The solo scenario

One-player parties are fun for two

by Katharine Kerr

Although it's more fun and more usual to adventure with a good-sized party of player characters, sooner or later every Dungeon Master needs to work out a scenario for a single player. At times, only one player of an established group will be able to play in a given session. At others, a new player may want to transfer in from another campaign and will need to learn the ways of the new game world. Most commonly, a single-player scenario can benefit the rank beginner, bewildered by the rules and starting up a player character far below the experience level of the ongoing party. The DM also benefits from running a single-player scenario: Without a large party to keep track of, the DM can do more actual role-playing and less record-keeping.

Given an opportunity to go through a solo adventure, the experienced player has a chance to act independently, making *all* the decisions (as most of us have always wanted to do). The beginner can learn the basic rules without feeling that he or she is an object of scorn or a frustration to the other players.

Yet despite all these benefits, planning a solo adventure presents certain difficulties for the DM accustomed to group play. A single player character will have a specific and very limited (compared to a group of characters) set of abilities and characteristics, and thus will be unable to deal with all the usual circumstances of the game world. What's more, even a very high-level player character can't be expected to conquer a vast crowd of enemies single-handed. Thus, if the DM wants the scenario to be fair as well as challenging, he or she will have to look beyond the usual sort of adventure — the pre-set area crammed with monsters that is the staple of gaming aids. This article discusses the general principles of designing single-player scenarios, as well as some specific suggestions and ideas for one-player adventures.

Consider the character . . .

The key to a good scenario lies in thinking about the player character for whom the DM is running the adventure, rather than thinking only in terms of the opposition. The DM must consider who and what the PC is, then tailor the adventure to take advantage of the PC's strengths and prey on his or her weaknesses — without being so unfair that challenges become either frustrating impossibilities or tedious pushovers.

The obvious considerations are the PC's character class and experience level. The problem to be solved or the dangers to be overcome should be compatible with both. Although there must always be real risk in a scenario, the risk must be one that the PC can overcome with good gaming skills and a bit of luck. The DM needs to remember that the single PC has limited skills and cannot fall back on other members of a party to make up for his or her deficiencies. A magic-user will be at the mercy of armed brigands without a fighter or two along; conversely, a fighter has no way of detecting ***cursed*** objects without a magic-user or a cleric.

. . . and the player, too

Not so obvious a consideration is the character of the gamer behind the PC, but by taking this into account, the DM can create interesting situations beyond the scope of normal group play. If the player is a rash hack-and-slash type, the DM can present a problem that requires thought to solve, or enemies that might turn into allies if the player can compromise.

If, on the other hand, the player is unduly timid, the DM can build up his or her self-confidence by presenting enemies whom he or she has a good chance of overpowering. Without other players around who might get annoyed, the DM can also use these one-to-one sessions to get the upper hand over that constant bane of gaming, the loud-mouthed rule splitter. The trick, in any case, is to develop an adventure that goes against the player's natural grain, thereby expanding his or her gaming skills.

Two kinds of plots

Basically, the plot of the scenario should grow directly out of the character of the PC. Thieves should be given the chance to steal; fighters, to fight; and so on through the character classes. From this basic slant, the DM can develop a plot for the scenario. Most plots and situations fall into one of two categories: 1) a series of random encounters, and 2) a simple goal with opposition in the way.

The first category is of course the easier. The DM merely picks a situation — a dungeon, village, forest, or whatever — and fills it with monsters or NPC's with whom the PC interacts randomly. If the gaming session is going to be short, or if the DM is pressed for time, this solution may be the better.

The second category of scenario, however, is a lot more fun to run and to play. Here, the DM invents a goal for the PC to reach — an object to acquire, a task to be done, or a place to visit — and then proceeds to put difficulties in the way of reaching the goal. The difficulties can be natural dangers of terrain or landscape, direct opposition from hostile NPC's, or even a random element of wandering monsters.

The goal should be consistent with the PC's character class, alignment, and personality, but other than that, the DM can make this goal-plus-opposition pattern as simple or as complex as he or she wants. For instance, a simple pattern might be the goal of retrieving stolen property from an orc in the same town; a complex one, that of recovering a holy object from the ruins of a temple, now the home of a mad hermit who wants the object for himself.

Opposition, passive and active

Developing the opposition for a single **PC** can be tricky if the goal is to be both challenging and attainable. The DM must consider passive opposition as well as actively hostile NPCs. If, for example, a PC has to ford raging rivers, climb dangerous cliffs, and evade traps just to reach a goal, the active opposition waiting at the end of the journey should be less formidable than if he or she merely strolls out of town to a meadow to meet the foe.

The opposition should also be of a type that gives the PC a chance. To put a lone

fighter up against a pair of high-level magicians would be most unfair, for instance, as would the converse. As a general rule of thumb, consider the experience levels (or the hit dice, for monsters) of the NPCs who will be actively opposing the PC. One of those NPCs should be of the same experience level or higher than the PC, but the total of experience levels of the group of opponents should not be greater than twice the PC's experience level, nor should it be less than the PC's experience level. The DM should also provide the PC with an opportunity or two to learn about the forces set against him or her.

Some DM's might think that this level of opposition is too low, but remember that a large number of weak opponents can be deadly in a mass, and that the PC has no one else to fall back on if he or she is injured early in the adventure. As an example, I once ran a scenario for a third-level fighter who was hired to guard a temple treasure against thieves. The sticky fingers in question belonged to a pair of gnome thief/illusionists, one third level, the other second. Although this doesn't sound like much for a well-armed fighter to face, the gnomes nearly succeeded in killing the PC and stealing the treasure, simply because there were two of them. While one made noise in one area, the other attempted to slip into the temple through another location — on and on until the fighter was run ragged. By the time he subdued the gnomes, he'd been backstabbed and was down to 2 hit points.

Once the DM sets the goal and develops the opposition to reaching it, there arises the question of motivating the PC to reach the goal in game terms. If the goal is something that the PC would normally seek on his or her own, the DM can use NPCs to spread the news that it exists in the given area. If a druid heard of a particularly rich cache of mistletoe, for instance, he or she would doubtless go to cut it. Or, a thief would love to hear rumors about the richest man in town. On the other hand, the DM can also invent an NPC to hire the PC to perform a task, or request the PC to solve some problem. The standard example is the local worthy who begs a paladin's aid, but the game milieu offers many other possibilities, some of which will be discussed later. If the DM chooses to offer the PC a job for hire, the DM should keep other booty to a minimum, because the PC is already gaining gold (and thus experience points) from being hired. Into the category of hires, of course, falls being ***quested*** or ***geased*** by an NPC, but in this case the booty can be more generous.

New players have special needs

If the DM is designing a scenario for a player from an ongoing campaign, he or she will know the player well enough to have a fairly straightforward time of planning and running the adventure. Two other groups of players, however, have special needs: the experienced player coming from another campaign, and the raw beginner.

Adding a new player to an ongoing group is a delicate matter, particularly if the new player is a stranger to the other gamers. Since all DMs have quirks and personal definitions of ambiguous rules, the new player may be counting on possibilities that don't exist in the new campaign or, conversely, may be unaware of stringent interpretations of certain rules.

A one-to-one game between the new player and his or her new DM is the best way for both to learn each other's style of play. By working things out in private, the DM and the player spare the rest of the group the annoyance of hearing them argue things out. Also, if the new player is simply not going to work in properly, the DM can get this across to the player without embarrassing him or her in front of the others. In a sense, then, the DM is putting the new player through his or her paces; at the same time, the player deserves a chance to see how the new DM handles various aspects of play.

A scenario for this kind of player, then, needs to be as varied as possible, moving through different kinds of situations and encounters rather than concentrating on one. It should include both indoor and outdoor movement, plenty of NPC encounters of varying emotional levels, and of course combat. Although a random encounter series might seem best, the DM should introduce some simple goal to be reached in order to see how the new player handles problem-solving and planning. (If the new player can handle neither, it's best to know this right at the beginning.)

At all times, the DM should encourage the new player to say what he or she feels about the DM's conduct of the game; likewise, the DM should be open about what he or she is thinking of the new player. If both parties consider their differences as friendly problems to be solved rather than matters of life and death, their future play together will be much smoother and more enjoyable.

The absolute beginner represents a different kind of problem. It's too easy for DMs and experienced players alike to forget just how bewildering the rules, mechanics, and minutiae of the AD&D™ system appear to someone who's watched a game or two and thumbed through a single book. The key word here is ***patience,*** and it's much easier for a DM to be patient in a solo game than in a game with a group of players who are eager to get on with the adventure.

By designing the right kind of scenario, the DM can guide the beginner through the rules in graded steps, rather like a teaching-machine program. The DM

needs to remember that such a scenario can — and should — be so simple that it would bore experienced players. Killing a giant rat is strictly ho-hum for a high-level paladin, but for a beginner it's a real thrill.

The very first game a beginner plays should never end in the death of the PC unless the DM has placed a convenient resurrecting cleric or some such thing close at hand. Rolling up a character for the first time requires too much work for the beginner to take the sudden death of that character with any kind of sportsmanlike attitude. Even the first adventure can have risks, such as being beaten up or robbed, but the DM should remember that the point of the game is to have fun, not to be bitterly disappointed in the first twenty minutes of a playing career. If the DM has the time, the ideal way to introduce the beginner to the campaign is in a series of single-player scenarios, starting with a simple walk-through situation and progressing to an adventure that does indeed carry potentially fatal risks. The DM is also perfectly justified in warning the player that ***soon*** things will get much, much tougher.

Back to basics for beginners

To design these simple scenarios, the DM must keep in mind what the player needs to learn: *everything*. The beginner has never entered a strange town, cast a spell or swung a weapon, or even walked down a corridor with a torch as the only light. The DM must start by explaining the simplest mechanics, move on to interactions between the PC and NPCs, and finally present combat and complex setups like crowded taverns. The first minutes of the beginner's first game in particular need to be stripped down to bare essentials to avoid confusion, frustration, and ultimately irritation between player and DM.

An example of such a beginner's game should make things clear. After the new PC has been rolled up and fleshed out with some kind of background and personal history, the DM should give the PC some reason for being in the part of the game world where the party that the PC will ultimately join is staying at the moment. Suppose we' have a young fighter, just discharged from the local militia with some pay in his pocket (the rolled-up coin). The DM tells the player that his character hears that adventure and profit can be found in a nearby town.

During the journey to town, the player can learn about movement rate, the need for rest, the passing of game time, and other such things in a very simple way. The road can present NPCs and random encounters in simplified outdoor conditions. Along the way, the DM can place a situation to explore: a simple abandoned hut, say, to be explored in daylight, where indoor movement and the indoor turn can be introduced. From there, the PC might find a dark place (a ruined house at night) in order to learn about torches and mapping in the dark. In these simple settings the PC can have low-level combat experiences — a giant rat, a large spider. The PC can also find his first treasure, say a hoard of ten copper pieces or a bit of cheap jewelry.

After this, the PC will understand the basic mechanics well enough to try a simple scenario. Perhaps a farmer offers food and shelter in return for our fighter's help in killing a bothersome wolf, or a hermit might ask a young neophyte cleric to dispose of a single animated skeleton in a shrine. Such scenarios will introduce clear goals and non-hostile interactions in order to train the new player to plan ahead, think through the consequences of his or her actions, and to see beyond looting to the possibilities of life in the game world.

Ultimately, these beginning scenarios should integrate the new PC into the ongoing group playing in the campaign. By using imagination, the DM can introduce new players in game-world terms rather than falling back on the mundane. In our example, the new player finally reaches town, has a few encounters on his own as he buys equipment, then hears a rumor that an adventuring party is drinking in a certain tavern. There the new PC meets his party for the first time, and it's up to him to think of ways to introduce and ingratiate himself. Perhaps the DM can arrange a brawl with the local yokels in which our fighter pitches in on the party's side, or some other such dramatic moment. The approach of "This is Joe, he's a fighter, and is it okay with you guys if he plays with us?" may work, but it's a lot more fun to have Joe show off his fighting skills in a situation where the admiring adventurers can watch.

Specific scenario ideas

With both the general principles of designing scenarios and the specific needs of the player in mind, let's consider some specific ideas that can provide the seeds of scenarios for the overworked DM. Each group of suggestions that follows starts with a generalized goal, then shows how the general can be turned to the specific for various character classes. From these starting points, the DM can work out particular plots for individual players.

1. Acquiring a desirable object: Somewhere, on a lonely hill or in a ruin, is just what the PC yearns for. This particular goal is perhaps the most useful scenario-starter, having vast numbers of variations.

For instance, fighters will desire magic weapons and magic armor, which may be hidden in a ruin, lost in the wilderness, or in the possession of an NPC of opposite alignment. An interesting variation for a ranger is a valuable horse, running half-wild, that has to be tracked and tamed.

Thieves want riches, and the single-player scenario is a good way for them to steal without having to muck about in dirty dungeons. A big-mouthed NPC could brag about his riches, or gossip with the thief about the local miser in his lonely villa, or perhaps the thief merely sees a wealthy individual walk past in town and sets his or her heart on stealing said individual blind. Assassins may hear of a rare poison or a particularly fine knife to be had.

Magic-users yearn for magic items and spells, but remember that they also have to gather material components, some of which are rare and can be made hard to obtain by the clever DM. Consider the small canine statuettes needed for a *repulsion* spell, for instance: The DM might announce that the only pair to be had in the entire area were lost in a ruin some years ago.

Druids need mistletoe, which the DM can ensure must be harvested in dangerous conditions. For other clerics, the desired object might be a particular blessed mace or an important holy object that the cleric seeks not for him or herself, but for the sake of his or her temple.

The obstacle(s) standing between the PC and the desirable object can vary greatly, from mindless wild animals to NPCs actively seeking the same object and determined to keep anyone else from having it. The DM should remember to make the rewards as well as the dangers

dependent on the PC's experience level. For example, allowing a second-level fighter to acquire a +5 sword would seriously unbalance a campaign; a +1 dagger would be more suitable and more likely to be guarded by the kind of enemies that this level of fighter could overcome. A low-level thief had best be restrained to robbing the weak and the helpless for a few gold pieces, but a high-level thief could be introduced to the local miser's villa, filled with traps, alarms, and armed guards, with a vault containing jewels and bags of gold.

A good variation on the "desired object" theme is to have the PC *quested, geased,* or simply hired to obtain the object for someone else. In this way (if the DM is dealing with an honest PC, at any rate) the DM can have the desired object be most magical and wondrous without introducing it into active play later in the campaign. Another variation is to have the desired object be an item of stolen property which the PC is retrieving, either for him or herself or on hire. The opposition (the original thief or thieves) can be easily adjusted to the PC's capabilities. Still another variation is the rescue, where the desired object is another character. Fighters can be hired to free someone being held for ransom; magic-users, to break evil enchantments; clerics, to exorcise evil spirits; rangers, to track down a missing person in the wilderness.

2. ***Guard*** duty: This goal of keeping someone or something safe can also be widely varied. Fighters are the most obvious choice for guards, either as personal bodyguards or watchmen over threatened property. A rich merchant may worry about thieves, or a lord a sworn enemy who seeks blood vengeance. A traveler going through wilderness may pay a ranger a pretty penny to accompany him. A paladin might volunteer to guard a cleric from evil enemies. Other classes, however, can also do guard duty if the circumstances are right. A cleric or druid might be sent to guard a holy spot against desecration by undead or an evil cleric; likewise, some treasure of their temple might be threatened. A magic-user might be hired to turn back a magical attack against an NPC. The magic-user might also have a particular magical item that others want to steal from him or her. Thieves, by their nature, do not usually make reliable guards for someone else, but if they have booty, it might attract other felonious sorts who want an unearned share of it.

In all of these cases, the opposition wants the property or the person that the guard is looking after. If property is at stake, thieves are most likely the ones coming after it, either on their own or hired by an NPC of another class. If the item being guarded is a character, the opposition may be a hired assassin, or the danger may be a band of unskilled brigands. The assassin makes a good enemy for a rash hack-and-slash type player. Part of the player's job in this case is to use thought and guile in an attempt to figure out the assassin's disguise and to anticipate where the attack will come — a real learning experience for the unthinkingly violent.

3. Acquiring information: This goal is most suitable for a player in a long-running campaign. If the game world has a highly developed political situation or a war in progress, the PC can be hired by one side or another to spy. Although thieves and assassins make the best spies, a magic-user or cleric might well take on a temporary job of this sort if he or she feels the cause is worthy of it. Since heavily armed strangers look too suspicious to be successful spies, fighters are unsuited for this kind of job unless they can successfully convince the spied-upon that they are mercenaries with no attachments to either side.

The opposition to a player who is spying will consist of anyone who discovers the truth about the spy. The warlord or ruler in question will be highly aware of the danger from spies, as will his loyal subjects. Strong rulers will probably have their men check out any strangers in their territory. The spying PC may well meet a counterspy, too, who will entice him or her with bits of false information, then

ultimately turn the PC over to the authorities if he or she doesn't figure out what's going on.

Besides political spying, the player from an ongoing campaign can also undertake a scouting mission for the rest of the party. The party may have heard an interesting rumor of treasure to be gained or a wrong to be righted; on his or her own, the single PC can check out the rumor and scout out the possible dangers. The single player can also hear the rumor for the first time and do the scouting for an adventure that the DM has planned for the whole party.

For example, a cleric or magic-user of good alignment might hear reports of evil activities in some nefarious temple, or a paladin might hear of a lord who is oppressing the poor and generally engaged in wrongdoing. After tracking down rumors of treasure, a thief might decide that he or she needs the party's help in obtaining it.

In these cases, the opposition consists of those who have something to hide. An evil warlord, for instance, would be generally displeased to hear that a paladin is hanging around his fortress, and will no doubt take steps to have the do-gooder removed.

4. Vengeance: If a trusted friend or henchman of the PC has recently been murdered, or if the PC is foully insulted by an NPC, then vengeance is in order. The PC will have to track down the enemy, then challenge him or her to honorable combat (if the PC is one of the good alignments) or merely dispatch him or her (if the PC has a more flexible sense of honor). The enemy should be on guard against such an attempt, and would have guards and other obstacles around his or her person. Vengeance makes a particularly good single-player scenario for an assassin PC. The master of the assassin's guild can announce that someone has cheated the guild and send the PC off to avenge the insult. Of course, the assassin may simply be hired to do away with someone as a single-player adventure, but adding the vengeance theme dignifies the craft.

5. The random encounter ***series:*** Aside from the goal-plus-opposition pattern, discussed in detail above, the other typical category of scenario is a series of random encounters in a given area. If the DM has little time to plan a plotted scenario, such a series has much to recommend it, but even here the DM should use imagination to avoid the "just another dungeon" syndrome. Underground settings offer too many unfair difficulties for even a very high-level PC operating on his or her own. Besides having to fight enemies, the PC is responsible for all the mapping, lighting, and hauling of either supplies or booty, which adds up to more than a single person can handle while still enjoying the game. The DM who wants a dungeon-like setting for a single-player game should choose above-ground ruins to be explored by daylight. There can still be a dark corner, or a tunnel or two, in the environment, but the mechanics of such a setting won't interfere with play.

Perhaps the best setting for a series of random encounters for a single PC is the town or village, simply because towns are full of people of varying races who may or may not give the PC trouble. The PC may find him or herself cheated by a dishonest merchant, involved in a tavern brawl, challenged to a duel by an insulted noble, falsely imprisoned by a scurrilous sheriff, seduced and then robbed by a handsome thief of the opposite sex, and so on. On a brighter note, the PC may also meet assorted variant-class NPCs, like alchemists or astrologers, who may offer good advice and friendship. Another interesting idea for the DM is to set up the town gaol and have the unfortunate PC thrown into it for a night. The medieval-style gaol was generally one large room where criminals and vagrants of all descriptions were shoved in together. Any number of interesting encounters can arise from such a situation.

The wilderness is another good setting for a random series of encounters for a single player, as long as the DM keeps the opposition and dangers fair and compatible with the PC's experience level and character class.

The DM can also give the adventure a bit more meaning by suggesting a reason that the PC is in the wilderness, such as traveling or a hunting expedition. A druid gathering mistletoe or a magic-user searching for material components might meet all sorts of interesting things in the woods besides wild animals and monsters: brigands, madmen, hermits, evil spirits, and so on. A cleric might go to visit a holy (or unholy) spot and find it inhabited by hostile beings. In short, even when the DM has no time to plan an elaborate scenario, the adventure should have some purpose and some game-world "reality."

Set your standards high

Although imagination and consistency should be vital parts of every scenario, they are especially important in the single-player version. The interaction of a group of player characters creates plot and conflict within even the most routine scenario, but with only one player and the DM involved, the scenario has to be strong to avoid a kill-and-loot tedium. If the DM starts by considering the character of the PC, then keeps in mind what the game world has to offer for an adventure, the task of designing a single-player scenario will be easy — much easier than it might seem! — and the result much more fun to play.