhausting weight. This is unfortunate, yet understandable, given the pressure that may exist from this feedback.

However, there are methods to reduce these feelings. One of the best ways is to schedule some time that doesn't involve the game. No matter how many games are on the GM's docket or how busy their life schedule is, they must include time for self-care. Sometimes the best feedback the GM or their players can give is that it's time for everyone to recharge their batteries. Taking a break to destress isn't a sign of weakness or that the GM is doing something wrong—it is often the opposite. It's a sign that they are handling potential issues positively to develop the best game possible.

Final Thoughts

Let's be honest: getting feedback can be intimidating. It's not a comfortable experience, and it can be extremely intimidating. But that doesn't take away its importance and can often contribute to it. Just approach it with the mindset that the feedback you're getting is most likely intended to help you and is coming from a place of respect. We don't want to avoid feedback because we're afraid of hearing something that we don't want to hear. Instead, consider that's often exactly what we need to hear, especially from those who have our best interests in mind.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Seeking and Utilizing Feedback. Your players will be your primary source of feedback, though you can give yourself feedback if you're careful. Self-reflection requires you to be honest with yourself about the game while balancing the positive and negative. Players can be apprehensive about giving feedback for fear of hurting feelings or reprisal. Anonymous surveys and specific questions can help gather constructive feedback, which can be used to enhance the gaming experience.

Processing Feedback. Feedback is often going to sting a little bit, especially if someone is pointing out a fault. You should carefully consider what you're being told, taking care to avoid overwhelmingly negative or positive responses. Take a step-by-step approach to improve specific aspects of their games (preferably in the order of what you feel is highest impact) rather than trying to address everything at once.

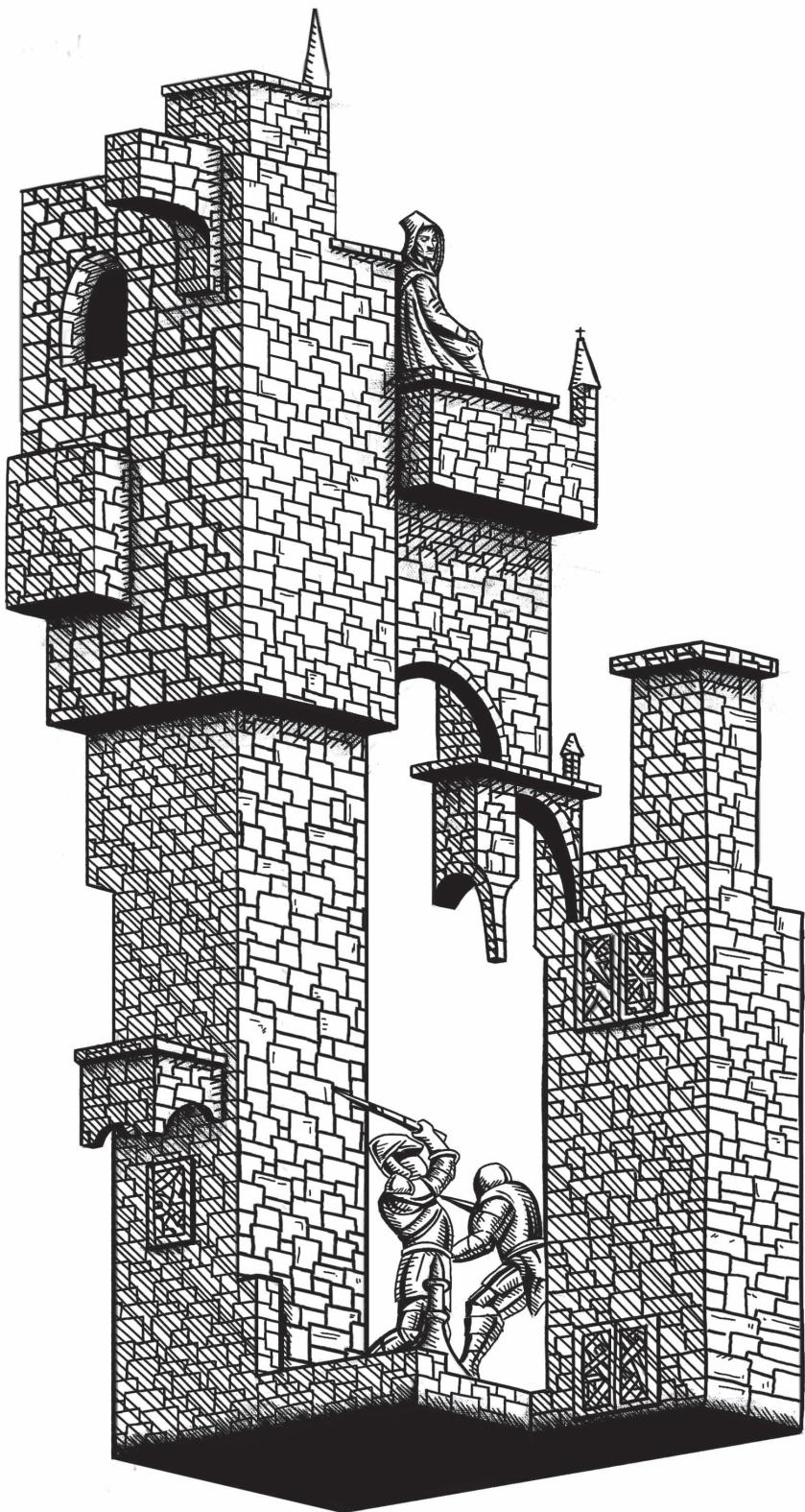
Applying Feedback. Not all feedback is equally valuable, so you should evaluate it for relevance. Be incremental in the changes you apply and give them time to settle into the game; don't try to fix everything all at once. It is important to discuss feedback and actions with the entire group to ensure everyone feels heard.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Have you ever had trouble getting feedback from your players?

How can you make sure you can consider feedback critically without it becoming overwhelmingly negative?

What strategies can you use to make sure you're not overwhelming yourself by trying to fix everything at once?



CHAPTER 13: PROBLEMS IN THE GAME

With everything else that the GM manages before, during, and after a session, the last things they want to deal with are intergroup problems or troublesome players. Their role is to prepare and run the game, not provide therapy to the group. Despite this, the GM's designation as the de facto leader sometimes means they must step in to mediate and navigate several problems.

Although the GM will mediate disputes or problems, it's essential to know they're not technically responsible for handling them. It doesn't mean they should ignore issues when a player or the group is struggling; as a human being, the decent thing to do is address the situation and try to make it workable. The GMs need to manage countless concerns to enhance everyone's enjoyment, but the most common ones revolve around metagaming, problem GMs, and problem players.

METAGAMING

Metagaming is one of the most prevalent issues in TTRPGs and possibly the hardest to avoid. The term refers to using knowledge gathered from outside the game to influence the characters' in-game choices and actions. This is information the player—not the character—knows about a situation, monster, or game mechanics they can exploit; ultimately, it presents as a common source of aggravation for the GM and the rest of the table.

Considering that all players bring external knowledge into the game, what makes it a problematic addition? Honestly, the primary issue is that it's terrible roleplaying, if not a direct attack against the spirit of roleplaying. Having someone incorporate knowledge like this into the game often detracts from everyone's fun, as it stifles the player characters' ability to learn and grow in the game world. This frustrates GMs because it hinders their ability to run exciting games; when players know things or have all the answers, it makes it difficult to surprise or challenge them at the table.

Tabletop gaming culture doesn't mesh well with metagaming. This hobby focuses on letting players learn and experience something firsthand, thus growing revelations into unique memories that inspire joy in the game. Other media types do not have this approach. Video gamers, for example, are much more open to how a player experiences a game, even if they look up information online or in-game guides. But tabletop gamers almost universally agree that new players especially shouldn't have grand reveals spoiled by foreknowledge brought from outside sources or the past.

Keeping this in mind, some aspects of metagaming are acceptable if they facilitate the overall gaming experience. For example, how player characters meet and form an adventuring party requires a significant amount of suspended disbelief. Anyone running a poll in society is almost guaranteed to discover that no one has met random strangers in a bar or hotel and gone adventuring with them! This is something that nobody—professional player or GM—could apply to a real-life scenario. And yet each player enters the game knowing they'll form a party. Is it metagaming? Yes—but it enables the game to begin smoothly, which makes this a beneficial form of metagaming.

Metagaming can be challenging to handle. On the one hand, some situations benefit from it overall; by and large, though, it's a distraction that can lower the game quality. Not every case will be clear-cut, however. Because of this, the GM will need to approach each instance on a case-by-case basis to determine if it impacts the group's enjoyment.

PROBLEM GAME MASTERS

While most of the issues GMs experience are player-centric, sometimes they are the most significant impediment to player enjoyment. This troublesome behavior can manifest in various ways, such as in how the GM interacts with players or in how they prepare for the game—and the list of examples that follows isn't exhaustive. Although this is a section for players to consider, the GM should also be mindful of their actions that might contribute to game problems.

Many of the cases involve how the GM interacts with players. For example, if the GM rules more in favor of one player's actions (or, conversely, being more likely to rule against them), this creates an imbalance in the game that causes resentment. Alternatively, the GM may get upset with players unfairly for something as simple as trying to interact with the game world in a way they don't want.

GMs may create problems by using the game world to single out or punish players. One way this happens is by singling out characters or players unfairly. To clarify, this isn't the same as having an NPC react harshly to character choices in the game; this is the GM retaliating against a player for their gaming choices and has little to no basis in the game itself. In these instances, the GM might also use meta knowledge to their advantage, drawing on specific monster exploits or character features to punish the player.

METAGAMING

- ◆ Make a judgment call for each occurrence.
- ◆ Consider if the metagaming is necessary, such as when the characters agree to become an adventuring party.
- ◆ If the metagaming is harmless and needed to progress the story, consider looking past it.
- ◆ If the metagaming impacts the group's enjoyment, it should be stopped immediately.

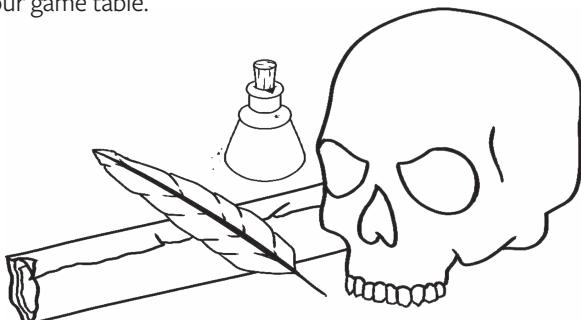
PROBLEM GM

- ◆ Be mindful of your actions as a GM, and always act in the best interest of the group.
- ◆ If only one player notices an issue, they can ask the other players for input.
- ◆ The players should talk to the GM about any issues as soon as they come up.
- ◆ The GM must be receptive, avoid being defensive, and should try to find a solution with the players as a team.
- ◆ The GM and player(s) may not be a good match, and either the player or GM should leave the group.

PROBLEM PLAYER

- ◆ Keep an eye out for unpleasant/unwanted behavior and try to fix it as soon as possible.
- ◆ Have a private talk if the issue is mild and can wait or address it as it happens if the issue is extreme.
- ◆ Have a respectful conversation with the offender and allow them to tell their side even if it will not change the outcome.
- ◆ Offer solutions to the problematic behavior and try to solve the issue together.
- ◆ Always check in with the rest of the group, especially in extreme cases.
- ◆ The player may not be the right fit for the group and may need to be asked to leave the table.

Note: not all groups are the same! Use your best judgment and talk to your players to find the best solutions for your game table.



HANDLING PROBLEM GAME MASTERS

Whatever the case, players who come across GMs guilty of this should act to minimize the situation. One of the first main things players should do is share their concerns when providing feedback or speaking confidentially with the GM. The GM may not even be aware that they're creating an unhealthy environment for the players; thus, speaking with them allows them to course-correct.

Sometimes more is needed; however, players must address persistent issues. The player can also gauge whether the rest of the group feels the same way about the situation—more than likely, others share the same sentiment. Sometimes having more voices acknowledging the problem makes it easier to raise concerns, and not being the lone voice shouting into the void can be an impetus for change. If all else fails, the player should evaluate whether this is the right group. Depending on the severity of the GM's problem behavior, this might be the best solution, and, with situations that affect the integrity of the table's safe space, this may need to be the immediate step taken from the start.

For GMs, it's crucial to be receptive to players' concerns about these issues. Rather than get defensive, take a moment to consider the situation and reflect on the feedback. If self-reflection leads to a realization that their conduct is problematic, then the GM should take steps to change those behaviors. We provide more details on the process a GM should take to undergo this improvement in an earlier chapter; implementing those suggestions could be the difference between repairing the group's trust and losing it entirely.

PROBLEM PLAYERS

Nearly every GM has a story about a problem player from one of their games. Maybe it's fascination or schadenfreude, but sharing these tales for everyone's entertainment is almost like a rite of passage. However, no matter how much amusement the events create after the fact, they are agonizing nightmares in the moment. As with problem GMs, the following examples are far from a comprehensive compilation, yet they are the most common signs of trouble with players.

Problem players take many forms, but one of the most noticeable is when they intentionally cheat. This usually includes obvious examples, like changing dice rolls to be a specific number, misinterpreting a class feature or spell deliberately, or altering a character sheet improperly to gain additional buffs. It can also tie in with metagaming if the player actively pulls up information from a module or about a

monster. In a game and life, society usually frowns upon cheating, and it requires immediate attention.

Rules lawyers fit into a similar category. These players mold technicalities or vague game rules to their advantage and will often push their own interpretation—this differs from the GM requesting someone share their input or advice because this is a solicited request. Rules lawyers will manipulate how to interpret or word the rules to find exploits that break the game’s intended flow; being accurate often takes a back seat to them using their interpretation for personal gain. More often than not, it can lead to arguments with the GM, creating a more toxic rapport that sours the game for everyone.

Power gamers fit into a parallel category, focusing on building the most overpowered characters they can find through stats or features. Countless sites offer ideas for developing characters with feature combinations to exploit in the game, and many of these optimized designs are interesting. The problem arises when this creates an unstoppable character that barely shrugs at the GM’s challenges. It can weaken roleplaying at the table since the player focuses less on a collaborative experience with the group and more on their character’s greatness. If this was the original intent for the campaign and the entire group has agreed to power game together, that’s the exception; if only one person does this, it’s a different story.

Players acting out at the table also drain the sense of fun for the rest of the group. They can exhibit this across a spectrum of reactions, from responding more antagonistically to the GM’s world to throwing a tantrum over outcomes or decisions. It can also manifest as the player purposefully screwing over other players, such as by undercutting the rest of the group’s plans or actively doing them harm. GMs should nip this behavior in the bud quickly since it undermines the social contract and affects everyone’s comfort at the table.

Another type of problem player is one who demands the spotlight constantly. This may be connected to the last example since antagonism can occur more often when the player feels the need to be the center of attention again. This behavior can get old fast, especially considering the collaborative nature of the hobby. If it becomes too prevalent and detracts from everyone else’s opportunities to share experiences at the table, the GM should take steps to prevent the situation from spiraling into something worse.

Another issue that GMs need to be mindful of is how many distractions a player has. Whether an environmental disruption or electronic notifications, these all vie for their attention, especially when the player isn't actively involved in the events. For this reason, some tables have a strict no-electronics policy at the table. Still, the myriad of available digital tools can make this harder to enforce.

HANDLING PROBLEM PLAYERS

Unfortunately, addressing these situations is among the more challenging aspects of being a GM, but they still need to be handled. A private chat with the offender can often be the quickest and easiest solution, explaining what the issue behavior is and why it causes a problem. The GM can then request that the player take specific actions to remedy the problem and hopefully resolve the matter.

However, some situations require the behavior to be called out publicly at the table when it occurs. The intent, in this case, isn't to embarrass the player but to stop the issue. However, the harsh truth is that sometimes a problem might be so extreme—such as a player who crosses a pre-established boundary about specific types of violence—that it cannot wait for a private discussion. In these circumstances, the best thing to do is immediately pause the game and address the behavior.

Even in this situation, when the issue requires stopping active gameplay, it's essential to remember that this is a dialogue, not a dictation. Be sure to listen to the other side, even if it won't necessarily change the outcome. In most cases, opening the door to dialogue will resolve the issues. Everyone is there to play a game, not cause problems (or, at least, that's the most successful mindset to have when dealing with these situations).

As an extreme response, the GM can also ask the player to leave the game. This action is typically a last resort, though it is vital in some cases, like continual toxic behavior. In more severe circumstances that affect the table's promised safe space, the GM should handle it immediately. If it is the appropriate decision, or if the problem continues even after multiple warnings, then sometimes this is the best recourse for the group's continued enjoyment.

Extreme actions are sometimes not enough to treat a toxic situation completely. After resolving the problem, the GM should take time to check in with the rest of the table. The main reason to do this is to reassure any injured parties that they have handled the issue. However, ensuring that the affair doesn't turn the player away

from the hobby entirely is just as essential. It's a massive (yet necessary) change to drop a toxic player, but losing an excellent player because of poisoned impressions of the game is even worse.

THE PATH AHEAD

While there are many opportunities for issues, the GM can develop strategies for managing them. By preparing for problems before they occur, GMs can anticipate the actions necessary to address each situation. Sometimes this may require hard decisions and deeper introspection; in the end, however, how the GM faces these issues will define how much the players enjoy the game.

* * *

A GM needs to be mindful of many steps and moving parts while facilitating the game, but they are all key to growth in this role. From the GM's responsibilities to handling problems at the table, we've presented the foundations of game mastering. The preceding chapters provide a working strategy for addressing potential issues and building the skills to run the game effectively. By following these guidelines, we see an incredible opportunity for you to develop ways to become a great GM!

But one subject has been conspicuously absent throughout this: developing the best adventure or campaign for your players. How do you approach a one-shot versus a years-long campaign? What tips and tricks are there for designing encounters and maps or for building the game world into a place players want to visit? All these secrets and more lie ahead in the next phase of your adventure to becoming a GM and running roleplaying games.

With this in mind, let us turn the page and begin leveling up your game creation for ultimate success!

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Metagaming. Metagaming is where players (and game masters!) use external knowledge to influence their in-game decisions. It makes games less fun and reduces the challenge, as it prevents surprises, hinders character growth, and is widely considered taboo in tabletop games. While some aspects of metagaming may be okay or even good for the game, you should carefully evaluate when that is the case and when it is not. There won't be a universal answer, and you'll need to discover what works for you.

Problem Game Masters. When there are problems in the game, sometimes we may need to look inward. Often done unintentionally, you may find yourself falling into the habit of making biased rulings, unfairly targeting players, or using meta-knowledge. Hopefully, if this happens, your players will be comfortable enough to tell you what they're seeing. When something like this is brought up, approach it with maturity, consider whether it is true or just perception, and carefully implement solutions if it is.

Problem Players. Problematic players can manifest in various ways, such as cheating, rules lawyering, power gaming, disruptive behavior, or attention-seeking tendencies. How you address these issues is up to you and will depend on the nature of the issue itself. In extreme cases, removing a player from the game might be necessary.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What does problematic metagaming look like?

What types of metagaming are you okay with?

How do you identify problematic behaviors in people at your table, including yourself?



• PART 3 •

INTRODUCTION

The GM sets aside their pen, letting out a weary sigh as they stare at the compilation of notes recorded from the hair-raising session. “Well . . . that was unexpected,” they murmur to the empty room. The session had ended a couple of hours ago, and while the players had all gone home, the GM lingered behind in their game room, considering how events had transpired.

The battle against the pit fiend had been going so well. The cultist minions had perished quickly, the devil significantly weakened, and the party was on the verge of triumph. And then the Cleric went down after a critical hit and failed their death saves. Somehow the Paladin and the Rogue survived by the skin of their teeth, but without a way to revive their comrade due to the Paladin’s commitment to abjure necromantic magic.

Shaking their head, the GM takes a sip of warm tea, trying to soothe their tired vocal cords. *Now, where do we go from here?* They glance at the session report, reading over the notes. *Paladin was adamant about finding some way to revive the Cleric, and Rogue had suggested reaching out to old contacts to see if anyone had any ideas on how to do this . . . Could that be the next adventure?*

The GM picks up their book of monsters and flips through it. *Perhaps something to do with a powerful wish or other high-level magic? Something that would make a worthwhile quest for the surviving companions to undergo?* A word jumps out at them amidst the pages, and the GM pauses. “Genies,” they whisper. They glance at the corresponding stat blocks and groan. No, for some reason, genies don’t have a way to cast the wish spell. *Then again, why not rely on mythology and say they can do so under rare circumstances? Or do the players need to convince the genie to do this somehow?*

Setting aside the book, the GM takes their pen and turns their notepad to a clean page. “Where to find a genie?” they mutter aloud as they write the question. *Well, wherever they need to go, I’ll need to make sure that there are opportunities for social interaction, combat, and exploration. Perhaps the genie is imprisoned in a*

wealthy noble's estate? What if the noble is an archmage throwing a party to show off their extraordinary exploits, such as capturing a genie? The GM jots that idea down, along with the words “Social function?” and “Free the genie, get a wish as a reward?”

Now, I have to introduce the Cleric's temporary character as quickly as possible—maybe they're another guest heading to the party? They jot a quick reminder on the page to connect with the Cleric to see how to arrange that. That introduction should be fluid enough to get them together for this mission. Maybe their character would desire to embarrass the archmage, making it easy for them to join the others.

The GM then pulls out a pad of graph paper and begins sketching a rudimentary floor plan of the building. Ground level for party-goers, upper level restricted for the archmage and their servants, and a basement vault to hold the genie. *I can provide several ways for the party to get down to the genie; that shouldn't be an issue. They might have to talk their way in or sneak in, then wander around for ideas on how to get into the vault. Then they have to free the genie...*

And what if they succeed? The GM considers a moment. Well, the archmage won't like losing their prized genie, making them a powerful foe for the players. The archmage may be involved in something more significant with a faction that will make hunting the players their new mission.

With the new potential story arc in mind, the GM smiles and begins filling in the details of this next adventure.

* * *

A GM's work is rarely ever done. If they aren't adjudicating a session's events, they often use their time to prepare assiduously for the next. Curating monsters, drawing up maps, developing NPCs, writing out read-aloud text—all these and more are elements that take center stage in the GM's mind when preparing great scenarios. Over the following chapters, we'll provide insights into some of the best techniques and steps to follow so that the GM uses preparations and time to their full potential.



S
O
C
I
A
L

C
O
M
B
A
T

E
X
P
L
O
R
A
T
I
O
N

CHAPTER 14: GETTING READY TO CREATE THE GAME

We've covered a considerable amount of ground in the previous chapters of this book. From delving into some of the core concepts to what the GM does in and out of the session, our discussions have focused on managing the session and preparations. Those concepts are the foundations that GMs use in their game preparations; they are integral to developing a memorable and enjoyable tabletop roleplaying scenario.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE GAME MASTER ISN'T PREPARED?

Preparation makes everything in life more manageable. Planning before an event makes it much more straightforward, whether going on a trip or preparing a speech. This same principle applies to running a TTRPG and is crucial to preserving the GM's sanity. It's no exaggeration to say that without preparation, there is no game. Of course, you can always choose to run the game without preparation. But will you run it well? By not having anything ready ahead of time, the odds that the game won't go smoothly are almost certain. Every variable in the scenario amplifies the GM's stress; instead of adjudicating the events or setting the scene, they will frantically flip through books and notes to find essential details. Players get frustrated, the GM makes mistakes, and no one has fun.

The point of this is to show a direct correlation between the effort the GM puts in and everyone's resulting enjoyment. When the GM is more confident, in-game situations are easier to manage, and the game will move faster. Having notes ready and details about what to expect in the scenario go a long way toward this goal. The upcoming chapters will describe what preparations a GM should make and how to make them.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CREATE A ROLEPLAYING GAME?

Roleplaying is the most vital aspect to remember about TTRPGs. It's the heart and soul of this hobby, permeating every aspect of the game. Roleplaying happens when characters interact socially, explore a new environment, and confront a monster in battle. Without this intrinsic element, our TTGs would lose the uniqueness that differentiates them from traditional board games.

Our goal as GMs, therefore, is to understand how to create games that encompass that core idea of roleplaying. We want to make games that inspire our players to

roleplay. The best way to do this is to examine game aspects that inspire this most: ensuring players can make choices and combining the three pillars of gameplay (we'll review these below). Although we've touched on these topics, we'll be returning to them often moving forward, so it's vital to understand them clearly.

MAKE SURE THE GAME HAS CHOICE

While each TTRPG has something that makes it the GM's own, the variable that makes the game more special is choice. How players react and respond to in-game events defines the collaborative storytelling aspect. Everything boils down to how the GM presents pivotal decisions to the players and how much latitude the GM provides when the moments arrive. While each GM's approach to building a game around choice differs, we can categorize their methods into three groups: railroads, sandboxes, and linear adventures.

RAILROADS

Railroads are a very restrictive type of game that directs players to participate in certain events at specific moments for particular reasons; no matter what players do or say, they must participate in the event as directed. Most players aren't keen to engage in a game with limited options, and their characters are merely vehicles to take the plot from Point A to Point B. This method removes choice from the equation, and the resulting railroad is usually as fun as it sounds—it's not.

One way of viewing this is to recognize that most video games are railroads. Nearly every video game falls under this category, including major ones that tout an open world. No matter what side quests or activities happen in the game, the only way to progress is by taking the predetermined steps the developers have designed.

This isn't to say that video games are an inferior form of entertainment; they still serve a purpose for GMs. The structure and concepts for plot points in these games can be great inspirations for a TTG. However, a video game's rigidity and forced progression in specific ways shouldn't be used when preparing a TTG because it stifles players' choices and makes the game less enjoyable for everyone.

SANDBOXES

Some GMs react to avoid creating a railroad and end up at the far opposite end of the spectrum: the sandbox. The world becomes an open book that allows players to do whatever they want. There are no restrictions, penalties, or plot hooks to speak of. Sandboxes, which grant unlimited and unfettered choice to the players, may seem

the best way to run a game and are often held as shining examples of the highest form of RPG. However, this is a misguided perception.

Consider what a sandbox entails: a lack of constraint, repercussion, or guidance. While the first two are benefits of this game style, the last is where problems arise. Dropping players into a completely open, free-range world can leave them lost and directionless. Where do they go from there? What's their purpose for being there? These are just a few frustrating questions players will likely utter while navigating the sandbox they have landed in—and they're not alone.

The GM is likewise left in a more difficult position. If the players don't know what they're doing, how should the GM? What sorts of events and scenarios should they prepare for? A straightforward answer is "all of them," but that's easier said than done. The GM doesn't have unlimited resources to devote to amassing various situations.

Alternatively, a GM who chooses to run a sandbox may decide that—since they don't know what the players will do—they'll make everything up on the fly, resulting in an even less enjoyable game for everyone. Of course, some will claim they can run exciting and engaging games by making everything up as they go. There are certainly those who succeed, but they'd be far and away the rarity, and most games of this nature are generally not enjoyable.

For these reasons, a sandbox game style usually isn't ideal.

LINEAR ADVENTURES

Since having too few or too many choices presents challenges, the GM is left with the task of finding a middle ground between them. Linear adventures combine the best of both approaches into a more balanced package: the GM prepares an open-ended scenario that gives players the flexibility to approach and resolve issues how they wish. Players can still choose how they address events, but the GM's guidance helps them focus on the circumstances.

A linear adventure has a much looser plot structure than a railroad. One adventure leads to the next, which leads to the next, then further into even more adventures. While seemingly episodic, this method can still feel connected to the whole when the GM introduces plot hooks that lead players toward the next steps in their journey.

This begs the question of how player choice works regarding how the characters progress through the adventures. There's a fine line between too little and too much choice. An approach that often works well is to always have two or three options to choose from in whatever form makes sense for your game. These can be a combination of adventures related to the main plot of the campaign, or players can choose to divert their path to follow side quests or other activities they want to do.

Whenever you're ready to prepare for the next adventure, be sure to identify which adventure the characters will be going on. The most effective way to do this is by simply asking the players after a game: "I'm getting ready to prepare the next adventure for you guys. Which one of the options that you've found do you want to go on?" This means the players always have agency and can choose between adventures. You also get to keep your sanity and don't need to prepare for every possible event, only the next one.

By blending the best of both extremes into a convenient mix of structure and choice, this game style combines elements widely considered the preferred design. The subsequent chapters of this book will provide a guide to creating linear adventures based on the popularity of this model. However, much of the advice presented also applies to creating sandbox games, so the information may need to be adapted to align with that type of game.

THE THREE PILLARS

As mentioned earlier in this book, roleplay integrates into every facet of TTRPGs—in the conversations we have between characters, and anywhere we portray them in the game. You can find it when you challenge monsters in a harrowing battle or wander through the darkest dungeons. We can categorize each way roleplaying incorporates into the game under one of the three pillars of gameplay: combat, social interaction, and exploration.

COMBAT

Most game systems center their rules around combat. The mechanical reason for this is that many elements need to be defined, but also because fighting is almost inevitable in-game. Whether it arises from antagonists, the wildlife, or just a simple misunderstanding between characters, the opportunity for physical conflict is always present. The GM should be open to including this where appropriate.

It is while developing this pillar, however, that the GM will most likely come across discussions about balance. “Balance” refers to how challenging an encounter is—too hard, too easy, or just right. Finding the sweet spot often requires some trial and error, as well as some understanding of what affects the difficulty of the encounter. Since this is a crucial element in most of the game’s design, it’s a topic we’ll cover in more detail when discussing the best ways to create encounters.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Seemingly on the opposite side of the spectrum, social interaction delves more into how characters speak to one another. This pillar is most often wrongly associated with roleplaying. Even though a considerable amount of roleplay happens during these discussions, how we represent characters occurs throughout the game. There are places where social interactions will naturally arise, such as meeting with allied or random NPCs, but this pillar also often bleeds over into parts of combat and exploration.

When social interaction bleeds over into encounters that would typically fit into one of the other pillars, don’t fret. You haven’t done anything wrong—quite the opposite. That is a sign that the game has developed into something more complete and immersive. Don’t shy away from social interactions during combat; lean into them, and let your game come alive.

EXPLORATION

The last pillar is exploration, which involves characters investigating their environment. This usually takes the form of them searching for traps, solving puzzles, tracking down treasure, finding enemies, or just about anything else. Generally speaking, whatever doesn’t involve a physical attack against a foe or speaking to someone falls under this pillar. Part of the reason it’s so hard to quantify how roleplaying fits into this category is that it’s so broad. But as long as players filter what they do through the character’s knowledge and experience in-game, it still contributes to this goal.

These three pillars define roleplaying, and GMs weave them together to create a satisfying game experience. Although not unheard of, it’s unusual for a game system to forgo one of these aspects. How much of each should exist depends on the game system and how the GM prepares their game. There is no right or wrong way to do this; as long as each pillar exists in some fashion and everyone enjoys the session, the GM has done their job well in this regard.

WHICH ONE SHOULD YOU FOCUS ON?

The easy answer to this one is “None of them; they should be treated equally.” But is this the *correct* answer? Well, it depends. Some groups enjoy each of the three pillars equally, so it would do them an injustice not to focus on all of them equally throughout the game. However, this isn’t the case for other—perhaps even most—groups. So how do you decide?

Well, first, don’t fret. The pillars your table enjoys will be the ones you engage with naturally. If your table doesn’t particularly care for exploration, the players probably won’t engage with it. Likewise, if your table prefers the wargame aspect of TTGs, they will probably engage in more combat than other tables.

However, to keep your life easy as you prepare for each game, it’s always wise to ask the players during a session 0 what aspects of the game they like to focus on. That also allows you to understand why they want the various elements; that way, you can narrow down what you’re preparing into something more manageable.

Beyond this, keep an eye on what your players actively engage with throughout the games you run for them. Do most of them shy away from puzzles? Do they rush headfirst into combat at their first opportunity? Do they try to negotiate with every passing kobold or trader? Make sure you write these things down when you notice them, along with the other notes we discussed in Chapter 11; that way, you can be sure you’re preparing things your players will both like and want to engage with.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Throughout this book’s earlier chapters, we have focused on providing insights and tips on what to do when becoming a GM. The following chapters shift the spotlight instead toward how to be a GM, with practical ideas and concepts that will improve the gaming experience. The journey takes more than a single bound, but each step will pull back the curtain on the secrets in the broader world—one that’s often of our own creation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Importance of Preparation. Preparation is one of the key things a game master can do to make sure the session goes smoothly. Without proper prep, you're likely to find sessions difficult and frustrating. Players may feel limited by a lack of options, and you may struggle to run the session effectively. In most cases, there's a one-to-one correlation between prep and enjoyment of the game, but only to a certain point.

Creating a Roleplaying Game. Fundamentally, a tabletop game involves roleplaying, and the entire game is centered around that concept. It permeates every aspect of the game, from character interactions to exploration to battles with monsters. The goal, thusly, is to create a roleplaying game rather than a story (the story comes from the game!). The most important thing we can remember when doing this is to ensure that choice is available to the players and we aren't dictating what needs to happen.

The Three Pillars. The three pillars of gameplay - combat, social interaction, and exploration - define roleplaying in tabletop RPGs. Combat involves rules and mechanics for physical conflict, while social interaction focuses on character conversations and roleplay. Exploration encompasses activities such as investigating the environment, solving puzzles, and tracking down treasure. Game masters weave these pillars together to create a satisfying game experience, and the balance between them can be adjusted based on the preferences of the players and the game system being used.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What does it mean to you that you're creating a roleplaying game?

How can you use all three pillars of play to make the game more exciting?

How will you apply this to your preparation in the future?



CHAPTER 15: BUILDING YOUR WORLD

One of the GM’s responsibilities is building the world where the characters’ adventures take place. While many GMs throw themselves into worldbuilding, others see it as a chore and seek only to do the bare minimum, allowing the world to grow with the characters. Both perspectives are valid, as is any point between those extremes: each game is different, and worldbuilding is only required insofar as necessary for a given game table.

And while worldbuilding may be a joy to some and hard work to others, the GM must complete this task to whatever degree required. One of the most complex parts of worldbuilding isn’t just knowing where to start but when to stop. Creating a world where the campaign will take place is essential, but it should never get in the way of playing the game. If the GM never stops building the game’s framework, the game can never actually begin.

THE THREE FACES OF WORLDBUILDING

The word “worldbuilding” evokes different perspectives from different GMs. To some, it means the creation of the game world; to others, it speaks to the evolution of the game world based on the players’ actions. And to others still, worldbuilding is creating a “living world” for their players, where events are constantly occurring around the characters, not just to or because of the characters. The truth is that worldbuilding is all three of those concepts working in concert.

The GM is indeed responsible for creating the world. Some see the world’s creation as the GM’s art, building the environments, societies, and structures around which the characters will adventure. Some enlist their players to aid in that endeavor, making their worldbuilding decisions based on the players’ character generation choices and backstories.

Different GMs choose different places to start, and there is no correct answer to that question. A GM may begin by developing a religious pantheon, deciding the central climate they want to use for the campaign setting, or building the world around one major city. Some GMs don’t build the world until they know what characters will be involved, molding their world’s development around the lineages and character types that will be central to the game. Some GMs only focus on a tiny region where the characters’ early adventures will take place, planning to expand as the characters’ adventures grow. And others strive to build entire nations, continents, or even worlds before the game begins. There is no correct answer, but the GM needs

to remember that the game eventually has to begin. Excessive worldbuilding should never prevent a campaign from getting started.

Once the world exists to whatever scope the GM desires, it should grow and evolve based on the characters' actions. Nothing makes the world more "real" to the players than seeing their characters' actions affect it—seeing their decisions matter. GMs should ask themselves, "How do the characters' actions affect the world overall? What are the positive and negative impacts of their successes or failures, and how do those impacts change the world in which the next campaign will occur?"

Player immersion is also essential to ensure the game world feels alive. While the players' characters should be the most critical individuals in the game world, they're not the only people living in it. NPCs will also affect the world, especially those who hold power over a part of society. And while the player characters' actions should always be at the forefront, creating a truly living world requires other characters' actions—from the experimental chef in the next town to the kingdom's ruler that the players' characters just left behind.

The players' characters may be the most influential people in the game because their actions have sweeping effects on their world. That world's reality is enhanced by the understanding that the world around them is fluid and just as real and "alive" as they are; events would continue to occur even if the adventurers weren't a part of it. Sights, smells, and sounds are all a part of that, but so are everyone else's motivations, actions, and schemes. GMs should call on their own experiences with the world they live in, such as their favorite sights and places, how their senses perceive the world, and how they see the people around them interact with each other, then use those experiences to fuel their imaginations.

THE SUPREME METHOD

There are many methodologies that aid in building a world, but perhaps the most inclusive one from the creation process perspective is the "SUPREME" method. When building a location, whether a small town or an entire nation, this method asks the GM to address several factors: social, underworld, political, religious, economic, military, and environmental. The GM may not need all these factors at any given time, but understanding how they affect the game world is one of a GM's most effective tools.

Social: Wherever there are people, there are social constructs, expectations, trends, and taboos. Together, these things define the social culture of a world or region. And as time marches on, these things evolve and change. Whenever a social group

introduces a new idea or concept, there will be members who will quickly embrace that ideology, carefully consider its value, or resist for the sole purpose of resisting. Sometimes the status quo is forever changed, but sometimes social change fails because it came too soon or it was a genuinely bad idea, and the masses eventually came together to stop it. Social considerations are the foundation for most other aspects of the SUPREME methodology. They drive politics and the military and profoundly influence religion and the economy; the economy motivates the underworld.

Underworld: The underworld could involve anything from a national thieves' guild to a band of local bandits or a single cutpurse. To many people, "the underworld" is synonymous with organized crime, but it needn't be anything so dramatic, though it often is when focusing on a larger scale. Rarely does a single highwayman become a legend worldwide, but it's not an impossibility. After all, who hasn't heard of Robin Hood? Understanding how the underworld fits into the game world is important not just for characters that work in that field, such as smugglers and thieves, but also to understanding where the power rests within a society and an economy ... and the underworld inevitably finds itself intertwined with a world's politics.

Political: Wherever people form a social construct, there are politics. Not every campaign revolves around the characters getting involved with the political happenings of a territory, and some rabidly avoid it. Still, the world's political structure can have a massive impact on the characters. Politics impacts everything in society, from the laws and how they enforce them to taxes to social constructs meant to aid the less fortunate. Changes in political structure ripple throughout a society and can impact trends, the economy, and even social norms. The type of government, whether monarchies, oligarchies, plutocracies, or theocracies, form the backbone of a society's alignment, beliefs, and sometimes even its faith.

Religious: While the government can affect religion, it's also true that religion can influence politics. After all, in most cultures, ethics and morality are often born from some religious ideology, even if they no longer practice that religion. Religion begins with the structure and nature of the gods, or lack thereof. Understanding the gods, how they perceive and interact with the world, and what mortals think of and expect from them shines a light on society. Among the taboos of ancient Greece were adultery, incest, and patricide; their primary god, Zeus, was guilty of all three, which can tell a lot about how that society viewed its deities. Religion is usually also the motivator behind most holidays. While social and political holidays exist, "holy days" present a culture's sense of reality and affect its society and economy.

Economic: Above all things, however, is money. It affects society more than anything else across all social classes. However, an economy isn't just wealth but how wealth is accumulated. What are the region's primary products? Do they export those products to other places? How do they get the things they need but can't produce themselves? And who holds the purse strings? What kinds of money do they use: coin, paper, or credit? What are the standard exchange rates, and do those vary from one place to another? The answers to these questions not only explain how the economy works but also profoundly influence everything that's come before. And aside from possibly religion, there is no more significant motivator for conflict than money.

Military: War also bolsters economies, creates jobs, presents opportunities for warriors to make names for themselves, and it can strengthen political and religious power. It can also destroy such things and bring an all-too-sad end to a great many lives. Conflict shapes history, and that's no different for the GM's world. Understanding where a world's military strength lies, how it affects political and social development, and where the tensions currently stand provides a living backdrop to the characters' lives. It can also become a significant impetus to their adventures.

Environmental: Regardless of their scope, however, all the subjects we've addressed thus far result from peoples' actions, inactions, or interactions. One aspect of worldbuilding exists well beyond the confines of the social construct, and it is well beyond mortal control: nature. Climate, terrain, and weather, from simple rainfall to massive natural disasters, are crucial to making a world feel real. And keep in mind that, in some genres like fantasy, environmental effects aren't limited to the natural; from magical storms to the wrath of gods, the environment can be a cruel master. A GM should understand their world's environmental makeup to present their players with a world that seems as alive as the people living in it.

As demonstrated in the SUPREME factors' descriptions, none exists in a vacuum. The environment can affect religion, politics, and other factors due to how society evolved within or responded to it. A GM that understands these factors has all the tools necessary to create a truly living world that will feel real to them and their players.

A COLLABORATIVE ART

And while the GM is the final architect of their game world, they should never be afraid of allowing their players to collaborate in the process. Ask players for their input on worldbuilding and listen to their suggestions—even if they're unsolicited.

Players are just as creative as GMs, and they may have an idea or perspective that their GMs never considered.

It's important to remember that even though the GM created the world, once the players' characters step into the picture, the story becomes theirs, and the world is a part of that story. It can be challenging for a GM to let go of their "baby," but the rewards of such collaboration can be mind-blowing when the GM sees the world taking its first steps in a direction they never imagined.

One of the most common pieces of advice new GMs receive is "make sure the players' decisions matter." The players' choices need to matter beyond the moment; they should also impact the world's evolution. It carries far more weight for the players when their choices affect the game world long term for good or ill. When the players' choices have a direct and lasting effect on the game world, it gives them something to remember.

Players have their own goals, sometimes even conflicting with each other. They make allies, make enemies, are betrayed, and are occasionally even the betrayers. They may come into a town and buy out all the essential products that the village has in stock, such as arrows or healing potions. They may throw money around like its candy or murderhobo their way through the town's wealthiest citizens. A character may rise from a race usually hostile to humanity to become a hero of the realm or be of a traditionally admired status only to abuse their power or accidentally cause catastrophic damage to a city. It's up to the GM to decide how these activities impact the game world.

The usual response when the characters stop a war or prevent a powerful evil from destroying a city is for the local ruler to throw them a party and hand over the key to the treasury. If they fail, if the war rages on, or if the villain succeeds in their diabolical plan, the impact seems obvious. But even when the characters win, their actions should affect the world at large. What are the positive and negative effects of their successes, and how do those impacts change the world? What happens when the alien outcast becomes a hero of the people or when the character who should, by all expectations, be a hero to the town proves themselves unworthy of the title? Does it affect how they will perceive characters like those in the future?

When answering such questions, the GM should consider the same kinds of factors they used when building the world. The SUPREME method can be applied here with as much significance as it was during that process. Do the characters' actions change the social aspects of society? Do children begin to emulate the heroes

and pretend to be them while playing in the streets? If the characters defeat an influential member of the underworld, who rises to take their place? Are they better or worse than their predecessor? And do they prefer to promote a different kind of crime—perhaps their own flavor?

Did the local leadership hire the heroes, help them out when needed, or oppose them until they had no other choice? And how does that affect their authority moving forward? Do the people who now celebrate their champions want a leader in power who made their task more difficult? The same questions could be asked of the local religious hierarchy, especially if one of the characters is a prominent member of a different faith. Do the citizens turn their eyes towards the god of the hero that saved them, or remain faithful to the local temple and its traditions?

Economically, do the local shops suddenly find a huge demand for clothing in the styles worn by the characters? If the characters bought out all of the healing potions or med kits, do the prices for such commodities skyrocket? What happens to the town when a plague strikes while the local clergy or shopkeepers struggle to recover their supply? From the perspective of the military, how do the local soldiers and guards feel about a group of outsiders coming in to solve the city's problems? Are they relieved, or do they find themselves overshadowed? How do they respond to recover their reputations? Wars have been started for far less.

Perhaps the most challenging place to allow the players' choices to impact the world is in the world's environmental factors. Most such changes are in the players stopping some enormous threat to the environment, containing a mad druid from razing a city through a storm, preventing a nuclear disaster, or saving people from an earthquake or avalanche. But on a smaller scale, the characters might end a plague, destroy an ancient artifact that had long held a region under the thrall of eternal winter, or accidentally start a wildfire with a misplaced explosion, destroying a town's entire crop of staple food. These events could all have long-term impacts on the local environment for good or ill.

It's impossible to provide concrete guidance on evolving a game world based on the players' choices. After all, every world and set of characters is different, every campaign unique, and there's no limit to players' choices. This chapter is merely a starting point to fire the GM's imagination. After all, no greater power can influence a game world than the GM's imagination. And by making the players' actions serve as the drivers to change in the game world, the GM rewards them for their agency and shows them that in this game, their choices really do matter.

ASK YOURSELF

Do the actions of the characters change the social aspects of society?

Did the local leadership hire the heroes, help them out when needed, or oppose them until they had no other choice?

From the perspective of the military, how do the local soldiers and guards feel about a group of outsiders coming in to solve the city's problems?

Do the citizens turn their eyes towards the god of the hero that saved them, or remain faithful to the local temple and its traditions?

If the characters bought out all of the healing potions or med kits, do the price of such commodities skyrocket?

Note: These are only a select few of many examples.

THE SUPREME METHOD

SOCIAL

- ◆ The culture of a world/region is made of social constructs, taboos, expectations, and trends.
- ◆ Things will evolve with time, new ideas will show up, and society will respond either positively or negatively to them. Either the status quo will change, or the new ideas will fail.

UNDERWORLD

- ◆ The underworld refers to the crime in the world/region and includes all wrongdoers, from well-known guilds to solo criminals.
- ◆ It is important both to those who work in the field and to understand how it affects the power in the world. It will inevitably bleed into the politics and economy.

POLITICS

- ◆ The government forms the backbone of societies and their beliefs.
- ◆ Even if the campaign avoids the characters playing a role in politics directly, it will affect them in some way. They will need to follow the rules set in place by the government just like the society under it.

RELIGION

- ◆ Most cultures, ethics, and morals come from religious ideologies. Understanding the gods and their relationship with mortals can show how the religion of a society may affect those within it.
- ◆ Religion can heavily affect politics, and it is a big motivator of war.

THE SUPREME METHOD

ECONOMY

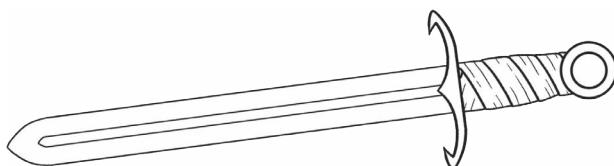
- ◆ The economy is both the level of wealth and how that wealth is acquired. It includes primary products, who controls the system, what currency is used, how the exchange rates may vary, and so on.
- ◆ Money affects all social classes more than any other aspect of society, and there is no bigger motivator to change and war than the economy.

MILITARY

- ◆ Understanding where military strength lies, how it affects the development of an area, and where the tension stands can have dramatic effects on a world/region.
- ◆ Though one side of war is horrible, the other bolsters economies creates jobs, strengthens political and religious power, and gives new heroes the opportunity to rise up and claim their fame.

ENVIRONMENT

- ◆ Nature exists well beyond the confines of social construct and mortal control. Climate, terrain, and weather are crucial to making a world feel real.
- ◆ The environment can affect religion, politics, and other actors due to how society evolved within or responded to it.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

You Have Flexibility. Worldbuilding is an essential task for game masters, but the extent they do it will vary. Some game masters enjoy extensive worldbuilding with detailed and intricate lore, while others prefer minimalism and simply letting the world develop through gameplay. However, no matter how much worldbuilding you want to do, there needs to be a balance between having enough to run the game and actually starting to run the game.

Aspects of Worldbuilding. Worldbuilding as a larger concept is built on a combination of three main ideas: creating the world, evolving it based on player actions, and building a living world with events happening independently of the players. All three aspects are interconnected and contribute to making the game world feel real and immersive.

The SUPREME Method. The “SUPREME” method is a comprehensive approach to worldbuilding that covers various factors: Social, Underworld, Political, Religious, Economic, Military, and Environmental. Building the world around these factors will let it feel complete and give you a more efficient way to let the world evolve over the course of your campaign.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What aspects of worldbuilding excite you? Which ones don’t?

Can you use the SUPREME method in your games, even if you’re not creating a homebrew world?



CHAPTER 16: USING A PREWRITTEN WORLD

Creating an imaginative world from the ground up is something many GMs find enjoyable. Whether in-game or between sessions, the GM's imagination offers an opportunity to layer several details upon the setting's ever-expanding tapestry. Placing physical features on a map, populating settlements with characters, and developing a rich and intricate history all flesh out the game world and make it feel alive.

Of course, only some enjoy developing intricate specifics like this; others need more time or desire for this creative outlet. Some GMs prefer to run the game without delving too deep into background lore and features. And there's nothing wrong with that. For those who want to leap into the game with their players without spending as much time designing the world's setting, a prewritten world may be the optimal choice.

WHAT ARE PREWRITTEN WORLDS

First, a prewritten world is a world setting established especially for playing a TTRPG. Many game system developers will design a standard world that serves as the default setting of their system, and most of the materials they produce will tie into this in some form. Members of the tabletop gaming community also make other settings, which may be based on their homebrew games, actual plays, or pure imagination. The extent of information available also varies from source to source. Sometimes a passionate worldbuilder will offer a comprehensive tome of lore, facts, and a map; in other cases, they have designed the information for modular use, where different GMs can take it and apply it to any other world (or even system).

As a GM, it's ideal to know the end goal of this content. Will you take it and apply it as-is with no alterations? Doing so requires considerably more familiarity with the source material, as less latitude is available to embellish or respond to player situations creatively. However, this form of game can be incredibly satisfying if the setting is based on well-known material or if there's considerable information to learn from. How much the setting relies upon the prewritten content can always be changed as the game progresses; however, any adjustments down the road may affect past revelations that players learned in-game.

Alternatively, a GM can change aspects of the world to match their vision for a game setting. Whether a map, a settlement, an organization, or any other detail

from that setting, they can borrow it entirely or as inspiration to enrich their world. This is often a more popular approach. It allows the GM to reduce their prep time without feeling constrained by the existing lore or details. The added freedom to address the evolving game world without worrying about perfectly matching the current information will provide considerable space, allowing the GM to insert their ideas and creations to modify the setting.

MODIFYING PREWRITTEN WORLDS

All setting books, whether developed by a professional company or homebrewed by the community, exist as a template that doesn't dictate the boundaries of creativity. Even though this is someone else's prewritten content, this doesn't remove the ownership of the world from the GM. As with everything in the world or system, the GM has complete freedom to change anything that doesn't fit their vision; nothing is set in stone unless the GM decides it should be.

For example, a setting book may establish that a region of the game world is renowned for trading exotic creatures to other nations for gems and ore. A GM can decide that such an exchange doesn't match their vision of the world they want to engage in. Instead, they can have the region's economy be based on sharing knowledge. Such a change is within the GM's purview and shouldn't significantly affect the established world. This is, of course, only one example, and you can make several different alterations in the same vein.

The existing world should typically match whatever setting befits the game; for instance, a prewritten steampunk setting may not be the best pairing with a high-fantasy medieval game. That said, there are some instances where a prewritten setting has an iconic element intrinsic to its aesthetic. You can alter it to work, but not without extensive adjustments that run counter to the original setting's intention.

There are some exceptions to this rule when the goal is a subversion of the established setting's intended style. An example of this is a fantastical realm suddenly losing access to all magic, shifting the trajectory of the prewritten world's established story. The GM must adjust the setting to align it with the game's scenario, so they should weigh whether it's the correct choice before acting. Even if it is the right fit for one campaign, it doesn't mean such a subversion should become routine when worldbuilding.

Sometimes, in-game events or the existing lore clashes with the narrative and alters the world's details. Ultimately, even when using a prewritten world, the GM will want to leave their fingerprints on it and make it their own. The GM will probably also introduce their NPCs in specific locations, which often happens even in pre-made adventure modules—more on this in an upcoming chapter. The bottom line is that once the GM has chosen a setting for their game, they take control of the world's details and can make changes to improve the table's enjoyment.

BRINGING YOUR CREATIONS INTO THE WORLD

The GM can bring many potential elements into a prewritten setting, but we can categorize them all distinctly. Most will be inconsequential additions like NPCs or groups with which characters will interact minimally, such as a shopkeeper who doesn't drive the main storyline, but they may meet occasionally. Others will be meaningful creations that players may interact with regularly and may tie elements of the plot together. The GM may also include player-oriented items for players to seek during the game.

Two things that don't fall into these three categories are quests and adventures; these form different game aspects that we will cover in greater detail. However, everything else the GM brings into the world needs to be in one of these primary classifications. Doing this organization will help the GM incorporate them in the best way to avoid impacting the game too much—or too little.

INCONSEQUENTIAL

Anything inconsequential, from a minor NPC to a small feature of the world or lore, can be incorporated into the game freely. Sometimes they result from a roll on random tables or something included to make the world feel inhabited. Whatever the case, these creations should be brought into the game freely when needed.

At the same time, GMs should be careful to prevent these creations from taking on too expansive a role in the game. Their primary function is to facilitate an event without interfering in the situation too much. Of course, players may choose to elevate an inconsequential NPC to a more meaningful level, but these instances happen because they're fascinated with the character. The GM shouldn't discourage this interest, but planning for it in advance may not be productive in the grand scheme of things.

MEANINGFUL

The GM needs to tread more carefully when introducing a meaningful part into the world. They may bring these additions in to replace an existing game element, such as removing a specific character and dropping in a different one. Another example would be swapping a settlement in the prewritten setting for one of the GM's creations. Each change falls under their purview, and there is no restriction on what they want to change.

However, taking this action may affect many more elements in the game world. Some events designed for the setting may not transpire similarly (or at all) with a new character whose motivations differ from the existing one. A specific city detail may be the key to starting a situation, but now it makes no sense due to its absence. Altering the established world this way may cause a ripple effect, which the GM must remember when deciding to include the change.

Bolstering the world actors that can impact the story may become unwieldy for the GM to keep track of and complicate how events unfold. If the GM uses their creations to supplement what already exists in their world without removing these elements, it is safer and has less impact. However, the GM should make these additions judiciously, as most pre-made settings already feature meaningful NPCs and groups.

PLAYER-ORIENTED

A GM will often include something that should pique a player character's interest. Usually, these elements will set up a plot hook for an adventure or quest that the party will undertake to attain something beneficial. In this case, the most common reward in a high fantasy setting is a magic item, but it could also be information that ties into a character's backstory.

The primary concern with these additions is that they often result in player characters becoming much more powerful than before, especially if an item that buffs a character is involved. However, they can serve as the perfect motivator for characters to undertake quests since players are much more inclined to care about their characters' actions if it directly benefits them. Therefore, it helps to incorporate these elements into the setting where appropriate, as long as the GM considers how it could affect the game's balance.

INTEGRATING CHARACTERS INTO AN EXISTING WORLD

While choosing whether to add custom elements into established settings is up to the GM, one factor is unavoidable: how to integrate player characters into the world. Although some settings may have default player characters available, the GM will need to add them in most of these prewritten worlds. Most tables may prefer this, as creating a character is often the ideal way for players to mold them into excellent roleplaying vehicles.

There are many ways that player-made characters can be dropped into a campaign, although none are as simple as most GM creations. The most crucial factor to consider in this process is what will help establish players in the world and motivate them to become an adventuring party. While the options highlighted below are effective, it is fair to recognize that this isn't a comprehensive list.

OPTION ONE: NOBODY CARES

Rather than agonize over the details, some gaming groups don't care about the fine points that brought their character into the story. They're present, looking for adventure, and that's the extent of the information they want or need. Since many pre-made modules offer minimal aid in determining a reason for players to form a cohesive group, this is an ideal method for these adventures. A vague hand wave over the details concerning where the characters fit into the world is okay and should suffice when using this method.

OPTION TWO: EXISTING FACTION MEMBERS

One of the more common and easiest ways to bring player characters into the game world is to have them be members of one of the setting's factions. Because of the convenience this provides for character motivation and plot progression, these factions are often ideal for GMs to use when beginning a campaign in a pre-made setting. Having characters engaged with an organization at the start of an adventure has several advantages, primarily that there is already an established quest-giver to aid and drive the story.

OPTION THREE: CREATING A NEW FACTION

Another option that GMs can use to integrate player characters into a setting involves creating a faction for them to grow with. While similar to the previous process, there's a bit more flexibility because it's more open-ended, giving the GM greater freedom to develop an organization that works specifically with the

characters. However, this approach requires additional work. The relationships this new faction has with other groups will need to be defined, as will further details and motivations for this new creation.

OPTION FOUR: VARIOUS ALTERNATIVES

As mentioned, these ideas are only a partial collection of all possibilities. Sometimes a party has a detailed backstory that integrates with the world but has nothing to do with existing factions. Other times, players will develop a backstory that isn't associated with the world and is only used to establish roleplay opportunities. And many alternate options still provide even more opportunities to introduce player characters into the existing world seamlessly.

FINDING PRE-EXISTING WORLDS

One of the tremendous benefits for GMs preparing to run their games is the wealth of material available. The worlds designed for official game systems often include lore that expands on specific game elements, such as features associated with character classes or other options. Some third-party publishers may create an alternate version of this established history to adjust or correct elements that need fleshing out or are contrary to present norms. Even other publishers develop system-agnostic worlds that can be taken and placed in any relevant setting. Many GMs may draw inspiration from books, video games, or movies to produce a world setting that meets their standards.

The plethora of options makes the GM's task of developing a game world for their players much simpler. They have more freedom to take the best aspects of various sources and combine them into one cosmopolitan world. Whether the material is available online or in published books, these established settings lay a solid foundation for the GM to incorporate settings into their games.

Of course, challenges will still exist in almost any prewritten setting, such as adding GM and player-made characters into the world or adapting aspects to align with the planned narrative. Yet a significant license allows the GM to find solutions to incorporate these ideas into the setting, as long as they evaluate their impact and importance beforehand. However, now that we know how to add these creations to a world setting, there is a logical next question: How do we design these characters to be effective and beneficial to the campaign?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Pre-Written Worlds. Pre-written worlds are those that have been written by the designers of a game system (referred to as “official” worlds) or by a third-party designer. These settings can vary in the extent of information provided, ranging from a detailed, comprehensive overview to a smaller view better suited for a specific adventure. You can choose to use pre-written worlds as they are or modify them to suit your needs. You may even wish to adapt things from other pre-written settings if they are cool or work well.

Modifying Pre-Written Worlds. You can alter anything you need to in a world, including the economy, NPC motivations/goals, or city details to align with what you want out of it. However, be sure to consider potentially unexpected effects to the rest of the world when making significant changes. Subverting the established setting can be an option, but take care that you don’t subvert it beyond recognizability or usability.

Bringing Your Creations into the World. Of course, there are few times that you won’t bring anything into the setting. By the very nature of running a campaign, you will have your own creations to put in the world. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into inconsequential, meaningful, and player-oriented creations. Inconsequential additions, such as minor NPCs or small world details, can be freely incorporated with little risk. You do need to be more careful with meaningful creations due to potential effects on the game world. Player-oriented elements, like plot hooks or character rewards, can motivate players but should be balanced/limited to what is needed or warranted.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Which pre-written worlds excite you the most? Are there any that you wish you could change?

How do you bring your creations into the world so they don’t disrupt it more than intended?



CHAPTER 17: POPULATING YOUR WORLD

As you walk into the tavern, you see an active cacophony of people. At the bar, five customers sit jovially sharing drinks; one of them, an older man, turns towards your group and yells, “EH, fresh meat! Come sit and have a drink!” As his cloak settles around him, a glint of steel becomes visible on his right breast; he bears the steel insignia of the armorers’ guild! His friend on his left seems to be wearing a decent gambeson, while the one on his right appears to have a dagger on his hip. “Who are these people, and what do they want?” the players ask themselves.

As player characters journey through the game world, inevitably, they will come across various creatures and characters of the GM’s creation. Some will be affable helpers that enthusiastically help players, while others scheme and plot to oppose them. Whether introduced as individuals or members of a larger group, these non-playable characters make the world feel alive and vibrant and are a core element of any tabletop gaming system.

WHAT ARE NPCs?

“Non-player character,” or “NPC,” is broadly defined. While the general meaning describes all GM-controlled characters, it usually refers to friendly characters that the GM portrays. Technically, common parlance also refers to villains and monsters as NPCs; however, they are typically associated with more malicious intent, making them the opposite of the average NPC.

In this chapter, the term NPC applies to any character not managed by players. As we expand on details about NPCs in the paragraphs ahead, there will be qualifiers to show whether the attributes relate to the player characters’ friends or foes.

In addition, we also associate NPCs with patrons, factions, or organizations. These terms refer to large groups of NPCs that share a common goal, but how they interact with player characters makes them distinct. For instance, patrons provide a friendlier connection and often ally themselves with the player characters, while factions usually oppose them. An association with organizations is less common but provides a more neutral, unbiased stance toward the players. This latter group can incorporate features from either factions or patrons, so the GM must carefully consider how any details they include will affect the game world.

INDIVIDUAL NPCs

Just as players interact with the game by playing through their characters, the GM's NPCs allow them to play at the table too. This is one of the most understated yet vital roles that NPCs fulfill. While the GM has many (sometimes better) tools they can use to accomplish nearly anything required, such as imparting information or creating an ambiance of mystery, it's essential to remember that the GM is also a *player*. These characters allow them to immerse themselves into the session as well, and they are crucial to increasing the GM's enjoyment of the game.

An NPC also provides a way for players to interact with the GM. When they're searching for quests or information, a friendly NPC can provide this conduit to keep them informed. Monsters and villains likewise develop conflict in the world, as needed by the GM, providing challenges for players to overcome. NPCs are also excellent sources of lore and secrets that the player characters can discover, allowing for a more immersive experience in which players and characters learn simultaneously.

However, a more subtle task that NPCs help with is keeping the game on track. Players sometimes get lost or frustrated when they need a clearer idea of what to do; a consistently friendly NPC is an ideal resource to set them on the right track. They can also serve as contacts for reporting quest results and getting rewarded (something the next section will expand on when discussing patrons). Likewise, monsters and villains are unifying threads for players to follow when lost; in these cases, the players can search for more information about these foes to get direction.

Not all NPCs will require a rigorous depth of detail. Inconsequential characters can often be created on the fly as needed, such as shopkeepers or passersby the party will only interact with a single time. Others may require more attention, such as villains and their plans. For any characters of consequence, it makes sense to have some general notes about what they look like, their occupation or role, what bonds/ flaws they hold dear, and what secrets they keep. This information will be highly beneficial when determining how they'll react to player characters and the events they cause.

VILLAINS AND ESSENTIAL NPCs

As a special category of NPCs, we have those who drive the campaign forward in a special way. These are the villains and essential NPCs who make up the bulk of the force behind a campaign, the ones who shape the narrative you're creating with your players, and the ones that keep the characters up at night.

Essential NPCs are just that: the NPCs who are key players within the world. Often, these are political or economic leaders, those who can hire adventurers or mercenaries to do what they need to do. Others are shopkeepers, smiths, or someone who has unique and far-reaching talents that shape the world. Typically, you will only need a few of these for an entire campaign, as they will come back time and again. Consider the game from the perspective of these individuals: to them, the characters are the essential NPCs. There are few people like the characters in most worlds (usually there's something special about them compared to the average person); essential NPCs should be the same.

Likewise, villains are key players but antagonistically. They have their means, minions, and motives; usually, what they are trying to accomplish will have a far greater impact than they anticipate or could even threaten an entire world. While it can be tempting to think of a campaign as having just one overarching villain, it's often better to think about them as a web. There's usually a single powerful villain behind everything but an interconnected web strings out from them to myriad other villains. Some of these villains are simply allies, some are minions or thralls of the others, and others still just happen to benefit from the rest but aren't actually affiliated.

When we construct our villains into an interconnected web, what we end up with is a complex path the characters may follow through the campaign. It will provide the characters with all the agency in the world as they find clues and targets organically throughout their adventures while also keeping things easy for you to set up and track. In short, it helps you create a linear campaign that is easy to run while feeling like a sandbox where the characters can do and discover anything they like.

Naturally, this isn't to say that you're restricted to not using stand-alone or one-off villains. There's no reason that you can't occasionally throw one of them into the campaign to break up the monotony or for something that's going on in one of the character's personal backstories. In fact, doing so is encouraged! It gives the players a chance to do something different for a moment and gives you the chance to take a break from the campaign and use some things that might not otherwise fit with everything else going on.

Factions, Patrons, and Organizations

Whenever player characters need something to stimulate them to action or inaction, for good or ill, an ideal method is to use the groups that NPCs associate with.

How events unfold often dictates which group makes sense at the moment. Patrons are allies that offer direction through quests, rewards, or a convenient gathering place; factions, meanwhile, take on the role of enemy organizations that are usually antagonistic toward players. The key is that players know what to expect from these diverse groups before they seek to interact with them.

While these groups' roles benefit the GM for structure, it's essential to recognize that they're not strictly necessary. GMs can execute the same game benefits through individual NPCs; however, we encourage you to include factions and patrons due to their utility. Patrons can span the entire world, keeping players up to speed on various potential quests and enemy activities. In addition, factions are a perfect tool to drive the game forward when needed—and to provide protective layers that players need to peel back before reaching the villain at the endgame.

These groups can exist within any tabletop system, although the specifics may vary between systems and games. However, several standardized traits are universal to these organizations. The first is a defined structure that specifies who is in charge of whom. While this doesn't necessarily need to be rigid or reminiscent of military ranks, a logical chain of command should be associated with the group. GMs don't need to create every possible detail to make the organization feel real; however, more critical organizations, particularly those that the characters will frequently interact with, require more information to maintain realism.

The second universal trait is the existence of named or generic NPCs with which player characters can interact. Here, named NPCs are important group leaders. They may or may not appear for interactions with the player characters, but the rest of the organization should name-drop them occasionally to build their presence in the party's mind. On the other hand, generic NPCs are those who will interact with the player characters within the group, giving them life and a means to communicate. One way to make these less-impactful characters more lifelike is to have a collection of random names available that you can assign on the spot; having this will make even mundane run-ins with these NPCs a bit more memorable and put a name to the face of the organization.

Finally, it's vital to have quests associated with each group. As mentioned, patrons should be quest givers, directing the player characters toward actions that further the organization's goals. Meanwhile, factions create friction through their efforts to oppose the characters' or their patron's plans. Both groups are ideal for developing

opportunities for players to find plot hooks within the game, leading to more immersion in the events that transpire.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT AND USES

Having individuals or groups of NPCs populating the game world provides many opportunities for GMs. They help guide players and clarify their goals while spurring them into action. NPCs also allow the GM to interact via roleplay with the rest of the table, creating memorable characters that will live on in players' memories long after they exit the stage. Either that or the players will choose to make the character an essential member of their troupe, forever integrated into the narrative moving forward. There are enough stories of players adopting hapless goblins and kobolds to make this a distinct possibility!

When a character elevates to this level, it may be worth developing more information to continue fleshing out their essential details. As mentioned, there will be additional specifics on developing components for key NPCs and villains for your campaign in an upcoming chapter. For less-impactful characters, however, the guidelines above provide a simple template for creating them at the table. With these ideas in mind, the GM will have no issues determining the types of people living in each region.

Where will these people live? Where will the villain's lair be, and what does the world look like? In our next chapter, we'll discuss how to design maps and what elements to remember so that your world can be ready for everyone who populates it!

KEY TAKEAWAYS

NPCs. NPCs are the characters that the game master controls and that players will encounter in the game. They can be allied to the characters, villains, or monsters and can be individuals or part of larger groups such as patrons, factions, or organizations. NPCs provide a means for players to interact with you in-game, offering quests, information, or challenges. Most of the time, when you're interacting with the characters, it is through an NPC. They also serve to mark progress or to help keep the game from going off the rails. Additionally, NPCs can share lore, secrets, and rewards, opening up entirely new avenues of gameplay that wouldn't be possible without them.

Factions, Patrons, and Organizations. NPCs can be associated with patrons, factions, or organizations, which help give you and your players a bit of organization to the game world. Patrons are friendly allies who offer quests and rewards, while factions often oppose the players; you'll typically have several of each available at any given time (though usually more factions than patrons). These groups have defined structures, a variety of NPCs, and quests associated with them.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

How do you use NPCs in your games?

Are there any uses that you will add or change?



CHAPTER 18: MAP DESIGN

USING MAPS IN YOUR GAME

You've seen the maps, right? They're hard to miss nowadays. Often colorfully detailed art pieces or hyper-complex, sprawling designs, the maps used in today's roleplaying games are many and varied, and it can be tricky to know where to start. In the 1970s, back when D&D and its wargame counterparts were just getting started, maps were considerably more utilitarian: black-and-white sketches on graph paper where locked doors, spike traps, and acid pits were all marked by simple keyed circles. Frequently maps weren't meant for players to see; they were just basic dungeon layouts designed to help track the game.

Nearly 50 years later, maps are still vital to how many people run their games. So why are maps still such an important tool? And how can you use them better? While the variety and style of maps have changed dramatically, they all serve the same purposes at the table: First, they help provide clarity, letting everyone visualize a scene without having to re-explain the exact details multiple times. They also promote engagement. If you've ever had trouble keeping players focused online, battle maps can be a great solution. Putting something visual in front of players gives them an excellent focal point and keeps people on track. Finally, maps provide opportunities for players to think outside of the box. If you show the players a complex, exciting environment, they'll look for ways to use it. Collapsing walls, building barricades, and unnecessary table slides all become real possibilities for your game when everyone at the table can visualize their surroundings.

MAP TYPES

Okay, so maps can be helpful. But if you've ever flipped through a published adventure, watched a play, or read a fantasy novel, you know there's more to it. There are many maps out there. When running TTRPGs, most maps you'll use will fit into three basic types.

Regional and world maps are the classic fantasy overworld maps. They provide a bird's eye view of your story's setting and can be valuable tools for establishing the tone and scope of your game.

Battle maps, sometimes called scene maps, represent specific scenes. You'll usually encounter these maps for combat scenes, complex puzzles, or essential locations.

Dungeon maps are hybrids; they depict a series of challenges and scenarios that players traverse. Examples of dungeon maps include an infested mine, a crumbling temple, and a ruined town.

REGIONAL AND WORLD MAPS

World maps are pretty much what it says on the tin. They're large, overarching maps that show your entire setting. They're great for establishing scale and building on the exciting features of a unique environment. Regional maps are more specific. They do the same thing, showing the big picture, but they zoom in on one particular world region. Regional maps often define the area your players will realistically explore, like a few small towns and neighboring wilderness or a single city.

Maps like these aren't for every game but can be instrumental. These maps are great for any campaign that involves much travel. If you plan to send players on a grand quest across the continent, a map can show them how big that continent is. Large-scale maps also help to set the tone for large-scale stories. If your players will be interacting with multiple kingdoms or a variety of environments, representing them with unique regional maps helps hammer in that these are various places and cultures. Finally, these maps are perfect for games with unique physical characteristics. Suppose the people in your campaign live on an island carried by an enormous turtle or in immense cities held in the branches of humongous trees. In that case, you should absolutely give your players a visual to associate with that world.

Practice is always king when making maps, but some tips can point you in the right direction.

Study real maps. This is especially important regarding geographical features like rivers, lakes, and mountains. Even if you don't have a background in geography, it's easy to tell when a river is out of place, even if you're not sure why.

Study fantasy maps, too. You're probably already familiar with a few of these. Popular fantasy maps often break some real-world rules by creating prominent, unique landmarks. Doing this can generate interest but try to use it sparingly. If your world has one impossible feature, it becomes a point of player interest, but if your world has twelve, it becomes twelve features that the players aren't going to remember.

Look at other maps in your chosen genre. While fantasy maps are often demonstrative of a wide variety of scenes and can be valuable to learn from, regardless of the genre you're running, some nuances vary from genre to genre. Be sure to look

at maps specific to the type of game you're running; a steampunk map will have some quirks and details that a map for a space opera will not, and vice versa.

Finally, don't forget to leave empty space. This is especially important if you're running a large-scale game. Don't feel you need to have an entire detailed world from session one. It's often best to focus on a single region and build outwards. Generally speaking, you only need to detail enough to last a few sessions. There's no reason to create a detailed map of somewhere the characters are unlikely to go for months, if at all.

BATTLE MAPS

Remember those bright, colorful scenic maps from earlier? Those are battle maps. If the world and regional maps are the big pictures of a campaign, battle maps are the opposite. They're localized, specific, and focus on the active scene. If a regional map is a village, then a battle map is a street corner brawl, a burning barn, or a rat-infested basement.

Battle maps do much lifting in modern TTRPGs. They provide clarity in combat, allowing everyone to be on the same page and providing more accurate rule-calling and tactical gameplay. They give players a toolbox of terrains and objects to build stories around. Most importantly, battle maps encourage movement. Combats can quickly devolve into straight-up slugfests when nobody moves. And while they're called battle maps, it's important to remember that you can use them for much more than fight scenes. A battle map can benefit any scene where movement, creativity, and tactics come into play. Stealth missions, masquerade balls, and complex traps are fantastic opportunities to use environmental storytelling.

So, what makes a good battle map? It's best to think of your battle maps in the same way that you plan for sessions. The group is trying to tell a story through the medium of the game, and your maps should help in that endeavor. Here are some go-to tools to help you get started.

Make maps for exciting locations. Open fields, featureless rooms, and blank voids don't make good maps. They also don't make for memorable scenes. If the setting for a battle isn't visually interesting to you, it probably won't be for your players, either.

Use points of interest. Moving parts, interactable objects, and environmental hazards are all excellent examples. When you can, add interactive elements to battle maps. Focus on what encourages movement and what promotes a risk vs. reward mentality. If a stream of lava is on the map, give your players a reason to jump over it.

Use a variety of different terrains. Remember that open field from earlier? Adding some rocky turf, boulders, or water features can go a long way toward making a map more functional. Using contrasting elements in your maps helps tell the players where to look and what to focus on.

No one likes falling to their deaths. One of the easiest to use and most impactful tools in the mapmaker's toolbox is elevation. It's both a hazard and a tool for characters, providing tactical use and visual variety to any scenario.

Use running water as often as it makes sense. And as a final tool, use running water whenever you can get away with it. Water features usually incorporate several tips above, combining movement, opportunity, and risk, especially when paired with elevation.

DUNGEON MAPS

Don't let the name mislead you. Even if you never plan to lead a group of adventurers into a necromancer's damp, cobbled-together lair, fighting through the horrific denizens of an ancient prison on your way, you can still accomplish a lot by incorporating dungeon maps into your games.

Dungeons are just a niche way of talking about an adventure contained in a limited setting. Any series of rooms or locations that fit together in theme and tie together narratively can be a dungeon, whether underground, in the forest, or in a posh manor's well-lit rooms. Dungeons are also a great example of environmental storytelling. Players like to explore, so if you give them a map with many different rooms and secrets, each with its challenges and rewards, you're dropping them into a big play pit full of imagination, fun, and deadly traps.

Dungeon maps are a good starting point. Dungeons are also a perfect opportunity to work maps into your game. Providing players with a visual aid makes it easier for everyone at the table to figure out where they are and where they're going next. Luckily, most of the skills you need to build engaging dungeon maps successfully are things we've already discussed.

Dungeon maps are more complex battle maps. Every tip that applies to making a good battle map will work here, too. Thinking about each dungeon room as an individual battle map is an excellent place to start.

Good dungeons are all about choice and movement. Providing multiple entrances, pathways, and secrets makes the location more genuine and engaging. Give players a chance to argue about which hallway to take or give them the clues they need to break through decayed walls. Importantly, ensure your dungeon doesn't feel like a haunted house, where things are simply placed at random without thought for cause and effect (unless that's your goal with your map!).

Dungeons are adventures. Whether the goal is to kill a creature, find some treasure, or get out alive, every dungeon should be a self-contained story. It can help to think of a dungeon map as a flowchart where every room is a function that leads players deeper into the scenario the GM has crafted for the players and toward its conclusion—whatever that might be. If a room doesn't contribute to moving things along, that's a good sign that it might need more work. Starting a dungeon this way can make creating and running the adventure easier in the long run.

MAPMAKING MEDIUMS

We've talked a lot about using different maps and map design techniques but getting started making maps can be daunting when you look at the options. It doesn't have to be; there are many ways to get good-quality maps for your games.

Never underestimate the simplicity of a hand-drawn map. While colorful, detailed maps can be impressive, a simple visual aid is still better than nothing. Sometimes hand-drawn maps work better than the alternatives; using a simple map can make a chaotic scene much more manageable for players to navigate. Making a map on graph paper or a dry-erase board is an excellent way to get started with clean, easy-to-understand maps that don't break the bank.

With the rise of 3D printing and the increased popularity of TTRPGs, 3D terrain pieces are easier to find than ever. If you're playing in person, 3D terrain is a great way to add an extra layer of engagement at the table. And while this method can be expensive, it doesn't need to be the only tool in your arsenal. If you don't want to use an entire set of 3D terrain, try using select pieces for points of interest in your hand-drawn and printed maps. If an element of the map is three-dimensional, it will immediately attract your players' attention.

Mapmaking programs are also a great way to start making detailed maps. Digital mapmaking software is plentiful, and even without artistic training, it's easier than ever to make clear, colorful, and detailed maps. This route can be a great place to

experiment, but creating digital maps for every encounter can be time-consuming, and not all mapmaking software is designed for easy printing.

Finally, another great source of maps is published works. Use maps from adventure modules, map packs, and online map makers. This is a great option when you're in a hurry or need extra inspiration for a battle.

Do I NEED TO USE MAPS?

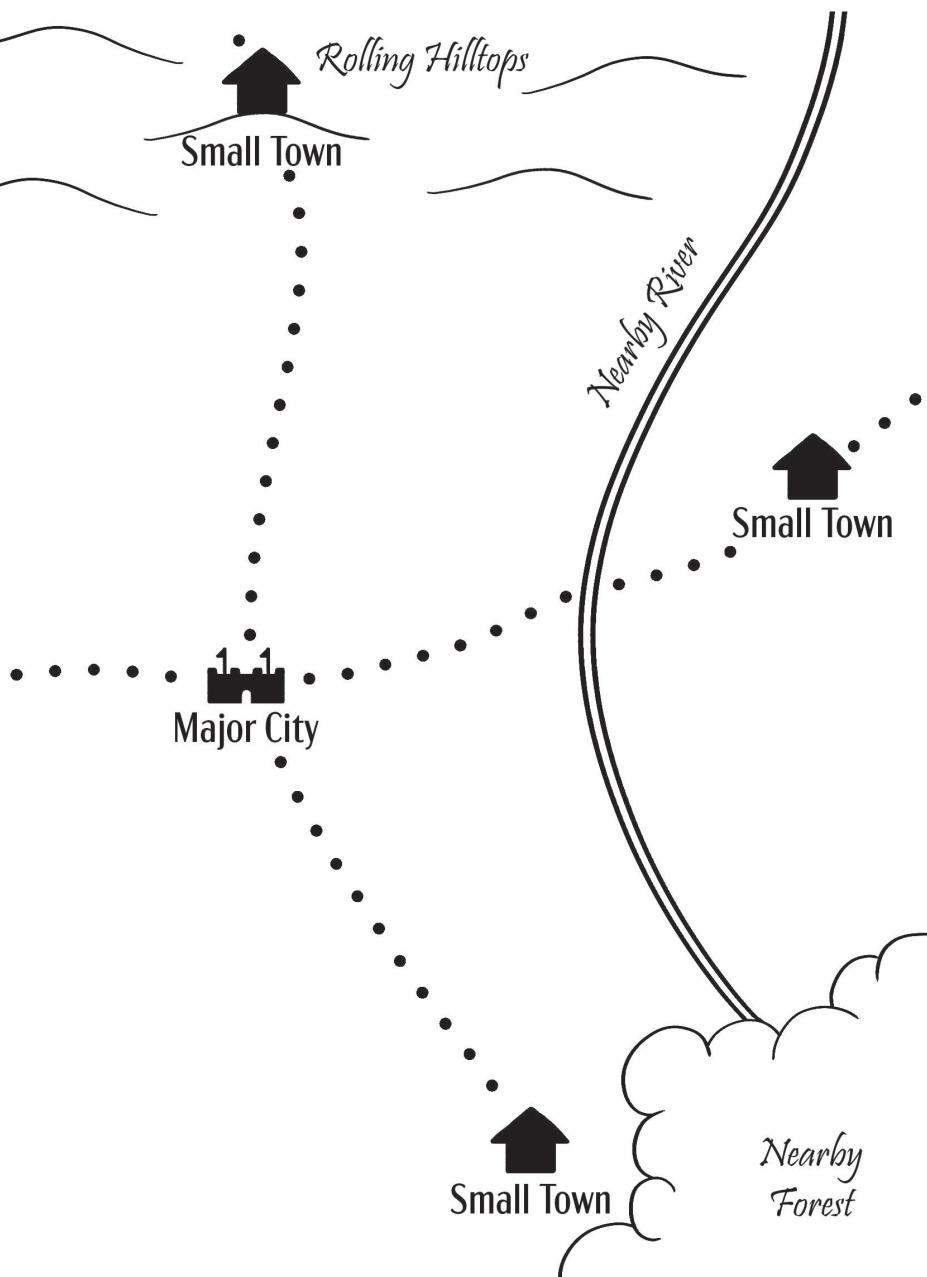
Maps are a tool. They can be a fantastic addition to a roleplaying game, but they're not the only tool you have. Some games don't require or even benefit from extensive map use. If you're running a short campaign in a cavern, you probably don't need a world map, and if you're running a high-stakes political drama, you probably don't need to make a map for every meeting room and town hall.

Before putting your valuable prep time into making maps, it's crucial to consider what it adds to your game. In many cases, running combat through the theater of the mind will work just fine. If you focus on making good, exciting maps for the integral fights and hard-hitting scenes, then those are the moments your players will remember.

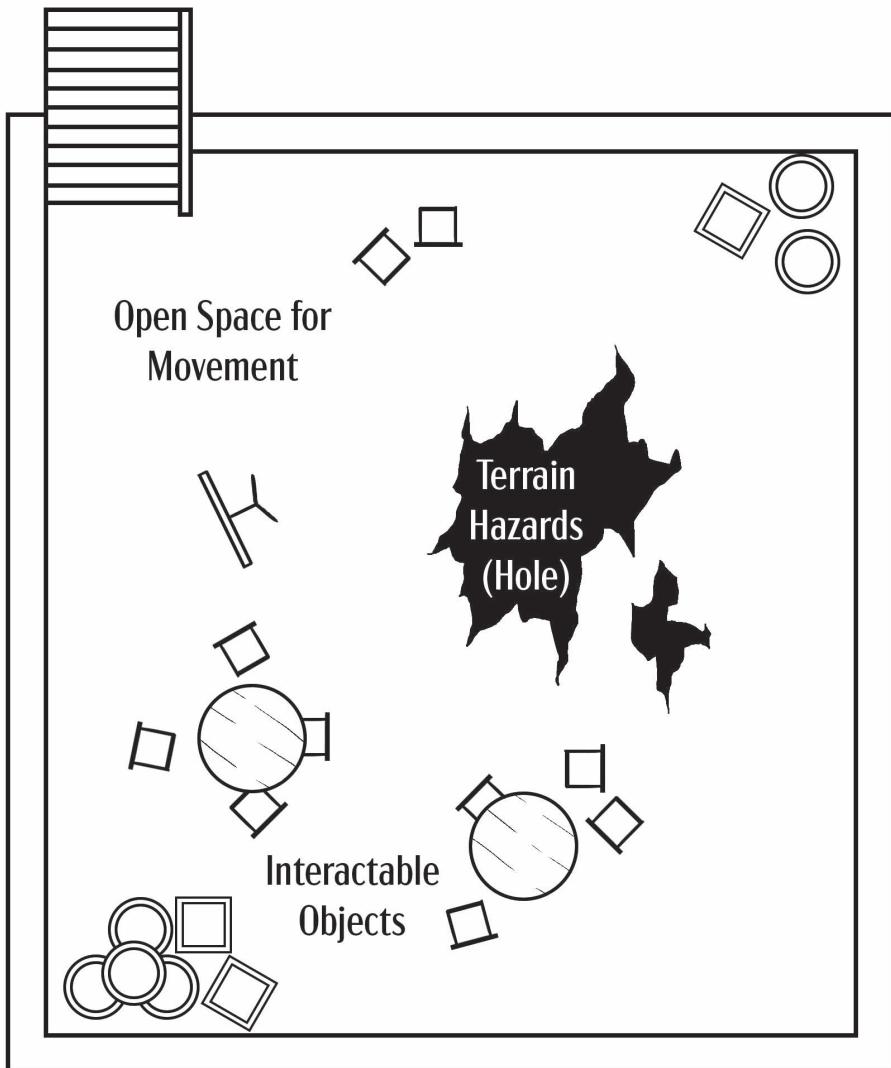
Of course, that neglects a vital consideration: Do you enjoy making maps? Even if it takes time, the map may not be necessary, or there are all kinds of reasons not to use one; if you still want to make them, then the answer to this question should be a resounding yes. It's important not to turn the process of creating and sustaining a game into a balance sheet like an actuary might make; do what inspires you and what you enjoy.

LOOKING AT THE BIGGER PICTURE

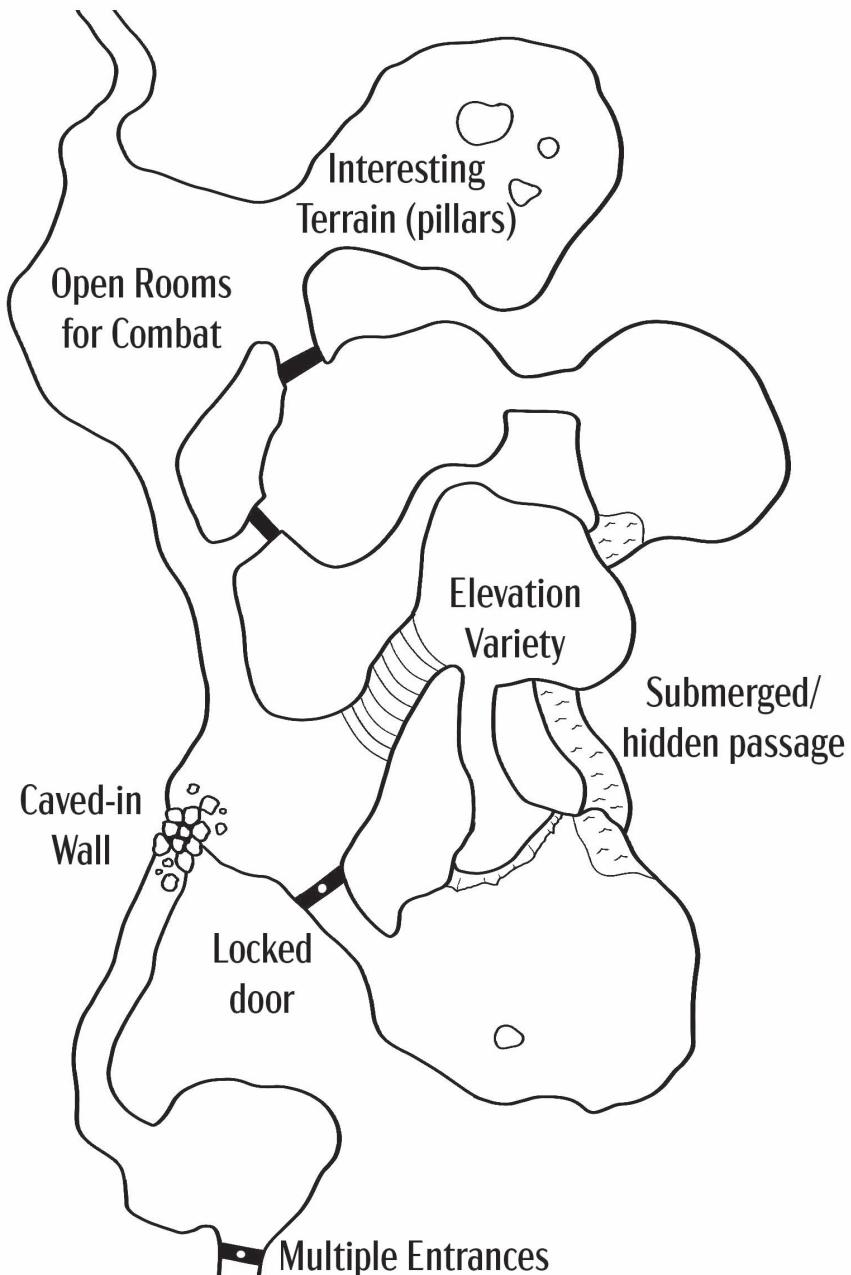
As we've discussed and alluded to, a well-designed map will both enhance the game and inspire you. A gorgeous dungeon can inspire an adventure, trigger some ideas for creatures to use, and give you juicy hooks for players to interact with. A well-designed battle map will help you create more exciting and dynamic combat by inspiring different terrain effects or other things for characters to interact with. And finally, a well-designed regional or world map can inspire entire campaigns that take heroes from their first steps all the way through to ultimately becoming world-renowned beings of might and justice. The next chapter will discuss what such a campaign can look like and how to design it.



REGIONAL MAP



BATTLE MAP



DUNGEON MAP

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Why Use Maps? Maps are a key resource for many games. They provide direction to players and serve as a way to ensure engagement with the game. When well designed, they help players clearly visualize a scene, help keep players focused, and offer opportunities for the players to concoct creative (and wild) solutions to problems.

Types of Maps. Regional and world maps provide an overview of the setting and help establish tone and scale. Battle maps focus on specific scenes, particularly combat encounters, and are designed to make tactical opportunities easier to find. Dungeon maps represent interconnected challenges and scenarios, encouraging exploration and storytelling within a specific area.

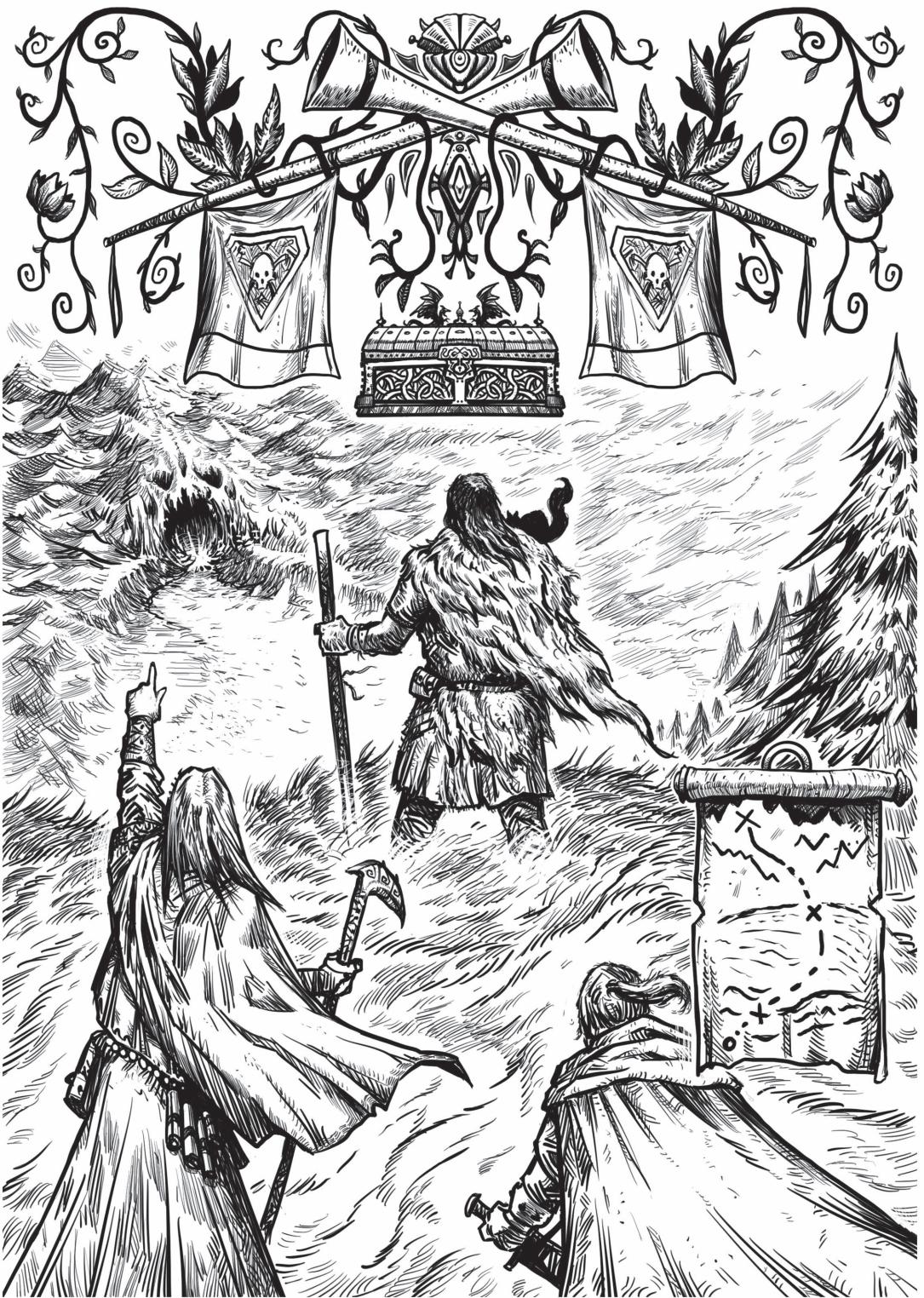
Creating Maps. Creating effective maps requires studying both real and fantasy maps and making sure you understand genre-specific nuances. Battle maps should be visually interesting, with points of interest, varied terrains, and elevation. Dungeon maps should offer choices, movement, and a self-contained narrative progression. World maps should be exciting, depict the world as it was when the map was designed (which may not be the same as it is right now!), and invite a sense of adventure.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Do you like creating maps? If so, why?

If you're not making your own map, how do you evaluate it to make sure it's a good map?

Is there anything you want to add to your maps?



CHAPTER 19: WHAT DOES A CAMPAIGN LOOK LIKE?

With the conclusion of an epic one-shot adventure, the GM might expect their work in that game world to be complete, and they can develop maps and worlds for a new setting. But the players request an opportunity to continue with their characters. So, the next adventure continues the tale of their illustrious characters as they hunt down dangers and grow their fame. Then another quest comes along that is perfect for the same intrepid heroes to embark upon. Before the GM knows it, their one-shot adventure has suddenly become a full-blown campaign.

WHAT IS A CAMPAIGN?

Fundamentally, a campaign is a series of adventures that connect in some capacity. How integral the adventure is to the central plot depends on the type. Some adventures are clearly linked and transition from one primary task to the next; others are interludes between key events that inject variety into the game. These latter quests are opportunities to direct the focus toward the party's individual characters or shared goals.

Each adventure helps shape the next, particularly as player characters' choices affect the game world. A decision to dramatically alter a vital world region requires the GM to respond to those choices, which develops a cohesive story that grows and expands on the events that players instigated or carried out. This reactive process makes the world seem more alive, and it is one concept discussed deeper in this chapter.

There is no hard and fast rule regarding a campaign's length, except that they typically span more than two or three adventures. The only exception is that a single adventure cannot be considered a campaign. This type of game classifies as a "one-shot." Nevertheless, there is no prescribed campaign length; whatever works for your table is the best. This also should not be determined in advance, as different factors may increase or decrease the sessions required to fulfill the campaign's premise.

WHAT IS THE CAMPAIGN'S PREMISE?

When developing the campaign's premise, the GM needs to consider a couple of critical aspects: the overall description of the campaign, the themes involved, and specific rules that may apply. The campaign's description is a general concept of the key ideas behind the campaign, offering specific details about the intended plot.

These details should be informative, such as describing the world setting or the driving forces behind events; this may need only to be hints rather than stated directly. Essentially, this would be the GM's hook to convince players that they want to partake in this game.

Another aspect delves more into details regarding the subject content integrated into the campaign. Themes are best described as crucial featured elements and provide more clarity on the campaign's direction. Will the campaign feature stealth/espionage as a major component? Does magic play a significant role, or is it outlawed? Should players expect to maneuver their characters through political intrigue? These themes do not need to be used to define every facet of the campaign—especially because variety is a spice that enlivens sessions—but should at least help players understand what type of campaign they are signing onto.

Lastly, a premise should also clarify some of the campaign rules. Most important is what the GM will and will not allow players to do. Sometimes, certain character classes or ancestries are not a good fit, or GMs deem them too overpowered for the game; maybe specific game element combinations are disallowed because they will decrease everyone's enjoyment. In addition, a GM should share house rules particular to the campaign if they will change how players interact with the game rules; for example, some tables require a character to complete training or other prerequisites before they can adopt a secondary class or feature.

These aspects of the premise are ideal for introducing during session 0 because they help set the tone of the campaign. The information can be straightforward at that time, requiring just a few sentences to establish the details. Players may also have feedback on if the ideas shared align with their expectations, or they may agree. This input can help with fleshing out the finer points of the premise into something more concrete.

While most of the above details are great to discuss with the players, it is perfectly fine to withhold some information that is not integral for them to know. For instance, players should not know who the key villains are when they first join the campaign. An intrigue-heavy campaign needs to build slowly to allow players to weave the threads together. All that is necessary is that the GM has the information in mind to help shape the campaign as events unfold.

WHAT DRIVES THE CAMPAIGN?

While the premise focuses on the campaign's content, other factors drive events from one adventure to the next. Many definitions explain what driving forces are, none of which are more right or wrong than the next, but this motivating element helps direct the plot and is the one we believe fits best. Within this context, three primary driving forces are most common: villains and factions, key NPCs and patrons, and causality.

VILLAINS AND Factions

As the antagonists and problem-makers of the world, villains and factions often drive campaigns by seeking to achieve their malevolent goals. When these foes enact their evil plans, the GM—nay, the entire game world—expects the characters to react to the situation. Usually, we can expect characters to step forward and confront the villainous entity to prevent their success, leading to a scenario affecting the world.

However, what happens if the players choose not to intervene in the villains' malevolent deeds? They may decide to pursue personal interests or that other quests are more important (regardless of whether that reasoning is accurate). On the one hand, the scenario doesn't use what the GM prepared, which may mean considerable planning is unfortunately not used for the session. Yet this can also provide an opportunity; with player inaction against a truly powerful threat, the GM can proceed under the assumption that the villains' plans succeeded. This creates a scenario that puts even more pressure on the party, as they must face an event considerably worse than initially planned—an increasingly dire situation.

A campaign usually has one primary villain or faction that looms prominently in the narrative. Their actions and goals may connect across several adventures, instigating most of the scenarios that the players face. They are not necessarily the only villain or faction characters will encounter. The GM should build them up as the primary foe threatening everything the characters hope to accomplish.

An example of this would be a cult worshipping an ancient being destined to destroy the world while preserving the faithful so they can rule the remnants. The leader would be the primary antagonist, arranging the cult's antagonistic opposition to the characters. From their first contact with the group, the characters should be introduced to the lower echelons of the organization, obtaining hints of the shadowy leader behind everything. As they interact more and more with the cult across several adventures, each more dangerous than the last, they gain additional

information about the cult's plans until, at last, they confront the leader to bring their evil plan to an end.

Slow tension-building and continued escalation will keep the villain and their organization front and center in the narrative. Rather than relegate an organization to the sidelines after their first defeat, the GM can make them a recurring threat that hints at a larger arc in the narrative. The faction can also be the primary narrative driver as they respond to the characters' interference and reassess how to achieve their own goals.

KEY NPCs AND PATRONS

As an opposite force to villains and factions, patrons and key NPCs strive instead to be a force for good. They most often operate as employers or people requesting the player characters' aid. These forces are a more proactive element, helping to ensure that the party takes positive action when the time comes. These elements are also excellent guideposts for players. When unsure where to go or whom to talk to, patrons and key NPCs are often a good way for them to get back on track.

In addition, the players might receive additional perks and benefits from patrons and key NPCs that will help them on their journey. With the proper steps taken to let relationships flourish, the characters may convince their allies to assist them on a dangerous mission or persuade them to share more powerful weapons to secure their victory. If a situation looks dire and unlikely to succeed, the GM can use this to tip the scales more favorably to the players.

One way patrons can advance the plot toward a certain adventure is by having them share information that is necessary to the narrative. Let's use the example of the cult from the previous section; perhaps a group is tracking the cult's movements due to their world-destroying plans. A contact for this group could reach out to the characters and request their aid in looking into the events. As the characters learn more, the patron relies on them further to resolve the issue. As the danger level increases and the world threat becomes more apparent, the patron can supply the characters with health-restoring items and magic weapons to improve their chances of success. Because the patron is more involved in the party's actions, they become a guide that helps direct the primary narrative.

CAUSALITY

The last main force that can affect the campaign's flow is causality, meaning how the players' choices affect the world around them based on actions they do or don't

take throughout the campaign. Sometimes those decisions will lead them toward different locations to explore or be the domino that causes other events to unfold.

For example, a GM may intend for an NPC with an agenda to better the world to become the characters' primary patron. This NPC may work with them to provide connections to prominent figures in the world or guide them toward actions that will make them more heroic. However, the players may decide that they do not trust their potential patron because they seem too helpful and supportive; rather than work with the intended benefactor, they seek their own path to greatness. This decision to not do the expected can alter how the characters interact with the world, as there is no "in" for them with potential plot hooks and opportunities.

Another way that causality can manifest is in the choices they make—good and bad. This might happen when, for example, the characters prevent a villain from seizing a powerful artifact that would augment their magic; then someone decides to touch said artifact. The artifact fuses to their hand, cursing them, and now the party needs to find a way to free their companion from it before it kills them. A scholar points them towards a powerful mage that may help remove the curse, and now the characters have their next adventure—little do they know, the mage they seek has an evil agenda of their own...

These examples offer ideas on how some player decisions might alter the original narrative's flow. However, the resulting incidents do not need to be consequences. Good things can also occur from these situations, such as providing a reward or establishing new beneficial relationships. For instance, if the characters get ambushed by a scouting party for an enemy army, a player may choose to spare a hostile warrior and let them go free. Later, when the army attacks the settlement where the characters are staying, the spared warrior may repay the favor by ordering their unit not to attack the characters, letting them escape. Alternatively, a down-on-their-luck NPC may receive monetary aid from a character to repay their debts; this ingratiates the NPC to the party, and as their fortunes improve, they share the bounty with the players as well.

Of course, disasters are just as likely, such as a retaliatory strike from the villains or factions they interfered with. Although every action or choice should somehow affect the world, only the most important ones should drive the campaign forward. Having every key event revolve around reactions to character choices would be extremely rare and may lead to a feeling of monotony.

BREAKING UP THE MONOTONY

Of course, campaigns that focus on a single storyline or series of adventures can quickly become monotonous. Consider a plot that devotes itself to only standard fetch quests: the player characters receive news of a valuable item at a far-off location, battle through a dungeon, and then fight a boss to claim the coveted item. Now imagine that this is the scenario every...single...session. After a few of these repetitive events, the players and the GM should all be desperate for something new to experience.

The GM could inject a breath of fresh air into a campaign in many ways to prevent it from becoming monotonous. Sometimes all it takes is an adventure or diversion that pulls the players in a different direction. Character backstories are a great way to accomplish this; tying a scenario's events directly to a player's character instantly engages them and offers more personal excitement to the adventure. Alternatively, a session can focus on an interlude that allows players to direct their attention toward a communal goal. These are promising approaches for players and GMs to enjoy a break from their standard quest fare.

Another option that GMs can use to shift the predictable pattern is to have minor villains and NPCs show up to wreak havoc in a nearby region. While the ensuing danger should never be enough to overshadow the main villain's goal, the threat can inspire the characters to take defensive action. This shift in focus provides a simple detour that can introduce new types of adventures into the mix, refreshing everyone so their next step along the dominant story does not feel as mind-numbingly repetitive.

Although these diversions may not tie in significantly to the primary campaign, they can still benefit the players' future sessions. Different rewards may grant them an edge in upcoming combats, improved relations with patrons and NPCs may lead them to provide aid in later endeavors, or a new secret can shed light on villains' plans. No matter the reward in these side quests, they prevent sessions from becoming stale and can still build satisfying elements to the campaign.

A GM can introduce as many of these side quests as needed to avoid burnout from repetition and, using the elements described above, develop a memorable and exciting campaign. However, a campaign is only as good as its adventures, which leads to the next logical question: What components are necessary in a good adventure?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

What Is a Campaign? A campaign is a series of interconnected adventures that form an ongoing narrative that unfolds as you play the game. The length of a campaign can vary, but they typically last many adventures, with a few being as short as just two or three. You should establish a solid campaign premise, which includes the overall description, themes, and specific rules, to set the tone and expectations for the players, as well as providing the opportunity to get their input. The choices made by the players in each adventure shape the game world and drive the story forward.

Driving the Campaign. Your campaign will be driven by a variety of factors, including villains and factions, key NPCs and patrons, and the consequences of player choices. Villains and factions create obstacles for the players, while key NPCs and patrons offer support and direction. The choices made by players have a direct impact on the campaign's flow and can lead to different outcomes and events.

Avoiding Monotony. To avoid monotony in a campaign, you can introduce diversions, character-focused adventures, or minor villains and NPCs that provide new challenges and refresh the gameplay. One-off adventures or sudden happenings that don't affect the main story that is unfolding can be welcome breaths of fresh air and are a great way to introduce elements from character backstories. Side quests can still offer rewards and contribute to the overall campaign, keeping the sessions engaging and exciting.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

How will you drive your campaign forward?

What side interests can you bring into your campaign to help it become more exciting?



CHAPTER 20: COMPONENTS OF AN ADVENTURE

An adventure is like a multi-course banquet. At the start is the appetizer, designed to catch the attention of those partaking with subtle flavors—not enough to sate a palate, but to intrigue them and entice them into looking forward to what comes next. Following the introductory element, next comes plate after plate of mouthwatering morsels, each more tantalizing than the last. Then comes the entrée, a magnificent culinary delight that puts everything before it to shame with the perfect combination of spices and tender cooking. Finally, with everyone full and satisfied to bursting, the last element: a lush slice of cake that complements all that preceded it, a delectable conclusion to wrap up the feast and leave everyone ready for the next meal.

The pages ahead will explain the significance of the elements a GM uses to create an adventure—from its introductory appetizer to its satisfying dessert. While the next chapter describes the traditional structure of a quest, the following chapters build upon the components here to explain how to create the most complete adventure possible.

HOOKED FROM THE BEGINNING

As with most things, the best place to start is often at the adventure's beginning. Although many books and movies may drop their audience in media res or into the middle of the action, this is less than ideal for TTGs. A roleplaying game traditionally requires more work for players to be grounded in the scene to have a clear understanding before major events begin.

While an *in-media-res* beginning may work to introduce players to a chaotic instance at the start of a campaign, it's less convenient for introducing them to a situation and letting them know what you expect of them at the moment, who their allies are, or even what they're doing there. To achieve this form of buy-in for the adventure, the ideal way to bring players up-to-speed regarding the situation is through a plot hook. A plot hook is a game element that provides direction while informing them why they should care about the scenario.

The GM's goal should be to introduce plot hooks as smoothly as possible. They can achieve this in many ways, such as the characters hearing rumors of trouble or finding traces of the next quest after the previous adventure. The characters can also learn about plot hooks in a much more straightforward fashion, such as through a quest board with notices for adventurers. However, if the GM wants to catch and

keep the players hooked, a more cinematic and interactive situation will benefit everyone by providing more investment.

Despite the plot hooks' intention to connect players to the adventure's events, this isn't a means for the GM to strong-arm the players by railroading them into participating. Instead, players keep their agency because it's an open-ended presentation that allows them to approach the scenario as they see fit. The plot hook provides direction and signals to the players that their GM has prepared something for them to interact with. When done correctly, players smoothly transition into the environment intended for the adventure to begin.

WHAT MAKES A PLOT HOOK GOOD?

Although a plot hook is a significant component of an adventure, it only performs its duty when integrated well into the events. If the GM presents a plot hook, and players either don't realize it is a hook, exhibit disinterest, or are confused by the information given, the hook isn't achieving its goal. Therefore, there are three simple truths regarding plot hooks that are necessary to achieve full effectiveness:

First, a plot hook should be clear. The GM may cleverly wrap their hook beneath layer upon layer of complexity, and it can be a genuinely artful plot element. However, if they conceal the hook to the point of obscurity, players may miss it, making that hook much less effective—or even worthless! Thus, ensure that your plot hook makes the problem at hand very clear to your players.

An exception to this is when the GM intends for players to discover the hook gradually over time—yet these are exceptions, working best when there are multiple adventures to peel back the layers. If players should embark on the quest immediately, then it's better to provide a much clearer hook from the start.

Second, the hook needs to be compelling. Introduce an event that immediately snags the players' interest, brings them into the moment, and drives them to pursue the adventure. The last thing the GM should leave a player wondering is, "Who cares?" If this is the reaction, the adventure will lose its impact and cannot grip them, leading to apathy regarding the outcome.

Remember that different things appeal to different players and characters, too. Some are motivated to "do the right thing"; others might smirk at that, but immediately perk up when they hear the offer of a reward should they help resolve the situation. Usually, it's best to bake a few different motivating factors into a plot hook.

Last, the plot hook must provide direction. After receiving details from the plot hook, players should prepare to address the situation. But, if they don't know where to go or what to do, the plot hook may have been too open-ended. Therefore, every good plot hook should tell characters where they should go first to get started on resolving the issue or completing the quest.

The plot hook's instructions are a general template for what the players can expect at the start, but that doesn't mean the GM needs to lay the adventure out exactly as presented. Sometimes, having events unfold differently than players expected can make adventures more memorable as they subvert player expectations. However, this doesn't change the fact that, at the outset of the quest, players still need a direction to begin the scenario before events challenge their expectations.

An alternate way to make plot hooks meet these three criteria at once is to tie the current quest into something from past events. For example, suppose players have recently completed an adventure that led into a bandit's stronghold and uncovered evidence linking the outlaws' activity to a mysterious villain nearby. In that case, they may want to investigate further. Events connecting this way help to create a sense of continuity between adventures and can seamlessly replace the need for a traditional NPC quest giver to explain a situation and ask for aid.

THE MEAT OF THE ADVENTURE

With the plot hook handled and the players possessing the information necessary to undertake the adventure, the rest falls into a rhythm similar to a traditional story. There are moments of rising action with encounters, followed by a climax in the form of a boss fight or other significant event. The adventure then concludes with a resolution that provides a reward for completing the quest—while also beginning to reveal the effects of player choices.

While this is a more traditional story structure formula, there is always a chance that something will happen out of order (or not at all) because of player agency. Choices in-game may lead characters to avoid encounters or charge straight into the adventure's climax without finding the loot or hints that would simplify the battle. Therefore, the best advice for structuring adventures is to view this process as a guide rather than a step-by-step prescription. Each element should be present, but how the players interact with the rising action and climax will be based on their characters' actions and decisions.

RISING ACTION

Rising actions are any challenges the characters experience in the adventure, and the GM should plan to use a mix of all three pillars of gameplay for this purpose. For example, a sudden confrontation with a guard that forces them to talk their way out of being arrested is part of the social pillar; attempting to navigate a secret passage filled with perilous traps on the way into a dungeon is a prime example of exploration; fighting minions while discovering the goal is classic combat.

Blending these elements creates an adventure that appeals to many player types. Besides content variety, the adventure should also contain a range of difficulties. Some encounters should be serious challenges designed to thrill players, while others are **less** difficult to overcome. And while we describe these as “encounters,” it doesn’t mean that they need to focus only on combat; sometimes, an encounter should emphasize social elements more than fighting. The intent is to incorporate each pillar with varying degrees of challenge into the adventure, understanding that player choices may mitigate or augment the difficulties.

We can combine these aspects in an adventure in many ways. A rumor that leads characters to uncover proof that a nobleman is allegedly manipulating the price of wool may become a heist into their home. However, the nobleman’s study is locked not by a key but by a sphinx that requires players to solve a riddle. Several noble household members can offer hints if persuaded, or characters can discover clues in various rooms. Here, including the riddle provides a change of pace while still challenging the players to be creative to find a solution.

Alternatively, characters investigating an ancient tomb may activate a pressure plate that causes the walls to slide in to crush them. As they search for a mechanism to stop the trap, dangerous oozes drop into the chamber to inconvenience them. Adding a trap into the midst of combat increases the players’ peril, and the added complexity can lead to a truly memorable encounter.

These examples show that the elements can remain separate or intertwined for even more drama at the table. Not everything needs to occur all at once, in any case. Characters may fight a band of goblins in one room of a castle, then discover a pair of captives in the next. The prisoners warn of an even larger group in the castle’s banquet hall, then advise that there are rumors of a secret passage that avoids this chamber and leads directly to the goblin king’s lair. Characters can then explore to find this passageway—or, failing that, press on for a significant battle in the banquet

hall. Fully representing each pillar creates an adventure of more than death and destruction at every turn.

How many elements to include for a perfectly balanced adventure depends on several factors. On one scale are official guidelines for each system about balancing encounters for various stages of gameplay, from fledgling characters to powerful end-game heroes. Opposite this is how well the GM understands their players; no matter what a book may suggest, they will know the players' preferences (and the character's capabilities) best. Therefore, the GM's preparations should include both facets, knowing to reserve the most significant threat for the adventure's climactic event.

THE CLIMAX

The adventure's climax is what the quest has been building up to—the deciding event to determine success or failure. In most cases, this is the form of a boss fight where a creature or NPC opposes the characters as their goals collide. Bosses are often more powerful than the other creatures encountered during the adventure, and the confrontation with them usually has some narrative significance.

In most cases, the boss fight should be a genuinely challenging experience with the potential for the characters to be defeated. As mentioned throughout this book, the idea isn't to create an unwinnable scenario to crush the players; the GM instead should aim to make this encounter just at the threshold of player capabilities. The goal should be to create an encounter that increases the players' accomplishment when they succeed while still elevating the stakes.

Although these are the most common way for the adventure to come to a head, the climax doesn't need to be combat-oriented. Sometimes the adventure has been building toward an epic chase sequence, such as if characters must escape with a stolen artifact or “re-appropriate it for a good cause,” if they prefer. Alternatively, this could also be a significantly tense social interaction where the fate of an entire region weighs upon every word the characters speak.

For example, consider how attempts to quell a war between rival city-states through negotiations may unfold. Assuming that the player's quest is to sue for peace as neutral ambassadors, this could leave them deep in the heart of the enemy territory. A logical situation may be that there are divisions in the rival city-state; one faction may brutally murder the ruling class and seize power, casting the blame for the coup on the visiting adventurers. Amidst an entire city outraged at the alleged crimes, the

adventurers may wisely choose to escape or talk their way out of a deadly execution. As this scenario shows, a climax can revolve around any pillars of gameplay, and the results can leave everyone feeling accomplished or drained as they enter the adventure's final stage.

THE RESOLUTION

As the action begins to wind down and the dust from the climax settles, the adventure enters the phase known as the resolution. At this point in the quest, the characters should discover or receive the rewards promised. It can also be when they resolve any remaining issues to tie up loose ends.

But the resolution should also include more than just rewards and accolades. Players should see evidence of how their actions and decisions affect the situation, both positively and negatively. A corrupt aristocrat is being led away in chains while their disgraced children's glares promise retribution. The battle destroys an ancient holy site; its caretaker stares around the wreckage in horrified disbelief. Each ending hints to players about how their actions have affected others in the immediate aftermath and possibly provides some new ideas for future events.

In the same vein, this is also an area where the adventure can incorporate a tie-in to upcoming events. A hint or a clue may lead to the next adventure, or someone involved in the wrap-up may direct players to the following thread in the story. While including elements like this to direct players toward the next adventure isn't required, it's not an unusual method to help lead them to what comes next.

Expanding on the situation outlined in the previous section, after the coup of the pro-peace leadership in the city-state, the party may hear rumors of a new organization comprised of survivors from the former government. If they're interested in taking down the faction that supplanted the last regime, they can choose to follow up with this group to support their efforts. Of course, escaping back to safety is another option as well; how the resolution proceeds can be flexible to character decisions and unique situations.

These major components are needed to develop a remarkable adventure regardless of how everything in the quest ends. Sometimes the quest ends in the party's obliteration, sometimes with their triumph applauded—what matters is that they include these necessary elements, which are the hallmarks of narrative stories. And, by keeping these ideas in mind, you're now ready to create your own adventure!

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Plot Hooks. Plot hooks serve as game elements that provide direction and engage players by informing them about the situation and why they should care about the scenario. Effective plot hooks are clear, compelling, and provide direction to help players smoothly transition into the adventure.

Adventure Structure. When you’re designing an adventure, you’re going to want to consider a traditional story structure with rising action, climax, and resolution. Even though you’re not writing a story, this structure is still useful in terms of design. The adventure should include a variety of difficulties in the encounters and blend different elements to appeal to different player types.

Flexibility and Player Agency. When preparing, you don’t want to write yourself out of flexibility and inadvertently limit player agency. While the adventure structure provides a guide, the players’ choices and actions may change things from how you envisioned it in your mind. You should be ready to adapt and allow for creative solutions while ensuring that the adventure includes an appropriate amount of direction so the players aren’t lost.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

How do you write your adventures so you can plan without limiting player agency?

How do you build your adventure’s narrative structure?



CHAPTER 21: CREATING AN ADVENTURE

Adventures are at the core of every roleplaying game, or at least most. They make up the meat of the gameplay, taking the characters into deep dark caves, abandoned buildings, or even the far reaches of space, driving the campaign's plot forward and allowing for a somewhat controlled space in the game. However, creating an adventure is often no small feat and is a significant element in the GM's toolset, so let's explore in detail how creating an adventure looks.

One thing to note is that there are a few differences between designing an adventure for an ongoing campaign and designing one for a one-shot. Many of their core design ideas are the same, but we'll discuss one-shots specifically in Chapter 23.

THE CONCEPT

Having a concept is a critical element to making a complete adventure. Often, you'll start with an adventure concept you want to create that will inform the rest of the creation process. However, sometimes you may not be sure what you would like to do and would prefer to start getting inspiration from the creatures, map, or other things first. Either way you do it will result in a fantastic adventure; however, the earlier you can have a basic concept, the easier the rest of the process will be.

When you're formulating your adventure concept, it should answer these questions:

- What problem is happening in the world?
- Why should the characters care?

These two questions will form the backbone for the rest of the creation process, though, as stated above, you may not fully realize the concept from the beginning. Many GMs like to get inspiration from the creatures they choose or even the map they want to use before deciding on an idea.

THE TWIST

One idea that has been gaining traction lately, and one that we highly encourage you to consider when you're constructing an adventure, is the idea of a twist in each adventure. Exactly what the twist is will vary from adventure to adventure. Sometimes, it might be the classic trope of an NPC betraying the party (though that one borders on the cliched). Other times, it might be a challenging environment

to have to deal with or some other unexpected situation. The key thing is that it doesn't need to be the classically bemoaned twist that is common in the movies which we've seen a thousand times and have lost their flair. Instead, ask yourself "what makes this adventure unique and would make it more exciting?" The answer to that question is your twist!

So, WHERE Do You START?

Broadly speaking, there are three elements to an adventure. First, creatures appear within the adventure; these are generally the antagonists causing a problem the characters need to solve. Second is the map, which serves as the adventure's location. Finally, we have the events that will take place in the adventure. It's possible to start with any of these three when beginning to create your adventure; however, for simplicity, our discussion here will start with selecting the creatures.

THE CREATURES

Creatures form the central component of any adventure; they are the characters' opposition, the primary thing they interact with, and usually the reason the characters are there in the first place. When choosing the monsters, you will want to make a selection based on three criteria:

- First, does the creature make sense for what you're trying to do? For example, an adventure concept in a frigidly cold environment will probably not have monsters meant to live solely within the deep sea.
- Which creature will be the "big bad" of the adventure? This will usually be the strongest monster and will either be or be responsible for the thing the players need to find a way to deal with.
- How do the minions fit with the big bad? Generally, you want monsters that will supplement the big bad somehow. It could be that they are others of the same species—such is often the case with monstrous creatures—or they could be creatures that augment the big bad, such as heavily armored creatures to protect the much frailest villain.

Once you have selected the creatures you wish to use, it's time to move on to the next phase of the creation process: choosing the map.

THE MAP

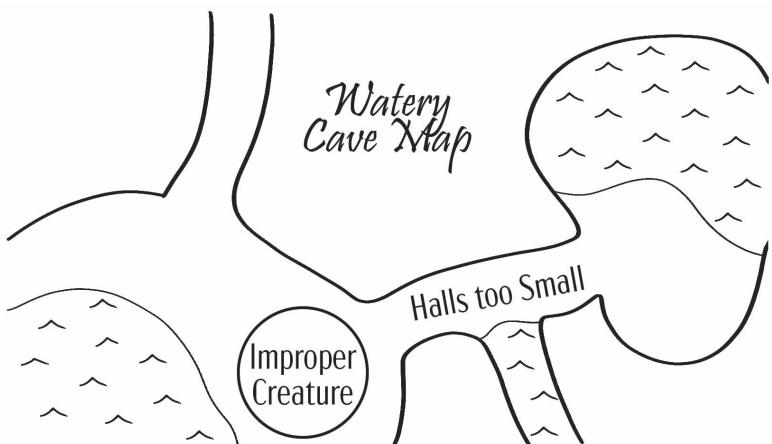
Even if you run the adventure using theater of the mind, you should consider having some map—however bare bones it may be—available to help you along the way.

Maps come in all shapes and sizes for TTGs. Digital maps are designed to work on VTTs and typically have full color and considerable detail; these maps are also usually found printed in books as they're quite visually appealing in general. In-person games typically use hand-drawn maps. There are numerous ways to make these, though the most popular is a dry-erase mat that you can purchase in most local game stores. (A handy trick, if you don't have or want one of these mats, is to use the backside of wrapping paper. Most wrapping papers will have a one-inch grid on the back.) Finally, use note-taking sketches for GM notes or for running theater-of-the-mind adventures.

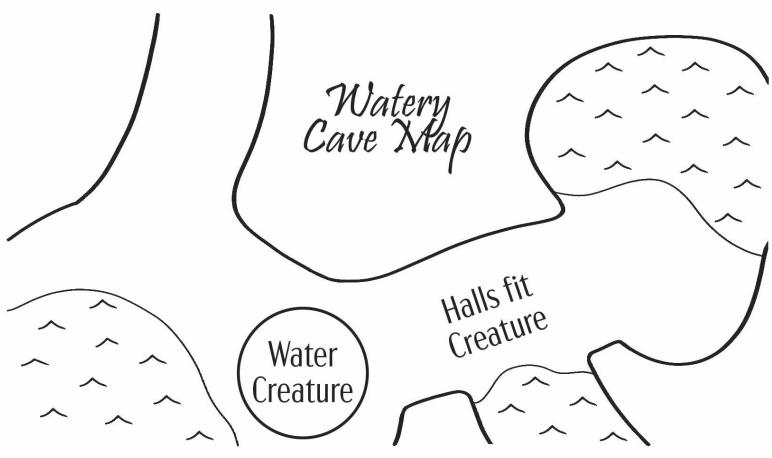
You should select maps primarily on personal taste, though a few guidelines can help you find the most effective one for your adventure. In general, you should consider the following:

- The first consideration is the most important, and that is simply whether the map inspires you. If you choose the map you want before selecting creatures and events, then it should inspire you with fantastic ideas for what you can include in the various areas. This consideration may be less critical depending on the type of map you're using, though you should still feel like the map is opening up more options, not closing them off.
- The second consideration is whether the map works with your chosen creatures. This might seem like a trivial thing or something to gloss over, but in truth, it's critical. For example, if your creatures are larger than the hallways, they will have difficulty moving around. Likewise, a map mainly covered in water probably doesn't work exceptionally well for fire creatures.
- The last consideration to make is whether or not the map is practical. This can mean many different things, but there are two straightforward ways to interpret it. First, is the map helpful to use at the table? Sure, a massive dungeon is fantastic, but it might be challenging to use at the table if the map has to span an entire football pitch. Second, is the map practical to have in the game? Things like extraplanar portals in fantasy games are popular and cool, but those are often reserved for higher-level characters, so if your adventure is going to be for low levels, it may not be practical.

BAD MAP



GOOD MAP



Once the map is selected, the next step is to consider various events during the adventure.

THE EVENTS

When referring to “the events” in this section, we don’t mean an event-based adventure (we’ll include some unique details about those at the end of this chapter). Instead, we want to look at the two or three most important events we plan to occur.

Of course, there’s always the possibility of missing one or more of these events, but such is the nature of player agency; generally, it’s sufficient to play them out as though the events failed or the characters were defeated, though in some cases you may wish to do something different.

When you’re at this step in your adventure creation process, consider the following events:

- **Inciting action.** What happens that kicks off the adventure? Are the characters meant to be there to witness it and intervene, or are they arriving to see the aftermath? It may be a benign request, such as someone asking the characters to accompany them for dinner.
- **The journey.** How do the characters get to the adventure’s location? Will something happen along the way? Will it be a “cut to black” and then cut back in once they’re there? Or will the characters have to journey through the muck in a swamp and hunt for it?
- **The climax.** The climax is where the characters have a showdown with the big bad or are otherwise on the cusp of resolving the problem they went to deal with. This is a critical element to the adventure and should be present in some capacity in every single one.
- **The conclusion or resolution.** This is where the villain is defeated, or the characters stop the threat, and now the heroes are basking in their victory and being handsomely rewarded. Or they lost, and the villain’s machinations are now coming to fruition, and the characters are left to deal with the aftermath of a humiliating defeat.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Now that we have established the three critical elements of the adventure—the creatures, the map, and the key events—we can move on to developing the adventure in more detail. We'll explore how to flesh out a room or location and ensure the adventure makes sense and feels complete without overpreparing. The one element we won't be touching on is how to design an encounter—the entire topic behind Chapter 22.

FLESHING OUT A ROOM OR LOCATION

The first element we'll explore is fleshing out a room or location. One thing to bring up before we dive into the meat of this discussion is that every GM will find they need to develop a different amount of details for each room or location. Those exceptionally skilled at improvisation and note-taking may only need to flesh out a little. In contrast, others may find it helpful to have highly detailed notes before beginning the session. There's no one right amount to do, just the right amount for you.

Let's dive into how to flesh out a room or location. We'll share a three-step sequence to flesh out every possible room while keeping it simple.

POPULATING THE ROOM

First, we need to populate the room. Naturally, we must identify what creatures—if any—will be in there. Of course, not every room needs creatures; however, even if there aren't any, we still want to populate the space with other exciting items. Bookcases, magic circles, secret passages, access terminals, and more are all common non-creature elements to occupy a room. At this step, we don't have to detail them; we merely identify what will be present.

DESCRIBING THE ROOM

The next step is to describe the room. When creating the description, we want to engage as many senses as possible—not just sight. Things like how the room smells, what we can hear, whether there's a certain aura to the room, and more. We could engage every sense in an ideal world, though it will typically be two or three in practice. Everything we identify while populating the room should appear in the description in some capacity, with the creatures naturally coming last (mainly because as soon you describe the creatures, there's a tendency for players not to hear the rest).

FINISHING TOUCHES

Finally, we'll finish fleshing out the room by providing a detailed description for each primary element. We'll put names and descriptions to the books on the bookshelf, identify what's cooking in the oven, and figure out how the characters might be able to find the secrets hidden inside. This stage is also where we'll finish the encounter in the room—if any—including traps, puzzles, and other gameplay elements. We'll discuss encounter creation in depth in the next chapter.

AVOIDING OVERPREPARING

A significant pitfall that GMs run into is overpreparing. For our purposes, we'll consider overpreparing to be any time a GM creates more than they intend because they're worried about not being fully prepared. We don't consider it overpreparing when a GM chooses to prepare in great detail more than they need because they enjoy creating those things or simply want to. This is a crucial difference to keep in mind! While one person may feel satisfied just prepping what they need, others enjoy preparing things and find it to be a relaxing way to spend an evening. If you're wondering if you're overpreparing, ask yourself if it's because of fear you're missing something or enjoyment of the process of creation. If it's the former, that's overpreparing. The latter is just the way you might enjoy interacting with the game.

Note that we haven't discussed how to plan for every possible thing the characters might do in the adventure. That's by design, as it would fall into the category of overpreparing. Instead, we have focused on ensuring that when the characters walk into a room, anything they might interact with has the information needed to explain what it is and what's happening.

With that in mind, the best way to avoid overpreparing is to have a ready-made checklist that allows you to double-check that you have everything. Naturally, you will still need to improvise some things because it's impossible to predict what will happen in the game perfectly. What should your checklist contain? Well, that will vary from GM to GM, though a great starting point is to have everything we've already discussed in this chapter.

EVENT BASED ADVENTURES

Event-based adventures have a few unique considerations that you'll want to make that go beyond what we've already discussed. What we've discussed so far is everything you'll need to run a location-based adventure – that is, an adventure

that takes place in a set location, with the characters navigating through what can broadly be described as a dungeon. And you'll want to use the same sort of concept for setting up an event-based adventure, but we'll need to go one step further to make it successful.

With an event-based adventure, we don't have a specific location to help drive the adventure forward so you and your players can create the story. With that in mind, we still want a driving force behind the adventure, which will be time and NPCs.

NPCs AND TIME

Exciting, engaging, and evocative NPCs are the lifeblood of most event-based adventures. By creating allies the characters (and the players!) will want to save and protect and enemies that the characters (and, again, the players!!) will want to defeat, you'll be able to have an adventure with the characters pursuing their goals with abandon, despite not having a set location for them to explore.

The goals and motives need to be active and cause real problems, not just perceived or eventual problems. For example, consider two villains:

- The first villain is subtly manipulating the political system in town to their benefit. People are starting to become allies with the villain, further increasing his power. His eventual rise will be bad for the townsfolk, so he's going to need to be stopped.
- The second villain is kidnapping people off the streets. Each night, a dozen or more people go missing, and recently a missive was found indicating something big is coming. Tonight, the kidnappings have started again, but en masse. Certain neighborhoods are being targeted, with the first already missing two dozen people.

Which of these villains is going to be the more compelling one, the one that can drive an adventure? Well, the second one. The first is a great option for a full campaign, if you want to focus on political intrigue, but isn't well suited for a singular adventure. Their goals, motives, and methods are too general and long spanning. The second one, on the other hand, clearly has more immediate ambitions which will have immediate consequences.

Is Your Adventure Ready?

Once you've worked through everything in this chapter and gotten everything fleshed out and you feel like you have what you need to run something fun and exciting . . . then yes, your adventure is ready. Well, sort of. Beyond what we've discussed in this chapter, you will need just one more game element for your adventure: the encounters.

We skipped discussing these in this chapter on purpose. The complexity that they present—and the diverse elements they can include—warrant their own chapter. In fact, it isn't unreasonable to say that, due to everything that can happen in an encounter, they're the most complex and comprehensive game element for GMs to create. Let's explore that now.

ADVENTURE CREATION PROCESS

Step One - The Concept

The “concept” forms the backbone of the rest of the creation process. It tells you what the problem in the world is and why the characters should care about it.

Many GMs use monsters or a specific map for inspiration.

Step Two - Choose the creatures

Consider the following:

1. Does the creature make sense in the environment?
2. Which creature will be the “big bad”?
3. How do the minions/secondary creatures fit in?

Step Three - Select the Map

Consider the following:

1. Does the map inspire you?
2. Does the map work with the creatures you chose?
3. Is the map practical in and out of the game?

Step Four - Plan Key Events

Make sure you have the following:

1. Inciting Action: Why should the PCs care?
2. The Journey: How do the PCs get there?
3. Climax: The big showdown to solve the problem.
4. Conclusion: The outcome and consequences.

Step Five - Flesh It All Out

1. Populate the rooms with encounters, objects, etc.
2. Describe everything in the room with every sense you can.
3. Avoid overpreparing and focus on the overall picture.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Three Major Components of Adventures. Designing an adventure for a roleplaying game involves three key elements: creatures, maps, and events. These components work together to create a compelling and immersive gameplay experience. The adventure concept serves as the foundation, addressing the problem in the game world and providing a reason for the characters to care. Inspiration can come from creatures, maps, or other sources, and the selection of creatures should align with the adventure concept and include a “big bad” antagonist and complementary minions.

Building the Adventure. You’re going to want to follow a strategy to build your adventure. When you look at the three elements, most game masters will choose either creatures or maps to be the starting point. When setting everything up, you should make sure that things have synergy with each other, rather than clashing, unless that is the goal of the adventure.

Overpreparing. As always, be careful not to overprepare. Having the likely things planned out makes sense, but always remember that the goal is to set up a situation, not to script an event. There’s a balancing act that’s tricky to find, and it does take some trial and error, but finding that balance is extremely important.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What is your strategy when you’re designing an adventure?

How do you tie together the different elements of your adventure?

How do you avoid overpreparing?



CHAPTER 22: ENCOUNTER DESIGN

The characters have wandered into the next room; the floors are slightly sticky, though not quite enough to impede movement. There's a faint smell of decay in the room, and several large, white masses are scattered around the floor and suspended on the walls. Suddenly, one of the characters looks up and notices three black forms slowly descending from the ceiling. Their eight legs are weaving a web to bring them to the ground while clear venom drips from their fangs. As the spiders descend, two white masses on the floor wriggle violently, their screams muffled, each cry bearing the voice of desperation. What do you do?

Encounters like this form the backbone of TTGs. They're not entirely unlike the atoms and molecules that make up our world; without them, the bigger picture never takes shape. Sure, they contain smaller pieces—creatures, puzzles, traps, and the like, all of which we'll cover throughout this chapter—but the encounter is the medium through which the players and their characters interact with the game.

OKAY, BUT WHAT IS AN ENCOUNTER?

Before diving into the elements of an encounter and how to design them, we first need to know what is and isn't an encounter. This is often a bit of a nebulous concept because people may have different intentions when they say the word "encounter." For our purposes, we'll define an encounter as any event or short sequence of events that occur in a single area.

This definition is intentionally broad because there is a great variety of encounters, and even within the different types, there's a great deal of variability. While combat encounters generally come to mind first when people think of encounters in a TTG—and to be sure, these types are the most prevalent—many other options are available. And even within encounters geared towards a particular pillar of play, a mixture of different elements is often included.

At the end of this chapter, we'll discuss how to combine the different pillars of play into a single encounter, but first, let's explore each pillar in a little more detail. We won't be going back over what each pillar is in this chapter (see Chapters 1 and 14 for discussions on that topic), but instead, we'll be focusing solely on how they work in the context of an encounter.

ENCOUNTER DESIGN PROCESS

Step One – Start with Exploration

Think to yourself: what feels natural here?

Fill every area with a variety of things for the PCs to explore. Not every room needs to have combat, but social interactions, puzzles, traps, secrets, and everyday items should be included.

Step Two – Move on the Combat

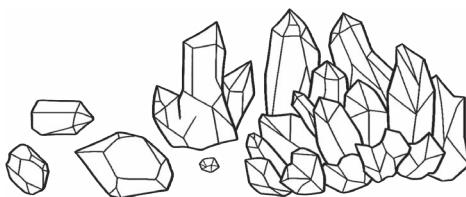
Think about how exploration elements can affect combat.

Ensure the balance of any combat is correct, the creatures make sense in the environment, and there is variety within the encounters throughout the adventure location.

Step Three – Plan Social Interactions

Keep in mind that not all encounters need to have combat.

1. Whether or not you plan for the PCs to fight, allowing the option for them to communicate with creatures throughout the location (when it makes sense) can result in unique effects on the encounter as a whole.
2. Be careful to never force social encounters and keep the responses realistic to the creatures being used.
3. Before the game session, create a general plan of how the creatures included in the adventure would react to certain situations. Just be careful to not over plan during this step.



THE PILLAR OF COMBAT

Combat is the quintessential pillar of play that we think of when we hear the word “encounter.” But are all combats created equally? Are there ways to enhance combat to become even more exciting, exhilarating, and nail-biting? Of course! But does combat need to be brutally challenging to accomplish that? In short, no. At length, we need to consider two main ideas to enhance our combats without simply making them brutal: a variety of difficulty and exciting abilities. Do keep in mind that the exact specifics of each of these will vary from game system to game system and may even vary within a particular system depending on which books the GM has available.

VARIETY OF DIFFICULTY

This topic would have been just as at home in our previous chapter, but it felt better to discuss it here while we review individual encounters. The basic idea is that you always want your encounters to have various difficulties. Some of them should be relatively easy, with the characters having little, if any, difficulty in defeating them. Others should be challenging, with the genuine possibility of a character dying being on the table. And, of course, there should be a significant number of encounters that are somewhere in between these two extremes.

The natural next question to ask is, “Why?” Why wouldn’t you want to have encounters all similar difficulties? After all, wouldn’t that help ensure the entire adventure’s balance works out correctly? And wouldn’t you want your players to know what to expect?

Well . . . not really. The idea here is to use the difficulty of combat to help in the narrative flow of the adventure. See, all tales, whether a novel or TTG, follow the same broad flow. They begin with an inciting event that starts everything off. Then there’s rising action, where tension builds as the protagonists discover what’s happening, a climax and resolution to the tension, and finally, a conclusion that wraps everything up in a tidy bow. Many stories even have multiple sets of rising action and climaxes!

By having various difficulties, our games can also follow this quite natural flow. We can have easy and moderate encounters that serve as rising action. These challenging encounters can either serve as rising action or a minor climax, and then tough encounters that serve as the adventure’s climax.

INTERESTING ABILITIES

All right, you're thinking about making sure you use a variety of difficulties in your combat encounters, but how fascinating are the creatures the characters are intended to fight? Generally speaking, giant sacks of hit points that hit really hard are . . . boring. Let's be honest; if the only thing a creature can do is hit really hard, it's generally not particularly exciting or interesting; instead, it feels like little more than an exercise in accounting.

What can you do about this? Well, it's pretty straightforward: make sure the creatures involved can do exciting things! The exact method you use to accomplish this will vary from genre to genre; in fantasy, you'll often have the creatures use magic, while in sci-fi, they'll use technology. It can be tricky to determine how to apply this at times without upsetting the game balance. Still, as a general rule, if the interesting ability is weaker than the creature's standard attack, then you should be okay.

But hang on . . . what makes an ability interesting anyway? That will vary from group to group because what interests one person may not be interesting to another. Still, most of the time, it's a matter of ensuring the ability brings something new to the battle that wouldn't be there otherwise. This will often change the entire dynamic of the fight; a character getting mind controlled, the environment suddenly evolving, or the creature suddenly targeting an unexpected weakness are all common ways an interesting ability changes everything.

THE PILLAR OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Now that we've discussed combat at length, let's touch on the next pillar of play: social interaction. How does a social interaction work into an encounter? Is there any real point to making one, or is it something that fills some time where we didn't prep anything else? What are the stakes in play during social interaction? Let's consider the following two ideas regarding social interaction: They should influence the state of the encounter, and they should feel organic.

THE STATE OF THE ENCOUNTER

First and foremost, social interaction serves as a way for the characters to influence the state of an encounter without engaging in combat. This means that they might get some form of benefit if the social interaction goes their direction—such as an enemy becoming unwary of them or otherwise assuming they're not intruders—or a detriment if it doesn't—such as sounding the alarm for reinforcements.

However, with that in mind, the character's choices should determine the degree of change. If the characters are pushing for a massive benefit—such as being led straight to the big bad without any combat—then the risk versus reward should correspond to that. If they're successful, they will gain a massive boon . . . if not, they may risk being swarmed by a larger group of enemies than expected. Likewise, if the characters are merely pressing for information or lightly taunting, failing in that may only have a minor detriment if one presents itself at all.

There should be an ebb and flow to social interaction as there would be in combat. In this case, it's about generating satisfaction at the table. Nobody likes having their attempt at social interaction cut off, only to have it resolved with a dice roll. Instead, it should crescendo until the right moment, where the clattering of the dice across the table serves as the climax of the encounter!

MAKING IT FEEL ORGANIC

Sometimes, there's a tendency to make social interactions feel forced, as though they must check a box rather than be included as a natural part of the game. The GM should avoid this state whenever possible, as it tends to relegate social interaction to a secondary encounter type compared to others. When this happens, an entire pillar of play—one-third of the hobby as a whole—is lost.

Instead, when preparing for an encounter, consider what those individual creatures might be interested in. What gets *them* excited? What makes those creatures get up in the morning? Of course, you're probably not going to end up with a social interaction discussing the hopes and dreams of a random minion in a dungeon . . . though sometimes you might. However, this consideration gives you an insight into how that creature would behave and what matters to it, letting whatever interaction you create feel organic.

THE PILLAR OF EXPLORATION

Exploration. Widely considered to be the least exciting pillar of the game and often unceremoniously passed over when designing an encounter in favor of social interactions and particularly in favor of combat. However, it's usually unwise to do so, as exploration can account for some of the most interesting components of an encounter, such as puzzles, traps, and secrets. Unlike the other two pillars, we will discuss exploration a little differently; instead of discussing considerations, we'll simply discuss types of exploration elements. The reason for this will become

apparent when we put everything together to form an encounter at the end of this chapter.

GENERAL EXPLORATION ELEMENTS

To start our discussion of exploration, let's use the most general items first. These are the ones that the characters immediately see whenever they walk into a room: the furniture, the floor, the ceiling, and whatever else you describe. This often bleeds over into the other elements—particularly traps and hazards—but these are the things the characters can see without having to make any dice rolls or even ask. In fact, the GM often includes them in the read-aloud information they provide the players, such as the sticky floors implying spider webs from the example at the beginning of this chapter.

PUZZLES

Puzzles have an interesting place in TTGs. They're a polarizing concept; some players and GMs swear by them and genuinely love when they appear, while others loathe them and avoid them at all costs. It's easy to understand why this might be the case, too. Puzzles typically challenge the *players*, not the characters, like nearly anything else in the game.

Thus, puzzles occupy a different place here than the other elements. In the case of puzzles, it's usually best to find out whether the players even want them to appear in the game and, if they do, how often. If none of your players like solving puzzles, it's best to leave them out. If they do like solving them, consider incorporating them on occasion; just remember that you're not challenging the characters when you do, only the players themselves.

TRAPS

Traps are probably the most familiar portion of exploration in TTGs. They tend to be sudden, exciting events that don't happen in any other way. A sudden click as the player moves their token onto a specific tile, stones crashing as the defenders activate a rockfall trap—just their presence alone makes the game more interesting.

The challenge with traps is that you don't want them to happen too often, or they can cause several problems. The most common is that the players ask to look for traps at every step they take, though it is also not unheard of that players will also start to do . . . crazy things in response, things that take away from how they want

to roleplay their characters. Ever heard of players sending an ally to run down a hallway to check for traps? Yeah . . . not exactly what most people think of when they’re playing the “good guys.”

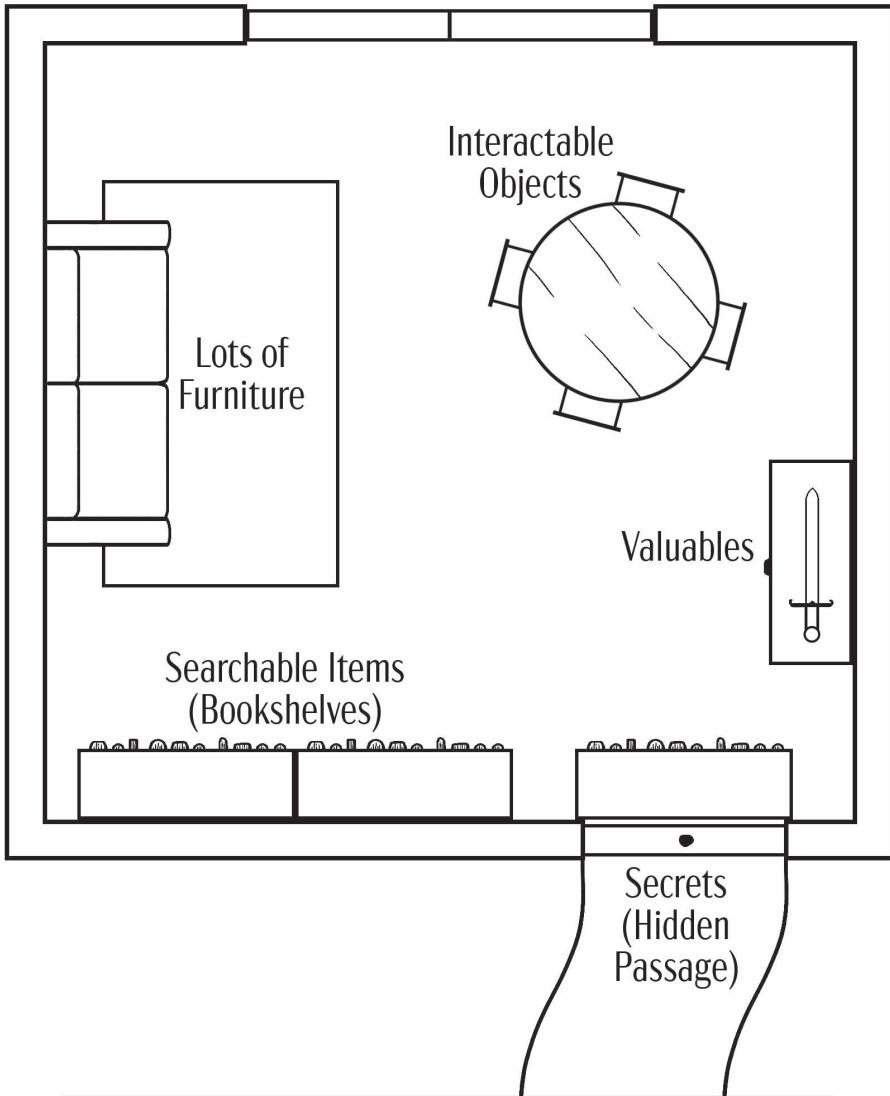
Of particular note, this portion includes a subset of traps that operate differently. These are traps that act as a terrain hazard or similar environmental effect. These can be an enriching addition to any encounter, though it’s usually wise to consider when to use them carefully. They work best either as a setting element to the entire adventure—such as taking place in a poison swamp—or as something to raise the stakes in a major encounter like a boss battle. They generally don’t work as well when simply used randomly, like a random minion’s room suddenly filling with poison gas.

SECRETS

Secrets are a classic element in TTGs. They’re the hidden-away rooms, secret passages that let you navigate the area differently, and most delectably, the sweet, sweet loot tucked away in the false bottom of a chest. Players get excited when they find the secrets and wonder if they have missed something, even when they haven’t; often, the GM has similar feelings since they had to take the time to craft it.

It’s often wise to have a solid offering of secrets scattered throughout your adventures and encounters. They should be common enough that there’s good reason to search for them but not so common that the players know they will always find something just by looking for it. It’s a tricky balance to find and one that will vary a bit by group depending on how often they search and how many players care enough to find them.

As a general rule of thumb, it’s reasonable to ensure that about half of the time, the players will roll to search for secrets and have the *opportunity* to find them. The key word is opportunity. If they have to roll or use another game mechanic to find a secret, there also needs to be a meaningful chance of failure. The result is that, depending on the system, the players will discover secrets about one-quarter to one-third of the times they look for them, but they will likely find about three-quarters of the secrets you create. That results in a nice balance of the characters having to look but never being certain that they missed something, and you won’t have to prepare many things they will never use.



EXPLORATION MAP

COMBINING THE ELEMENTS INTO AN ENCOUNTER

Now that we have discussed all of the different pillars of play and how they specifically factor into encounters, we need to discuss how to combine them into a cohesive encounter. That's right; we aren't looking at them as "combat encounters" or "social encounters" or as something that happens in isolation from each other. Instead, we'll combine them into exciting, dynamic encounters that combine multiple pillars of play to bring our games to the next level.

To do this, we'll use a basic strategy that gives us a solid foundation to work from. For our purposes, we'll start with the pillar of exploration as the foundation from which we'll build; we know that it might be the least popular of the three pillars, but it encompasses so much that it lends itself to be a natural starting point.

Thus, we begin building this encounter by asking ourselves what feels natural here. Often, this will be informed by the map we're using; many will contain secret passages and decorations scattered around. Most decorations will likely just be for show, such as a bed, but others will afford a bit more utility, such as a magic circle on the ground or a hole in the floor. This is also where we'll want to decide whether we'll include some of the other exploration elements. That hole in the floor might be the perfect place for a spike trap, and a magic circle could be a solid place to include either a terrain effect or a puzzle.

Once we have identified the exploration elements we want to include, we'll move on to the combat pillar. The balance of how many creatures to include and the types of creatures will vary from game system to game system, so we'll simply leave that at "ensure your balance is correct, and you have a reasonable variety of difficulties," as we describe in the combat section of this chapter. However, what we want to look at here is using creatures that can use the exploration elements we have included. For example, if there's a large hole in the floor that we have decided will have a spike trap in the bottom, then we may want to include creatures strong enough to push the characters into the hole. It may also be that you have decided that combat isn't going to be a likely occurrence here unless the characters choose to attack recklessly; that's okay! Not every encounter needs to have combat, though it's always wise to remember that due to player agency, combat can still break out.

Finally, after we have figured out which creatures we would like to use, we can move on to the social interaction in the encounter. Regardless of whether you plan to have combat or not, it's almost always wise to have a social element in an encounter.

There are rare exceptions, such as the entire encounter being creatures that cannot speak, but these should be the exceptions. Consider what the creatures might be saying or doing, how they might feel or react to certain provocations, and anything else you think might get a reaction from them. Even if the creatures plan to ambush the characters as soon as they walk into the room, they're still likely to talk or say things during combat; this is still social interaction and should be considered here!

By using these building blocks and creating an encounter utilizing this strategy, you'll find that your encounters are more exciting and less one-dimensional. The players will be more engaged in the events that are transpiring around them and won't feel as though the only thing they can do is roll dice and see if an attack connects. Even in game systems that are known for having long, slow combat, players will be more engaged and active, leading to a more exciting game session and even more fulfillment for you!

By understanding these game design basics, GMs are ready to start crafting adventures for their groups. Encounters grow to become adventures which become campaigns, with the GM always returning time and again to the basics to hone their skills continuously. In the next chapter, we discuss how to engage those newfound skills in designing an encounter by creating a one-shot adventure.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Exploration Elements. Exploration is often overlooked compared to combat and social interaction, but this pillar can quickly add new depth to an encounter. Elements such as general exploration elements (furniture, floor, ceiling), puzzles, traps, and secrets can make encounters more interesting. Puzzles should be included based on player preferences, while traps should be used sparingly to avoid excessive caution and unconventional player actions. Secrets should be scattered strategically, providing an opportunity for discovery while maintaining a sense of mystery.

Social Interaction and Organicity. Social interaction should be included in encounters to influence the state of the encounter and provide a meaningful alternative to combat. Players' choices during social interactions can change the encounter, either for or against them, without a single attack being made. By making social interactions feel organic and considering the motivations and interests of the creatures involved, you can integrate social interaction into nearly every encounter.

Variety of Difficulty. Incorporating a variety of difficulty levels in combat encounters enhances the narrative flow of the adventure. Easy encounters can serve as rising action, challenging encounters as rising action or minor climaxes, and tough encounters as the climax. Differentiating difficulty levels adds excitement and keeps players engaged throughout the adventure.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

How do you represent each of the pillars in your encounters?

How does spontaneous social interaction influence your encounters?

How do you vary the difficulty of encounters so that the players stay on their toes and it follows a narrative flow?



CHAPTER 23: ONE-SHOTS

Everyone has gathered around the table for something unique. Perhaps it's someone's birthday, or maybe everyone wants to try out an exciting new game system. Perhaps it's just time for a break from your regular campaign so everyone can try new characters or do something completely different than the usual game. Regardless of the reason, everyone has gathered to play a one-shot. This quintessential style of game is as old as tabletop gaming itself; the idea of sitting down and playing through something complete in a single session has many positive qualities and few downsides.

However, some one-shot elements differ from other adventures, particularly in those that take place in an ongoing campaign. The differences in this type of adventure are all centered around time. The idea is that everyone sits down and plays through the adventure, a single adventure, in one sitting. We'll discuss how to address the challenges that arise from this individually, but this single idea will be the backdrop we are working against.

So, What Are the Differences?

As stated, time changes a number of things in the context of a one-shot. However, it's a bit more complicated because how time affects things varies from element to element. The most obvious is that your time will be limited regarding the number of encounters or events that can occur. This, in turn, means that you will need to condense the challenge in the adventure into fewer encounters, which can drastically affect individual encounter difficulty. Another difference is how the characters are introduced to the adventure; usually, there isn't time for the characters to wander around town, find a quest giver, talk to them, and then travel to the adventure location and all the other stuff that takes place between adventures in a typical campaign.

Finally, there is a difference in scope. This is the most significant change and the most challenging to navigate. In short, the adventure has to keep the characters in a bit tighter of a box than we usually associate with a TTG; yes, one-shots often have some rails related to them by necessity. But don't worry. All is not lost, and you won't be railroading your players. Let's take a deep breath, and we'll start exploring these differences in more detail.

ONE-SHOT GAME

- ⊕ Time constraints limit the number of encounters you can have, meaning fewer but more intense battles.
- ⊖ Little-to-no time for roleplaying beforehand, so the PCs usually start the game already at the location.
- ⌚ How quickly your players get through combat determines how many encounters are included.
- ⚠ Use social contracts and smart design choices to help guide but not railroad the players.

STANDARD GAME

- ⊕ There are no time constraints, so there are usually a lot of encounters in every adventure.
- ⌚ Characters have time to find inciting actions themselves, meet relevant NPCs, and travel to the adventure location.
- ⌚ The number and difficulty of the encounters you use are determined by the system's game mechanics.
- ⌚ Allows you to give the characters complete freedom when deciding what to do and how long to take.

STARTING A ONE-SHOT

Even though above we introduced this concept second, it's an easier change to discuss because it impacts the game the least. In a typical adventure, an inciting action, quest giver, or something else tells the characters and the players, "The quest is over here; you should go in this direction." That's what we both expect and desire from our games because it keeps the world open to the characters while giving them direction. Nothing about it is forced, and there's no railroad.

Alas, we don't have such luxuries in a one-shot. This "in-between adventures" stuff often takes several hours, perhaps even an entire game session, during a regular campaign. But if we look at our goals with a one-shot, we can't do an entire session just getting to it. Fortunately, this is the simplest element that we can change. When beginning the one-shot, we provide players with the inciting action, quest-giver information, and then place their characters at the adventure's starting location, such as the entrance to the ancient crypts wherein lies the artifact they must retrieve.

This means it's slightly less open than an ordinary adventure, at least initially. That's okay. In this specific instance, we must accept that we cannot run this as a sandbox—or even linearly (in this particular portion only!). We have to give definitive direction to the players and tell them where they're starting.

ENCOUNTERS

Now that the characters are on the adventure, what will they do there? Well, they probably face a handful of encounters that lead to the adventure's ultimate conclusion. The question, however, is, "How many encounters should there be?" In a typical adventure, you can include as many as you like within the confines of that system's mechanics. In a game system like *Dungeons & Dragons 5e*, this refers to the adventuring day mechanic, whereas in a system like *Pathfinder 2.0*, there's no adventuring day but simply individual encounter balance.

In a one-shot, we don't have the option to use that as our guideline. Instead, we have to consider how many encounters characters can complete realistically within the allotted time. The exact number will vary from game system to game system, depending on how long we expect each encounter to take. Realistically, this primarily depends on how long *combat* takes to complete. Social interaction and exploration rarely take long enough during an encounter to need significant changes. This is

even more true if you follow the encounter construction strategy discussed at the end of the last chapter and build every pillar of play into each encounter.

It's generally a good idea to have one more encounter than you expect to need for the amount of time you have. This allows a little more flexibility in how things shake out. For example, the characters might get extremely lucky and steamroll an encounter they shouldn't have or bypass one altogether due to clever play. However, it's usually wise to prepare encounter rewards that are easy to move around, such as the key to a room or the item the group needs to complete the adventure. That way, if things are moving too slowly and you need to take out an encounter, you can do so without too much issue.

DIFFICULTY LEVEL

One key element of any TTG encounter is the difficulty level. In the last chapter, we briefly discussed having various difficulty levels present to maintain the typical narrative flow of rising action, climax, and conclusion, as well as how to provide variety and avoid having every encounter be brutally deadly or terribly easy. Ideally, you want the same to be true in a one-shot, but that presents a catch-22: How do you limit the number of encounters and have various difficulty levels?

The best solution is to start with three encounters: a particularly easy one, one that is roughly middle of the road, and one that is challenging. For some game systems, this is all you're going to need! For others, you'll still want to start with this, then add alternating easy and middle-of-the-road encounters along the way to maintain variety while ensuring you can finish the one shot.

The challenge is ensuring the characters use their resources at a reasonable rate, despite having fewer encounters than usual. This means that the standard of difficulty for each encounter will be slightly different than in a typical adventure. The characters are likely to have more resources at their disposal and the ability to burn their resources more readily. In most cases, encounters are easier than their numbers would otherwise indicate.

PUZZLES

In terms of encounters, puzzles are of particular note. Puzzles can be an excellent encounter element to include in a one-shot that doesn't involve any combat, but there are risks involved. Because puzzles don't challenge the characters but rather

the players, they are a bit of a wildcard. There's always the risk of—even for a simple puzzle—the players spending far longer on any given puzzle than expected, throwing the adventure's duration off. With this in mind, if you want to include a puzzle in your one-shot, do so only if you're also going to have a “release valve” to end the puzzle if it is taking too long. This could be because an encounter shifts location and interrupts the puzzle by including more than one viable way to solve it or some combination of both.

Scope

This is likely to be the most contentious point in this entire chapter, but it's one that we have to discuss. In a typical campaign adventure that isn't part of a one-shot, we advocate strongly against limiting the characters' choices. Even in a linear campaign, as we discussed in Chapter 9, the characters have significant freedom to approach adventures as they see fit, to do whatever they wish in between adventures, even going so far as to leave the adventure if they want and return later with a different plan or additional supplies. The skies are the limit in a typical adventure.

However, in a one-shot, that often isn't possible. While we don't advocate for railroading the players—that is, we don't support defining how players **must** approach things and only allowing one particular solution—we still need to keep the characters moving forward and not faffing about. There are two effective ways to do this: the social contract and careful design choices.

The Social Contract

As with any game, a social contract is necessary for a one-shot. In most ways, it's just like the social contract for any other game: no PvP, don't touch my dice unless you want to lose a hand, bring pizza or snacks, the everyday things. However, for a one-shot, we need the players to agree to play through the adventure in front of them and do their best to avoid running off into the abyss that is the rest of the world. For many groups, everyone involved understands this to be the case; however, for other groups, particularly those that have never played together, it's usually wise to state this explicitly.

Design Choices

We can also keep the scope of an adventure limited through the use of careful design choices. The first design choice we can make is to have a way to instantly limit how a character can leave the adventure area other than going *through* the adventure.

A classic example of how to do this is by setting the adventure in a cave; however, part of the background information you provide to the players includes a cave that traps the characters inside. A similar alternative would be a pirate vessel sinking their ship in the middle of the ocean, leaving commandeering the enemy vessel as the only way to return to civilization. In truth, there are limitless ways of accomplishing this, but they all come back to that core idea: The only way *out* is *through*.

The second design choice we can make is to have multiple paths through the adventure that are equally viable. Often, players have their characters leave and come back later because they can't identify the way forward and feel that is their only solution. By having multiple ways ahead, it's more likely that the players will find one of them and proceed forward.

THE HARSH REALITY

So, what do we do if both of these ideas fail, and the players decide that they're going to run off and do who knows what? Unfortunately, this is one of those instances where we have to break player agency. It's harsh, and nobody likes doing it, but in this case, it's necessary; otherwise, the one-shot will likely go on for many extra hours or even require multiple sessions, making it no longer a one-shot. That can be a frustrating experience for everyone involved, particularly those who just want to play through the adventure.

WHAT IF THINGS DON'T GO AS PLANNED?

Nobody, not a single GM alive, can perfectly plan for everything that could possibly happen. In almost all cases, it's not a big deal, and they can resolve things on the fly without too many issues. In other cases, you can get things back on track by simply talking to your players. Or, in the worst-case scenario described above, you have to forcibly get things back on track. But what happens in the other cases, the ones we can't resolve quite so quickly? We'll discuss what to do when the adventure goes wrong next.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Time Considerations. Time constraints in a one-shot adventure affect nearly everything in the adventure, including limiting encounters and scope. The adventure needs to provide clear direction to the players from the start, unlike a typical campaign where characters can explore and find quests organically.

Controlling Encounters. The number of encounters in a one-shot should be realistic for the time allocated. You'll need to use your judgment based on experience and the game system for the exact number to include. The difficulty level of encounters may differ from a regular adventure, as characters have more resources available and encounters are often easier than they appear.

Social Contract. In a one-shot, the scope of choices is more limited compared to a typical campaign. The social contract between players should emphasize the expectation to follow the adventure and avoid wandering off. Design choices, such as setting limitations or providing multiple viable paths, can help keep the adventure focused. If the players get completely off course, you may need to intervene to bring the game back on track.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

How do you adjust your adventures when you're running a one-shot?

How do you make sure your players stay on track when you're running a one-shot?



CHAPTER 24: WHAT IF YOU'RE NOT PREPARED?

Many of the chapters in this book offer guidance on how to be a prepared GM. Locations include objects and their details for player characters to interact with; maps are drawn to prepare for encounters or dungeon crawls; and various NPCs' motives and information are noted.

And yet, despite this process, sometimes the most important elements can slip through the cracks—or, sometimes, the GM may find that *everything* they need to run the adventure is missing entirely. When this happens, the GM must recognize one unsettling fact: They are unprepared for their session.

UNDERSTANDING UNPREPAREDNESS

The first thing to recognize about being unprepared is: It happens. Many things may hinder the groundwork necessary for a session, such as life events, work, and social life. Once the GM recognizes they're not ready, the next step is to understand how the unpreparedness manifested: Is it because they honestly didn't prepare or because they prepared the wrong things?

Not taking the time to set everything up is a very recognizable issue, whether the reason is conscious or unconscious. This happens because we're human; preparation takes time, and everyone has a finite amount available daily. Someone not having time to plan the session as thoroughly as desired doesn't make them less of a GM. They may forget that their next session isn't ready, and the work doesn't get done. When this occurs, it's critical to recognize that this afflicts all mortals—the GM may be an overpowered god in the game, but outside is a different story.

Another way that not being ready can reveal itself is when something falls through the cracks—the GM has notes on Point A and Point C, but Point B slipped their mind. With everything happening during sessions, finding out something didn't get included is unsurprising. Sometimes GMs prepare an adventure, only to discover that characters take an unpredicted left turn. Whether this is from misreading players' intentions, not understanding the GM's cues, or various other causes, the fact remains that the plans they laid may no longer be viable for this session.

The distinction between these two types of unpreparedness provides introspection to understand the root cause of the lack of planning. That knowledge can help

recognize potential issues in the GM’s process for the future and allow them to take corrective action. Yet, this ultimately doesn’t matter beyond this analytical purpose. The situation still exists, and the GM needs to decide what to do about their imminent or active session.

WHAT TO DO WHEN UNPREPARED

After the GM accepts that they are unprepared, their next thought may be to cancel or end the session early. This course of action shouldn’t be taken lightly, though, as it could be the catalyst for the scheduling spiral of death. Instead, the GM has several tools available to regain control of the session, regardless of how well they prepared it. A GM can put the session back on track by ad-libbing the unknown and adapting what is known. While we’ll review these two common examples in this book, several others may be more suitable to a specific situation.

AD-LIBBING

Ad-libbing, or running the game without pre-made notes or information, works well for certain people, depending on the situation. Someone experienced in thinking on their feet and quickly articulating details may thrive on this form of performance, while others may not. Like most skills, a GM’s ad-libbing skills are trainable through consistent practice and effort—and it’s worth developing this talent, as it has many real-world benefits beyond game mastering.

Ad-libbing is helpful in many instances during gameplay. The various NPCs that players encounter can be conceived and portrayed through this method, particularly shopkeepers and other non-impactful characters. How creatures and NPCs react to character actions during events can be decided spontaneously (especially when players are renowned for off-the-wall decisions). Even location descriptions—note that this is precisely the *description*, not the *details*—can be created on the spot with no one the wiser.

An example of an ad-libbed addition making sense would be a surprise decision to visit a tavern to learn more about a situation. Having divulged the information believed necessary for the quest, the GM has no such tavern prepared. However, this is a low-stakes addition to satisfy the players’ curiosity rather than critically impacting the narrative. All that is necessary are general details about some patrons, a way to project the establishment’s atmosphere, and some descriptors of the common room. The GM can pull many of these quickly from random tables and

expand on them to deliver worldbuilding details; meanwhile, the information the players receive can either expand or reinforce previously shared knowledge. Once the party has finished their business there, they will likely resume the expected adventure's path.

In the above scenario, the setting and events are relatively simple to present. The more complicated the situation, the more challenging the demands on the GM's quick thinking become. For instance, a surprise chase sequence spawned by a character's ill-advised attempt to pickpocket a nobleman requires much more to remain engaging and exciting. The GM needs to introduce responses from the authorities, reactions from passersby, potential hazards that may impede the thief and their pursuers—the list goes on! While the results can be thrilling, the GM undoubtedly will feel hard-pressed to improvise such a scene at a moment's notice, although it is possible.

However, the ad-libbing method also isn't ideal for other situations where careful planning is necessary. The last thing a GM should choose to do is build an adventure from the ground up as players interact with the scenario since that can lead to a disorganized mess. Similarly, encounters can suffer if ad-libbed, as a GM has less opportunity to determine the ideal number of creatures or how the terrain may affect combat. In addition, events with far-reaching consequences on the world and plot should not be unplanned since this will affect the narrative considerably.

CHANGE THINGS

There are two approaches that a GM can take to change things on the fly. The first is to adapt something already prepared, like an adventure or event, into the current situation as a substitute. Alternatively, the GM can pivot and adopt a style that allows them to address changing circumstances more spontaneously.

Adapting something is a fairly straightforward remedy to the situation, especially if the issue is that the GM prepared the wrong things. Most games have core mechanics that help guide the development of conditions, allowing GMs to make simple one-to-one substitutions. In most cases, planned encounters are also drag-and-drop, sometimes needing only quick modifications to set them in a new environment. When paired with ad-libbing, this approach allows situations to be quickly swapped when required, even during a session.

One example of this is if the GM runs a module (prewritten adventure) that guides characters to a location on the other side of the woods. A road passes through the trees, and you've planned a bandit ambush to catch the players off guard at a fallen tree. However, the characters render the intended encounter moot by deciding to travel around the forest instead. As everything pointed to the party encountering the bandits in the woods, the GM can change the bandit encounter into a confrontation along the alternative path to fit the new location.

However, shifting gears and running a different encounter altogether may be more prudent. Perhaps the local forestry unit stops them because they look suspicious, and they need to talk their way out of being detained. Even if the module provides details of one event, the GM can bring in other types of challenges for the players that befit their alternative route more naturally.

Another option available is shifting to a different approach for adventures to provide more flexibility. Most adventures are designed around a specific location, which is less amenable to being improvised on the spot. Yet there is another type of adventure that works well with ad-libbed content: event-based adventures. In these adventures, various events propel the adventure rather than a specific location. Rather than focus on what happens at a particular dungeon, for instance, an event-based adventure is more similar to a TV show's approach: characters go to a place where something happens that they must react to, leading them to another location.

There are many potential cases where this type of adventure flow would make sense. If characters meet with a representative of their patron and are charged with learning more about a nefarious faction's activities at a tavern across town, they can pursue this in various ways. They may choose to infiltrate the tavern to investigate who attends and what happens there; on the other hand, they may decide to kidnap the tavern owner and question them directly, or a variety of other options may ensue. Whichever approach the players choose, they may reveal that a faction member had just left to report to their superiors at another nondescript building across town. At this point, the characters can proceed to this new location. The process repeats itself until the adventure reaches a climactic event.

Because of this formula, the GM has more opportunities to adapt to events as they transpire. Prep time in response to this shift in style is also minimal because

the GM's goal is for characters to shape the narrative; they need to be receptive to character choices and actively react to what happens. However, this style can be more challenging to run because the amount of ad-libbing required is considerably more significant than with location-based adventures.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Throughout this chapter, the focus has been on ways for the GM to handle being unprepared. However, this doesn't address what happens when a group of chaos gremlins (a.k.a. "players") decide to "zag" when everything has been building toward a "zig." Character choices in-game are always the wild card, usually leading to unforeseen situations that the GM must somehow react to. But what is the correct response to the sudden change of events?

One thing *not* to do is panic. Preparation is the GM's friend in these circumstances, and the amount of preparation is vital in preventing the situation from spiraling into disarray. Before the session, the GM should consider what the characters might do and make provisions. This doesn't need to account for every possible eventuality that may come to pass, but at least a few essential solutions for the most likely cases. The GM might not use them in this session, but they can file away the generic options for future use. In these cases, the GM doesn't look at the situation to address something specific. The goal is to find a simple way to address a common issue. For instance, if characters decide not to go directly toward the site of their next quest, instead announcing they intend to go to a tavern to get rumors of what has happened, the GM can plan some generic gossip for the party to hear while they're on their detour, or have a member of their patron organization find them and firmly remind them of the task at hand.

These are generic solutions that can help keep things on track, but there are opportunities to expand the players' understanding of the local area. For example, events could also happen around the town, like a protest over new taxes or a herald announcing an upcoming festival, which may serve as upcoming plot hooks. Even if they may become irrelevant (or unnecessary) at this stage, having them in mind is great for fitting into unexpected gaps caused by character decisions.

That said, there has to be a limit to the number of contingencies the GM should plan for. This has no hard and fast rule since everything depends on how chaotic a group is in-game; however, a good rule of thumb is to look at the likelihood of

something occurring. If there is at least a 50% chance that something will happen, having a method to address it will be beneficial. If the odds of it happening are less than half, then it may not be worthwhile to expect.

This last advice may contradict the first recommendation to prepare basic solutions to what the player characters might do. Although this may be the first impression, there's a difference between the two scenarios. Generic solutions can apply throughout the campaign and should be treated as campaign-wide prep, while contingencies for specific events are part of session prep. When approached with this focus, the distinction becomes more evident, and the GM can develop some pre-session-planning elements at different stages of the process.

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Even though there's plenty of detail in this section to address being unprepared, it's essential to relax and take a deep breath. This may be something iterated multiple times in earlier paragraphs, but that's because it's critical. Nobody can ready themselves for every unexpected situation. There are too many variables possible in-game.

The best advice in these circumstances is to carry on. Be ready to adapt and react on the fly, regardless of how well you prepare the session. The GM may have an adventure detailed from start to finish with everything imaginable, but as soon as characters interact with the world, all bets are off; it's just the nature of the beast.

Preparing the core elements of the session so that the GM can run the game confidently is crucial, as this helps maintain the integrity of the world when spontaneous events occur. However, finding the sweet spot between necessary and superfluous takes time. Sometimes preparing too much information makes it harder to use it effectively as events occur, which is essential when something unexpected happens—or worse, everything in the adventure seems to go horribly wrong.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Reasons for Unpreparedness. Unpreparedness can occur due to various reasons, such as limited time for preparation or plans not aligning with player actions. It is important to understand the root cause of unpreparedness to address potential issues in your process. Of course, always keep in mind that sometimes things will just happen, and there may not have been anything you could do to have been prepared.

Ways to Recover. One way you can recover is to ad-lib, letting you create content spontaneously and quickly adapt existing material to suit the current situation. Ad-libbing can be useful for non-impactful characters or simple setting descriptions, though, in more complex situations, there may be unexpected consequences. When handling unexpected player choices, don't panic and rely on your preparation. Having generic solutions or contingency plans ready to address common issues is often wise. Try to be sure to strike a balance and plan for likely occurrences without overloading with excessive contingencies.

The Unexpected. Regardless of the level of preparation, unexpected situations will arise, and it is crucial that you can adapt and react on the fly. Finding the right balance between necessary preparation and flexibility is key to keeping the game moving and handling the unexpected.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

What happened the last time you were unprepared?

Were you able to recover? How did you do it?

What's your plan for situations that you couldn't have anticipated?



CHAPTER 25: THINGS CAN (AND WILL) GO WRONG

Everyone stands up from the table, shaking their heads with dejected looks on their faces—perhaps there's even a scowl from one of the players. They had just entered a room with something way above their level, were teleported to the moon with no way back, or some other random occurrence dashed their hopes of continuing the campaign. Perhaps their characters' lifeless bodies lie in what can charitably be described as a pile, or perhaps one of the characters finally had enough and decided to cut another character's throat. Or maybe instead of a tragic ending to the session, the players were just bored and wanted to head home.

An immutable fact of the universe is that for everything that goes right, just as many events go wrong. As with everything else, all GMs—brand-new or long-term—can have lousy game sessions. More experience helps them limit “bad session” frequency. Yet, no one can ever eliminate the possibility of a less-than-stellar game.

The enormity of how terrible the session has gone is usually inflated by the GM’s concerns. In reality, GMs are much more critical of their performances than players. Players mostly fixate on enjoying and participating in the game; only the GM knows something is wrong. Therefore, even when the game seems to spiral into chaos, a GM should take a moment to reflect on whether the session is genuinely crashing and burning or if the disaster is only in their heads.

BUT DID IT ACTUALLY GO WRONG?

First and foremost, let’s consider whether things *actually* went wrong. Just because the characters lost a fight or were utterly wiped out doesn’t mean the session went wrong. We’ll dive into specifics for different scenarios throughout the rest of this chapter, but before that, let’s consider some telltale signs that it might be time to examine the issue in more detail:

- Are most or all of the players leaving the table in a good mood?
- Can a direct chain of player choices be drawn from a typical starting point (such as the beginning of an adventure) to the event that appears to have caused the upset?
- Have outside influences affected those choices, such as unprompted hints from the GM?
- Could the players have reasonably foreseen the consequences of these choices?

If the answer to all of these questions is “yes,” then it’s likely that the session wasn’t as bad as you think. Even if just two or three of these answers are yes, it’s still somewhat likely that the session was nevertheless a good one, even if it ended on a bit of a downer note (though that could be turned into a chance to hype up the opportunity to triumph in the next session!).

However, if you could only answer yes to one of these questions, or if the answer to all the questions is no, then it may be time to explore what happened in more detail. It’s still entirely possible that things aren’t as bad as they seemed, but it’s still a signal that it’s time for reflection.

WHERE THINGS MAY GO WRONG

While most bad sessions may exist in the GM’s imagination, there is truth in those thoughts occasionally. The first step of recovering from a “bad session” is digging deep into whether it was terrible and, if it was, gauging how much. This review requires honesty, and it’s equally important to consider what went right as well—additional advice on this process is included in Chapter 12. However, balancing the positives and negatives prevents the situation from being considered an outright catastrophe.

This doesn’t minimize that sometimes elements within a session cause issues, and the GM needs to address those potential problems. While there’s no exhaustive list, character deaths and player-versus-player activity are the most common elements that may point to issues.

CHARACTER DEATH

To address the elephant in the room clearly, character deaths aren’t always bad. Sometimes a character dying at the table serves a purpose, such as emphasizing that there are meaningful stakes in the game and that each choice has consequences. The result may also be outside the GM’s control if it comes down to unlucky rolls, as bad fortune can be just as deadly as poor choices. The long and short of it is this: The GM shouldn’t be afraid to let characters die out of fear that it will ruin the game. In nearly every case, the adventure goes on, sometimes with a renewed purpose if a future plot hook relates to the character’s death.

The GM should evaluate why one or more characters died. Was this through their actions, like running ahead of the party and getting swarmed by mobs of enemies before the others could aid them? Or were they struck down by creatures far more powerful for their level, even with the help of their companions? Each situation points to a different underlying problem, but only the latter should lay blame at the GM’s feet.

When a character dies naturally through ill fortune or poor decisions, the GM can confidently relax, knowing the death wasn't their fault. They can instead turn their attention toward addressing their new primary goal: reintroducing the player into the game with a new character. Every table may have a different approach, but most will agree that it's imperative to reintroduce the player whose character died into the game as quickly as possible. Rather than spending the session building to a grand introduction that's narratively sound and makes up an iota of gameplay, focus on allowing them to join as soon as possible; the introduction is only one percent of the player's gameplay, and waiting on the sidelines for that moment may cost them the opportunity to play.

On the other hand, if the character's death was because of imbalance or something that the GM handled poorly, the best thing to do is to own the situation and acknowledge that it happened. While this is most likely not a popular take, remember that the game is not—dare we say “should not be”—perfectly balanced in all things. Sometimes it's good that the game has high-difficulty encounters that challenge players or that bad luck is nearly insurmountable. This deliberate inequality, when used correctly, makes successes more rewarding, although these intentions don't always result in players' success.

However, the GM must recognize the reason for increasing the difficulty. They should take a moment for introspection, determining where it stemmed from. Did the GM accidentally misjudge the characters' abilities, or did they make a calculated decision to hamstring the party? The answer to this question is essential to recognizing the root cause of the character's death, a step that is especially crucial for games intended to feel deadly.

TPKs

TPKs, or “total party kills,” relate to the above yet deserve special consideration. As with most character deaths, experiencing one doesn't mean the GM did something inherently wrong. They don't need to do anything to prevent it from happening. The ability to lose is essential to any game, and most TPKs result from players forging their foolhardy path that results in ruin.

Nevertheless, a TPK shouldn't be a tool that the GM uses to boost the narrative or punish the party, and they should never force it to happen. When the entire party is defeated, the GM should ask themselves three questions to understand whether the characters even had a chance to avoid it:

Could the characters have talked themselves out of the fight? This focuses more on whether there was an opportunity for characters to escape danger with words. However, it also may reflect on the GM if they didn't telegraph the imminent threat not talking posed. Even if the dice gods didn't favor their rolls, it's essential to know if the players could evade peril through social interaction.

Did any of the characters' choices in-game affect what they encountered? For example, did the characters mistake a helpful NPC, who had information about a secret passage bypassing a host of bandits lying in wait for an enemy and kill them? This sort of situation can be chalked up to the players making the problem harder on themselves since their decision increased the difficulty of their mission.

Did the characters make poor decisions along the way? For instance, splitting the party is generally considered a less ideal course of action, and it may contribute to why a character's death occurred. The GM shouldn't take it upon themselves to mitigate a situation designed for the entire party just because they separated and bit off more than they could chew.

For every "yes" response to the questions above, it's increasingly likely that the TPK happened through the natural course of the game rather than because something went wrong. Addressing these questions helps provide insights into what may have caused the incident in the first place. It also allows the GM to identify areas that may require improvement if any answer is "no." As long as the confrontation with death happened due to player actions, the GM shouldn't shy away from allowing a TPK.

PLAYER VS. PLAYER EVENTS

One specific rule is invaluable to protecting the longevity and camaraderie of a TTRPG group: Don't allow player-versus-player (PvP) in games. This is a rule that we employ at our tables because this behavior breaks the cohesive and collaborative atmosphere of the game. When one player can act against another, the unified story of a party overcoming dangers together transforms into a situation where someone wins and others lose.

What's more, PvP often quickly results in conflict between players. The focus shifts toward competing against one another as they try to one-up each other, which leads to escalation. A character steals a valuable magic item from one of their comrades; in return, that character throws the thief under the bus when the authorities question the unusual adventuring party about suspicious activities, so the guards take the entire group into custody. The attention and energy spent on the petty

rivalry between players can become even more amplified in the process—more than most competitive games—considering the players’ connection to their characters.

With enough tension applied, anything will eventually break. That includes TTG groups. Once infighting begins, it becomes challenging to contain and may spill over beyond the game. The most common result of PvP is the group fracturing under strain, damaging real-life friendships as everyone goes their separate ways.

But is there ever a time when PvP should be allowed? This is a decision that every GM and group will need to determine for themselves. It may be rare, but some tables make PvP work without negatively affecting the game’s quality. If a group were to introduce PvP into the game, the best advice available is to limit it to particular, minimal instances to reduce the potential fallout.

Since each table decides whether to permit PvP, it may be harder to determine why this is a sign that a game has started to go wrong. However, it can indicate that trouble is brewing when it’s strictly disallowed. A one-off incident can be explained away as a player getting too engrossed in the game and character; however, if it occurs regularly, the GM should consider that there may be a problem.

There are several scenarios for why PvP can develop. The most obvious can be that a problem player is at the table. To be clear, a player who does PvP isn’t always the problem; it can be that the receiver has built tension between them more subtly. This is the less obvious type, where a wedge has developed between the characters in-game or players out of the game. Whatever the case, this tension can quickly lead to stress fractures that threaten to shatter the group if the GM ignores the warning signs.

WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Now that we know many ways a game can take a wrong turn, the GM is ready to take the following steps. The first thing to do is determine whether something went wrong, which you can do using the ideas and examples presented in the earlier parts of this chapter. If they determine that issues have occurred, then the next step is to own that the problem exists. This may be harder to accept, but it’s essential to recognize it so they can take corrective actions.

Once the situation is acknowledged, the GM can move on to identify what has caused the problem. There are a few likely culprits, such as inexperience with the game system. This may be as simple as further studying the core rules or as complicated as understanding the intricacies of the game’s guidelines for balance.

Reviewing these elements helps the GM identify gaps in the system they need to account for, such as imperfections in calculating monster challenge levels.

A related problem may arise from the GM's adventure design, which may cause the encounters' difficulty to exceed a survivable threshold. Alternatively, the GM may have provided a way to lessen the combat's challenge, but the tool necessary for this had been hidden too well. When this happens, they should research more about game design to improve upon this or consider ways to make it easier. Many of the chapters in this book provide relevant ideas behind the process, and these can be excellent resources to start with.

Other scenarios may be more problematic. Sometimes the issue isn't with the game's system or design but with the players. Problem players can exacerbate existing complications or be the catalyst for new ones. If a discussion cannot resolve it, the best action a GM can take may be to eject them from the game entirely. While it may be an extreme step—especially if the problem player is a close friend—the toxicity such players bring to the table isn't conducive to an enjoyable game experience. Often this regrettable but crucial step is all that's necessary to return the game to an enjoyable collaborative story experience.

No matter the situation, the GM should take appropriate action to address the issues that cause the game to go wrong. Whether a character dies—or all of them—or a player strains the table's camaraderie, much introspection is needed to learn from the event. Each occurrence is an opportunity for growth, and the GM's ability to handle the next incident will only be strengthened by the experience they gained.

MOVING ON

At the end of the day, no matter how bad a session went, it's all just a game and, honestly, isn't that important in the grand scheme of life. There's always another session, another game to play. Provided the GM has done what's in their power about the situation and actively tried to improve things afterward, that's all that can be asked, and GMs who do it should be commended. Once all is said and done, however, it's time to move on to bigger and brighter things and not dwell on the past. In that vein, we'll next discuss how to use a module for a campaign; many GMs find using modules to be a welcome reprieve from a homebrew campaign, particularly if they're trying to bounce back from something going terribly wrong.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Did most or all of the players leave the table in
a good mood?

yes no

Can a direct chain of player choices be drawn
that leads from a typical starting point to the
event that appears to have caused the upset?

yes no

Was there outside influence on those choices,
such as unprompted hints from the game
master?

yes no

Could the players have reasonably foreseen the
consequences of these choices?

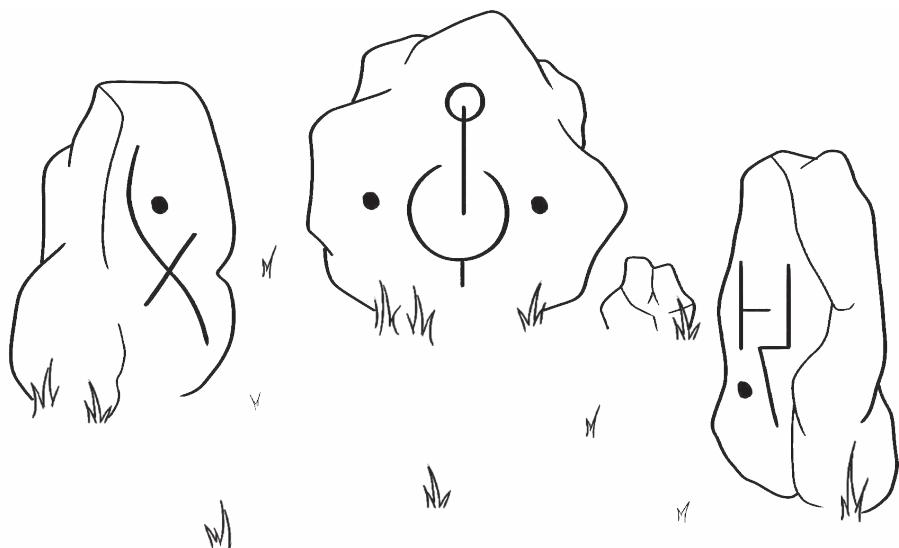
yes no

Note: If you answered mostly “yes”, it is likely the session wasn’t as bad as you think. If you answered mostly “no”, you should dive into what happened and reflect.



WHAT NOW?

1. Analyze the session honestly with yourself.
2. Identify the root cause.
3. Work towards a solution. This could mean...
 - ◆ The GM needs to study more about game design and balance.
 - ◆ The GM must fill a void that is built into the game system.
 - ◆ Talk to or remove problem players.
4. Give yourself some grace and move on after you have done all that you can do.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Challenge Your Perception. We are all guilty of perceiving game sessions as worse than they actually are. We are our own worst critics, even when players are actually enjoying the game. That's not to say that things never go wrong, far from it, but it's important to differentiate between genuine problems and their own concerns to maintain a balanced perspective.

But Things Will Go Wrong. Certain elements within a game session naturally cause issues, such as character deaths, player-versus-player actions, or the dreaded TPK. Character deaths should be evaluated based on whether they were a result of player actions or poor game master decisions. TPKs should be assessed to determine if the characters had a chance to avoid it. Player-versus-player events are generally discouraged as they can lead to tension and group fragmentation.

What To Do? When something goes wrong in a game session (and is not just a perceived problem!), you should take the following steps: acknowledge that a problem exists, identify the root cause (e.g., system inexperience, adventure design, problem players), and take appropriate action to address the issues. It's usually not necessary to retcon the issue away, though, in singularly extreme circumstances, you may have to. Learning from the experience and actively trying to improve is essential for growth as a game master. Ultimately, it's important to remember that it's just a game, and moving on to new opportunities is key.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

The last time things went wrong, what caused it? How did everyone react?

What strategies will you use to look at things that went wrong dispassionately?

When you identify the root cause, how do you plan to correct the situation?



CHAPTER 26: USING A MODULE AS A CAMPAIGN

Whereas a homebrew world or adventure is a GM's sandbox, the earlier chapters have shown that dozens of hours are necessary to develop campaigns from scratch. While the personal gratification that the GM gains from the act of creation is wondrous, they must ask whether they have the time to pursue it. If the answer they arrive at is "no," it may be time to look to a module for your next game.

WHAT IS A MODULE?

In roleplaying parlance, "module" is a term that means a prewritten adventure. There is occasionally some variance in systems or communities regarding what the best word is for this type of gameplay tool; however, as defined in the context of this book, it refers to any prewritten adventure, one-shot, or campaign.

The company or individual who designed a game system will often publish some modules directly tied to their creation. These are "official" modules because, although many systems allow others not connected professionally to the creator to design adventures, the industry also refers to these as "third party" modules. The distinction between these two entities, as well as which may be better, truly comes down to personal preference. For the information shared in this chapter, the concepts and ideas presented can apply to either type.

WHAT MAKES A *Good* MODULE?

As with nearly everything in life, there are both good and less convenient ways to design a module. A suitable module devotes itself to making the GM's job easier, taking the most challenging aspects of adventure prep, and providing it prewritten for convenience. A less-developed module that offers fewer details, by contrast, leaves more work for the GM before it's ready to run.

A GM should use several methods to evaluate the module's quality. One of these should determine whether the module is balanced. The GM should look through the module critically, selecting content from each of the three pillars of gameplay built into the adventure. In addition, they should include various challenges, multiple types of tasks, and unique goals.

As a side note: When a game system publishes new options for players, the concept of balance will naturally shift—usually in favor of the players. Older modules designed before several player-focused books were released will be more affected

than others, their contents underwhelming in terms of challenges. The GM can compensate for this using many of the ideas and concepts shared before, but this requires much more work to regain the proper balance.

Besides evaluating balance, the GM should ensure the module's information is in an easy-to-use format. If the content is inconvenient to access due to surrounding walls of text or spreading throughout the book, the GM will need more time to organize and digest the details. For example, if the module's author buries an NPC's name within three paragraphs of flavor text, it requires more time to sift through the necessary details to understand their significance. In some cases, this may become harder to work with than creating everything from scratch in a homebrew adventure!

Sometimes a module is designed with beautiful illustrations and fancy decorations that make it attractive. These can be enjoyable to admire and may even be a significant draw for GMs looking for inspiration. However, it's essential to remember that a module is a tool; if it becomes too difficult to use effectively, it has failed in its primary purpose.

The other key aspect a GM should consider is whether the module is compelling. A genuinely well-written module should serve as a guide to discovering an exciting narrative that can develop with input from all the players at the table. An ideal storyline should grab the interest and attention of everyone at the table. For example, only a few players are likely to be invested in an adventure about finding a lost sheep in the hills when there are no indications of something unusual afoot. However, if that lost sheep has vanished because someone cursed it to become a winged monster that spews fiery death from its bleating maw, suddenly, there's something unique to seize everyone's attention.

MODULES ARE NOT RAILROADS . . . USUALLY

As with all adventures, the GM should endeavor to run a module that doesn't railroad players. All systems contain modules that are railroads; however, they are usually poorly designed, and it's best to avoid them. Instead, the GM should endeavor to run a linear adventure, where one incident leads to the next—but in each isolated event, the characters can choose how they react to events and influence their outcomes.

This last element of choice implies that players may have ample freedom to do whatever they want—and they can, depending on the GM’s approach. However, part of the social contract includes an agreement that players won’t subvert the module and abandon the adventure’s path on a whim. Sometimes this is an option, but most modules don’t have the means to accommodate it—the next chapter will discuss this concept in greater depth. This section’s primary focus is to explain how a GM can prepare and develop a prewritten adventure for their group.

How to Prepare a Module

Developing a campaign around a module is different from creating everything from scratch. The module’s creator should have included context regarding all the essentials—whom the characters will meet, the creatures they’ll encounter, and where the adventures will take place. This information significantly reduces the required prep work so the game can get underway even sooner.

However, having all the details provided doesn’t mean the GM has no work to do. As the GM hasn’t created the information from scratch, they’ll probably have minimal foreknowledge of what the adventure contains. Therefore, the GM must still become familiar with the details to run the game properly. GMs should follow the five essential steps below when preparing to run the module, with the last two repeated before each adventure to help things run smoothly.

Read the Module

The best way for the GM to become familiar with material they haven’t written themselves is to read it. And not just the juicy bits about what will happen in the adventure—*everything*. Cover to cover, from how the introduction sets expectations to the appendices that contain item or monster details.

While this is a lot to take in, the goal of this reading is to gain familiarity with the material rather than memorize everything. There’s no test at the end of the lesson; the focus is on having a working knowledge of the module’s plot, an understanding of who’s involved in which key events, what those key events are, and which locations will be significant to the action.

Minutia is less important to take in at this point in the process. The GM doesn’t need to know what is included in the fourth room of the castle in chapter three right now; instead, the priority is noting the significant aspects of the adventure.

An example would be the location of a magic item crucial to defeating the main villain or which key NPC drives the plot to bring the party to that integral location.

IDENTIFY KEY ELEMENTS

After flipping through all the pages in the module, the GM's reward should be an understanding of the key elements. That knowledge comprises multiple layers that often overlap but provide a framework for guiding the GM through the module. In most cases, the GM needs to focus on achieving the following points in their analysis:

First, all significant NPCs should be recognizable by name, along with a clear understanding of if they are allies or enemies of the party. Their motivations, goals, and investment in the module's primary events should be clear. Additionally, these characters' relationships with the party and other NPCs can become important when the GM roleplays them.

Second, the core events the module's creator intended to drive the plot need identifying. These will most often be associated with adventures, but the GM now needs to consider the likely results and how characters' choices may influence those outcomes.

As the last element to focus on, the GM needs to be familiar with the key locations in the module. There should be a central hub that the characters will use as a home base, from which they set out for an adventure or to gather information. The villain needs an established lair, McGuffins (objects that are triggers for a plot to happen) need to be recognized and located, and NPCs need places to spend their days.

CREATE DETAILED NOTES

After differentiating the major elements from the minor, the next step is to create notes about them. While the module may have everything included within its pages, accessing the details quickly while the game is in session can be challenging. Flipping from a monster stat block in the book's appendix then back to a paragraph about an NPC's background slows the game down, and finding specifics on the fly can become cumbersome.

To prevent this awkward searching and flipping, the GM should have separate notes on major elements and why they are essential to the module. In addition, it

makes sense to figure out how these elements may change over an adventure or the entire narrative, as well as other key points about how aspects of the story interact. Again, the goal isn't to make these notes intricate; instead, they should touch on the essentials so the GM can refer to them at a glance while running a session.

The advice to maintain simple notes rather than in-depth information also applies to critical events. While the GM will eventually dedicate preparations to adventures that spawn from events, the intent is to study the concept of the incident. This review is more objective, considering the factors that brought about the circumstances and how it ties into the module's overall arc.

PREPARE THE FIRST (OR SUBSEQUENT) ADVENTURE

Once the overall module and its elements have been studied and annotated, the GM is ready to dive into the adventures' specifics for more detailed prep. They should scrutinize the adventure line-by-line, page-by-page, and any issues noted for alteration. While not every quest will need to be analyzed this deeply at once, the GM should do this assessment before running each adventure.

One of the first things the GM should consider is whether the adventure is balanced. In some cases, the module may have everything set up correctly; however, factors like the number of players and their characters' power levels may shift the balance one way or the other. Older modules struggle to remain balanced as more powerful character options become available, or the players may enjoy more challenging encounters. When this is the case, the GM shouldn't feel restricted by the existing details and should change the module accordingly—it's important to remember that the provided information is a guide rather than a rule.

Balance extends beyond just combat as well. The availability of items either via loot or stores also factors into this calculation, so the GM needs to weigh if something needs adjusting. With treasure being too prevalent or too powerful, they may need to step in to replace some with alternate rewards. Likewise, some may offer too little reward for the challenge, and the GM should bolster the loot in these cases.

The next aspect to consider is how the party will navigate from event to event throughout the adventure. Each step, from the plot hook and quest giver to the resolution, should have its key elements accounted for. NPCs, traps, puzzles—each of these are usually essential and should be defined, as the players are likely to

interact with them. In addition, elements that the module may have overlooked, like bookcases and nightstands, may have no information associated with them; the GM will need to create details to prepare for player inquiry.

These elements, once identified, should have notes about why they are essential. The most pertinent details are how the characters can influence or interact with each component. Some well-written modules may already include these features, but checking for any gaps in the information should be a standard practice with any new adventure on the off chance something needs added.

After reviewing the adventure as described above, the GM should be able to answer two key questions. First, in what ways can the characters reach the adventure's beginning? Linear adventures may already have built-in transitions from the last quest's conclusion, but less direct connections may require a few options to provide characters with choice.

The second question the GM should consider is: How will the characters reach the next adventure? This parallels the above point, as something should connect the two quests. However, if the module misses this crucial detail, the GM may need to develop plot hooks and connections to help guide players toward the next adventure.

RUN THE ADVENTURE

At long last, after all the hard work studying the module's many pages and developing notes about virtually everything significant, the time has come. The players arrive, eager to delve into the latest adventure. Post-it-covered papers and stat blocks are stacked neatly behind the GM's screen, personalized with scribbled notes. As everyone takes their seats, the GM takes a deep breath. The adventure begins.

Of course, the GM's work is far from over. Over the next several hours, they need to take everything they worked on from the previous steps and tie them together to make a perfect presentation. The fruits of their earlier labors become their best tool, helping them quickly reference essential information in response to character actions and choices.

The GM must also carefully track anything that substantially shifts how the world perceives the characters. Friendly NPCs may turn a cold shoulder to their one-time allies, or factions may take a nefarious interest in the characters' actions. Tracking this information now may influence the adventures within the module, altering the prescribed plot in exciting ways. Because of this, the GM needs to be keenly aware of how events unfold around the characters.

For that matter, the characters themselves may uncover secrets or other tidbits of information. These elements may offer insights into NPC motivations or direct them to subsequent events. Even more importantly, the GM should note what the characters do *not* discover, as upcoming events may become affected. Did the characters learn of an NPC's bribable nature? This opens an opportunity for them to expose this. Did they miss the evidence pointing to a cultist faction's plan to overthrow the government and plunge the region into chaos? The characters may find a dangerous surprise waiting for them in a few sessions.

Sometime close to the adventure's conclusion, or at least before players leave after everything resolves, the GM should also have an idea about what the characters will do next. There should be a few plot hooks available for the players to choose from, and having them decide which interests them most is ideal for preparing for the next adventure. It is crucial to the GM's sanity that they know which quests to set up before the next session starts. Otherwise, the GM will spend their limited time preparing every potential option.

In the interim between this session and the next, the GM's next step is to review their notes—the old and the new—to evaluate what player decisions may have affected and what may stay the same in the module. This should naturally transition into the previous step, setting up the GM to detail and study the players' chosen adventure. Throughout a module's campaign, these last two processes should repeat as needed until the campaign ends.

SETTING PROPER EXPECTATIONS

Each of the above steps will guide the GM toward successfully running a campaign module. However, we base these steps only on the information in the module. Many elements a module's creator cannot consider may affect the players' enjoyment. Because of this, the GM should take steps before running the module to set the proper expectations to prevent disappointment or confusion.

One of the most significant gaps in a module campaign is the presence of character backstories or personal quests. These generally take a backseat to the module's overall narrative, as its creators cannot account for the intricacies that a player may create in their backstory. Of course, the GM can take steps to develop specific tie-ins for these elements, but the module, as written, has no means to include it; if it did, it would be in the form of pre-generated characters, which removes players' agency to create their unique characters.

Similarly, modules have a limited capacity for side quests. Some opportunities may arise as the main quest progresses, but these are less common. Instead, characters will expectedly help further the plot's forward momentum. If it needs to be clarified, modules have a much more linear design, even compared to other linear adventures. While they toe the line that might label them railroads, they often don't quite reach this level of linear narrative. Nonetheless, even the best modules offer a narrow path that rarely branches or offers much choice.

Despite this, many players may embrace a module's simplicity, allowing them to quickly progress through an adventure (or series of adventures). For the players who want more personal character depth in their adventures or for a GM who prefers flexibility in what beats their campaign addresses, this approach may be a bit more lacking than preferred. However, there is an alternative that addresses these concerns or at least lessens the problem considerably: injecting homebrew into a module.

MODULE PROCESS

Step One – Read the Module

Read everything – cover to cover.

The goal here is to familiarize yourself with the material, not to memorize every page. You need to have a general idea of the module's plot and understand its key components.

Step Two – Identify Key Elements

This will provide a framework to guide the Game Master.

The main focuses should be important NPCs, core events that are meant to drive the plot, key locations in the world, and where important keys like magic items reside within the world.

Step Three – Create Detailed Notes

The goal here is to save you time to reference key details.

Have separate notes and jot down where and why they're important or ease of use. These notes shouldn't be packed with too much information and just only cover the essentials.

Step Four – Prepare the Upcoming Adventure

Only focus on the adventure the PCs are directly approaching.

Dive into every ounce of detail the adventure offers, and make sure you note any issues that need to be adjusted. Double-check for balance, flow, and missing exploration details.

Be sure to plan how the adventures will connect seamlessly.

Step Five – Run the Adventure

You will need to tie everything you've gathered together.

Make sure you track every important thing the PCs do and how they affect the world around them.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

What Is a Balanced Module? A good module should be balanced, provide a variety of challenges and tasks, and have unique goals. When deciding what module to run, you should evaluate the options to decide if it's the quality you're looking for. Depending on the system, the balance may need to be adjusted if new player options are introduced or if your players are above or below the skill level the module was written for.

Narratively Exciting. A module should be compelling and provide an exciting narrative that engages all the players at the table. The adventure's storyline should capture the interest and attention of everyone, offering something unique and captivating. A module with a mundane or unremarkable premise is less likely to engage your players.

It Shouldn't Be a Railroad. While modules offer a structured path for the adventure, they should not be rigid railroads. Players should have the freedom to make choices and influence the outcomes of events within the module. However, players should also respect the adventure's path and not subvert it on a whim, as this may disrupt the intended experience. Your role is to prepare and develop the pre-written adventure, ensuring a balance between player agency and the module's structure. Sometimes, this may mean inserting homebrew content to allow for agency that the module did not account for.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

How will you review a module to ensure it's high quality?

What are some of your own creations that you can insert into a module?



CHAPTER 27: MIXING MODULES AND HOMEBREW

All GMs weigh how to approach their campaigns carefully. A module's prewritten elements with all its characters and locations rest on one scale, while the other weighs homebrewed adventure elements that require active preparation and creativity. One may be heavy on combat with minimal setting or social interaction, or the other might never offer any adventure variety for its players. Each separately can be too light or heavy, preventing the GM from achieving the perfect balance.

That's where the GM's creativity kicks in. They can pick and choose bits from each to level the scales and supplement whichever type of game they are building. The result is a well-balanced campaign that is neither wholly homebrew nor prewritten. But while staring at the wavering scales, the first question that comes to their mind is the broadest: how to combine these disparate types of campaigns to result in a perfect blend of the best from both worlds.

APPROACHES TO INTEGRATION

As with all of the advice shared throughout this book, a GM can take various approaches to combine prewritten adventures and homebrew into one cohesive campaign. GMs have often employed this tactic in their games, either to fill in gaps for their homebrew world or to expand the game world's opportunities and details. Regardless of the reason, a GM's approach to blending these different types of material depends on whether the module or homebrew content forms the primary narrative.

MODULES AS THE PRIMARY NARRATIVE

One more manageable way to include homebrew and prewritten material in a game is by letting the module's content remain the focus. Earlier chapters in this book have already detailed why modules benefit the GM. Rather than retread through the material already covered, we can summarize the relevant advantages through a couple of crucial points. First, a well-designed module can save the GM time by providing everything necessary. Second, the module should already have a compelling narrative that will hook players into the action and events. If both are true, the GM has a solid framework to pull from when setting up their campaign.

However, modules need more scope on their own. The core adventure narrative may be pre-existing, but the next challenge is designing a more personal touch with the game. Modules almost always lack character-driven elements, which makes integrating player creations into the established world much more challenging. Homebrew material is often a perfect remedy for this, allowing the GM to inject

adventures and other materials related to a character’s backstory into the setting. Including these elements provides a tangible link between the player and the game world, anchoring them even more in the lore and events that transpire.

Another option for GMs is to use homebrew to offer alternative adventures not included in the module. Many modules provide a few side quest opportunities, but often these need more variety or have the same feeling as the main adventure. Inserting homebrew into these adventures allows everyone to escape the module’s constant forward momentum and instead experience a change of pace through some one-off adventures.

HOMEBREW AS THE PRIMARY NARRATIVE

The other way to combine homebrew and modules is by introducing the prewritten material into a GM-created world. In this case, the GM creates an entire campaign but supplements their world with module elements. Rather than having a third party design the entire primary arc, the GM has control of the narrative’s foundations. Still, they can benefit from having parts already created—especially if the module is well-designed and simplifies prep. In this way, there’s still unlimited creativity to build a campaign’s narrative while streamlining parts that take more time or are less enjoyable.

Granted, this is only the case if the module *is* well-written. Any time saved by having a pre-made adventure ready to insert into a campaign is lost if the GM needs to fix and adjust elements that don’t meet their quality standards. Instead, it will root the GM into a cycle of bending a module to fit their game parameters, replacing elements that don’t work and creating ones that do. Instead of reducing their role, the GM may find themselves involved in revisions that take just as much effort as producing something from scratch.

Another thing about modules that have a primary campaign designed to progress across multiple adventures is that they are cohesive within the context of that module. Taking the middle chapter from a module with an entire campaign of build-up and expecting it to have the same impact in a homebrew campaign is less likely to integrate smoothly. Likewise, the module’s adventure may guide toward a conclusion that satisfies players who started at the beginning of the module and reached its end; this is less likely to resonate within a homebrew campaign that hasn’t had the same lead-up.

The above issues are more prevalent, with a module progressing linearly across several adventures. An exception exists, such as books designed around the concept

of one-shots. For example, an adventure series that relates to a single town and its surroundings, but doesn't rely upon each other entirely, may be easier to drop into a setting than a module that points toward a significant story arc. Alternatively, a collection of adventures that have absolutely nothing to do with each other can be indiscriminately lifted and adapted to a setting as the need requires. Both situations offer considerably easier opportunities for GMs to entwine them into their homebrew world with much less effort.

HOW TO INTEGRATE MODULES AND HOMEBREW

Now that we've examined the two primary approaches to achieving an ideal combination, the next question is, "How should the GM integrate the two?" Luckily, whether the module or homebrew provides the primary narrative is immaterial to the core process we should follow. There are three essential steps to take: choosing what to supplement, determining how to guide characters there, and preparing for the addition.

The first part of the process, choosing what to supplement, may likely happen while the GM evaluates the campaign before the game even starts. However, the GM shouldn't restrict these thoughts to their pre-campaign prep; instead, they should identify aspects that need fleshing out as part of their standard preparation throughout the campaign. Including this part of the planning process throughout the campaign ensures that the narrative addresses the three pillars of gameplay and prevents too much repetition of the same type of adventure.

For example, a GM may decide that including elements vital to a character's backstory provides an opportune diversion from the typical adventures in the module they are running. Instead of attempting to shoehorn the backstory into an adventure in the module, they use this as a side quest. This could happen by developing an entirely original adventure for the group or pulling another well-written one-shot from an anthology that includes the elements for this quest. Once that adventure ends and the character's story element results in personal satisfaction for the player, the original module's narrative can resume.

On the flip side is fitting a module into a homebrew game to reduce the preparation time needed. One way GMs can achieve this is by incorporating a prewritten adventure into an extended travel event. For instance, if players are traveling across a wide-open plain, this is a perfect opportunity to provide an interlude from the journey. A frantic villager may approach and beg for aid, a band of bandits

intercepts the traveling heroes, or a supernatural weather event forces the players to take shelter. Whatever plot hook would best lead the players smoothly from their original goal to the side quest can be the start of a welcome diversion.

The second important step is considering how to get characters into the new material's events. The last example above provides a few ideas through a plot hook for that case. This is one of the easiest ways to guide players toward that goal, especially if the GM weaves that hook into one of the primary quests the characters embark upon. Yet they can also do this in other ways, such as having a contact for a patron or faction approach the party between adventures or having a sudden action happen along the road that requires immediate attention. An alternative option is having plot hooks fit into the characters' downtime, helping to balance their activities by expanding the narrative.

The third part of this process involves preparing to include supplemental material in the narrative. We've detailed the steps to prepare for this in the previous chapters, and that procedure remains the same in this case. The only addition is that the GM will need to find a natural point in the campaign to integrate the plot hook linking the new material to the rest of the game. Once they achieve this, they can weave additional elements into the narrative seamlessly so it seems natural—only the GM would know otherwise.

KEY DIFFERENCES WHEN RUNNING A MODULE

Although the core premise of supplementing a campaign remains the same, the GM must consider additional points when adding to a module. The foremost item of business is ensuring that inserting something into the existing module doesn't lead to excessive work. Suppose the homebrew supplement requires considerable work and ties the GM up for a substantial amount of time. In that case, it may be worth re-evaluating whether to make that addition.

The GM should also take precautions to prevent the homebrew addition from significantly affecting the module's elements. Most modules include important NPCs, locations, and events that are crucial cogs in its narrative machine. Removing one of those elements can quickly stall the adventure's intended flow.

Suppose the GM develops a side quest that requires the characters to stop a marauding monster devastating the countryside and threatening farmers. While this appears to be a simple adventure away from the main story, what if a future

event in the module requires characters to investigate something at one of the prominent farmsteads? This may affect how that next adventure plays out, especially if a monster slays one of the established farmers, the primary contact for characters on that adventure.

Another example is if the GM plans an exciting assassination attempt on a prominent city leader in the palace. Assassins drop in, throwing explosives about and destroying a massive part of the building. Suppose the leader gets killed in this attack because the party fled and saved themselves. In that case, a later plot thread involving the leader's secret alliance with cultists to release a terrible evil later in the module may be unsalvageable. Possibly more problematic is the devastation to the palace, which is the site of the climatic battle at the end of the module, requiring even more effort to prepare a new battle map or alternate storyline.

The best-case scenario for GMs is to set the majority of the new adventure—as well as the consequences, good or bad, of the characters' actions—in a location irrelevant to the module itself. This can be another city, another cave in the mountains, or just about anywhere that won't be a part of the prewritten narrative. That way, rather than creating a butterfly effect where important characters die or locations are destroyed, the results are isolated to the adventure itself.

However, there is a caution to keep in mind when the supplemental adventure occurs in another location: the module's established timeline. The second example shared above shows that the cultists may have a set timetable to unleash their horror on the world. If player characters set off on a side quest and miss the climatic event because it happens while they are away, then this will significantly impact the flow of events. Therefore, the GM must watch upcoming events and avoid inserting adventures that distract players from their campaign's primary issue.

A final aspect to consider is how the new adventure will affect balance—mainly by accidentally overpowering the characters. A typical quest ends with the characters gaining new loot, additional levels, or more powerful abilities, and players will expect these to be rewards at the end of the mission. However, distributing these can quickly lead to characters becoming much more powerful than intended (especially if the module is older and not prepared with high-powered characters in mind). The simple addition of a homebrew quest into a module may start as a simple task but quickly lead to complications requiring the GM to course correct and adjust everything that comes afterward to be more in line with character abilities.

KEY DIFFERENCES WHEN RUNNING HOMEBREW

Unlike inserting a homebrew into a module, the reverse is a bit safer to work with since the DM can mold a homebrew adventure's future events around the module's results. However, there are still some pitfalls that the GM should keep an eye out for, such as relying on player characters having knowledge from previous adventures in the module or introducing new factions and organizations.

The first issue has some pretty easy workarounds, such as adjusting some details from the module to gloss over those elements from the module's past adventures. Alternatively, the GM can sprinkle hints of the module's history into their homebrew campaign to build up the side quest. These are effective ways to incorporate the prewritten material into the homebrew, but the GM should still be mindful of how much extra work may be involved. Ultimately, creating a new adventure from scratch may be easier than fitting the module into the mix.

Issues from introducing module elements into the campaign are much more challenging to handle. If a prewritten adventure relies heavily on a particular organization being present, it will represent another group that challenges the party. While the GM may intend this threat to exist only for this one adventure, player agency may rear its fickle head with the characters fixating on this new threat. Any originally planned threats can quickly overshadow what the players want to focus on, creating further distractions that may force the narrative to shift drastically.

Despite these being additional hurdles for the GM, they aren't as significant as other problems outlined previously. For one, as mentioned, the GM can adapt their existing homebrew campaign to incorporate future events around any changes the players create. Also, the GM can prepare for these potential setbacks ahead of time. These points are especially valid for anthology adventures, which generally have more open-ended options to facilitate taking and dropping them into other settings.

THE END RESULT

All GMs can benefit from including a mix of homebrew and prewritten material in their campaign. The creative designs of homemade adventures can fit into modules to fill in lacking elements, while the pre-made modules relieve the stress of always creating something new for a campaign. Both require varying amounts of effort to be incorporated by the GM at their tables. Still, the result is a combination of materials that can delight players and streamline the GM's workload, all while developing a unique campaign.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A Combination Approach. When using a combination approach, balancing pre-written modules and homebrewed elements is crucial to creating a well-rounded campaign. The two approaches, when used in combination, can provide a campaign that offers a compelling narrative, character-driven elements, and adventure variety.

Supplementing Modules. When modules serve as the primary narrative, you can supplement them with homebrewed content to add personal touches and character-driven elements. Homebrew material allows for the inclusion of player backstories, additional side quests, and a change of pace from the main adventure. By integrating these elements, players can feel more connected to the game world and enjoy a more diverse gameplay experience, which is usually not possible when running a module straight from the book.

Supplementing Homebrew. Conversely, you can incorporate pre-written modules into your homebrewed campaigns to reduce your prep time and benefit from the already created content. You’re generally going to want to select adventures that don’t require large amounts of setup from prior portions of the module and won’t result in inadvertent changes to your homebrew content.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Do you like using a combination of homebrew and pre-written content?

How do you integrate different content types into your adventures?



INDEX

A	
(Interesting) Abilities	205
Ad-Libbing	223
(Prepare the First (or Subsequent))	
Adventure	244
(Run the) Adventure	245
Adventure Creation Process Boxout	199
(Is Your) Adventure Ready?	198
Approaches to Integration.....	251
Ask Yourself Boxout	143
Author Game Masters.....	25
Avoiding Burnout.....	113
B	
Battle Map Example.....	170
Battle Maps	165
Be Inspired, Don't Impersonate.....	40
(Chapter 4:) Be Your Own Game Master	37
Books.....	64
Breaking up the Monotony	179
Bringing Your Creations into the World	150
(Chapter 15;) Building Your World.....	137
But Did It Actually Go Wrong?	230
C	
(What Drives the) Campaign?	174
(What Is a) Campaign?	174
(What Is the) Campaign's Premise?	174
Causality.....	177
Change Things.....	224
Chapter 1: What Is Roleplaying?	16
Chapter 2: What is a Story?	24
Chapter 3: What Is a Game Master?	31
Chapter 4: Be Your Own Game Master.....	37
Chapter 5: Why Should You Be a Game	
Master?.....	44
Chapter 6: The Game Master's Role at the Table	54
Chapter 7: Tools of the Trade	63
Chapter 8: The Time and Place	73
Chapter 9: Choosing a Playstyle	81
Chapter 10: What Does a Game Master Think About During the Game?	92
Chapter 11: Post-Game Organization	100
Chapter 12: Improving as a Game Master	107
Chapter 13: Problems in the Game.....	116
Chapter 14: Getting Ready to Create the Game.....	129
Chapter 15: Building Your World	137
Chapter 16: Using a Prewritten World.....	148
Chapter 17: Populating Your World.....	156
Chapter 18: Map Design.....	163
Chapter 19: What Does a Campaign Look Like?	174
Chapter 20: Components of an Adventure.....	182
Chapter 21: Creating an Adventure	190
Chapter 22: Encounter Design.....	202
Chapter 23: One-Shots	214
Chapter 24: What If You're Not Prepared?	222
Chapter 25: Things Can (and Will) Go Wrong	230
Chapter 26: Using a Module as a Campaign.....	240
Chapter 27: Mixing Modules and Homebrew.....	251
Character Death	231
(Chapter 9:) Choosing a Playstyle.....	81
(The) Climax	186
(A) Collaborative Art	140
Combat.....	132

(Chapter 20:) Components of an Adventure	182
(The) Concept	190
(Maintaining a) Cooperative Atmosphere	96
(Chapter 21:) Creating an Adventure	190
(The) Creatures	191
 D	
Dedication	3
Design Choices	218
(Further) Development and Uses	160
Dice	63
Dice Trays and Dice Towers	69
Difficulty Level	217
Discussing with the Group	111
Dungeon Map Example	171
Dungeon Maps	166
 E	
Economic	140
(Combining the Elements into an)	
Encounter	210
(Okay, but What IS an) Encounter?	202
(The State of the) Encounter	205
(Chapter 22:) Encounter Design	202
Encounter Design Process Boxout	203
Encounters	216
(The) End Result	256
Environmental	140
Event Based Adventures	196
(The) Events	194
Everything Is Roleplay	20
Exploration	133
(General) Exploration Elements	207
Exploration Map Example	209
 F	
Factions, Patrons, and Organizations	158
(Applying) Feedback	109
(Following Up on) Feedback	111
(Getting) Feedback	107
Feedback Flowchart	112
(Getting) Feedback from Others	108
(Give Yourself) Feedback	107
(A) Final Thought (Chapter 1: What Is	
Roleplaying?)	21
Final Thoughts (Chapter 5: Why Should You	
Be a Game Master?)	48
Final Thoughts (Chapter 9: Choosing a	
Playstyle)	89
Final Thoughts (Chapter 10: What Does a Game	
Master Think About During the Game?)	97
Final Thoughts (Chapter 12: Improving	
as a Game Master)	113
(Some) Final Thoughts (Chapter 3: What Is a	
Game Master?)	34
(Some) Final Thoughts (Chapter 8: The Time	
and Place)	78
(The) First Pillar: Social Interaction	18
Foreword	10
 G	
(Establishing Your) Game Master	
Identity	54
(Which) Game Master Should You Be?	26
Game Master Vs. Player Mentality	55
(Handling Problem) Game Masters	120
(Problem) Game Masters	117
(Types of) Game Masters	25
Game Masters Are More Than Players	33
Game Masters Are Players	32
(Chapter 6: The) Game Master's Role at	
the Table	54
Game Masters Run the Game	31
(Chapter 14:) Getting Ready to Create the	
Game	129
(Problem) GM Boxout	118

GM Needs Boxout	66	Be a Game Master?).....	49
GM Wants Boxout.....	67	Key Takeaways (Chapter 6: The Game Master's Role at the Table)	61
GMs Are Always in Demand.....	45	Key Takeaways (Chapter 7: Tools of the Trade)	71
(It's a) Group Game	78	Key Takeaways (Chapter 8: The Time and Place).....	79
H		Key Takeaways (Chapter 9: Choosing a Playstyle)	90
(The) Harsh Reality.....	219	Key Takeaways (Chapter 10: What Does a Game Master Think About During the Game?).....	98
Healthy Game Master Vs. Player		Key Takeaways (Chapter 11: Post-Game Organization)	105
Mentality Chart	57	Key Takeaways (Chapter 12: Improving as a Game Master).....	114
(Key Differences When Running)		Key Takeaways (Chapter 13: Problems in the Game)	124
Homebrew.....	256	Key Takeaways (Chapter 14: Getting Ready to Create the Game)	135
Homebrew as the Primary Narrative.....	252	Key Takeaways (Chapter 15: Building Your World)	146
Hooked from the Beginning	182	Key Takeaways (Chapter 16: Using a Prewritten World)	154
How Does This Mentality Manifest?	56	Key Takeaways (Chapter 17: Populating Your World)	161
How to Play Flowchart	87	Key Takeaways (Chapter 18: Map Design)	172
How to Prepare for the Unexpected.....	226	Key Takeaways (Chapter 19: What Does a Campaign Look Like?).....	180
Hybrid Adventures and Settings	84	Key Takeaways (Chapter 20: Components of an Adventure).....	188
I		Key Takeaways (Chapter 21: Creating an Adventure).....	200
Identify Key Elements.....	243	Key Takeaways (Chapter 22: Encounter Design)	212
(Chapter 12:) Improving as a Game Master....	107	Key Takeaways (Chapter 23: One-Shots).....	220
Inconsequential.....	150	Key Takeaways (Chapter 24: What If You're Not Prepared?).....	228
Integrating Characters into an Existing World	152		
Introduction (Part 1)	13		
Introduction (Part 2)	51		
Introduction (Part 3)	126		
Is There a Best System?	103		
K			
Key Takeaways (Chapter 1: What Is Roleplaying?).....	22		
Key Takeaways (Chapter 2: What is a Story?)...29			
Key Takeaways (Chapter 3: What Is a Game Master?).....	35		
Key Takeaways (Chapter 4: Be Your Own Game Master)	42		
Key Takeaways (Chapter 5: Why Should You			

Key Takeaways (Chapter 25: Things Can (and Will) Go Wrong)	238	Modules Are Not Railroads . . . Usually.....	241
Key Takeaways (Chapter 26: Using a Module as a Campaign)	249	Modules as the Primary Narrative.....	251
Key Takeaways (Chapter 27: Mixing Modules and Homebrew).....	257	Module Process Boxout.....	248
		Moving Forward.....	28
		Moving On.....	235
L		N	
Let Yourself Give It a Chance	47	Narration	94
Linear Adventures	131	(Where Is the Line Between) Narration and Railroading Exactly?	95
M		(Taking) Notes	97
Make Sure the Game Has Choice.....	130	(Individual) NPCs	157
Making it Feel Organic	206	(Villains and Essential) NPCs.....	157
(The) Map	192	(What Are) NPCs?	156
(Chapter 18:) Map Design	163	(Key) NPCs and Patrons	177
(Bad) Map Example	193	NPCs and Time	197
(Good) Map Example	193	O	
Map Types.....	163	(Starting a) One-Shot	216
Mapmaking Mediums.....	167	One-Shot Game Boxout	215
Maps	65	(Chapter 23:) One-Shots	214
(Do I Need to Use) Maps?	168	Online or In Person?	85
(Using) Maps in Your Game	163	(Get) Organized	100
(The) Matt Mercer Effect.....	37	(How to Be) Organized.....	102
Meaningful.....	151	(You're) Organized, Now What?	103
(The) Meat of the Adventure.....	184	(Avoiding) Overpreparing	196
Metagaming	116	P	
Metagaming Boxout.....	118	Part 1	13
Military	140	Part 2	51
Minis or Tokens.....	65	Part 3	126
(Chapter 27:) Mixing Modules and Homebrew.....	251	(The) Path Ahead	123
(How to Prepare a) Module.....	242	(The) Pillar of Combat	204
(Key Differences When Running a) Module ..	254	(The) Pillar of Exploration	206
(Read the) Module	242	(The) Pillar of Social Interaction	205
(What Is a) Module?	240	(How Do You Find Where to) Play?	75
(What Makes a Good) Module?	240	Player Agency	92
(How to Integrate) Modules and Homebrew..	253	(Taking Away) Player Agency	93

(Problem) Player Boxout	119	(Describing the) Room.....	195
Player Game Masters	26	(Populating the) Room.....	195
Player Vs. Player Events	233	(Fleshing Out a) Room or Location	195
Player-Oriented.....	151		
(Handling Problem) Players	122	S	
(How Do You Find Your Players?	75	Sandboxes.....	130
(Problem) Players	120	(How Do You) Schedule a Session?	73
(How Do) Players Find Game Masters?	74	Scope	218
(Choosing a) Playstyle.....	85	(The) Second Pillar: Combat.....	19
(What Makes a) Plot Hook Good?.....	183	Secrets	208
Political.....	139	Session 0.....	81
(Chapter 17:) Populating Your World	156	(Why Does a) Session 0 Matter?	82
Post Game Checklist Boxout	101	Setting Expectations.....	88
(Chapter 11:) Post-Game Organization.....	100	Setting Proper Expectations	246
(Finding) Pre-Existing Worlds.....	153	So, What Are the Differences? (One-Shots)...	214
Preface	9	So, Where Do You Start?	191
Pre-Made Adventures and Settings.....	83	(The) Social Contract	59, 218
(Choosing Between) Prewritten and Homebrew Material.....	83	Social Interaction.....	133
(Modifying) Prewritten Worlds.....	149	(What Is) Social Interaction (If It Is Not Roleplaying)?.....	17
(What Are) Prewritten Worlds	148	Standard Game Boxout.....	215
(Chapter 13:) Problems in the Game	116	Stories Have a Purpose.....	27
Putting Theory into Practice.....	134	(The) SUPREME Method.....	138
Puzzles.....	207, 217	(The) SUPREME Method Boxout	144
R			
Railroads.....	130		
Reflection	104	T	
Regional and World Maps	164	Take a Deep Breath	227
Regional Map Example	169	Theater of the Mind or Grid and Minis?.....	85
Religious.....	139	(Chapter 25:) Things Can (and Will) Go Wrong	230
(The) Resolution.....	187	(The) Third Pillar: Exploration	20
Responsibilities at the Table	55	(Other) Tools.....	70
Rising Action	185	(Chapter 7:) Tools of the Trade	63
(How) Roleplay Encompasses All Aspects of the Game.....	17	(The) Three Faces of Worldbuilding	137
(Why People Equate) Roleplaying with Social Interactions.....	17	(The) Three Pillars	132
		(Chapter 8: The) Time and Place	73
		TPKs	232
		Traps	207

(The) Twist	190	What Does It Mean to Create a Roleplaying Game?	129
U		What Happened? Boxout.....	236
Underworld	139	What Happens If the Game Master Isn't Prepared?	129
Unfettered Creativity.....	47	What Happens If We're Timid about Intervention?	96
Unhealthy Game Master Vs. Player		What If Things Don't Go as Planned?	219
Mentality Chart	57	(Chapter 24:) What If You're Not Prepared?... <td>222</td>	222
(What to Do When) Unprepared	223	(Chapter 3:) What is a Game Master?	31
(Understanding) Unpreparedness.....	222	(Chapter 2:) What is a Story?	24
(Chapter 26:) Using a Module as a Campaign	240	What is Roleplaying?	16
(Chapter 16:) Using a Prewritten World.....	148	(Chapter 1:) What Is Roleplaying?	16
V		What Now? Boxout.....	237
Variety of Difficulty.....	204	What Should You Not Take Away From Famous Game Masters?	40
Villains and Factions	176	What Should You Take Away From Famous Game Masters?	39
Virtual Tabletop (VTT)	68	What To Do When Something Goes Wrong	234
(Playing In-person with) VTTs.....	68	What to Play Flowchart.....	86
W		Where Things May Go Wrong	231
What Can Be Done to Prevent This?	58	(Chapter 5:) Why Should You Be a Game Master?.....	44
What Do You Do When Someone Is Missing?	76	Y	
(Chapter 19:) What Does a Campaign Look Like?	174	You Are the Heart of the Hobby.....	44
(Chapter 10:) What Does a Game Master Think About During the Game?	92	You Can Play When You Want.....	46