**DMing and DM Empowerment**

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In a previous article Arthur talked about playing by a common set of rules for the league, for players, and briefly mentioned DM rules. This article goes more indepth on the subject of DM rules and DM Empowerment. – Ed.

**DMs Must Follow the Rules as Set Forth in the *Player’s Handbook* and the *Player’s Guide* and to Generally Run Adventures as Written**

DMs are expected to follow all of the rules in the *Player’s Handbook* and *Player’s Guide* when running games. Since the *Player’s Guide* permits characters to use all of the material in the D&D basic rules and *Player’s Handbook*, except for rolling ability scores and hit points and imposing certain alignment restrictions, and restricts characters to those rules, DMs cannot impose any additional restrictions or permit characters to use any additional rules.

This requirement is consistent with the rules set forth in the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, which states on page five:

The *Player’s Handbook* contains the main rules you need to play the game.

…

To referee the rules, you need to know them. You don’t need to memorize this book or the *Player’s Handbook*, but you should have a clear idea of their contents so that, when a situation requires a ruling, you know where to find the proper reference.

Similarly, DMs are expected generally to run D&D Adventurers League adventures as written. DMs who create their own rules and who depart from the text of adventures significantly destroy the common experience of the game and the portability of characters.

In a home game, a DM can freely depart from the rules and the text of an adventure without destroying the experience for their players. However, in organized play, players find it unfair when their characters cannot do what other characters did. They get angry and complain when their DM imposes restrictions that do not limit other characters or when their DM makes them face risks that other characters in the same situation did not face. They also get angry and complain when they hear other DMs gave other players and characters opportunities and wealth that are not generally available to everyone. Therefore, in the D&D Adventurers League, DMs are required to follow the rules and generally to run adventures as they are written.

Nonetheless, DMs have a great deal of latitude in how they run games. On page five, the Dungeon Masters Guide states:

The rules don’t account for every possible situation that might arise during a typical D&D session….How you determine the outcome [of such situations] is up to you.

Where there are no rules, or where the rules leave something unclear, it is up to the DM to decide how to handle a situation. Page fifteen of the *Player’s Guide* places responsibility for such decisions on the DM, stating:

[Dungeon Masters] are responsible for making adjudications . . . while running the game. A DM’s ruling at the table is considered final for the purpose of that play session.

For example, a player may want his or her character to swing from a chandelier during a combat, casting a spell as the character does so. The *Player’s Handbook* does not have a clear rule for that situation. The DM could rule it is not possible, call for a Strength (athletics) check to hang onto the chandelier, call for a Dexterity (acrobatics) check to swing from it, and/or rule that the character has disadvantage on the spell attack (or the foe has advantage on its saving throw) due to the motion of the chandelier during the casting.

The current D&D rules intentionally do not cover every situation. When the situation is not covered by a specific rule, or when the rules leave a gray area, whatever the DM says is final. DMs are free to consult their players, other DMs, and the Wizards community forums at [**community.wizards.com/forums/132291**](http://community.wizards.com/forums/132291) for guidance on the D&D rules, but are not bound by such guidance.

However, where the rules do cover a situation and there is no gray area, the DM cannot vary from them. For example, the *Player’s Handbook* clearly indicates when players can take feats. Similarly, the *Player’s Guide*clearly indicates that players cannot roll character ability scores and hit points. DMs running D&D Adventurers League games cannot change or ignore those rules.

**Although We Play the Same Adventures,  
DMs Are Empowered to Make Certain Changes**

DMs also have some latitude in how they run the League’s adventures. Generally, DMs should run the adventures as written to ensure that players campaign-wide face the same challenges and earn the same rewards. Wizards and the campaign staff carefully draft and playtest the adventures to make sure they are relatively balanced, that they fit the campaign, and that they introduce and handle elements that appear throughout the storyline season. DMs who change, omit, and add encounters disturb that balance, in addition to destroying the common play experience.

Nevertheless, the text of an adventure does not cover every possible contingency. A player might want his character to seek out a non-player character (“NPC”) from an earlier adventure. A group might inadvertently bypass an encounter and the associated rewards. DMs can make minor changes to adventures to account for such circumstances, role-playing the encounter with the NPC if time allows and reworking the missed encounter and inserting it into the adventure at another point so the players have an opportunity to face the challenge and earn the rewards.

The Player’s Guide speaks extensively to the power of DMs to alter adventures in this way. On page eleven, it reminds DMs to “Make decisions and adjudications that enhance the fun of the adventure when possible.” That does not mean DMs should ignore the rules or the text of the adventure, but rather that they should make decisions where there are no rules or where the text of the adventure offers no guidance, in ways that make the adventure fun for everyone.

On page 12, the Player’s Guide enumerates some things DMs are empowered to do in these circumstances:

* You are empowered to make adjustments to the adventure and make decisions about how the group interacts with the world of this adventure. This is especially important and applicable outside of combat, but feel free to adjust the adventure for groups that are having too easy or too hard of a time.
* Don’t make the adventure too easy or too difficult for a group. Never being challenged makes for a boring game, and being overwhelmed makes for a frustrating game. Gauge the experience of the players (not the characters) with the game, try to feel out (or ask) what they like in a game, and attempt to give each of them the experience they’re after when they play D&D. Give everyone a chance to shine.
* Be mindful of pacing, and keep the game session moving along appropriately. Watch for stalling, since play loses momentum when this happens. At the same time, make sure that the players don’t finish too early; provide them with a full play experience. Try to be aware of running long or short. Adjust the pacing accordingly.
* Give the players appropriate hints so they can make informed choices about how to proceed. Players should be given clues and hints when appropriate so they can tackle puzzles, combat, and interactions without getting frustrated over lack of information. This helps to encourage immersion in the adventure and gives players “little victories” for figuring out good choices from clues.

Note that Player’s Guide does not empower a DM to ignore any rules. Similarly, while the Guide does go on to say “being the DM isn’t about following the adventure’s text word-for-word,” it does not empower DMs to just ignore the adventure or even substantively depart from the adventure.

Instead, the *Player’s Guide* gives DMs the power they need to adjust adventures to keep the challenge level appropriate to the group that is playing and to keep the adventure moving and fun. In conclusion, to give DMs some guidance in determining when it is appropriate to modify an adventure, here are some examples of things DMs may do and some things they must not do.

**Dos and Don’ts of Modifying Adventures**

* **Adding and Subtracting Foes:** Do add or subtract foes of the same type from a combat to keep the challenge level appropriate to the group. Don’t add foes of a different type or switch out combat encounters entirely. Different types of foes have different abilities that can make combats much harder or much easier than substituting one foe for another of the same challenge rating may otherwise indicate. D&D Expeditions explicitly states which monsters can be added or subtracted for each encounter, however, D&D Encounters/Casual Games are a bit looser and rely on the DM to modify the encounters per the guidelines in the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* on encounter building.
* **Changing the Intended Difficulty of a Combat:** Do try to keep combats at the intended level of difficulty when modifying them; make sure combats written to be easy for the group remain easy and combats written to be difficult remain difficult. Making an early easy combat too difficult uses party resources, turning later difficult combats into bloodbaths. Similarly, making an early hard combat too easy preserves resources, making later combats too easy.
* **Adding Encounters:** Be very careful when adding encounters. Most adventures are written to be played in a certain amount of time. If you add encounters, you run the risk that the players will not have time to finish the actual adventure. Add only those encounters that the characters actually trigger, such as being confronted by the town guard after they break the law or speaking to an NPC whose assistance the characters seek. When you add encounters, be very conscious of the time. Play them out only if there is time; narrate past them if there is not.
* **Cutting-off Encounters:** Similarly, be very careful when cutting-off encounters. If you are pressed for time, such as when a convention slot is ending or a store is closing, you can waive the last few rounds of a combat that the characters will obviously win or narrate through an encounter. However, doing so deprives the players of the chance to play the game by deciding what their characters do and by roleplaying their characters. It can also deprive them of the feeling of success that follows a combat or the opportunity to interact with an NPC. To avoid taking the game out of the players’ hands that way, don’t cut encounters short or narrate through them unless you must.
* **Eliminating Encounters:** Don’t eliminate encounters. As a DM, you don’t know what later events the designer and the campaign staff are setting up by introducing an NPC, a foe, a location, or an object in an adventure. The material you eliminate could be very important later in the campaign.
* **Modifying Encounters:** For the same reasons, avoid modifying encounters. However, do modify them to account for the characters’ actions. If the characters befriend someone, make an enemy, or come up with a creative solution, reflecting that fact in the encounter gives the players a sense of accomplishment. As noted above, if players somehow inadvertently miss an encounter or a reward, you may modify the adventure to insert the encounter or reward later in a way that makes sense in context. Such a change is often a good way to get an adventure that has gone far off track back in the intended direction.
* **Subtracting Rewards:** Do reduce awards if circumstances warrant doing so. If a character does something that would anger his or her faction, you may choose not to award renown that the character otherwise would have earned. Similarly, if characters take actions in an adventure that would result in them spending time in jail or on the lam, reduce or eliminate downtime awarded to reflect that fact. Be careful in reducing wealth and magic items, as tempers can run high when that happens. However, if circumstances warrant, NPCs can withhold rewards, and the authorities can fine characters.
* **Adding Rewards:** Don’t add any rewards to adventures, and don’t award rewards that the characters did not earn. The level of experience, wealth, magic items, renown, and downtime in the campaign, and the particular magic items available have been intentionally set by the designer and the campaign staff. You cannot change them. Moreover, characters must earn their wealth and advancement. If a character steals from an NPC or otherwise obtains extra wealth, reduce wealth found in other parts of the adventure so characters don’t receive more wealth than the adventure permits. Similarly, if an adventure is subject to limits on experience rewards, such as D&D Encounters and D&D Expeditions, make sure you don’t award experience in excess of the applicable limit.