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Sly Flourish's Running Epic Tier D&D Games

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55–70 minutes

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- *[Lazy DM's Companion](#)*

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Be kind to them at Heroic

Be even-handed at Paragon

Be a bastard at Epic

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How to Use This Book

This book is written for Dungeon Masters (DMs) planning to run epic tier Dungeons and Dragons 4th Edition games. It assumes you've run a bunch of D&D 4th edition games at this point and have a firm understanding of the basics. You've prepped

adventures, you've developed and ran a lot of encounters, you know the ins and outs of 4th Edition but ahead lurks the dark waters of the epic tier.

Maybe your campaign has finally reached past level 20 and you're about to dive into the stories where the player characters (PCs) have power beyond that of mere mortals. Maybe you've always wanted to run some epic-level battles against the most dangerous opponents in the multi-verse. Maybe you want to run a couple of one-shots against the oldest dragons to fly the skies. If any of these situations are true, this book is for you.

Running epic tier D&D 4th edition games is very different from running games at the heroic or paragon tier. With the vast number of feats, powers, and items available by any single PC, some devastating combinations of powers will no doubt show up at your table. PCs can recover hit points without using healing surges. They can kill minions with no actions spent. They can paralyze and quickly slay just about any single monster, solo or not. Dealing with all of this while you run a great game is challenging.

This short book is designed to help you run fun, challenging, and fantastic epic tier D&D games. We'll talk about building awesome stories worthy of epic PCs. You'll learn tricks to deal with the increase in PCs power above level 20. You'll learn how to keep combat challenging without increasing the time it takes to run it.

This is not a book for beginners. If you're looking for tips to help you build great D&D games at all tiers, take a look at Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips along with the Dungeon Master's Guide, the Dungeon Master's Guide 2, or the Dungeon Master's Kit. If you have a handle on all of that, however, and are ready to take your

PCs all the way to the top, look no further.

If you're looking for a summary to quickly improve your epic tier adventures, jump to the last chapter in this book where we summarize the best six tips for improving your epic campaign.

Otherwise, let's begin by building stories worthy of your epic tier PCs.

Tell Epic Stories

Building the right environment and story for an epic tier campaign is as important as tweaking the mechanics to make sure it runs well. Once your PCs have reached level 21 and are on the path to level 30, they are no longer simple heroes. They are the best of the best. They have saved kingdoms and battled the mightiest foes to walk the mortal worlds. They are the idols of entire global populations. How do you build an environment worthy of their stature? Where can you find the inspiration to create these worlds?

Superheroes

Your epic tier PCs are nothing short of superheroes. They aren't Tolkein's Legolas, they're Marvel's Hawkeye. Your wizard is going to be a lot more like Dr. Strange than Gandalf at this tier. Your barbarian is less like Conan and more like the Hulk. Traveling across worlds is common for superheroes. Fighting threats to entire civilizations is a daily duty for them. When you need inspiration for your epic tier campaign, you can do a lot worse than traveling through the pages of the Justice League of America or the Avengers.

You even have the option to run a stable of characters in a

Superhero campaign rather than a single character per player. Players could each have two or three characters as part of this large league of heroes and choose the epic hero they want to play for each particular adventure.

A campaign based on the Justice League would work very well at the epic tier. The scale is right, the scope is right, and the characters are right. Take a dip back into your favorite DC and Marvel comics to inspire your epic tier campaigns.

Godstompers

A phrase I first heard by [Dave Chalker](#) of [Critical Hits](#), Godstomping is a simple level 27 to 30 campaign design that works very well for groups that enjoy typical one-shot dungeon crawling. In this storyline, the PCs hunt down each of the worst gods and demon princes of the multi-verse one after another. You can design an overarching plot around this but it doesn't need to be elaborate. Perhaps an ancient book gives instructions for opening up portals to each of the god's or demon prince's inner sanctum. To determine who they should fight you can look at any solo creature above level 30 and throw them at the end of a three-encounter dungeon delve. Godstomping would also make for a fun series of level 30 one-shot adventures.

Epic settings and locales

Epic tier PCs need a home base worthy of their stature. Hanging out at the local bar in Fallcrest simply won't cut it. Instead, give the PCs a secret headquarters inside the center of an earthmote floating over the Elemental Chaos or a massive Spelljammer soaring through the Astral Sea or a tower in the famed City of Brass.

Give the PCs an amazing place they can call their own. As they travel through the final nine levels of the game, they should have a location they can fill out with all of their greatest desires. Permanent teleportation circles, iron golem guardians, treasure rooms as large as the halls of kings; give them what they've dreamed they'd have for the past 21 levels. Once they have it, avoid the temptation to attack it constantly or take it away. Even Superman had a Fortress of Solitude that, for the most part, was left alone.

Everyone knows your name

At the epic tier the PCs have no doubt made a name for themselves. Even in the outer reaches of the Astral Sea or deep in the cavernous maws of the Abyss, the angels and fiends have learned of the PCs. Their reputations should almost always precede them. The story for your campaign should begin to revolve around the PCs and their actions instead of a story paved by someone else that the PCs merely follow. Even the mightiest demon princes should take careful note when the PCs take notice of them.

Threats worthy of demigods

Always keep in mind how to scale your adventures and your campaign to the point worthy of demigods or superheroes. At level 21 and above, saving a kingdom simply won't do. Huge, ancient, and multi-verse changing threats are almost always the only threats worthy of their attention. Sentient planets on a path of galactic destruction, ancient primordial evils awoken in the depths that threaten global annihilation, a ten-thousand-year plot of a demon prince; these are the threats your players should expect to

see. Treat your PCs as the demigods they are and show them what it means to face the greatest threats ever conceived.

Good stories will carry your players' interest as they progress through the epic tier but in order to properly challenge them, you have to prepare yourself for what you'll see in combat from these powerful characters.

Prepare Yourself for Epic Battles

If you've run paragon-tier games before, you likely have seen a large increase in the power and capability of your PCs. Your ranged strikers slide away from attacks, your melee defenders shrug off massive amounts of damage, your controllers manage to lock down an entire battlefield of monsters. The jump from the heroic to the paragon tier increases the power of each PC quite a bit.

Expect even more of that at the epic tier. With both paragon paths and epic destinies at their disposal, along with 13 to 18 feats, dozens of utility powers, combat powers, and magical items; the combination of effects you'll begin to see from level 21 to 30 will stagger you.

Minions will die the second you put them on the table. The biggest brutes you can find will become paralyzed and killed without launching a single attack. Solo creatures will find themselves pinned down, chain stunned, and killed in two rounds of combat. The PCs can shrug off the most powerful hits, heal for free, resist nearly everything, and gain vast sums of temporary hit points.

Beyond the individual power of an epic tier PC, you'll also begin to see powerful combinations between multiple epic tier PCs as well.

Warlords will add +9 to the attacks of a ranger able to attack every creature within sight. Characters might score critical hits nearly every round and trigger a series of free attacks from everyone else in the party every time they do. Characters, boosted by their allies, might dish out 300 damage in a single turn. You'll have to prepare for these combinations if you want the game to be something more than a monster holocaust.

Gone are the days where monsters out of the book could threaten PCs. You're going to have to pull out a lot of tricks to keep players challenged. Environmental effects, fantastic terrain, traps and hazards, in-battle skill challenges; you'll have to use all of these tools to keep battles interesting, challenging, and fun.

The first step in this preparation is knowing how the traditional roles of PCs scale into the epic tier.

Know Epic PC Roles

In order to apply the right challenge to your group for a particular encounter, you need to understand the capabilities of each of your PCs. Your goal isn't to directly counteract these capabilities, but to build an encounter that will let the PCs use their vast power and still face a suitable challenge.

Nuking strikers

Powerful strikers with the right combination of items, feats, and powers can inflict up to 300 points of damage in a single round. They often have lots of escapes from attacks, are able to avoid terrain elements and visual obscurity, and pour out damage continually throughout a fight.

Adding brutes is an easy way to increase the amount of total hit

points in an encounter. You have to be careful, though. Too many hit points and the battle will grind to a halt. Ensure a large battle has some form of success criteria rather than simply killing every monster.

Example: The black dragon's bodyguards You want to run a high-level solo black dragon but you know that the strikers in your party will quickly cut him down. Add in four or five Yuan-ti brutes as worshippers of the dragon who can also bring a threat to the party. Give these brutes the ability to take damage instead of the dragon as an interrupt so that massive damage doesn't hit the dragon directly every time. When the dragon dies, however, so do the brutes whose life forces were tied directly to it. This way you have a way to remove some massive damage from the dragon but the battle won't turn into a slog-fest when the dragon dies.

Ranged strikers in particular are notorious for their ability to avoid nearly all threats. Counteract this with some artillery of your own, map-wide environmental effects, and creatures with reach.

Example: The donut aura One way to keep the threat high on your ranged attackers is with a tool called the donut aura. This aura only affects squares outside of a certain range from your central boss monster. For example. A level 25 lich causes a field of natural disruption that affects all squares outside of five squares from the lich. Anyone that begins or enters squares greater than five from the lich takes 25 points of necrotic damage and receives no benefits from heals. Now you have a constant way to keep ranged attackers on their toes and moving around the battlefield throughout the battle. Mix this with a traditional aura and you give PCs a choice, although neither of them are very good, which brings its own sort of fun.

Super-sticky defenders

Good epic tier defenders are like flypaper for monsters. They draw monsters in and mark them with marks so powerful that it would be idiotic to attack anyone else. Automatic damage, -3 to defenses, and applied status effects as free actions aren't uncommon from an epic tier defender. Incredibly high defenses, oceans of temporary hit points, and a dozen ways to heal prepare the defender to take these hits.

Challenge a party that has a powerful defender by ensuring no single creature acts as the primary damage dealer. Even in battles against powerful solos, environmental effects, auras, and extra creatures often will be the only threat to non-defenders in a group.

Multiple simultaneous bosses, expansive battlefields, hard-to-reach artillery, lots of brutes, movement-hindering terrain, creatures and environments that daze; all of these are good ways to deal with strong defenders without preventing the defender from performing his or her job.

Example: Replacing solos with elites: Instead of running a battle with a single powerful solo monster, consider replacing that solo monster with three elite monsters instead. Say you were planning an encounter against a massive epic-level Elder Purple Worm. Instead, replace that purple worm with three ancient abyssal worms (level 30 elites from [Demonomicon](#). Three elites are a lot harder for a defender to lock down than a single solo worm. Want to be really mean? Give them both.

Incapacitating controllers

Strong controllers create powerful zones that inhibit or damage creatures within it. They create apparitions that pin creatures down

and inflict continuing damage. They kill minions with hardly a thought and paralyze single creatures with a rainbow of various status effects.

Like the super-sticky defender, you'll want an expansive battlefield for your controllers. As many of the controller's zones require minor actions to sustain, a carefully placed stun or daze can often eliminate them. Don't do it too soon or too often. The player shouldn't feel like he or she got screwed out of a daily. But if that zone seems to be completely removing the challenge of a battle, you might want a way around it.

Catastrophic area attackers

Strikers, leaders, and controllers all often wield very powerful area attacks. Though most dangerous to minions, these area attacks can also dish out a lot of damage or control a big section of a battlefield.

Again, large battlefields, a good number of obstructions, or a network of hallways can help you keep your monsters apart from one another so they aren't all hit by the area attack. Adding a few more hit points to your monsters, adding a few monsters, or upgrading your monsters to brutes can also ensure they aren't wiped out in these area attacks.

Example: The minion generator Big area attacks eat minions faster than a lawn mower. A minion generator helps solve this problem. Say your wizard boss has four portals in his throne room. Every round, at the end of his turn, have the wizard summon four devil minions from these portals who act immediately after the wizard. This way they get at least one round before getting killed and keep coming every round. With three minor-action skill check

successes, the PCs can disable these portals to prevent the summoning of the devils. This setup gives minions a fighting chance at being something other than battlefield decoration against heavy area attackers.

Super boosting leaders

Leaders that boost a group's defenses, attacks, and damage can turn the threat of a battle very quickly. With a powerful Warlord, for example, the bonuses they give to the party essentially guarantee hits. Rather than fight this, simply accept that PCs will almost always hit and learn to deal with the damage and status effects rather than worry about defenses.

Strong leaders might toss around lots of temporary hit points. Large areas of ongoing damage whittle down those temporary hit points and give PCs an added threat to worry about.

Forcing the separation of a party can also reduce the effectiveness of a boosting leader. Roper-like forced movement, complex hallways, creatures that kidnap and teleport PCs, these are all tricky ways to split up a party. Use this with care, however.

Example: The fire shield Late in epic tier games, warlords in particular can give out an amazing amount of free-action attacks. Give your boss a fire shield of sorts to deal with all of these free attacks. Any time your boss takes damage, it inflicts 30 fire damage on the attacker with no action required. Because this can be particularly nasty, limit the duration by letting PCs disable this fire shield with three minor-action skill check successes, one per round. You can also see an example of this type of power with the Adult Black Dragon in the [Monster Vault](#).

Challenging but not contradicting

When designing encounters for such high-level PCs, you need to keep a careful balance to ensure you don't simply counteract your PC's advantages but still provide a challenge to them. Your players worked hard to get these powers, after all, and they want a chance to use them. Sometimes dominating the entire battlefield is the fun your PCs seek. There is always a careful balance between challenge and fun. Keep this balance in mind as you prepare your encounters for these superhuman PCs.

With a firm understanding of your player characters and their role, you're now ready to design the framework for your epic tier encounters.

Designing Epic Encounters

Designing an epic encounter requires a lot more from a DM than designing encounters in the heroic and paragon tiers. It isn't as easy as picking out a number of monsters, calculating the experience budget, and putting them on a table. Most published epic tier encounters won't run like you'd expect. Here are a few tips for designing solid epic tier encounters.

Ignore experience budgets

The experience budget, described in the Dungeon Master's Guide and Dungeon Master's Kit, is a useful guide to ensure you have the right challenge facing your party. It ensures you have enough monsters at the right level to keep your PCs on their toes without overwhelming them. It also lets you scale battles up or down depending on how hard a challenge you want them to face.

Unfortunately, it helps very little above level 21. The wild combination of effects generated by epic-level PCs makes it

extremely difficult to judge the true challenge of a battle. A battle three levels above your PCs might end up being a cakewalk while a battle of equal level that includes a lot of environmental effects may prove very challenging. Instead of using the experience budget as a guide, you're going to need do a few different things to maintain the right challenge for your PCs.

Prepare to improvise

All the planning in the world won't tell you exactly how an epic battle is going to go. You'll want to be prepared to change the battle around during combat to tune it on the fly and keep it fun. You'll also want to do this without the players realizing that you're changing the battle based on what is going on. If they feel like you're just changing the game whenever you want, they'll feel like all their special powers and items aren't really effective. What is the point of all these numbers and rolling if you're just going to change things whenever it goes well or poorly?

The way to counteract this feeling is to prepare for it ahead of time. Add an "overdrive" power to elites and solos. If the PCs are having too easy a time, this overdrive power might add the needed threat. An overdrive power might increase an aura's damage above normal, add additional damage to attacks, or adding immunities to status effects.

Another way is to add a reserve team. Additional monsters might come to the aid of the original group if things go particularly badly. Again, you'll want to have this reserve team already planned out and then decide mid-battle if you really need it or not.

Sometimes you'll need to go the other way. Maybe your encounter turned out to be too hard or it's simply going too long. Try reducing

the monster's hit points mid-battle to speed things up. As long as your players aren't aware of the sudden reduction, this adjustment can work out nicely. Monsters might become winded, reducing their defenses and damage output. If the battle is going long but the PCs can still use a bit of a thrashing, start adding 10, 15, or 20 damage to an attack and reduce an equal number (twice the number if it's a solo) from the monster's hit points.

The key to improvising is planning. Design your encounters ahead of time with options to scale the difficulty up or down or reduce time. When running a battle, don't feel locked into your design. Make small tweaks during the game to keep the challenge high and the game fun.

Award experience based on effort

If you've thrown out experience budgeting as a method to design encounters at the epic tier, now you need a new way to actually reward experience points. Some DMs simply choose to level up the PCs at certain points in the story. This can work well but it removes one of the few tangible rewards players receive from battle experience points. Sure, experience points don't really mean anything but it's a nice number to watch go up. Players might feel like they're being led along if PCs only level when you say.

Instead, award experience points based on the effort of the battle. Use your own judgment on how hard the battle was and award experience to each player based on that range. To find the right amount of experience, look up a single creature's experience value at a level that matches the difficulty of the encounter. Make sure that creature is a normal creature, not an elite, solo, or minion. That creature's experience value is the amount to award each PC

in a group.

Example: Effort-based experience So you planned out a few encounters for your level 24 group; two easy ones, one medium, and one very hard encounter. As it turns out, one of the easy encounters turned out to be harder than expected, the medium worked out as you would have thought, but the very hard encounter turned out to be a pushover. Since your group is level 24, you'll give the experience of a level 22 creature to each member for the easy battle, the experience of a level 24 for the other easy and the medium encounter, and level 26 experience for the hard encounter instead of the 28 you would have expected. This way they're getting experience for their effort in the battle instead of a static number.

You can award experience for quests, skill challenges, and story rewards the same way. This system is an easy way to quickly award experience based on the effort of the PCs.

Stay flexible

The key to running great battles is to build a system around your encounter design that gives you the freedom and flexibility to increase and decrease the challenge of the encounter on the fly. As far as your players are concerned, everything is by the book. As far as you are concerned, you can build the battles you want to build without inhibiting restrictions on what you might throw at them. Stay flexible and plan ahead.

With a general framework for epic tier encounters ready, you now need to ensure your monsters are up to the challenge when facing epic PCs. You start by preparing for epic offensive power.

Prepare for Epic Offensive Power

Unless you have highly limited character options (by running a D&D Essentials only campaign for example) you must prepare to see incredible combinations of effects and extremely high damage output. It is not uncommon to see characters inflicting 100, 200, and in some cases 300 damage in a single turn. For some battles this might be fine. You throw a bunch of monsters at your party and they cut them down with ease. They are epic characters after all. Sometimes, though, when you want to really challenge the PCs, you'll have to find a way to deal with these spikes in damage and combination of effects.

Skill challenge based defenses

You will find, more and more, a reliance of in-battle skill challenges to change the pace of combat in the epic tier. In-combat skill challenges can end a battle early or they can protect against these surges in effectiveness in combat.

Use skill challenges to defend your monsters or create situations even more dangerous than the monsters themselves. Instead of performing their powerful combinations of attacks, they have to deal with the challenge or face the consequences.

Example: The chamber of blood The party enters a chamber with large pools of blood on the floor. The doors slam shut and four coffins open up revealing Ancient Warrior Wights. The wights attack but they are not the real danger. Blood begins to flow into the entire room from the mouth of a demonic carving on the wall. Within four rounds the entire room will be filled up. Only by manipulating the mechanisms within the four coffins (three minor

actions per coffin to disable 1/4 of the trap) can they stop the torrent of blood. In the beginning, the monsters might take all the attention but when the party is up to their necks in necrotic blood (20 necrotic damage every round) will they realize the need to work on the trap. This trap forces players to move around the map and focus on disabling the trap rather than simply cutting down the Wights.

Other skill challenges might prevent damage from landing on your primary villain.

Example: The prismatic sphere A scintillating prismatic orb might surround the Lich Lord. Only by disabling the four prismatic pillars around the room can they begin to hit him. Each pillar grants him one protection; radiant damage, elemental damage, status effects, and resist 20 damage. Each pillar might take a particular skill to destroy such as arcane for the elemental damage and status effects, religion for the radiant damage, and athletics for the damage resistance. The nice thing about this protection is that PCs *can* simply fight through it if they want to. Breaking down the prismatic layers helps them but they can choose to ignore it. The battle will just be harder.

These in-battle skill challenges keep your battles unique, force PCs to move around the room, and protect your primary villains from getting killed or incapacitated too quickly.

Build multi-staged battles

For particularly important battles, you might combine two encounters together without a short rest between them. Such multi-stage battles would have one set of monsters come out first to wear down the party and then the second wave comes in to

bring the real challenge.

In the heroic and paragon tier, such a battle might result in PCs exhausting encounter and daily abilities early on but at the epic tier, PCs have so many options they aren't likely to exhaust all of their resources even with two battles back to back.

Such double-length battles will likely take a long time, up to two hours in some circumstances, so you will want to be prepared for such a long battle. You'll also want to change up the environmental effects of the encounter so the whole map itself stays interesting across two battles. Battles like this will bring a real challenge to your players whatever level they are, though epic-level PCs will have an easier time with such combined battles.

Prepare your lightning rods

Sometimes you'll need a sacrificial creature to take the brunt of the PCs' wrath. Such a creature is designed to take the main abuse your PCs can muster. From the beginning these poor doomed creatures step forward taking piles of damage and sucking down status effects. They might never get a chance to attack, but that doesn't mean they don't have a purpose.

Large flashy brutes make good lightning rods. They hit hard, if they ever actually manage to hit. They have low defenses so they're satisfying to hit, and they're usually big. A good single brute stands out from the rest of the crowd and gets the players' eyes to focus down on it. Yet instead of being your primary threat, it's really a pillow for them to punch while the real dangers come out in packs of skirmishers or artillery.

Use multiple bosses

Instead of having a single boss who will incur the wrath of the entire party, split your bosses up into a few different creatures. Maybe a trio of sorceress liches runs the Abyssal cabal instead of a single queen. Maybe the demon prince's advisor is just as dangerous as the demon prince. Combining a few different villains together avoids a single villain getting killed too quickly. One of these villains, however, is likely to die a quick and horrible death. That's the cost for battling an epic-level party.

Never fall in love with your monsters

Always remember that the ultimate purpose and end of even your best monsters is death. Don't forget that the PCs are the center of the story, not your special shiny beast. Sometimes your powerful boss will be killed a lot faster than you think. Let the PCs explore the full strength of their power. Let the story unfold as it does, let your grip loosen, and you will all be a lot happier.

With a good understanding of the potential for offensive power under your belt, you're now ready to deal with the strong defenses of epic tier PCs.

Deal With Epic Defenses

Epic tier PCs have numerous ways to avoid taking damage. Immediate interrupts let them shift away or disappear from combat directly. Magical items let them ignore the bulk of elemental attacks. Free healing and temporary hit points mitigate a lot of the damage done by monsters. Zones and auras threaten the most powerful monsters with repeated status effects and damage.

There's a very delicate balance between keeping the threat high in a battle and ruining the player's fun of having such powerful

defenses. Mastering this balance is the key to running awesome epic tier battles.

Crash against the rocks

First off, it's important that players get to use these defenses. The best way to do that is to ensure monsters crash up against these defenses regularly. Even if your entire party has resist necrotic 15, you should attack them with necrotic damage anyway so they can feel the usefulness of that resistance. If a character is particularly good at dicing up minions, be sure to give he or she some minions to dice. PCs didn't come all this way to simply have their magic armor negated or their minion-hacking powers found useless. Let them show off their power with some of the very things they want to see, just don't count on it giving them much of a threat.

Mix up artillery with brutes

Large brutes can be very effective against a highly-defensive epic tier party. First, they have extended reaches so they never actually get next to a PC, thus getting past most "shift when adjacent" interrupts. Second, they do considerable damage even if their attacks are reduced or their damage is mitigated. Third, their low defenses and high hit points make them fun to fight. Brutes should be the cornerstone of many of your epic encounters.

Artillery monsters are also able to get past many defenses. Any PC mobility defenses usually don't work against artillery monsters. They just fire away at one or more PCs within range. Their low hit points mean you'll either want a few of them spread out, hidden, or staying within some other defensive position. Like brutes, they usually inflict a lot of damage.

Mix up damage types

PCs are likely to have a lot of elemental resistance at the epic tier. It's not uncommon to find PCs that resist 15 damage from four or five different elemental types. Add additional damage types to attacks from epic tier creatures and you're a little more likely to see the damage go through without eliminating the need for resist gear completely. Sometimes the PC will get lucky and have both resists available. Other times the PC will not be so lucky and the damage goes through.

Adding about ten extra damage to certain elemental attacks is another easy way to ensure you get the bulk of damage past resistances without completely eliminating the usefulness of resistances. You'll want to use this concept carefully and not tip your hand to your players or they will feel like having resistance gear is a waste in the first place.

Example: The Lich Few monsters are as impotent as the Lich in the Monster Manual 1. It's very weak 5 necrotic damage aura is unlikely to ever affect any PC. Instead, gauge the resistance of your party and give the Lich a fighting chance to affect them. Consider replacing that 5 necrotic aura with a 25 necrotic aura that increases to 40 when it becomes bloodied. Now it has teeth!

Deal with marks

Epic tier defenders are likely to have very sticky marking effects. Their marks will be so effective that it will make very little sense for a marked creature to ever attack anyone but the marking PC. Learning to deal with these marks without ruining their usefulness is tricky. Creatures that can attack more than one PC with a single attack are able to get around marks but still ensure that one attack will hit the marked target. For example, a Flameskull with a fire ray

that can target one or two targets will fire one ray at the defender and one ray at someone else. This won't trip the mark but still lets the Flameskull threaten someone other than the marked target.

You'll also likely want to rule that any multiple-attack action doesn't trip a mark if any of those attacks hit the marked target.

Example: The Heroslayer Hydra The Heroslayer Hydra from Monster Manual 2 has a standard bite attack and a multi-headed bite attack. Consider ruling that as long as one head hits the marker, the others are free to attack anyone else without triggering the mark. Of course, with the Heroslayer, the bonus versus marking targets might sway you to go all out on the defender.

Higher damage trumps everything

The extra monster damage released in the June 2010 Dungeon Master Guide update available in the Wizards rules update archive includes higher damage expressions throughout all tiers. This extra damage is especially important at the epic tier and using these higher damage expressions throughout your game is the best way to deal with all of the defenses of epic tier PCs. Higher damage gets past resistances, breaks through temporary hit points, reduces the effectiveness of free healing, and keeps the threat high even when attacks miss or are reduced.

Ensure all of your epic tier creatures, traps, and effects are using the new damage expressions.

Only by watching your PCs deal with epic tier encounters will you know their true capability in mitigating damage and defending against attacks. Learn of their capabilities and have a few tricks up your sleeve to ensure you can keep the threat against them strong without removing the fun of having those powerful defenses.

Dealing with epic offensive and defensive power is critical for challenging groups. Keeping that challenge high when you might have more than five PCs is equally important. Now we will move on to scaling battles for six PCs.

Scale Epic Battles for 6 PCs

Typically, when you have more than five players at your table, you can scale up a D&D encounter by adding an extra monster or making one of the existing monsters an elite. Unfortunately this easy solution doesn't work as well in the epic tier. There are two added complications when scaling battles for more than five players above level 21.

First, with the extra combined power of an additional PC, one monster alone won't match up to the increase in PC power. Not only does an extra epic tier character bring a lot of power to the table, but the extra synergistic power of the team grows as well. One monster simply won't add much of a threat.

Second, adding more monsters often just makes battles run longer. We're already looking for ways to keep epic-level battles running fast and adding more monsters alone won't help.

Instead, here are three ways to scale a battle for six PCs without adding extra time to the game.

Add environmental damage

Add damage onto existing environmental effects or create new ones to scale up the threat of a battle. Increasing existing damage will put greater stress on the PCs without adding more time onto the game. If an existing environmental effect or bit of fantastic terrain inflicts 15 elemental damage, increase it to 25. If there is

currently no fantastic terrain, add some. Using the basic model of 10 damage per tier works very well to add damaging elements to an existing battlefield.

Example: Scaling the mummy crypt You want to scale a crypt battle involving four Mummy Lords and two Lich Nagas for a group of six PCs. Instead of adding more Mummies or Nagas, add two necrotic pillars. Whenever a PC enters or begins within two squares of these pillars, the PC takes 30 necrotic damage. Since this is straight damage with no attack roll, it will run fast but still keeps PCs on their toes. You might assign small skill challenges to destroy the pillars to give the PCs something else to do instead of just killing monsters.

Powerful fantastic terrain increases the threat to a larger group without adding extra time to the battle.

Add multi-target attacks to existing monsters

Your basic goal when designing encounters for six epic tier PCs is to ensure every character faces a challenge. Add multi-targeting attacks to your existing ranged attackers and they can meet this goal.

Example: Rot Slingers You have a battle with two Rot Slingers and four Abyssal Ghouls and want to scale it up for six. Add an additional target to the Rot Slinger's "Orb of Decay" attack so it can now target two enemies with this attack instead of just one. During the whole battle, the Rot Slinger can target two different creatures a round, threatening all six of the PCs. Adding attacks against multiple targets like in this example has the added benefit of avoiding penalties for marks. Since the marking PC is one of the two targets, the attack doesn't trigger the mark.

These additional multi-attacks work particularly well for elites and solos who are likely to stick around longer than a normal monster.

Add two artillery or lurker monsters for every additional player

While adding more monsters isn't an ideal solution, doing it smartly can work very well. Instead of just throwing more random monsters into a battle, carefully choose the best creatures to increase the encounter's danger without adding a lot of time. Very simple artillery or lurker creatures can do this very well.

Example: Flame Skulls You decide against adding necrotic pillars to your Naga Lich / Mummy Lord encounter. Instead you're going to add a pair of flame skulls. The flame skulls have very simple artillery attacks and don't take a lot of damage to kill. They will add an extra threat onto your group without adding a lot of time.

Add threat without adding time

The key to all of these suggestions is to keep the challenge on your party without adding a lot of time. There are many other solutions to scale battles up for six players. You're going to need to do something to keep the threat in line with the number of PCs but you want to do so without making the encounter run any longer than it needs to. Adding a sixth player will already add a fair bit of time to a game, don't exacerbate that problem by adding more complexity to an already complex battle.

Regardless of how many players you have, managing the length of an encounter is critical to keeping it fast and fun. Now we'll discuss how to run fast epic encounters.

Run Fast Epic Encounters

Running an epic tier battle requires a bit more attention than battles earlier in the game. Players have a lot more options from which to choose, monsters get more complicated, and giving the PCs a challenging fight requires more monsters, effects, traps, and hazards on the table. Stack this on top of your desire and the desire of the players to have a battle started and finished within an hour and you have quite the challenge ahead of you. Here are a few tips for managing an epic tier battle at your table.

Always be rolling

Though it's important for any DM at any tier of play, it is especially important at the epic tier to keep the game moving forward all the time. Always be aware of the pace of the battle, move things along when needed, and help players prepare for their turns. Try standing up during a battle. When you stand you are less likely to slow down, mentally wander off, or get into off-topic conversations. Standing gives you a good view of your own material, the map, and the other players. It literally keeps you on your toes as the battle moves forward.

Ask players to plan their actions before their turn so their turn is simply focused on committing actions they have already chosen.

Help your players prepare their character sheets

The number of options available to epic tier players is the most likely obstacle to a fast battle. Epic tier PCs have dozens of possible actions they can take. Studies have shown that human beings, when faced with too many options, take much longer to decide and make worse decisions than those with fewer options.

Help your players simplify their actions by helping them manage their character sheet. Have them take a large marker and write the

type of action of each power or item such as Interrupt, Reaction, Minor, Move, and Standard. If it's an interrupt or reaction, have them write the trigger such as "when attacked" or "when monster moves adjacent" or "when I drop to 0". The players might even organize their power cards by action so instead of choosing among thirty possible powers every phase they instead only need to choose one of seven standard actions and one of four minor actions. Organizing PC character sheets by action type can help them decide quickly what actions they want to take and get your game moving smoother.

Pause for interrupts and reactions

When characters reach the epic tier, they are likely to have numerous powers that interrupt and react to monster actions. It's not uncommon to go through an entire turn of monster actions only to have a player say "oh yeah, I interrupt that first attack". Now you either have to roll back a whole series of turns or you have to tell the player it's too late. It is better to pause during monster turns and, if needed, ask if anyone is going to interrupt. As you get to know your epic tier PCs, you'll begin to know what sort of interrupts and reactions they might have which will let you pause at the right place. Moving too quickly through monster turns could result in having to unravel an entire series of turns, which further slows down the game. Give enough time for players to react to the actions of monsters.

Reveal defenses

At the right point in your battle, reveal the defenses of the creatures on the table using monster defense cards. A 5x8 card folded in half like a tent card with the monster's name and four

defenses listed will help players roll their attacks ahead of their turn. Instead of going back and forth with the DM on each attack, all the player has to do is let you know how much damage they inflicted and any effect the attack had. This might look like you're pulling the curtain too far back, so you might not want to do it with every creature and you might not want to do it right away. Give players a chance to roll monster knowledge checks to reveal the card. In practice, however, the convenience and speed these cards add to the game makes it worthwhile. This tip, along with making the combat initiative order visible to your whole group, will dramatically cut down on the duration of your battles and is good for any level of the game.

Keep environmental effects simple but effective

In the epic tier you're going to make even more use of fantastic terrain, environmental effects, and environmental powers. Epic games are already going to be complicated, however, so don't make these effects too complicated. Each effect you have in the encounter should focus around one thing such as damage or a status effect. A slimy area of the battlefield should simply slow any creatures that step within it. A necrotic aura radiating off of an unholy shrine should inflict 25 necrotic damage to all who step near it. You should have probably no more than three of these effects as a maximum in any one battle and each of them should be designed for simplicity and powerful effect. Avoid terrain features that make attack rolls or randomly determined damage. Instead just inflict a static amount of damage. This makes them much easier to run and very effective against PCs regardless of their defenses.

Simple but powerful environmental effects can add a good

challenge to the battle without adding extra time to the duration of the fight.

Example: The skirmish, light on creatures, heavy on environmentals If you're looking to have a quick side battle, go light on creatures and heavy on environmental effects. For example, a sealed room with an elite Iron Golem Juggernaught might be filling up with poison gas that begins at 30 poison damage at the beginning of each creature's turn and goes up by 10 damage every round. Every round the party takes to kill the Juggernaught is another round that takes them closer to death. The battle will no doubt be short but might be quite deadly if not handled correctly.

Prepare for longer battles

Sometimes you might have a battle against a longtime villain of the PCs. Battles like this shouldn't be rushed through in order to get them done in under an hour. Instead, plan for a double-length encounter with multiple phases and shifting tactics throughout the battle. If you've planned for these longer battles and if the fights themselves are dynamic enough to keep the players interested, they can make for some very memorable and rewarding fights. Not all battles need to be done quickly, but you should know and plan ahead of time for the ones that will take longer.

Example: The Necromancer The party faces a dark necromancer in the upper tower of his keep. The necromancer, protected by four pillars of necrotic energy, watches as his powerful flesh golems and skeletal knights battles the party. This counts as phase 1. The party finishes phase 1 and enters phase 2 when they have broken the dark enchantments. This destroys any skeletal knights that

remain and breaks the necromancer's protective wards, opening up a new section of the battlefield. Now, the necromancer himself, a high level solo monster, attacks the party in phase 2. When the necromancer is slain, all remaining creatures are likewise slain.

Manage the flow

Managing an epic tier battle will require more from you than managing lower level games, but it doesn't need to take longer and can still offer powerful, dynamic, and challenging fights. Watch the interests of your players and find ways to add tension, bring them back in with lore and knowledge checks, or find other ways to re-engage them into the game.

With a great story, good encounters, and well-managed combat all prepared, it's now time to think about how to end your epic tier campaign.

Finish Your Epic Tier Campaign

Finding out the right way to finish your campaign might be harder than any other story element you've had to come up with so far. Whether your group has traveled all the way from level 1 to 30 or whether you began the story in the later levels, finding the right way to end an epic tier story adds its own challenges. Here are a few possible ways to end your epic-level campaign.

The cliffhanger

Half the fun is not knowing exactly where the story is going to go, so don't let it ever really end. End the campaign at a cliffhanger. Don't end it without the group fighting your main bad guy, but add a little twist to the end to keep them continually on their toes. Maybe they find one last mystery and the story simply leaves them

following this one last lead. Maybe after saving the Raven Queen from Orcus's evil assassination plot they step outside of her door only to see Lolth's massive spider-shaped chaos ship standing over it.

Godhood

Going a more traditional route, perhaps your epic tier party finally traverses the boundary between mortality and immortality. Perhaps they make a name for themselves in the pantheon. Perhaps they fill the thrones now empty from their actions. Perhaps they become the right hands of the elder Gods they serve.

Retirement to innkeeper

There's nothing wrong with hanging up your +6 vorpal greatsword over the hearth of your very own inn in a faraway place. The pace of excitement may simply be too much to sustain. Sure, you smote down the demon princes of the Abyss but that doesn't mean you can't re-learn how to scrub a pot. Godhood isn't for everyone, maybe your group just wants a taste of the simple life.

Don't end it

Why end it at all? Instead, switch the campaign over to one of the other story types. Your long-time mystery campaign can switch over to a Godstomper campaign described earlier pretty easily. Switch from a long-standing story to a series of one-shot adventures you might run every so often in between the adventures of your new campaign.

All of the above

There's no reason to presuppose your end. Let the end of your campaign flow from the actions and desires of your players. Let

them choose where the story ends up. Don't worry about tying together every loose end and making it all neat. A story that flows naturally usually doesn't have a very solid (or sometimes satisfying) conclusion. Instead, find the right place to step away and step away. Your PCs can always unsheathe that +6 vorpal greatsword and get back into the action.

While many will run an epic tier campaign through the full range of levels, sometimes you just want to run a single quick game that still has all the fun of fighting the worst that the multiverse has to offer. For this, you'll need to know how to run a great epic tier one-shot game.

Run Epic One-Shot Games

Normally running a one-shot epic tier game would not be a very good idea. The extra demands on the dungeon master, the large number of unknown player options, and the difficulty of building challenging encounters that don't take two hours to run might lead you to focus one-shot games at the heroic and paragon tier. Running a couple of one-shot epic tier games, however, gives you a great advantage if you plan to ever run a full epic tier campaign. It shows you the pitfalls and gives you an idea what to expect when you run your epic tier campaign. Hopefully, this book can give you enough tips to help you build fun one-shot epic tier adventures. Here are a few specific tips to help you build awesome one-shot epic tier adventures.

Let players build their own characters

You might be tempted to generate characters for your players to use. If your group is experienced at all, and they should be if

you're running an epic tier one-shot game, they probably won't like characters they didn't build themselves. Since you aren't actually playing the PC, you're not going to do as thorough a job as they would in generating that character. Character generation is also one of the things that bonds players to characters. When you remove that, you break this bond. It won't feel like they're playing their own character, it feels like they're playing someone else's. Unless you have no choice (like if you're going to run a convention game) you're better off letting players generate their own characters.

Limit source material

Though you want them to build their own characters, consider limiting the source material players can use when building characters for your epic tier one-shot game. Limiting their options to "Essentials Only" sources will help avoid strange combinations of feats and powers available across the entire range of source material such as Dungeon magazine, Dragon magazine, and the wide range of sourcebooks.

Limit magical items

To reduce the high amount of options players must select from and to limit the power of epic-level characters, consider using the alternate advancement rules of the Dungeon Master's Guide 2 and the Dark Sun Campaign Settings book for player power. This gives characters the magic bonuses they would normally get from magical items without possessing the items themselves. You might let the players choose a single magical item up to one level above their character level so they have some sort of option beyond straight attack and defense bonuses.

Review the Player Characters

When running a one-shot epic tier adventure, you will have no experience with the PCs in combat. You won't yet know what combination of powers and effects they might bring to your battles. For this reason you should spend a good amount of time understanding the capabilities of the PCs the players plan to run. Have your players describe their characters' overall theme and strengths. Because these characters were built from scratch at this level of play they're likely to be far more optimized than characters that grew to this level naturally.

All other rules apply

Most of the other tips in this book apply just as much to one-shot games as they do to full epic tier campaigns. Running an epic tier one-shot adventure will teach you a lot about running epic-level adventures. Reading this book alone won't help you get better at running epic tier adventures, running them will. Running epic tier one-shots is the best way to gain experience without diving headlong into a full epic tier campaign.

In Review: Six Tips for Running Epic Tier D&D Games

Now that we've reached the end of this book, it's time to do a quick run-down of the most important things to remember when running an epic tier D&D game. This review includes the six most important tips for running awesome epic tier D&D games.

Build encounters, quests, and adventures worthy of epic tier PCs

Player characters at level 21 and above should no longer be saving the young daughter of the local lord from a band of kobolds. Epic tier PCs require adventures worthy of their progress and powers. Traveling across the Astral Sea in search of ancient enemies planning to resurrect a dead god, saving the planet from an oncoming planet-devouring entity from the Far Realm, hunting demon princes in the Abyss; these are the sorts of adventures your party should face. Every adventure, every challenge, and every battle should be something that defines your PCs as epic heroes.

Limit PC source material

Consider limiting the source material used for character creation to deal with the possible abuses stemming from the wide-ranging combination of powers, feats, and items. Use the item rarity guidelines in the Dungeon Master's Kit or Rules Compendium to keep items under control. Consider using the alternate character advancement rules in the Dungeon Master's Guide 2 and then give each character a small selection of uncommon or rare items over a much longer period. Take care when using traditional classes from the original Players Handbook as Wizards of the Coast designed many of them before any of us saw exactly what the epic tier was like.

As the Dungeon Master, limit your own source material to monster books released after the Monster Manual 3. Monsters published before this are woefully underpowered for epic tier PCs. The Monster Vault, Monster Manual 3, Demonomicon, and Dark Sun Creature Catalogue are great sources of challenging epic tier monsters.

Understand the power of your PCs and build encounters around it

In order to build challenging encounters you need to understand the power of the PCs. Epic tier PCs may or may not have capabilities to completely pin down monsters, avoid or mitigate most attacks, limit movement, or inflict incredible amounts of damage in a single turn. You need to know which of these your particular group possesses and prepare for it. Before you begin planning your game, review the character sheets of the characters playing in your game. If you're running more than a single adventure, carefully watch how the PCs act in different battles. Expect their first few games to be monster slaughter festivals but take note of what you see and plan around it.

Use environmental effects to challenge epic tier PCs

A simple room full of monsters will provide little challenge to your party. Ensure you include environmental effects that add an extra threat to your PCs, require them to move around the encounter area, and require a greater degree of strategy on their part to defeat. Auras that damage players, reduce their actions, and remove resistances are possible choices. Of course, don't simply hinder the PCs' capabilities. Design encounter areas to be fun, unique, and challenging.

Increase monster damage

In the Dungeon Master's Guide Update available in [the Wizards rules update archive](), Wizards of the Coast included a new chart for increasing monster damage for all monsters created before July 2010. If you ARE running monsters older than the publication of the Monster Manual 3, ensure your epic tier monsters use these

new damage expressions.

Protect bosses

Epic elite and solo creatures published before the Monster Manual 3 can be easily incapacitated and killed by an epic-level party. Protect and improve these boss monsters by adding status effect protection, high damage auras, in-battle skill challenges, and escapes such as teleports to prevent them from getting pinned down or killed too quickly. Don't simply counteract PC power, but be prepared to deal with it to prevent your solo monster from getting locked down and killed without a real fight.

Ensure your epic tier solo monsters include four basic things: Status effect protection, a powerful aura, high damage output, and an escape when pinned down.

Armed with these tips, you're well on your way to building epic tier adventures that will stretch the minds of your players and give them battles they will always remember.

Good luck.

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