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# The Lazy Dungeon Master

*Michael E. Shea*

173–220 minutes

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by Michael E. Shea

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- *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master*
- *Lazy DM's Companion*
- *Lazy DM's Workbook*

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A note from 2013 by Mike Shea — *The Lazy Dungeon Master* was written over a decade ago. Some of the material is outdated. Some of the advice I no longer believe in. Some of the links are bad. Some of the references are to individuals either no longer in

the RPG community or who have since shown themselves to be poor representatives of the love we share for this hobby. Please keep this in mind and be patient while reading this book.

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## Table of Contents

*"I don't have to do much prep at all, I just kind of wing it. But they think I spend hours and hours and hours actually planning all this shit out."*

- Chris Perkins, senior producer of Dungeons and Dragons and dungeon master for Acquisitions Incorporated

## About This Book

This book builds upon two ideas. First, many dungeon masters spend a great deal of time planning and preparing their Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) games without necessarily bringing more enjoyment to their players or themselves. Second, and potentially more profound, less preparation may result in a more enjoyable D&D game. With these ideas in mind, this book aims to:

Save you time preparing for your D&D game

Help you focus on the elements of your game that bring the most enjoyment to you and your group

Show you how preparing less results in a more dynamic and exciting game

You probably love preparing your D&D game and these ideas come as a bit of a shock. We all love building great D&D games, that's why we're running them instead of just playing in them. You don't have to lose the joy of preparing your game. Instead, you'll see what and how to prepare so that you can focus on the things that bring the greatest joy to you and your group.

## Who is this book for?

This book is intended for experienced dungeon masters who have run dozens, if not hundreds, of Dungeons and Dragons games. This is not a book for a novice. Books such as the various Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Master's Guides and my own Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips are aimed at newer dungeon masters who need to get a better handle on the basics. Although this book doesn't require true expertise in dungeon mastering, it assumes that you know the basics and have significant experience running games at the table. The more games you have under your belt, the more useful the contents of this book will be.

Like Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips and Running Epic Tier D&D Games, this short book focuses on tips, tricks, discussions, and resources to help you spend less time building a better D&D game. Like the very goal it undertakes, reading this book will take little of your time and offer you practical solutions to build open and exciting D&D games. Every idea in this book may not resonate

with you or your preparation style. There is no one true way to prepare a great D&D game for every group. This book should, however, give you something to consider as you prepare for your games. Use what works for you. Discard the rest.

Now let's make our games great.

## The Mantra of the Lazy Dungeon Master

*"Of all the prep you do, maybe 10% will actually come into play."*

- Mike Mearls, head of Dungeons and Dragons research and design

We begin with a simple core concept, a simple statement to keep in mind while preparing our games. It is the concept around which the rest of this book revolves:

***Prepare only what most benefits your game.***

A simple statement yet difficult to follow. We all know the maxims "keep it simple" and "less is more". Regardless, many of us live lives that are far from simple. Figuring out what truly benefits your game takes considerable thought. Every time you pull back the reins on your overactive imagination, your mind will buck and kick and spit as it tries to push forward, to fill in all the blanks, define every variable, and build out every detail before your game has even started.

The success or failure of a game does not depend on the amount of time you spend preparing it. The story exists among a group of people at the table and is as good or bad as what those people bring to it.

Prepare only what most benefits your game.

## What will you STOP doing?

Good creative works come from what gets eliminated, not what gets added in. What will you remove from your game and your preparation to refine it? What will you eliminate to keep your time and energy focused in the right area? Appendix B presents the results of a survey with 817 dungeon masters on their game preparation techniques. Looking at the list, which activities do you find most beneficial to your game? Which ones are least beneficial? Why do you still do them?

## "But I LIKE preparing my game!"

This will likely be the single biggest criticism of this book's ideas. We *like* building our games. We like setting up detailed encounter areas and figuring out all the nuances of our story. We love building worlds and histories and political webs. We enjoy all of that work, and it makes our games better, right?

Maybe not.

What feels productive might not be. You might spend a good deal of time designing a monster or a scene or an encounter area only to have it fall apart when your players come to the table. Sometimes all the preparation in the world won't result in a better game for your group. As an example, according to Michael Mallen, writer of the Id DM blog, the worst session he ever ran was the one for which he felt most prepared.

All the time you spend preparing your game might feel useful, but instead it might be steering you away from the most important activities you may be subconsciously avoiding.

## Creativity and the Resistance

In his popular self-help book, The War of Art, Stephen Pressfield writes about a concept called **"the Resistance"**. In the book, Pressfield describes the Resistance as an insidious force that prevents people from making and finishing creative works. The Resistance is anything that gets in the way of true creation, whether justified or not.

In fact, this is one of the most interesting and challenging things about the Resistance; the Resistance might be something perfectly reasonable and rational. How can you write a novel when you're fighting cancer? How can you quit your job and learn to paint when you have four kids to support and two mortgages? No one would expect you to dive into these creative enterprises when you are faced with such reasonable limitations.

But they're still the Resistance.

The Resistance is anything, rational or not, that gets in the way of true creativity - whether it's writing a novel or preparing for your weekly D&D game.

## The Resistance and game preparation

This is where things like monster building get interesting. You might look at monster building and think it's good creative work. You have a goal and an output. You know when you're done. But is monster creation truly creative? What if what you thought was a creative output is actually the Resistance?

What could you be doing instead? What are you avoiding?

Some of the areas that have the greatest impact to your story may

end up being the most creatively challenging. Improving improvisation is one such example, one we'll discuss later in the book. Building your campaign around the stories of the player characters (PCs) might be another. Sometimes the most creative enterprise is simply learning to let the game build itself at the table.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is nothing.

## Being Lazy is Hard

*"Quit trying to control everything and just let go."*

- Tyler Durden, Fight Club

We all love this hobby. As dungeon masters, we have the drive to create worlds, tell stories, design dungeons, build encounters, and craft non-player characters (NPCs). It takes trust and energy to let go of our games and leave off the preparation. It takes a surprising amount of energy to stop doing things. That drive to create still exists in us and will continue to exist even if we decide to go lazy and skip a lot of things we used to prepare.

## Just let go

Much of this drive comes from being afraid to let things leave our control. None of us want our games to suck, and we assume that a lack of preparation will result in a terrible game. If we're not prepared, how can the game possibly go well?

Learning to let things get out of control feels counterintuitive, and it's really hard to do. Running a D&D game isn't the same as writing a book, and even the best authors of fiction know that wonderful stories don't come from a lot of planning but instead

from letting the story live and breathe on its own. Your stories, too, aren't created when you write up an adventure, plot out a story, or build a new monster. They're created at the table when six people bring a story to life.

Yet the drive remains to plan and prepare. How might you steer that energy to the right place?

## Channel the drive to create

Channeling your energy toward the right goals will keep you feeling useful before a game. You can use the energy you would normally spend on less useful activities in areas that will directly benefit your game. Two main areas merit your focus. First, you can build the bedrock for adventure, such as interesting NPCs, and fantastic locations. Second, you can focus on developing the tools and techniques you need to improvise and react to the evolving story of your game as it unfolds. We will cover the details of these ideas further in this book.

## The Dangers of Over-Preparation

*"No plan survives contact with the players"*

- Davena Oaks, The She DM

Being a lazy dungeon master isn't just about saving time. It's about spending time where it has the most impact on the enjoyment of you and your group. There are other more dangerous things than simply wasting time. Let's explore some of the potential dangers of over-preparation.

## You spend your time in areas that matter little to the

## game

Of 470 surveyed dungeon masters who run weekly D&D games, 38% spend 30 minutes or more designing monsters (read about the DM survey in appendix B). The most popular versions of Dungeons and Dragons (we'll stick to Pathfinder, D&D 3.5, and D&D 4th Edition for this discussion) contain hundreds to thousands of monsters across all levels. There's little need to build one more, regardless of your desire to do so. This all makes logical sense until you feel that drive to custom-build a new villain. It might take you fifteen minutes or an hour to build a monster depending on the edition, and that monster might get killed in only a couple of rounds of play. You might never get to show off the true capabilities of these monsters.

## You build up too much stake in your material

The more time you spend preparing for your game, the more you want your players to experience what you prepared. If you spend three hours setting up a beautiful three-dimensional encounter area, how likely are you to let the players find a creative way to skip it? How pissed off will you be when a pain-in-the-ass wizard casts "fly" and everyone soars over it like a flock of seagulls (including the hair)?

Every bit of time you spend preparing for your game emotionally commits you to use those results. You *want* your players to see the stuff you make. Therefore, the more stuff you make, the less likely you are to let your players deviate from that course.

It comes down to the feeling of control. What frightens dungeon masters the most is the feeling that our game will suck because

we didn't bother to prepare. The more control we apply to the game ahead of time, the better we feel.

But your game isn't about controlling the story; it's about letting the story run free. Think back over the games in your life, to the most memorable moments of those games. How many of those moments were pre-scripted by the DM and how many of them were memorable simply because *no one at the table had any idea what was about to happen*? This doesn't mean your planned ideas are useless, but they might serve better as ideas to tap later than as a fully-filled out story.

## You build a story before it should be built

DMs might often think the stories happen when they type out their adventure notes or build a map, but the true story is told while the game runs at the table. How much should we write ahead of time for a story that is supposed to happen during our game? How do you prepare for a spontaneous story to erupt? You certainly don't do so by writing up six pages of prose you expect everyone to follow.

The story of our games occurs at the table, not beforehand. The more you try to fill out the story ahead of time, the more likely you'll fall into a scripted, rehearsed, and potentially boring plot.

There are ways to avoid all of these and still have fun preparing for your game. It isn't about building stories, though - it's about building the stage, weaving in the backgrounds and desires of the PCs, wiring in personalities of the NPCs, and building the world in which the whole group tells their story at the table, not on your computer a week earlier.

## Five-Minute Adventure Preparation

*"How little can I possibly prepare and still have a satisfying and interesting game?"*

- Robin D. Laws, author of Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastery and co-author of the Dungeon Master's Guide 2

Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips contained a checklist of the twelve steps needed to build an adventure. We're going to shorten that to three simple questions:

- Where does your adventure begin?
- To what three areas might your adventure lead?
- What are your three notable NPCs up to?

These three questions give you enough to feel like you have a general handle on your next game without giving you so much detail that the game can't head in new and interesting ways on its own. In order to capture the answers to these three questions, let's use a DM's best tool: the 3x5 card.

## 3x5 card adventure design

The 3x5 card has many advantages as a dungeon master tool. It's cheap, it's simple, and it's constrained. It gives you the freedom to build out your world but forces you to remain within the boundaries of the card. The next few chapters will show you how to use a 3x5 card to build out an entire adventure or the seed of a complete campaign. For now, let's look at a quick summary.

## Where does the adventure begin?

First, you must understand where your adventure begins. There will be a moment as your group settles down when they look to you to start the game. This is one part of the game you can't improvise. You need to know where things start. The actual preparation for the beginning of the game might be nothing more than a single sentence such as:

*"We begin in the audience chambers of Lord Grahm, lord of the town of Winterfell, and he's pissed because orcs continue to harass merchants along the White Flint Road."*

You don't actually read that statement aloud to your group, but it gives you just enough to know where to start and clue you in to some potential options. As your core mantra revolves in your head, you know not to go overboard. You might want to fill out all the details in the room or understand the depth of Grahm's angst. Don't succumb to these feelings. Let it go and work instead on building Grahm into a character that you and your friends know and understand.

## What paths lie ahead?

Instead of building out an entire campaign, world, or multi-threaded adventure, narrow your story down to just a few potential options. Choose enough to give your players some real choices, but not so many that they become paralyzed. Keep your choices down to three.

These choices help in a few ways. It gives players a few options from which to pick without making things too narrow. If your group tends to look to you for direction, you have three directions for them to take. It also shows them there is enough room to

potentially choose a fourth or a combination of two of the three choices.

Most important, writing down three options helps you feel prepared. If you feel prepared, you'll be more comfortable before and during the game.

## What have the NPCs been up to?

The third question gives your game the true depth it needs to be a living, breathing world. Where have your NPCs been? What have they been doing while the PCs have been going about their business? How have the NPCs collided with one another? These questions breathe life into the game. They help move things and shift things in new directions game to game, and when your players see the results, they know they're in much more than a dungeon full of monsters springing from closets.

## What about larger campaigns?

Maybe you're just in the beginning stages of a big campaign. You need a lot more than this, right? Not really. In some later chapters, we'll discuss ways to get our heroes together so they don't just all start in a bar, but for the campaign itself, you don't need to think much further than your first scene in your first game. Campaigns don't need planning, and they are often more fun the less you plan them out. You might want to have an idea what the overall theme and plot of your campaign might be, but you don't want to outline it all out at once or you'll risk forcing your players down a single track. Instead, focus on the same three questions:

- Where will your game begin?

- What three potential paths lay ahead?
- What are your three notable NPCs up to?

While a half dozen to a dozen other activities may fill your checklist, these are the only three required to keep things moving along. The next time you're sitting down to begin your four-hour preparation session, try spending the first five minutes on this. It might end up being the only five minutes you need to spend.

With your 3x5 cards in hand, let's take a closer look at all three of these concepts in the next three chapters.

## Beginning Your Adventure

Of the three areas upon which to focus your energy, the first lies in understanding where your adventure begins. As with the rest of your preparation, you should focus on what matters most and eliminate the rest. This means keeping your beginning as small as it needs to be with only the details required to start things off and give your players enough to let the story unfold at the table.

## More than starting in a bar

If your introduction is too generic, it probably won't help. An overused general beginning doesn't set your adventure apart and doesn't fire up the engines of the imaginations at the table. You want enough detail to make the setting unique and raise an eyebrow or two.

Here's a poor example:

*"The party begins at the adventurers' guild while awaiting new missions."*

That doesn't give you anything to work off of. It doesn't spur the imaginations of the players. It won't make you feel like you have a handle on the adventure.

*"The party begins at the adventurers' guild in Whitefall, where they overhear of the deaths of their friendly rivals at the ruins beneath the Blue Twins mountain."*

Now you have some flavor. You have somewhere to start. If this is your first adventure, you might not have any idea what the ruins beneath the Blue Twins mountain actually is or anything about the background of the rival gang. You might fill in details a little bit more, but you have your initial start, and you know how things might begin.

## Give yourself a lead without following through

You don't, however, want to fill in the rest of the story. The minute you're typing out a seed and you have the urge to start writing more - stop. That's the moment when the story can run free. The storyteller in you may want to grab your net and go catch that fleeting winged idea, but don't. Let it go free and land raw and untamed in the middle of the gaming table. Let the rest of the group start to draw from the details, unleashing their imaginations into the mix and building it out in ways you might never have dreamed of. That's the sort of adventure everyone will remember in ten years.

## The adventure's elevator pitch

In Dungeon Master Tips, I describe the idea of a campaign elevator pitch as a replacement for world building. This concept of

a short, focused, single-sentence description works just as well for individual adventures. How would you summarize your whole adventure in a single sentence? If it takes you more than a sentence, it's probably too long. Keeping things simple leaves your game lots of room to evolve into something beautiful, unique, and entertaining.

## Example: Yellowtop

Throughout this book I have chosen a single example to use with each of these concepts. Let's begin with the seed:

*"In the salt-mining town of Yellowtop, tyrannical mercenaries leave the body of a resistance leader in the street with a dagger in his chest."*

This seed gives all of us enough of a start to have an idea what this adventure is about: revolution.

As you begin preparing for your own adventure, take out your 3x5 note card and write down, in just a few words, the core seed of your story. It doesn't need to be as well spelled out as the example above but it should have enough details to remind you of the ideas.

Got your seed down on your 3x5 card? Good, now let's move on to the three potential paths of your adventure.

## The Three Paths

Once you have our game's beginning seed written down on the top of your 3x5 card, write underneath it the three paths your game might take. Sometimes these paths might be linear - the three

scenes that will occur as the party navigates a relatively linear dungeon. Other times, they might represent the three main choices the group might make to decide where they're headed next.

Professional improvisation actor and Dungeons and Dragons freelancer Steve Townshend, refers to this idea as his "three things". He begins planning his adventure by deciding first where the PCs will end up, then decides where they begin, and then what they might find in the middle.

You might instead choose three adventure locations the PCs might discover, leaving the paths open for your PCs but the locations rich and deep enough to warrant their attention. Focusing on only three loose locations or scenes creates a more sandbox-style adventure in which the PCs have three locations they might explore.

Whatever method you choose, having three paths, locations, or scenes for your game will give you just enough detail to feel comfortable without overwhelming your story or your players. You want just enough to give you and your players enough direction to build the game at the table.

Though focused, your options shouldn't be too vague. Here are some examples of options that don't have enough detail:

- The party travels to the neighboring town.
- The party goes into the nearby ruins.
- The party investigates the local thieves' guild.

Here are some options with enough details to guide you at the table:

- The party chases the evil priest Ralthor to the nearby corrupt town

of Nyn.

- The party travels to the nearby ruins where gnolls have set up their slave camp.
- Through either subtlety or direct force, the party enters the thieves' den below the sewers of Ashton.

Generally speaking, you'll want these events or locations to tie back to your main adventure seed, either as a potential sequence of events or as a hub of different directions

These examples have enough detail to get the gears rolling without building out too much. They give you the feeling that you can easily improvise based on the directions of your players. They aren't, however, so structured that your players can't come up with other potential paths to follow - something you want to reinforce by not building things out too much.

## Example: The adventure locations of Yellowtop

Following through with the Yellowtop adventure seed, let's build three areas that might be used in the adventure. On that 3x5 card, let's write three potential adventure locations and a few key ideas surrounding them:

**Graystone Manor:** Former noble house, now mercenary headquarters.

**The saltmines:** Former center for the town's industry, now closed down when they found a dark power buried deep within. Leads from Yellowtop to Ashland Fortress.

**Ashland Fortress:** High in the mountains, a ruined keep now inhabited by hobgoblin and ogre mercenaries. Two trebuchets

threaten the destruction of the town.

Now this little micro-universe is coming together, but without over-writing the details. We have some adventure locations, we have some ideas of history and threat. We have enough to feel like there's some adventure to be had, even if it's not all tied together yet. What do we use to tie these locations to our adventure seed? Non-player characters.

## Character-Driven Stories

During the third component of adventure preparation, you want to determine the backgrounds and activities of the most important NPCs in your adventure or campaign. The paths and reactions of these NPCs flow like the lifeblood of the story and act as the sinew that binds the scenes and locations to the seed of the adventure. The actions of the NPCs move the rest of the story forward. Although the ancient history of a place might seem interesting, it is relatively static compared to the movements of living NPCs.

Consider a pool table filled with balls. As one ball collides with another it takes a new path, potentially colliding with another. Sometimes they smash hard together; other times they just rub off of one another and veer in a new direction. The actions and interactions of the game's NPCs collide the same way.

The PCs are the most active balls on this table, smashing and colliding and rebounding all over the place. It is the actions and motivations of the PCs that will fuel the story. Throughout their journey, they interact with all sorts of NPCs, creating new paths and reactions from session to session.

It gets really exciting when an action taken by the PC begins a

chain of events outside of their view until it comes careening back towards them from a different angle a few sessions later. Now they might see the results of their actions and tie it back together to the original actions they took. It becomes really interesting when the players are able to piece it back together again, like Sherlock Holmes tracking a criminal's motive back from the murder scene.

With some of this character-driven philosophy in mind, let's get pragmatic about using NPCs in your lazy D&D game. Although your PCs will drive the main story, you shouldn't prepare too much to drive their stories forward. Instead, focus on the NPCs you DO control. Flip over your 3x5 card with the adventure seed and three branches on it and get ready for the NPCs.

## Focus on three important ally NPCs

Great stories come from great characters. Keeping in mind that creativity comes from limitation, try to keep the number of these characters low. It's hard to remember a bunch of new characters, and no one wants to jump directly into book four of the *Song of Ice and Fire*. Sticking to three primary NPCs helps your group remember who they are and details of their idiosyncrasies.

## Example: Yellowtop NPCs

Going back to Yellowtop, let's identify three key NPCs:

**Lord Kanzlif Graystone**: Lord of Yellowtop. Paid off by mercenaries. Displaced from his home and secretly hopes for revolution.

**Lavasque**: Diplomat, alchemist, and "terrorist". Led attacks and revolutions previously and is now in exile. Currently seeks heroes

to displace the local mercenaries.

**Davins**: Former businessman and salt miner. Seeks to overthrow the mercenaries. Appalled at the murder of the resistance leader.

None of these characters are doing anything yet because the story hasn't begun. As the adventures go forward, let's track the actions of these NPCs in addition to the progress of the PCs. Let's focus on backgrounds and motivations of the NPCs first so we know what they will do when they begin to interact with the PCs.

On the 3x5 card containing the adventure seed, describe these three NPCs so that you have their names and enough of a background to remember who they are. Over the course of a campaign, consider giving each of these NPCs their own card to track their actions over time.

## Focus on one to three enemy NPCs

Good stories need good villains. Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips already discusses the process for creating great villains, but I will quickly summarize it with the following points:

- Good villains have a reason for being the way they are.
- Good villains think what they are doing is right. Great villains actually ARE right.
- Good villains aren't static, they have plots and plans.
- Good villains are smart.

Keeping this in mind, let's focus on the ideal number of villains: one to three. One is the perfect number for a story with one focus. Three villains are enough to have a lot of interesting twists and turns in a longer story. More than three and the story won't feel

focused. Your players won't really care about any particular one because their focus will be diluted.

## Example: Yellowtop villains

Let's take a look at the Yellowtop villains:

**Theorn Whitescar**: Noble mercenary with pencil-thin mustache. Brutal and dictatorial. Resides in Graystone manor with a host of bodyguards.

**Captain Blackhand**: Leader of the Ashland goblinoid mercenaries. Looks forward to unleashing the trebuchets on the village.

**Father Moorland**: A priest of a dark god, Father Moorland looks like the type of fat priest who travels with the mercenaries. Adores children, particularly as sacrifices. Lures in victims with kindness.

Again, before the story has begun, the villains may not yet have acted. You want enough background to know what direction they will head to once the story does begin. Flip over that 3x5 card again, and describe these three villains on the back. If they end up lasting more than one or two sessions, they will deserve their own 3x5 card to keep track of their actions.

## Improvise secondary NPCs

Just because you focus on four to six primary NPCs (both allies and villains), that doesn't mean the rest of the world doesn't exist. Secondary NPCs are equally important in making a world feel real. These guys won't have four-thousand-word biographies (of course, neither should your primary NPCs). In fact, they probably don't

need much more than a name and a primary occupation. The rest can come about organically.

The secondary NPCs serve two main functions: they breathe life into the rest of the world and they serve as the pool from which primary NPCs emerge. Because you do not always know who will be primary NPCs and who will be secondary, you need to be ready to promote a secondary into a primary. In later sections, this book will cover some tools to help you build rich secondary NPCs with no preparation.

## Rotate NPCs in and out

As the game moves on, as the balls collide and roll off in different directions, it's quite possible that a primary NPC may fall out of the view of the group. They had their time in the spotlight, but now it's time for someone else. At this point, you can promote a secondary NPC to a primary. The good news is that you largely don't need to worry about who to choose - the players will often choose for you. Maybe they like the French accent of that innkeeper. Maybe they promote the huge well-spoken bandit lord as the chief of their new business venture. Whatever happens, stay flexible in promoting one NPC and demoting another.

The same is true for villains. Maybe the PCs killed the primary villain in a glorious battle or pushed him into a cauldron of molten rock. Now the second-in-command, who was always the smarter one, finally takes the position for which she was born and becomes a new and even more dangerous villain. She would never be caught in a situation where a cauldron of molten rock posed a threat.

Good NPCs build a network of potential story ideas, but the best story ideas will come from your players and their PCs. Let's look at how you can tie all these threads together into a fantastic story.

## Tying PCs to the Story

So far we've focused on building out all you need for a single adventure, or maybe a series of gaming sessions focused around a single idea. Larger campaigns require a little more planning, however. Most important, they require that dungeon masters build and tie the story around the backgrounds and arcs of the PCs. Players will care less about these ties for short-run games, but for longer campaigns, it's important to always keep the PCs at the center of the stories.

In his Dungeon Master Experience article What's My Motivation, Chris Perkins describes the lessons learned in tying character backgrounds into your existing story with the following three points:

- Build on what the player gives you.
- Be willing to take your campaign in new directions.
- Suggest ideas that have future adventure possibilities.

The way of the lazy dungeon master helps considerably with two of these three points. First, as you have only a vague outline prepared in the first place, building on what the player gives you becomes much easier. The whole story might end up focusing on the characters. The second point also becomes much easier. If you have no focused campaign in the first place beyond a campaign elevator pitch, you will have little difficulty in modifying

the campaign to fit a character's background and motivations. It's a lot easier to correct your course when no course is laid out in the first place.

D&D organized play veteran and published Wizards of the Coast freelancer, Teos Abadia, spends an hour per session considering how PCs can fit into his story. Many other veteran dungeon masters agree. Building the story from the backgrounds and motivations of your PCs will greatly enhance your players' enjoyment of your game. They will feel far greater connection to the story when it's directly tied to their own PCs. Appendix C contains a series of questionnaires with veteran DMs, many of whom point at these PC story threads as a highly valuable element to their game preparation.

As you plan your campaign, consider keeping a single 3x5 card for each of the PCs, with a few key words on their backgrounds, motivations, and potential ties to the ongoing organic story. Reference these cards as you consider where each week's adventure goes. You might not need to spend an hour tying these PC threads into the story, as Teos does, but any time spent here draws your players much closer to the story as it evolves. More importantly, reviewing these cards before each session helps you spontaneously tie them in when the moment presents itself at the game.

In Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering and the Dungeon Master's Guide 2, Robin Laws defines different groups of players into particular categories. Robin also describes the "emotional kicks" these particular groups might get out of a typical roleplaying game. When writing out 3x5 cards for each PC, consider adding the emotional kick you think that player gets out of playing D&D.

Examples might include:

- "Enjoys flirting with nobility and authority"
- "Loves killing lots of minions"
- "Wants to take on the biggest baddest badass in the room"
- "Loves treasure with history"
- "Loves exploring the deepest ruins of ancient societies"
- "Loves creating political drama"
- "Is happy following the group"

If your players are not as forthcoming with character details or emotional kicks, you can bring out a few details from their choices of backgrounds, themes, or relationships. Later on, we'll discuss a way of building character-focused relationships to give characters more detail and bring groups together while simultaneously building out the game's world and generating interesting story hooks.

## Keeping the End in Sight

There's a big problem with character-focused open-ended stories - they often fall apart at the end. Even great writers like Stephen King and George R.R. Marten can suffer from these loose endings. Their stories are brilliant, thought provoking, and unpredictable, yet often at the end, they completely unravel. Take the end of *The Stand* as an example. It's one of the best fantasy books ever written, yet it ends with the hand of God appearing and detonating a nuke in the middle of Las Vegas with no actual interaction with our main characters. Why the hell did Larry and Ralph haul their

assess from Colorado to Vegas only to have God nuke them? Whoops, spoiler alert!

Your character-focused D&D game faces the same risk.

There's a good reason for this problem. When a story grows organically from the actions of rich characters, there IS no clear ending. These characters drive things forward, building up momentum in directions you never thought about when you started. Then, suddenly, you find yourself out of time or money or pages and you need to *end* it, however you can.

## Don't sell an ending you can't deliver

Consider the recent remake of *Battlestar Galactica* and its tagline, "They have a plan". They DIDN'T have a plan. The writers of the show didn't know where it was going to go. The *X-Files* had the same problem. All of the *X-Files* mythology episodes, the ones with the crazy ink-in-the-eye aliens and the smoking man and the syndicate - there was clearly no real end to that story when they started and, by the end of the show, we all knew it.

The worst thing you can do for a character-driven story is sell an ending you can't deliver. Don't pretend to have some detailed intricate plot thread that doesn't actually exist. Don't have your group chasing so many threads that, by the end, you have to tie them up in some sort of horrific mutated knot.

## The single-line campaign seed

Instead, focus your campaign along that single campaign elevator pitch we talked about earlier. Focus on a single event or outcome that helps drive your players forward. Don't make it more

complicated than it has to be and don't deviate. If you sell your campaign on preventing the arch-lich Xythar from destroying the Nentir Vale, stick to it and ensure you're heading in that direction.

A simple single-line seed leaves lots of room for the story to twist and weave as the characters and situations push it in new directions. Yet the primary goal always remains in focus.

## Ask your players what they want

Lucky for you, you don't need to do a focus group or a survey to find out if you're going to hit the mark with the story. All you have to do is ask your players if things are heading in the direction they want. After a few sessions into your campaign, ask them what sorts of things they want to do. They might come back with things like "fight a dragon" or "find old artifacts in ancient ruins" or "kill Azmodeus". Take note of those things and add them to the fuel of the story. When the time is right, you can bring these things forward. Do it early and often enough and you will have time to gently push the story in the direction they seek without simply reacting.

When you ask a question like this, you have to be prepared to change the course of the campaign based on the answers. It's no good to ask it one session before the end of the campaign.

## The advantage of the mini-campaign

Another way to ensure that your campaign's ending doesn't get too convoluted is to keep your entire campaign short. The fewer number of sessions you run, the harder it is for the story to deviate or stack up complications until it gets out of hand. Your players'

investment in the story also remains low. Instead of tying up three years of adventures, you're just tying up a three-month mini-campaign, sort of like a TV mini-series or a short novella. A focused series of adventures lets you build a specific theme around a single clear idea. Knowing the ending is always just around the corner keeps it in your mind as the story progresses.

It's always important for you and your group to have that single shining star far off to guide the game, but like the rest of the ways of the lazy dungeon master, hang on with a loose grip and focus on the journey instead of the destination.

## World Building Through Relationships

Of recent story-focused roleplaying games, Fiasco stands out for group storytelling fun. In Fiasco, players build backgrounds, relationships, and stories through a series of dice rolls, letting the story grow with every round.

You can use a stripped-down version of this technique to help players tie their characters together in a way that works far better than the old "you all meet at a bar" storytelling technique.

## How Fiasco-style relationships work

During the first session of your campaign or mini-campaign, use a list of twelve to twenty relationships to tie together each pair of PCs. Pick a player to begin the roll. That player rolls the appropriate die. The relationship tied to that result is the relationship between the rolling player's PC and the PC on his or her left. The roll now goes to the player on the left who rolls for the relationship between his or her PC and the PC of the player on his

or her left. This goes around the table until each PC has two relationships, one with the PC on the right and one with the PC on the left. If someone rolls the same number as someone else, have them re-roll. You want unique relationships between each pair of PCs.

This is a difficult concept to understand from simple description. To see an example of Fiasco in action, watch Wil Wheaton run a Fiasco setup on Tabletop.

## Weaving the fabric of the story

This new network of relationships builds the bed of the whole rest of the story. Give the players time to explore these relationships, making sense of the ones that, on the surface, may seem contradictory. Give them time to build out their stories from these relationships. Take careful note of the relationships and think about how they will play into the sandbox you've created for the adventure.

## Building your campaign in the first session

One way to build out your campaign's environment is to use the first gaming session of that campaign as the world-building session. Come to it with loose ideas about the game's world and the area in which the PCs might start. While your players develop characters and roll for relationships, give them ideas about potential themes such as dungeon exploration, political intrigue, nautical combat, war, or other overarching themes. As they develop their PCs, you can use their PC hooks to begin threading together the rest of the game world.

## Example: The relationships of Yellowtop

In the example town of Yellowtop, characters might roll on the following relationships:

1. Former salt miners
2. Former mercenary soldiers
3. Nieces or nephews of Davins
4. Apprentices to Lavasque
5. Guards of Lord Kanzlif Graystone
6. Explorers of the salt mine ruins
7. Displaced villagers sent north
8. Acolites of Chauntae the Greatmother
9. Orc hunters
10. Secret agents of the neighboring kingdom
11. Ancestors of the Graystone noble family
12. Survivors of a hobgoblin ambush

From group to group, different relationships will result in completely different stories. This is handy for one-shot adventures that will turn out differently every time you run them. You can find more PC relationships in appendix A.

## Building your relationship list

You can build out your relationship list from the seed of your world, the major NPCs of that world, and the locations of that world. If you've followed the rest of this book, that material is quite thin at

this point, but these relationships begin to help you flesh it out even more. These relationships spark ideas in your mind, even if the relationship never gets rolled.

When building out a list of relationships, keep the following concepts in mind:

**Keep relationships abstract from other character concepts**: You won't know any other details of a character when the relationship is defined. A relationship should work even with a strange mix of race and class. The relationships don't always need to make perfect sense. Relationships such as parent or child or sibling can be explained by adoption.

**Relationships should not contradict one another**: Because each PC has two relationships, they have to work well together. As you write out your relationship, make sure it makes sense working out with each of the others.

**Keep them specific, but open to interpretation**: Relationships should give a player enough detail to understand how it affects their character but not so much that it leaves them no room to fill it in on their own. Because you don't know the mix of relationships, you want them loose enough that the players can work out how these things all really work together. It's this combination of relationships that builds out the story, not each individual one on its own.

**Relationships should tie PCs to the world**: These relationships should help players see how their PC is tied to the world around them. It helps guide their motivations, but with a soft hand. Use these relationships to build out the world and make the PC a part of it.

**Let players use them as they will**: Some players may use relationships heavily in their choices and actions. They might love the potential depth it brings. Others want to tell their own story, regardless of the relationships and others still might simply not care to delve deep into such a story. Don't force them to use these relationships. Let them use the relationships as much or as little as they choose.

## A buddy system for roleplaying

The ties between two PCs help bring players together as well. One player strong in roleplaying now has the chance to work with another player who might not be as inclined. They might partner up, each teaching the other more of their style of play. Each pair of players can work as much or as little together to build out their relationships and thus their characters.

If your players are particularly creative in their character backgrounds and understand how to tie these backgrounds into the rest of the game, you don't have to stick to the relationship list. You might consider using it as a guide more than a requirement. The list of relationships might trigger their own ideas that fit in even better. Don't force the list on those who would rather build their character on their own.

The nature of these relationships ensures the story isn't simply one you build and tell to your players. Instead, it is a story built from you, your players, and the dice. It forces you to stay away from over-writing your story and gives you enough control to have an idea where the story might go. Far better than a traditional story outline, this relationship list gives you the feel for the story in a tool

directly used by your players to tie their characters to the world you all build together.

## Building From Frameworks

The life of a lazy dungeon master gets much simpler as your bag of tools fills out. Building entire worlds from scratch, however, or creating deep and meaningful characters from thin air takes considerable time. Luckily, other great writers have already built so many models, all we need to do is pick and choose. Instead of building out worlds, characters, monsters, stories, or encounters from scratch; use ones already built as a framework . With some subtle tweaks you can turn these frameworks into something that appears brand new, yet as deep and rich as the originals.

Simply put, a framework is a character, story, setting, or physical area you can use as a model for a component in your game. It's a quick and easy way to add an element to your game that feels rich and textured but took only a few minutes of your time. Let's look at some examples.

## Story seed frameworks

As we've discussed earlier, we don't need a complete story spelled out from beginning to end. All we need is a good starting seed and an idea from which potential stories might grow. We can steal the ideas for these stories from just about anywhere including movies, TV shows, books, or even other games. Here are some example story ideas:

- A creature of the heavens plummets to earth leaving a path of destruction in its wake. (*Diablo 3*)

- An evil army attempts to uncover a powerful ancient artifact. (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*)
- Two groups fight for power among the ruins of civilization. (*The Stand*)
- A small isolated village must be protected from bands of marauding raiders. (*Seven Samurai*)
- A small frontier town finds itself sitting on riches beyond imagination and becomes the focus of many powerful forces. (*Deadwood*)
- Kill Graz'zt. (*Kill Bill*)

When considering story seeds, avoid choosing story seeds based on the growth of NPCs. Main characters, the PCs, don't yet exist in these stories. As tempting as it is to build a story around an NPC, no group enjoys playing the secondary part to a main character controlled by the DM.

Because a seed is only necessary when first planning out an adventure or mini-campaign, fewer models are necessary than you might think. A seed might last you three months or a year or four years depending on how long you want your campaign to go.

## Character frameworks

Character frameworks give you deep NPCs without having to write entire novels of backstory. Build a list of some of your favorite characters and use them as both physical and mental models for NPCs in your game. Slight shifts in their character, such as changing genres or changing their sex, will make them appear completely unique to your game. Here are some example

character frameworks for NPCs or villains:

- Walter White from Breaking Bad
- Al Swereangen from Deadwood
- Wesley Wyndam-Pryce from Angel
- Wayne Unser from Sons of Anarchy
- Sam Merlotte from True Blood
- Colonel Saul Tigh from Battlestar Galactica
- Anton Sugar from No Country for Old Men

## Example: Mike Ehrmantraut as the grizzled war vet

Let's look at Mike Ehrmantraut from Breaking Bad as an example. We have a 70-year-old-guy who still acts as the head of security for a major drug distributor. He's deadly and cunning even if he appears to move slowly and always looks half asleep. We can take his character and easily turn it into the grizzled war veteran the PCs might encounter as advisor to a king or as a town guard who has seen many days in defense of the struggling town. His appearance, voice, background, and mannerisms give us everything we need to flesh him out during the game with almost no preparation ahead of time.

There are thousands of potential character frameworks you can use in your game. Keeping a list of twenty of your favorites on hand can help considerably when you need a quick NPC. Wrap a notable NPC in your game with one of these character frameworks and you have a rich character ready to go in seconds.

## Setting frameworks

As we discussed before, it's much easier to use one of the published D&D settings than it is to build your own. It also helps your players know their place in the world. As much as you might enjoy building your own unique world for your game, you have to recognize that it's not only a lot of extra work for you, but your players as well who must now learn all the histories, sociologies, politics, ecologies, and geographies of your new world.

Save yourself time and choose a published game world as your campaign framework. That said, there's nothing stopping you from throwing in your own unique variable into the mix. What if Athas in Dark Sun was the fifty thousand-year post apocalypse of Eberron? Just make it clear to your players that the Athas they might know isn't necessarily the same as the Athas in your campaign.

Sometimes using a published setting might appear to be more work than building your own game world. When you use a published setting, focus on one particular region and only worry about the details of that region. You also have full freedom to ignore canon, rename cities, move around the history, and built it into your own world as needed.

## Location frameworks

Location frameworks help you paint the details in the physical area the PCs might explore. The more detailed your framework, the more realistic it will appear at the table. Appropriate real-life locations work very well. The texture of the tower of London can make for a perfect dungeon location. A two-story bar might make a perfect inn.

D&D designer Rodney Thompson describes the three Fs of

locations: fantastic, familiar, and functional. Two of the three of these three Fs, familiar and functional, come from our frameworks. The third, the fantastic element, has to be something you throw in to show our players that they're inhabiting a fantasy. Consider the talking paintings and shifting stairwells in Harry Potter for example. You might add a massive purple fire in a hearth that never goes out, or a glowing axe of the retired adventurer who now runs the bar. These small fantasy elements change the feel for a location you've built from a framework. With your framework in place and the fantasy variable set within it, you have an environment that feels real and draws the wonder of your players at the same time.

## Theft and mashups

These frameworks can come from anywhere at any time. Keep your eyes open and you'll get better and better at plucking them out of our world and jotting them down. Over time, you'll get comfortable taking two or three potential elements and mashing them together into something brand new for your game. You'll have just enough texture and depth to make something feel real with enough variations to make it unique for the game you want to run. These models can save you hundreds of hours trying to rebuild what has already been built, making them the perfect tool for the lazy dungeon master. Appendix A in this book contains many example frameworks you can use. There's no end to the scope of mashups you can create. You can even mash up entire worlds.

## Colliding Worlds

More than any other popular director these days, Quentin

Tarantino has a knack for mashing up genres into movies that become far more than the sum of their parts. Kill Bill, for example, takes the best from 1970s grindhouse movies, kung-fu flicks, spaghetti westerns, and even Japanese anime and turns it into something that transcends genres.

These mashups shouldn't work. He doesn't even try to hide the mix of styles in his movies. In *Inglourious Basterds*, he didn't like how history played out so he rewrote it to fit the story he wanted to tell and the world he wanted to build.

In the gaming community, a lot of attention gets paid to staying honest to canon in game worlds like the Forgotten Realms and Eberron. DMs who stray from these set worlds might be accosted as heretics by those who hold canon as law. Yet the very authors of these worlds often break their own rules.

## Colliding your own worlds

You are hereby given full license to use your game materials, including all published game worlds, however best fits the vision you and your players have for your game. If you ever needed permission (and you didn't), consider it granted. Collide worlds together and come up with something completely new. Run Dark Sun as the background setting for a Gamma World campaign mixed with Stephen King's Dark Tower books. Stick Waterdeep in the middle of the Nentir Vale or Undermountain under the city of Greyhawk. Build a campaign where the knights of the round table must hunt down divine artifacts scattered among derelict space ship wrecks on the surface of Mars.

There are no limits and you need make no apologies. Steal from

everywhere and use it to build something new and wonderful.

## Deciding what mashes up well

Finding the right balance of stories and settings to mash up is tricky creative business. It's the sort of thing DMs might avoid in order to build a monster they don't really need.

Here's a bit of Pressfield's *Resistance* again. If it feels hard, it probably is hard. The Resistance is going to try to steer you away from that hard work to find something easier, comfortable, and most likely boring. If you find yourself avoiding the concept of mashing up these worlds, take note of it and ask yourself what you might be avoiding.

## A new world on a 3x5 card

Let's make this easy. Let's go back to the initial five-minute adventure design exercise and drag in a bit more Stephen King as well. You don't need a Microsoft Project chart on your wall with a ten thousand-year timeline to build a good world. You just need a single line and a few bullet points on a 3x5 card to get your world started. As before, begin with your elevator pitch. If it's so good it makes you giggle, you're onto something. If it feels boring and dry to you, tear it up.

Write a single sentence that describes your worldly mashup. Take out ten 3x5 cards and write out ten world mashups that might make for a good D&D game. Even if you never use them or simply throw them away, the exercise will show you that you CAN do this, and I bet one of them will be pretty good. Don't bother to write fifty pages of history about it, just stick to the core concept and maybe

jot a few points down that tie it to D&D.

## Example: Ten world mashups

Here's a list of ten world mashups as examples. Where does your mind take you?

- In a desert stone-age world, hunters find a derelict space ship filled with incredible technology.
- City hall politics with vampires.
- Stone-age nomads and derelict alien space ships.
- Undercover police work in a dark elf city.
- Murder mysteries on a planet about to be enveloped by a nova.
- Mind flayers as emperors in medieval Japan.
- The Godfather meets Serenity.
- Conan the Barbarian in a Cyberpunk setting.
- A dead-end wild-west town just found the most valuable substance in the universe.
- Vampire hunting in World War One.

## A setting for a mini-campaign

These mashed up worlds make for great mini-campaigns. The ideas you come up with might not be cohesive enough to last for four years, but they might make for a great time for eight to twelve gaming sessions. The mini-campaign is just enough to get the full feel and flavor of a world focused around a single clear hook that will leave your group itching for more.

## Six Traits About Your Game's World

*"A homebrew campaign setting is a great way to create a lot of work for yourself that your players will ignore and/or destroy."*

- Scott Rehm, the Angry Dungeon Master

There are ways to build out worlds without writing a Tolstoy novel in the process. Your time might be best spent elsewhere and your players are unlikely to absorb that level of detail anyway. Consider a technique used in the latest Dungeons and Dragons campaign settings, the "eight characteristics about …" idea.

Instead of writing reams on geography, history, culture, and demographics, stick to a fixed number of traits of this world that your players will grasp and remember. Use it to define the boundaries of their characters and their roles in the world. Use it to guide your campaign as you move forward.

While recent Wizards of the Coast publications chose eight traits, you can work with as few as four or as many as ten. Six to eight is likely a good sweet spot.

## Example: Four traits about Yellowtop

Using the example adventure in Yellowtop, let's work with the following four traits:

**Salt Miners**: At its core, Yellowtop is a village of salt miners and has been so for generations. The original settlers hoped for mines of gold, silver, or even mithril; but salt is what they found and salt put food on their tables.

**Mercenary Tyrany**: For the past two years, mercenaries, claiming

to protect the village of Yellowtop, have slowly taken over the town. The town's lord now bends the knee to the mercenary commander, and the villagers know to give the soldiers their loyalty and their taxes. The mercenary taxes continue to grow, putting even the richest villagers on the edge of poverty and starvation. The loudest protestors of this tyranny have begun to disappear without a trace, though few have the stomach to investigate. It is only a matter of time before open bloodshed finds its way to the streets of Yellowtop.

**Orc Tribes**: On the outskirts of the town and farms surrounding the town of Yellowtop, the last ragged bands of orcs hunt the tundra. Since the mercenaries came into power, the orcs have left the town alone. The mercenaries have even enslaved some orcs to dig in the salt mines.

**Haunted Caverns of an Ancient Power**: Three years ago, salt miners discovered chambers buried beneath the mountain of Yellowtop. Some who went to explore came back homicidal and raving mad, most never came back at all. Since then, the officials of Yellowtop barricaded and banned these chambers from exploration, though the mercenaries have brought in sages and historians to learn more of their origin.

These four points help tie together the potential story threads of the small town and the surrounding areas. They offer enough fuel for potential adventure locations, investigations, and interactions with the city. They do this without building too rigid a framework for the adventure, letting the players explore where they will.

## Guidelines for your own traits

When designing your own world traits, consider the following guidelines:

- Traits should differentiate this adventure or campaign from other D&D campaigns.
- Traits should describe common knowledge known to the adventurers and NPCs of the world.
- Traits should describe adventure locations, character interactions, and friction between factions.
- Traits should build the boundaries of the sandbox in which the PCs define their own stories.

Used effectively, these traits will help you get a further idea what your campaign is about without building so rigid a boundary that the PCs have little choice in the fate of their actions. Like the other tools of the lazy dungeon master, it should help you feel prepared enough to make you comfortable without taking more time than it needs.

Gathering and preparing the right tools might take a long time up front, but the end result will save you hundreds of hours in the long run. Acquiring the right tools and keeping them on hand can make a game with five minutes of preparation run like a well-scripted play. Having too many tools, however, can be just as bad as having too few, so choose your tools wisely.

Getting too focused on tools can easily distract you from the creative aspects required for your game. Only spend the time you need on your tools. Once you have the right ones, go back to working on the creative bits like integrating the desires of your players into your game and building awesome NPCs.

With that warning in mind, let's look at the tools that offer the best investment of time and money.

## The 3x5 note card

We've already discussed the 3x5 card earlier but it's worth talking about again. Creativity through limitation is a key concept for lazy dungeon mastering. Time and money are nice, forced limitations to endure, but there are other limits to embrace that ensure we only focus on the elements most required for the enjoyment of our game. The 3x5 note card is a perfect tool to enforce this limitation.

As described earlier, the 3x5 card has just enough room to write out the adventure introduction, three potential paths, and, on the back, the current actions of the adventure's primary NPCs.

Beyond this, the 3x5 note card continues to show its use. Another card might contain the names, backgrounds, and motivations of the PCs. As you randomly determine loot or the names of NPCs, writing them down on a card and keeping it together in a small campaign folder helps you remember the important parts as they spontaneously occur.

You might write down quests and the accompanying NPC quest giver on a card to hand out to your players. This gives then a dynamic quest journal to keep track of the campaign on their end.

3x5 cards also force you not to be too committed to what you write down. If you wrote five pages of text on the background of an NPC, you'll feel a great draw to use all of it. But a random NPC name on a 3x5 card with three scratchy bullets of background? You could throw that away and never worry about the time you invested.

WOTC freelance author and dungeon master, Matt James, recommends using colored 3x5 cards to help stay organized. For example, he uses red for combat encounters, yellow for notes on political intrigue, blue for long-term (or campaign-wide) plots, and green for side treks.

## The dry-erase poster map

Of all mapping tools, the Paizo dry-erase poster map is the best money you can spend. For $11 you get a re-usable game aid that opens up the possibilities of endless adventures. The fold-up design of the flip map makes it perfect for a portable DM kit as well. It's an excellent useful aid worth ten times its cost.

## Pre-printed poster maps

Sometimes a hand-drawn map just won't grab the attention of your players like a pre-printed poster map. Both Paizo and Wizards of the Coast publish excellent high-quality and reasonably priced pre-printed poster maps. It takes a number of maps before your collection contains enough to fit most situations, however, so budget appropriately. You want useful re-usable maps for encounter locations you most often see. Examples include maps of large dungeon halls, town squares, forest trails, roadways, temples, bars, inns, and stables. The wider your collection, the more useful it will be. Having these maps handy means your players are free to go where they choose and you already have a beautiful map ready to place on the table when they get there.

D&D freelancer and Critical Hits editor, Dave "The Game" Chalker, recommends using these maps to generate ideas for your

encounters and adventures, ensuring the map gets full use when its time comes.

As you build a portfolio of poster maps, consider building a poster map visual index to keep track of which maps you have on hand. This can be as simple as taking pictures of each of your maps and putting them on your cellphone, so you can quickly see which maps you have on hand.

Pre-printed poster maps have a few advantages over other encounter terrain products. They already have details included, they're very easy to set up, and they pack well. You'll invest little time in them, which means you won't force them into your game if they don't make sense. For the cost, aesthetics, and convenience, poster maps are a great aid to the lazy dungeon master.

## Monster books

Well-designed monster books give you everything you need to fill out your battles. Most often they contain quality professionally designed monsters you can re-skin to fit into your game. Keeping a monster book handy at the table means a lot less planning up front. When you prepare, consider the monsters your group might run into, but don't bother to plan it all out. Instead, let your group go where they will and pull out the monsters they are likely to face when they face them.

Both Dave Chalker and Jeff Greiner, host of the Tome Show, recommend using the monster book as a source of story seeds and inspiration. The background and ecology of the monsters themselves can become the core seed of an entire adventure or mini-campaign.

## A cheat sheet

There's a lot of math tied to each version of D&D; a lot of mechanics we should have on hand if we hope to improvise scenes, scenarios, encounters, and events. A cheat sheet of the most useful mechanics goes a long way to help you with these improvised events. For 4th edition D&D, I recommend my own 4e DM Cheat Sheet which contains nearly all the mechanics you'd need to run a 4e game at any level. The DM screens of other versions of D&D and Pathfinder contain most of the rules you need to run improvised adventures. Review them early and keep them handy during your game to run the right mechanics for an improvised scene.

## Random names

Random names are a key tool of the lazy dungeon master. There are many good random name generators. Yafnag (Yet Another Fantasy Name Generator) does an excellent job. When you're preparing a mini-campaign, run the generator and jot down twenty random names onto another trusty 3x5 note card.

As you choose names from the random list, pick ones with different beginning letters whenever possible. You don't want a random list of names that includes Andeth, Alaham, Averen, and Alexa. People will quickly get them mixed up. It's much easier for both you and your players to remember names with different beginning letters. Also choose names that are easy to spell and easy to pronounce. Random name generators often generate names difficult to spell and pronounce, so only record the ones that work well.

If you're looking for a bit more help with your NPCs, the product Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game has a thousand NPCs from which to choose. Printing off a few pages of these will give you enough NPCs to fill out the details of your adventure or mini-campaign.

Appendix A contains a list of twenty random names ready for use.

Like the rest of your preparation, the tools you buy and prepare should help you think and act on your feet during a game. They should save you time, not take it away, and give you and your players the freedom to take the game wherever you wish.

## Reskinning

Of all the tools and techniques vital to the life of a lazy dungeon master, few have the power and impact of reskinning.

Reskinning defines the act of replacing the flavor, story, and description of a set of roleplaying mechanics such as a monster, an encounter, a trap, terrain, or an environmental effect. In its simplest form, you might take all of the mechanics of a skeleton but replace it with the flavor of an animated scarecrow.

## Example: Eladrin battledancer into half-orc, half-elf assassin

Shade is a half-elf, half-orc freelance mercenary who currently works as a spy and assassin for the local orc chief. She's as beautiful as an elf, but possesses the strength and ferocity (as well as the dental work) of an orc. There is no such published creature in D&D 4th edition, but you need not despair when the party engages her in combat. Simply pull out your resident Monster

Vault sourcebook and look for something similar. As the group is level 7, and you want Shade to be someone quite powerful, relatively speaking, we will go with the level 9 Eladrin Battle Dancer.

Now an Eladrin Battle Dancer isn't quite the same thing as a half-orc assassin, but you can make most of your changes in simple description. For instance, instead of describing her dancing blade ability as an intricate dance of death, change it to powerful set of accurate blows. You MIGHT change the mechanics a tad as well, changing the invisible component of her attacks into knocking her target prone. For these changes, you don't have to prepare anything. You can just change it at the table.

This sort of reskinning requires a little bit of understanding of the basics of monster design. You don't want to replace one ability with another too weak or too powerful, but it doesn't require much experience. With enough games under your belt, you'll know not to put too many dazes on monster attacks.

While reskinning monsters might save you tons of time rebuilding and designing monsters, it doesn't need to end there. Reskinning works any time you want to transfer the mechanics of one thing to the flavor of another.

## What to look for with reskinning

When finding a suitable subject to reskin, you want to start at the lowest level - the math. Find a creature or element roughly the right level with the right amount of hit points and defenses.

Next, look for attacks that act like the attacks you want your reskinned monster to have. It doesn't have to be thematically

close, but it should be mechanically close. For example, a dragon's fiery breath might instead turn into a lich's cloud of magic ice daggers.

After that, you just want to tweak any of the mechanics enough that your group can't tell the difference. Experienced players might see something that feels like the signature move on another monster, so try not to reskin a monster whose mechanics are so distinctive that players will recognize it. Beholders and dragons, for example, might be easily identified by how they act in combat. Still, both of these can be reskinned quite successfully if the flavor is right.

If you're reskinning a monster into one of a notable origin such as an elf, halfling, orc, or some other notable race; you'll want to ensure that you bring over the right race-defining abilities. Players should be rewarded for understanding the rage-like abilities of orcs or the sneaky nature of halflings.

## Reskinning encounter areas

With so many published and digital adventures on the market, you have access to a wealth of professionally designed encounters to steal and re-use. You can easily reskin parts of these encounters - such as turning acid pools to lava or orcs into human brigands. An encounter on a boat might turn into one on an astral skiff. All of it easily transforms from one situation into another.

## Avoid tinkering

You may love to tinker with stuff like this but it's a temptation to avoid. You might find yourself driven to rewrite a stat-block or

change up some effects. If you're spending a lot of time tinkering, ask yourself if that time might be better spent on some other creative activity that you're subconsciously avoiding. There may end up being a good reason to tinker, but it's always worth questioning how valuable that bit of tinkering might actually be.

## Thinking bigger

Reskinning works with whole towns, dungeons, cities, and even game worlds. All you have to do is find the right tweaks to the flavor, and a whole world can change. Just find the right element or two to wrap around your original subject and you might save hundreds of hours of rewriting.

## Lazy Encounter Design

Of 452 surveyed dungeon masters running Dungeons and Dragons 3rd, 3.5, 4th Edition, or Pathfinder games weekly or more; 39% spend more than 30 minutes each week preparing encounters. Building well-balanced and well-tuned encounters can take significant time and it's one of the trickier components of Dungeons and Dragons to improvise at the table. Jeff Greiner, creator of the Tome Show, and Tracy Hurley, freelance writer and creator of Sarah Darkmagic, say that encounter preparation is key to building their 4th edition D&D games.

With such a demanding mix of mechanics and story, how can you make encounter design easier? Let's take a look.

## The components of encounter design

If you break down encounters into their most basic required

components, you'll end up with the following list:

- The scenario
- The battle space
- The combatants
- Terrain effects

For the lazy dungeon master, you need to draw upon your bag of tricks to build a complete encounter from these components at the table as the story demands it. Let's look at each of these components and determine what tools you might need.

## The scenario

During his podcast on encounter design, Wizards of the Coast developer and published Dungeons and Dragons author Chris Sims, discusses building encounters first and foremost from the story of the game. Instead of slapping a bunch of mechanics into an encounter, the encounter should instead flow from the story itself. This means the components may not come together at all during your game or may come together in completely different ways.

For example, although you have a host of hobgoblins at the fortress in the mountains and a host of mercenaries in the town of Yellowtop itself, you won't actually know where your band of adventurers may run into these foes. In this way, you split monsters and environments from each other to let them come together at the appropriate time as the story unfolds.

The scenario, however, might include ways for the battle to end early. Coined by Dave Chalker as the "combat out", you should

aim to become comfortable with ways to end a battle early without simply calling it over or having all the remaining enemies run away or kill themselves.

You don't always have to plan these outs ahead of time. Teos Abadia, for example, used to plan his combat outs, but now lets the situation during the game guide the appropriate end-state. As you get more comfortable with different potential combat outs, you will find opportunities to incorporate them into your encounters as they run.

Appendix A contains a list of twenty different ways to end combat early.

## The battlespace

A good portfolio of pre-built battlespaces can alleviate the need for a lot of design up front. In his article Schley Stack, Chris Perkins describes and offers samples of the maps he keeps handy to help him whip out encounter locations in very little time. Portfolios of maps, like the one described by Perkins, help you build out encounter locations quickly and easily as you need them.

The portfolio of pre-printed encounter poster maps, mentioned earlier, also helps considerably by offering fully designed encounter location areas ready to drop into your games.

## Monsters

Trusty monster manuals give you all the mechanics you need to run monsters in your game. As you plan out your three potential encounter areas, you should have an idea which sorts of monsters might lurk there. You don't have to plan out every room, but you

might want to know that around 25 kobolds inhabit a cave your PCs might end up visiting soon.

**Example, The Monsters of Yellowtop**: In the Yellowtop adventure, two dozen hobgoblins prowl in the fortress in the mountains, about twenty human mercenaries loiter in the town of Yellowtop itself, and a host of undead lurk in the abandoned mines below the mountains. We can use standard versions of these monsters from the appropriate monster manual and place these monsters out at the appropriate locations. By not assigning them to any particular area, they are free to move about as the situations warrant.

## Terrain effects

Although not always required for an interesting battle, terrain effects add a new layer to an otherwise familiar battle. Most dungeon master's guides contain lists of potential terrain effects. Keep a list of these effects on hand, and learn which ones work well for the types of battles you enjoy running. When considering potential adventure areas, it can't hurt to consider which effects your players might encounter. Sometimes, however, the best ideas for terrain effect placement happens in the middle of the battle. As long as you don't tip your hand, your players will never know you made it up on the spot.

Appendix A contains a list of twenty terrain elements you can use to generate these effects.

## The risk of over-preparation

With time saved in other areas, you may get to design many

enjoyable encounters, and that's a fine way to spend your time. Your group may fondly remember a well-balanced and exciting encounter. However, like other areas of game preparation, once you commit the time to build an encounter, you may find yourself pushing your group to use it. If your group comes up with a creative way to avoid your encounter, you might force them back into the battle simply to use what you prepared. No one wants to waste their time on an encounter that a group will never see.

The less you prepare your encounters, the less committed you are to their execution.

Keep things simple, use what works well, and build a portfolio of maps, monsters, and effects to keep your game moving in the direction taken by the will of the group.

## Lazy Treasure and Experience

Of 766 3.5, 4e, and Pathfinder dungeon masters, 84% spend less than 30 minutes preparing loot. 33% spend no time at all. If you find yourself spending considerable time preparing loot and experience rewards for your characters, consider how those 33% of DMs manage to not do it at all. This chapter looks at a few ways to handle loot and experience without spending any time on it. The ideas behind lazy treasure and experience preparation lets you instead focus on aspects of your game that help it come alive. Let's begin by looking at experience.

## Level PCs when it fits the story

The easiest method of calculating and rewarding experience is simply to ignore it and level the PCs as the story determines it.

Increase character levels every two or three games when your PCs complete a major accomplishment or finish a large quest. As an experienced DM, you can best determine when it makes sense for characters to increase levels. Unlike most computer-based RPGs, you don't really need an experience reward calculation system. You can just figure it out for yourselves.

## Effort-based experience rewards

If simply leveling PCs based on story rewards isn't your cup of tea, consider simplifying your life by rewarding effort-based experience rewards. Instead of calculating all the potential experience points for monsters and dividing them among the PCs, determine how much experience any single PC might get at any given level for an easy, normal, or hard challenge. Use this number to reward PCs for the effort they face in a given situation. If they easily complete a quest, give them a smaller amount of experience. If they find themselves particularly challenged in a battle, give them a larger amount of experience. This way PCs are directly rewarded for the challenge they actually faced instead of the potential mathematical calculations done before hand.

Finding easy, normal, and hard levels of experience is usually a matter of looking at the experience reward for a like-leveled monster. For example, if a level 5 gnoll is worth 200 experience, that is the right amount of experience to give a level 5 PC for a normal-level challenge. 200 experience would also be the right amount of experience for an easy challenge for a level 6 PC or a hard challenge for a level 4 PC.

This sort of reward isn't as simple as leveling PCs when it fits the

story, but it doesn't require as much work as calculating out the entire set of monsters, traps, and hazards and then dividing it up among the PCs.

## Treasure: Setting the right baseline

Different versions of Dungeons and Dragons handled the bonuses of magical items differently. Depending on your version of D&D, you might have to reward a standard baseline of magical items to your PCs simply to keep their attack and defense bonuses in the right place when compared to equally leveled monsters. In 4th edition, for example, the bonuses of magical armor, neck items, and weapons are figured into the math for the game.

In 4th edition D&D, using inherent bonuses all the time is the easiest way to ensure that your group doesn't fall behind the power curve. The 4th Edition Dungeon Master's Guide 2 describes the use of inherent bonuses in 4th edition D&D games. Other versions don't quite have the same requirements for magical items but 3rd edition and Pathfinder characters will find themselves falling behind if they don't get magical items sometime.

If you want to ensure that PCs meet the right baseline for magical power, let them purchase any generic magic items that provide base bonuses without any special features. This lets your players ensure that they can keep up with the rest of the party by simply spending gold and takes away your requirements to reward well-matched gear for their defenses and attacks.

## Random treasure

With a baseline of power established, you can instead focus your

primary treasure rewards on simple random distribution. Most versions of D&D have random loot tables available, either in the Dungeon Master's Guide or in various tools and tables online. If you happen to be playing 4th edition D&D, you can use Sly Flourish's Random Loot Tables for 4th Edition loot.

Random loot tables add spice to your game by giving your PCs unknown items that they might never have chosen if they had a choice. To ensure that PCs can use treasure from the lists, don't pre-define the item. Instead let the players decide what type of item it is or decide yourself once the roll occurs. For example, if your random treasure roll comes up with a "weapon of defense", let the players decide if it is an axe or a dagger or a longsword based on which PC ends up wanting it. This helps ensure that you don't overload your PCs with equipment they can't use.

## The PC wish list

Another way to handle loot is to ask your players for their wish lists. You might even have each player come up with their own list of ten items and use that as a random loot list they can roll on. Now each time your group would be rewarded treasure, you can decide or roll a die to determine which PC gets a piece of gear from their loot wish list.

## Loot as a story and quest reward

Occasionally you will want to reward a particularly nice piece of loot as part of a quest or story. This lets loot rewards act as an actual piece of the story, maybe even a key to a future adventure. If a piece of loot adds to the story and captures the imagination of

your players, don't worry about spending too much time using loot to build out your story.

## Seek the path of least resistance

However you decide to reward loot and experience, choose the path that takes the least amount of time and adds the most fun to the group. If you find yourself spending a lot of time calculating experience or choosing treasure rewards, ask yourself if that time might be better spent developing NPCs, tying PCs to the adventure, or building potential adventure locations.

## Using Published Material

Published books can be of great help or great detriment to the lazy dungeon master. Published world sourcebooks, location guides, and adventures give you a wealth of material to sift through, twist, and use to your advantage; but it comes at a cost - your time.

Books that contain a fair bit of game mechanics, such as monster manuals or treasure books, give you material that would otherwise take you hours to build yourself. Published books often give you professionally designed and edited rules you can insert, rebuild, or reskin into your game right at the table.

## Inspiration, not gospel

It's important to remember that we have full authority and responsibility to use these published works however we wish. We should not feel obligated to run material from these books "as written". We should use the components from these books however we wish to make our games fun. These books can be

fantastic sources of inspiration and models for the worlds we want to run at our table. They save us hundreds of hours creating details better left to professionals.

## The problems with published adventures

Many DMs either love or hate published adventures. As sources of inspiration, they give us a wealth of material we might use. They could, however, turn our game into something stale and bland if you're not careful.

Phil Vecchione, author of Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep and writer for the game mastery blog Gnome Stew wrote an article entitled I Don't Like Published Adventures that summarizes the issues of published adventures well. In summary, the article points out the following problems:

- They're too generic. They aren't built around your players or their PCs.
- They take away your ability to build out your own story as you go. They pre-package the story instead.
- They cost money.
- It takes too much time to hack them into something new.

These are all solid reasons to treat published adventures with caution. However, published adventures do offer benefits to the lazy dungeon master:

- They seed ideas built for Dungeons and Dragons. Sometimes you need a little push to get your imagination going in the right direction, and published adventures can give you that push.

- They include well-designed maps, locations, encounters, traps, and adventurous situations you can steal and use in your own game.
- The more recent Dungeons and Dragons adventures include poster maps - a powerful tool for lazy dungeon mastering as we have already discussed.

  As Phil Vecchione describes in his article, we can easily hack published adventures into their own stories. We just have to know what to use and what to toss away.

  The core issue of published adventures, however, remains the same. They don't save you time and, in many cases, can take more time than if you had built your own adventure.

  If you do plan on running published adventures, follow the wise words of Teos Abadia and spend the time understanding it and preparing it for your group. Running published adventures as written requires a commitment lazy dungeon masters might best avoid.

## Make it your own

Taking published works and making them your own is the key to getting value from these sourcebooks. Hold onto these books with a loose grip, using them for inspiration when you need it and using the well-designed mechanics found within them to help you run your game at the table. Many published authors agree that the reader and dungeon master who uses these works should twist, tear, and rebuild them into material that works well for them. It will be hard, however, not to fall into the trap of over-preparing. As Phil Vecchione described, it can often take more work to run a

published adventure than your own home-brewed adventure.

## Delegation

Delegation is a wonderful tool for the lazy dungeon master. Delegating out portions of the game not only saves you time and energy as a dungeon master but builds a bigger commitment in your players to the operation of the game beyond their character sheets.

Here are a few elements of Dungeons and Dragons easily delegated to your group.

## Delegating initiative

As a dungeon master, you have a lot on your plate handling the progression and growth of the story, the operation of monsters, and setting up encounters. You don't need the extra burden of handling initiative as well. Assign one of your players as your official initiative tracker. He or she will call for initiative rolls, manage the turn arrangement, and act as the caller for turns during the battle.

Delegation of initiative becomes much easier for the whole group if you make your initiative order visible to everyone. A whiteboard on the wall or some folded-over 3x5 note cards help keep the whole group informed. When the whole group can see the initiative order, everyone has the ability to keep it on track, even with a dedicated initiative caller.

## Tracking monster damage

Buy yourself a good hand-held white board and give it to one of

your players to track damage on monsters. There's no worry that you're giving too much away because any of your players could be tracking it already if they cared to. Delegating monster damage saves dungeon masters a lot of time and helps break past the perception that the DM **represents** those monsters instead of considering them elements of the overall story.

## Revealing monster defenses

It's not exactly delegation, but making your monster defenses and difficulty checks visible can dramatically speed up the game. Instead of constantly asking you whether they succeeded or not, they only have to check a visible board to determine if they succeeded or failed. Revealing monster defenses has the added benefit of proving to your players that you aren't changing the rules behind the screen. This technique might take away some of the mystery of the game, but the benefits to combat speed and the inclusiveness it brings to your group tend to outweigh this disadvantage.

A big white board on a wall is a good tool to help you keep these sorts of things visible including these defenses, initiative order, and the often forgotten names of monsters or villains.

## Delegating rules moderation

**"Never hold to the letter written, nor allow some barracks room lawyer to force quotations from the rule book upon you."**

- E. Gary Gygax, 1st Edition Dungeon Master's Guide, 1979

We're all familiar with the rules lawyer, the one person at your

table who takes great pride in not only knowing the rules backwards and forwards but also takes great joy in correcting others. Instead of trying to crush the spirits of the barracks room lawyer, employ him or her. Give him or her the official title of rules lawyer and the authority to interpret rules and judge disputes. Of course, as the DM, you have veto privileges, but you should almost always accept the judgment if it's fair.

This requires, of course, that the lawyer has a fair and objective view of the rules and isn't simply trying to bend the rules in the favor of his or her character or the group. You will find, however, that the more you delegate the enjoyment of the game to the group, the more objective the rules lawyer will become. When he or she realizes the authority and responsibility he or she has, the rules lawyer is much more likely to use it fairly.

## Delegating storytelling

If your group is particularly story-focused, work on delegating portions of the story to them. You'd be surprised how rewarding it can be to build a story among a group of smart, imaginative people. Be sure to let them know what they're about to get into before you spring it on them, or else you'll be looking at a bunch of deer in headlights.

You can start small with things, such as the names and histories of magic items in their possession. You might have them describe the insides of inns or taverns. Be sure not to open the door only to slam it shut on them when they go outside of the lines you had in your mind. If you're following the rest of this book's ideas already, you know there AREN'T really any lines and those you do have

are drawn in pencil and easily erased.

Of all of the elements of delegation, the delegation of the story is the trickiest and requires the most trust of between you, each of your players, and among themselves. Discuss it with your players beforehand to give them an idea how it might work before you simply spring it on them.

The Dungeons and Dragons 4th Edition Dungeon Master's Guide 2 has a whole chapter on this topic well worth your time to read.

## Delegate to the most distracted

To whom you delegate these functions is as important as the function you intend to delegate. In general you might delegate to the person best able to handle the job. Sometimes, however, you can use these delegated jobs to keep your players' attention on the game. If you find you have a player easily distracted by cell phones, iPads, or personal computers; call upon him or her to manage the table's initiative or track monster damage. If you find, however, that he or she still fails in this job and it ends up hurting the overall enjoyment at the table, maybe it's best to simply let him or her be distracted.

## It's our game, not yours

The key advantage of these forms of delegation isn't that it makes your life easier, though that is certainly a plus. Delegation like this shows your group that the enjoyment of the game is everyone's responsibility, not just yours. It ties you closer together as a group and creates a bond that breaks down the walls between DMs and players. Everyone should be having a great time at your game,

including you.

## Improving Improvisation

More than anything else, proper improvisation tools and techniques help a lazy dungeon master run a great game. The better you can improvise, the less you need to prepare. It takes a lot of practice and a lot of guts to get better at improvising, but the end result saves you time and makes your game more exciting. Improvisation is the key trait that helps you build a game that lives and breathes instead of one painted by numbers.

## Enjoyment at the table: A lower bar than you think

In his article A Lesson in Mediocrity, Chris Perkins describes how a game he thought went terribly turned out not to be too bad for the rest of the group:

*"Despite my less than stellar performance, the players had a great time. When the session ended, my players thanked me for the terrific game, to which I responded with silent surprise."*

Most of the time, our group doesn't have high demands. They want to get together, have a few laughs, eat some junk food, and escape the real world for a few hours. They don't demand the depth of a Stanley Kubrick movie with the choreographed action of Robert Rodriguez. They just want to relax for a bit.

You need to relax a bit, too.

If you paid for this book, you likely hold yourself to a high standard as a dungeon master. You likely hold yourself to a standard higher than your players expect. There's nothing wrong with demanding

more from your game, but don't let that get you down at the table. When it comes to your game, take it easy and let the game go where it will. Remember that, above your epic story and your well-tuned encounters, people just want to have fun. If that means throwing stuff away, throw it away. Unlike Chris Perkins, you don't have three thousand people watching you run a D&D game at PAX, so quit worrying.

## Preparing for improvisation

There's a careful balance between feeling prepared and feeling relaxed. The less you've prepared, the more nervous you might feel. Preparing for improvisation steers you the right way. Fill your toolkit with aids for improvisation instead of tools that force your game down one particular track. You can find many of these tools in appendix A.

## Trust

Steve Townshend often discusses the importance of trust in our D&D groups. In a podcast and follow-up article on improvisation, Townshend talks about the importance of looking at your players not as an audience, but as partners in the show. You have to trust them and build their trust in you. The more open you are to them, the more trust flows around the room, the more fun you will all have. The safer you will be to explore your cohabited imaginations.

## Act as if

You may never feel fully relaxed when you run your game. We put a lot of energy into these games and we want them to go well. Use

the common trick of both great leaders and recovering alcoholics everywhere: act as if. The folks at your table look to you to lead them. You're not taking a hill in 'Nam, but they still look to you and your behavior to guide them. The more relaxed you are, the more relaxed they are. Don't apologize. Don't fret over small stuff. Go with the flow. Listen, laugh, and say yes.

## Yes, and …

Good improvisors know when and how to interact with "yes, and…". This is a powerful aid and the cornerstone of improvisation. Each person at the table has something to contribute, and has the ability to take the game in a certain direction. Your job is to include their ideas and build off of them, giving them something back in return. As your players bring up ideas, find ways to include these ideas into the story and build off of them, adding a component they might not have considered or a way to tie their idea back into the central theme of the story. Being inclusive is critical to group storytelling and breaks down the walls between DMs and players. Should a player use these ideas as opportunities to steer the game away from the collective enjoyment of the rest, find ways to steer them back again by building off of the idea.

## Putting yourself into your character

Another acting tip has you putting yourself in the mind of the character, in many cases, is an NPC or villain. What are they thinking? What are they doing? The more you see things from their point of view, the more you will easily react to the actions of the players as they interact with these NPCs. As you build these

ideas, drop a few notes down on those NPC 3x5 cards you built for your game.

## Go with humor

We love our games, and sometimes we love our serious storylines. Players might use humor to break the serious tension of a game. Don't totally shut them down - build off of it. Let them have their moment of comedy. It doesn't mean your game can't be serious and that you can't return to moments of drama. Consider the mix of tension and humor in the game World of Warcraft. You have the tragedy of the Lich King and the threat of Deathwing on one side and the humor of the Harrison Jones quests on the other. Both comedy and drama can co-exist in your own game.

Humor can help you enjoy the wacky things that happen as you improvise. If you say something stupid, double-down and have fun with it. Use it to make fun of the NPCs and villains if they say something dumb.

In his article "Ham Acting Across the Table" Forgotten Realms creator Ed Greenwood describes the value of our wacky voices as the catalysts for the shared memories our games create. We all might make fun of the bad Monty Python quotes, but in the end, it's what makes a game unique and memorable for years to come. Humor is a powerful tool.

## Follow the masters

To see an expert dungeon master using all of these techniques, watch Chris Perkins run D&D games for the Penny Arcade crew in the Acquisitions Inc games. Chris improvises many of the scenes

and situations in these videos, changes voices often, and continually says "yes and…" to keep the stories evolving around the players.

## Practice

None of these techniques for improvisation come overnight. You'll have to work at them. The only way to get better is to actually improvise again and again. This means running games, lots of them, and paying attention to the moments when you can let things slip out of control and watch them blossom into something else. Put yourself in situations which require improvisation. Volunteer to run a game ten minutes before it's about to start. Continually refine your tools, adding those that help and removing those that don't. Focus on the tools that help you feel prepared without forcing your game down a single pre-determined direction.

## Immerse Yourself in Fiction

*"Reading is the creative center of a writer's life."* - Stephen King, On Writing

Preparing yourself for improvisation at the table is no easy task. Beyond simply writing pages of text, gathering tools, or buying a good stack of poster maps, you have to train your brain to react to the game as it happens in front of your players. Immersing yourself in fiction rebuilds your mind and fills it with ideas, character portraits, scenes, and environments.

King focuses heavily on reading, and he's right to do so, but there are a lot of crappy books and a lot of excellent movies and TV shows from which to draw ideas. The more you immerse yourself

in excellent fiction, the more your mind will create stories, seeds, and ideas using the same principles. The more you read and listen to great dialog, the more you'll be able to come up with it at the table. The more characters you're exposed to, the more characters you can draw upon when you need to.

Many dungeon masters recommend the list of books and authors in appendix N of the original Dungeon Master's Guide. Of course, many other great fantasy novels have been written since. Build your own appendix N fiction list to help influence your own games.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that fantasy is the only genre you should follow. Great characters come from any genre. They cross genres easily. Whether it's Sipowicz from NYPD Blue, Calamity Jane from Deadwood, or Saul Tigh from Battlestar Galactica; the alcoholic champion makes a great character in any genre.

If you're not a big fan of the written word, audiobooks can be a great way to absorb such material while you're stuck in the seventh layer of hell: the daily commute.

## It's not all fiction

In his article I Got Your Back, Chris Perkins describes his love of non-fiction and shows how it influences NPCs in his own games. Your characters and story seeds need not all come from fiction. Real world people, places, and situations can all make for fantastic inspiration for your game. Good ideas come from everywhere.

## Take What Works

We all have our own ideas about how best to run our game. It took

quite a few rewrites to ensure that this book didn't come across as too directive. Your ultimate goal is running an enjoyable game for yourself and your players. Consider anything that gets you closer to this goal and omit anything that does not.

The way of the lazy dungeon master isn't a "right way" to do things, it's a set of ideas and a set of levers to help you potentially gain some efficiency in your activities. The ultimate goal of this book is to get more out of your preparation and increase the enjoyment of your game at the same time.

If you try out some of the techniques in this book and they don't work, toss them out. If you find ways to modify the ideas, go for it. Each of us has our own style when it comes to preparing and running D&D games. Each of us wants to grow and improve this style to make each game more fun than the one before.

Whatever paths you take, whatever tools you use, always keep your eye on the end goal: running a great game for your players and yourself.

Now get out there, relax, and build a great game.

## Appendix A: Lazy Dungeon Master Toolkit

Below you will find a series of lists to help you build your lazy D&D game. Use them either directly or as examples to build your own lists. Print them out and keep them tucked in your DM kit to help you improvise when the time is right. Add your own lists as you need.

## 20 adventure seeds

1. Dwarven explorers uncover a mad wizard's vault.
2. Undead attack an old monastery protecting an evil artifact.
3. An isolated village seeks heroes to defend it from monstrous attackers.
4. Hobgoblin slavers allied with a demon-blooded dragon terrorize local farmsteads.
5. A powerful noble family seeks vengeance for a slain criminal son.
6. Orc raiders enslaved dwarves to dig into an ancient dark elf ruin.
7. A fledgling apprentice releases a demon who begins building a fiendish army.
8. A corrupt warlord harries a poor village with a hired band of rogues.
9. A supernatural plague from a forgotten elven ruin turns local villagers into ghouls.
10. A floating keep from an alternate world crashes into a nearby wild forest.
11. A thieves guild threatens to release a hallucinogen into a city's water supply.
12. Forbidden knowledge revealed in an old book brings powerful justicars who plan to wipe out everyone in the town.
13. The corpse of an old god infested with devils appears embedded within a nearby mountain.
14. The death of a hill giant lord's son brings down the lord's goblinoid army onto a nearby walled city.
15. A king finds a hidden door within his keep that leads to a vast

multi-leveled labyrinth.

16. A kobald witch-doctor discovers a powerful artifact that sways inhuman armies to his service.
17. A band of mercenaries starts a war between two feuding cities.
18. An evil priest becomes filled with terrible power and unleashes charismatic cultists across the land.
19. A fallen hero's father frames local adventurers, while allying with wilderness tribes to increase terror.
20. Recent foresting expansions upset a nearby swamp full of lizard-men and their black dragon god-king.

## 20 movie-inspired quests

1. Hunt down a powerful beast never seen in this area before (*Jaws*)
2. Find an ancient buried artifact before an evil army does (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*)
3. Find a lost treasure to negotiate a hostage rescue (*Romancing the Stone*)
4. Hunt down constructs that believe they are human (*Blade Runner*)
5. Protect a young girl who holds the fate of a kingdom in her mind (*Firefly*)
6. Seek revenge upon the cult that wiped out a whole village (*Conan the Barbarian*)
7. Drop behind enemy lines to destroy a bridge (*Bridge over the River Kwai*)
8. Hunt down a rogue general now seen as a god by an army of

goblinoids (*Apocalypse Now*)

9. Seek revenge on rogue bandits who accosted a bar wench (*Unforgiven*)
10. Find the last surviving brother of five in the middle of a war (*Saving Private Ryan*)
11. Take revenge on the orc tribe that murdered a young girl's father (*True Grit*)
12. Protect a village from a band of monstrous brigands (*Seven Samurai / Magnificent Seven*)
13. Save a village from two warring bandit tribes (*Yojimbo*)
14. Find a lost treasure before two other parties find it (*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*)
15. Imprison or slay a powerful demon trapped within a keep (*The Keep*)
16. Destroy an ancient artifact containing the soul of a demon prince (*The Prince of Darkness*)
17. Hunt down and destroy a shapeshifting monster released from an ancient buried vessel (*The Thing*)
18. Kill the gang of assassins who left you for dead (*Kill Bill*)
19. Kidnap or rescue an unborn heir (*The Way of the Gun*)
20. Steal an artifact from the most powerful bank in the city (*Heat*)

## 20 adventure locations

1. A network of natural caves beneath an ancient hollowed-out tree
2. A long-forgotten cellar beneath an inn

3. A forgotten dungeon beneath a castle
4. A ruined temple to a dark forgotten god
5. A field of ruin in the corpse of a massive dragon
6. A mad wizard's trapped dungeon
7. A twisted maze in a haunted wood
8. The ruins of a keep fallen in battle
9. Festering sewers beneath the town
10. A fortress carved from a stone mountain
11. A haunted catacombs in a mound carved like a giant skull
12. A forgotten crypt of a mad king
13. A temple of an evil cult hidden in the chambers of a church
14. A network of passages in a huge mansion
15. Dark passages of swirling nightmare beyond a portal of black-mirrored glass
16. The remains of a city buried under volcanic rock
17. A hidden vault beneath a seaside lighthouse
18. Hidden passages lost beneath an old library
19. A wizard's tower on a floating earthmote
20. Natural caves behind a huge waterfall

## 20 fantasy names

1. Axbury Whitemane
2. Brianne Ironfist

3. Janis Willowswift
4. Oroth Windstone
5. Peters Whitecloak
6. Randis Rockwell
7. Tristan Graystone
8. Ovena Blackstone
9. Anerhost Bluecloak
10. Palman Freestar
11. Krisset Alwind
12. Florena Graymoon
13. Duberos Rothchild
14. Chorn Evenstar
15. Envil Moonbane
16. Janna Leafblade
17. Kogas Ironcutter
18. Liona Seawinter
19. Patsi Dawnbubble
20. Travell Wintersbane

## 20 NPC character frameworks

1. Belloq, from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*
2. Han Solo, from *Star Wars*
3. Yu Shu Lien, from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

4. Dolores Claiborne, from *Dolores Claiborne*
5. Tom Hagen, from *The Godfather*
6. Sherif Ali, from *Lawrence of Arabia*
7. Dick Hallorann, from *The Shining*
8. Sgt. Dignam, from *The Departed*
9. Sgt. Apone, from *Aliens*
10. Little Bill Daggett, from *Unforgiven*
11. Jean Lundegaard, from *Fargo*
12. Chuckie Sullivan, from *Good Will Hunting*
13. Robert "Bobby Elvis" Munson, from *Sons of Anarchy*
14. Chief Tyrol, from *Battlestar Galactica*
15. Calamity Jane, from *Deadwood*
16. Mike Ehrmantraut, from *Breaking Bad*
17. Rupert Giles, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
18. Titus Pullo, from *Rome*
19. Lorne, from *Angel*
20. Sir Francis Walsingham, from *Elizabeth*

## 20 Encounter terrain effects

1. An unholy circle of power that steals life energy
2. A skull glyph painted in blood that fills creatures with battle rage
3. A summoning circle that spawns minions
4. A mystical obelisk that radiates arcane power

5. A flaming cauldron that spurts fireballs
6. A gargoyle statue that spits poison darts
7. A statue of a warrior with a swinging axe trap
8. A dragon statue that breathes fire
9. Murder holes from which enemies fire arrows
10. Invisible exploding runes on the floor
11. A skull on a pike that whispers dark words
12. A crystal that fires a beam of burning light
13. A pit trap filled with poison sticks
14. An area of anti-gravity
15. A mirror of entrapment
16. Portraits of screaming maidens that drive living creatures mad
17. Delicate urns of poison gas
18. Serpent statues that spit acid
19. Steel rods that fire lightning
20. A pillar of black tentacles that grabs and pulls people closer

## 20 PC relationships

1. Survivors of former adventuring party
2. Adopted siblings
3. Master and apprentice
4. Boss and hired hand
5. Former prisoners

6. Bounty hunters
7. Former militia
8. Former solders in a losing war
9. Former members of a thieves guild
10. Lord and serf
11. Ward and protector
12. Former grifters
13. Mercenaries
14. Former enemies that now work together
15. Business partners
16. Former students of beloved teacher
17. Former slaves
18. Former privateers
19. Dueling partners
20. Failed protectors of a lost artifact

## 20 combat outs

1. Constructs disabled
2. Summoned creatures unsummoned
3. Brutes sacrifice health for damage
4. Villains surrender and become quest givers
5. Monsters flee
6. Aberrant monsters explode

7. Truce negotiated
8. Puzzle solved
9. Powerful weapon unleashed
10. Followers sacrifice themselves while leader escapes
11. Cavern collapses
12. Villain teleports explosively
13. NPC rescued
14. Item stolen
15. PCs flee from an overwhelming force
16. Gods intervene
17. Minions betray villain
18. Guards break it up
19. The true villain shows up
20. The true purpose reveals the battle as a ruse

## 20 encounter-wide environmental effects

1. Growing clouds of poisonous gas
2. Whispers of the insane dead cause psychic damage
3. Acid dripping from the ceiling burns creatures
4. Thick fog makes it difficult to see at range
5. Quaking ground threatens to knock people prone
6. Hallucinogenic gas makes people attack allies
7. Hot steam burns creatures more severely each round

8. Lightning bolts damage or incapacitate creatures
9. Portals vomit forth hordes of minions
10. Ghosts of vengeance fill creatures with bloodlust
11. Shifting time increases accuracy but decreases defenses
12. An unholy presence limits healing
13. Arcing electricity hurts those that are close to other creatures
14. Arcane lodestones limit magic use
15. Icy floors make people slide around Mario style
16. Freezing mist damages and slows those within
17. Crushing walls close in
18. Clouds of bats interrupt casting
19. A flood of foul water threatens to drown creatures
20. Flammable oil threatens to ignite

## 20 Things that never should have been found

1. Ancient book from before the time of mortals
2. Sealed copper cylinder containing the last breath of a dead god
3. Crown of the lich queen
4. A jeweled demon skull that always speaks the dark truth
5. The dagger that pierced the heart of a child heir to a fallen empire
6. A ancient tablet describing the death of a current king
7. A steel coffin containing the dust of an entombed vampire
8. An urn containing the ashes of an adulterous queen and her dark

priest lover

9. An immortal child
10. Scrolls of a dark spell that cannot be destroyed
11. An ancient well leading to a dark world
12. A twisted horn that awakens the eater of the world
13. A sphere holding the souls of the dead
14. A jeweled box of secrets, lies, and jealousy
15. A priceless gem that brought murder to every previous owner
16. An ethereal prison in the form of an adamantine monolith
17. An ancient primordial burial ground
18. An intricate mechanical box containing an unknown seed
19. A treasure chest containing a still-beating heart
20. The skull of a man dated a million years older than mortals

## Appendix B: The Dungeon Master Survey

From 22 April 2012 until 17 June 2012, I conducted a survey of dungeon master preparation techniques. The survey included results from 817 dungeon masters across all editions of D&D. I broke the survey up into several multiple-choice questions related to the preparation of D&D games across any edition of Dungeons and Dragons. The survey questions included the following:

- How often to you run Dungeons & Dragons games?
- How much time do you spend preparing for each game you run?
- Which version of Dungeons & Dragons do you primarily run?

- How long are your D&D game sessions?
- In your game, how long does each combat encounter take?
- How much time do you spend preparing the following for each game?
- World building
- Combat encounter design
- Monster design
- NPC development
- Non-combat encounter design
- Battle map preparation
- Props and handouts
- Experience and Treasure

Each of these questions had specific pre-defined time periods. You can download a full copy of the survey results in Excel.

## Survey flaws

Surveys like these are almost always inherently flawed. Different game systems sometimes get mixed together in the results. The multiple-choice nature of the survey doesn't allow for a clean bell curve of time spent. These results, however, give us a broad look at where many DMs spend their time in preparation for their game.

## Versions of D&D ran

Of the 817 respondents, 51 of them (6%) mostly ran Original D&D, 1st Edition AD&D, or 2nd edition AD&D. Of the remaining 766

respondents, 420 (51%) primarily ran 4th edition; 278 (34%) primarily ran Pathfinder; and 68 (8%) primarily ran 3rd or 3.5 Edition D&D.

## How often did participants run their games?

Of the 817 total participants, 10% run games less than monthly; 14% run monthly; 18% run twice a month; 35% run weekly; and 23% run more than weekly. While looking at overall preparation time, I filtered the results down to those who ran games weekly or more than weekly; 470 of the total 817. This helped normalize the time spent between sessions.

## Total preparation time

Of the 470 participants who ran games weekly or more, 11% spent less than one hour preparing for each game; 39% spent 1-3 hours; 29% spent 3-6 hours; 15% spent 6-10 hours; and 7% spent more than 10 hours preparing for their games.

## Detailed tabulated results

The following chart includes results from 470 respondents who play all versions of D&D weekly or more often broken out by specific activity:

| | none | < 30 min | 30 min - 1 hr | 1-2 hrs | > 2 hrs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Combat Encounter Design | 19% | 42% | 24% | 11% | 4% |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-Combat Encounter Design | 16% | 50% | 20% | 12% | 2% |
| Battle Map Preparation | 37% | 41% | 14% | 5% | 3% |
| Monster Design | 27% | 35% | 19% | 14% | 5% |
| NPC Development | 14% | 52% | 20% | 12% | 2% |
| World Building | 17% | 26% | 12% | 14% | 31% |
| Experience and Loot | 40% | 47% | 9% | 4% | 0% |
| Props and Handouts | 31% | 46% | 13% | 7% | 1% |

## Appendix C: Dungeon Master Preparation Questionnaire

In addition to the DM survey and in preparation for this book, I sent out a questionnaire to ten dungeon masters who have run many D&D games and are strong supporters of the Dungeons and Dragons community. In the following pages, you will find their responses to the questionnaire.

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## Teos Abadia

Teos Abadia is a freelance WOTC designer, 28-year dungeon master veteran, and twelve-year organizer for Dungeons and Dragons organized play events. In 2010, he became the lead administrator for the Ashes of Athas Dark Sun organized play event.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

Two kinds:

1) Tying the developing story to the PCs. I usually spend at least one hour of prep for each 4-hr game working on aspects of the coming session that will link to the goals/backstory/personality /allegiances of 1-2 PCs.

2) A broad category I like to call 'Episodic story-arcing'. This is time I spend on ensuring the next session pushes the campaign's plot forward in a rich way. I like to have 2-3 broad story arcs, which may weave together at times. Because of that I find it is important for me to think carefully about how each session functions as an episode, progressing and revealing more of the story for PCs and their players. This isn't just high-level; it includes encounter design such as choice of foes, terrain, and the like, directly leading to actual mechanical elements.

The actual mechanical elements are an important third part. Things like fine-tuning monsters, writing puzzles, crafting story/skill challenges, selecting terrain powers, selecting rewards, etc. are all important to me as the third element in telling the story and, critically, making encounters stimulating and fun.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?**

I'm not big on custom extensive world building, mainly because few players really benefit from that level of depth. Also, campaigns seldom last beyond 9 months. That prep can end up a big solo experience.

There are many activities I once did in great detail but now an outline is best with the details best left for spontaneity at the table. For example, NPC details such as a distinctive voice: not bad, but

it works almost as well to just make up a voice and mannerisms at the table.

I used to work a lot on the flow between encounters, such as conditions when foes begin to fight or surrender. Now it is just the barest of an outline and I improvise based on what PCs do. Same with details of negotiations, descriptions of non-combat locations, work on organizations, etc. Just a very light outline and I take notes during the session on what I make up.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

I've had great games where I was making up everything. At the same time, my best sessions are ones where I prepared a great outline with close integration to story arcs and the narratives/goals of PCs and then had sufficient detail to make it a great engaging session. For me, preparation is very important.

From an RPGA perspective, preparation is critical. DMs that prepare are always better. The ones that add props for terrain, picked minis carefully, have voices for NPCs, and build upon the adventure are always the best. Some of that is related rather than causal (better DMs care) but it is also causal: it makes a difference when the DM goes the extra mile.

The same is true for DMs running pre-packaged adventures. Running cold is often boring and sub-par unless the DM is amazing.

I also find that experience is critical. I tend to think DMs learn a lot through preparation. They may go overboard on things like setting or terrain at times, but adjust over time. Eventually a DM is skilled

enough to do a lot on the fly.

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

Certainly with RPGA and pre-published modules. Runs by such DMs can be abysmal because it is hard to improvise when you don't know the core.

There are also times when I've tried to be true to what I wrote a while back, but which I had not prepped recently. It is very hard to do that - you are almost better off running complete improv and making up for the intended story progress with the following session.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

I would give up on most of my prior plans, take a bare outline, and improvise. The 30 min might be spent on one focused activity that will yield results, such as cool terrain with stock monsters or a great exploration puzzle.

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

I consider these critical:

1. Lots of RPGA adventures, since this pulls together tons of authors with different influences. Also, running those different RPGA adventures for varied audiences teaches me a lot about how to increase the fun of a wide variety of players.
2. Different RPGs, because they teach me different approaches/frameworks.

3. I try to find the best DMs I can and learn from them as a player in their games.

**What are your most useful tips, tricks, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

For me it is about knowing what kind of game you want to run, finding the level of preparation you are willing to do sustainably to achieve those goals, and then using that time effectively so it yields great results consistently.

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## Dave "The Game" Chalker

Dave "The Game" Chalker is the lead editor for the gaming website Critical Hits and freelance designer for both Wizards of the Coast and Margaret Weis Productions. Dave has been running D&D games for twenty years.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

Brainstorming, outlining, and organizing.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?**

Pre-scripting and trying to be funny.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

Usually, the best moments came from pre-planned moments or ideas reacting against the players in spontaneous ways. The spontaneous moments on my end can be fun, but my best

sessions come from where players take the story seeds I provide.

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

Usually the parts that fall flat are those I haven't generated enough cool ideas for or just wasn't a good enough concept to base an adventure off of. This can be because of lack of time, or just not enough energy put into an idea to turn it from OK to make it sing.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

Try to generate hooks from previous sessions, grab ones that come to mind as making sense as following previous games, and see what I have on hand that works with those hooks. Then during the game I can pull out appropriate encounters, etc.

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

The K-Mart Blue Light Idea Special. But seriously, I take in ideas from everything I read, watch, listen to, etc. Combining ideas in new and interesting ways powers a lot of my sessions. Usually I try to have campaigns with a specific genre or tone in mind, so at the very least, I fall back on that core campaign idea and try to steal ideas from that similar genre: like if I'm running a survival game, I research similar. If I'm running a revenge fantasy campaign, I look at those, etc.

**What are your most useful tips, tricks, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

Always look at ways to follow up on previous hooks, NPCs,

leftover encounters, etc. Those are your best source of inspiration while also driven by the previous actions and decisions of your players. You can inject your own stories, twists, and turns, but the best stories come from meeting your players halfway. Also, don't underestimate the value of just flipping through a book of monsters, looking at what maps you own, playing around with miniatures, etc. instead of worrying about details early.

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## Jeff Greiner

Jeff is the host of the Tome Show and its related Dungeons and Dragons and RPG podcasts as well as running Temporary Hit Points. Jeff has been playing D&D for 23 years.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

Encounter design is the key for me in 4e prep. Making sure I have the right mix of creatures, obstacles, and little tricks to make it interesting and unique is hard to do time and time again, and yet when I haven't taken the time to do it the games don't go as well. It's sometimes the unsung hero of prep in my games. If I work hard on encounter design it's usually not noticed, but if I don't put in the work everyone feels it.

But if I can highlight a secondary activity it would be finding ways to make the story matter to each PC. It's not a tangible concept in prep most of the time because you aren't walking away with stat blocks and maps and the like, but when I come up with some way to make a player's choice of feat or paragon path really matter in a game then that player suddenly buys into the story in a way they didn't before and they appear to have a lot of fun seeing where it

all goes.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?**

Setting up Dungeon Tiles. I invested in them, so I occasionally like to use them, but I've never had anyone tell me how awesome the Dungeon Tile set up was and I have at least one player who typically says that he would prefer a drawn map to a well laid out set of Dungeon Tiles. That said, it could be a few players giving me an impression that may not be true for a silent majority…but the data I have says that using Dungeon Tiles is the least impactful prep I can spend my time with.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

I have moments that are highly memorable from both categories but for different reasons and what's more, most memorable is not the same as enjoyable. My party remembers quite well the time they let the evil cult summon a slaad to terrorize the city because it wasn't any of their business. Not enjoyable…but they've remembered it for years. Some spontaneous moments led to highly planned moments that were memorable and enjoyable. For example, to avoid a TPK I had a trapped demon lord save a PC in the early days of my campaign. For the next 3 years the other players taunted him about having a "demon master" that told him to do things. The only thing the demon did say was that in the future the PCs would be powerful enough to free him and they would. All of that was spontaneous…but it set me up to spend the next few years planning for when they would eventually free that

demon lord much to their own surprise…and they did it willingly.

I guess to sum up, the most memorable and enjoyable times in my game come in three categories. 1. Big story moments that, through careful planning, tied into the PCs/players personally, 2. Unplanned moments that took the story in unexpected directions but then allowed me to plan for in other ways, 3. Character moments…players/PCs will do things you aren't expected and sometimes those things are awesome, hilarious, or definitive for the campaign (which, of course, are things that you can't control or plan for at all…if you could you wouldn't need other players).

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

The failure of my game sessions almost never have anything to do with prep. It's almost always about a story that didn't go well or a challenge where I went too far as a DM. That said, I avoided failures due to game prep several times by having some simple strategies in place. When the players went an unexpected direction I am usually able to convert things over to a role-playing/problem-solving heavy situation where prep is less needed and allow that to cover the time for the rest of the session, giving me time to think and prep for the new direction. Over time I also became good at avoiding this problem because I got to know my players and what motivated their PCs well enough that I could provide them with choices where I was pretty confident I knew where they would choose to go.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

I'd pull monsters, ideas for gimmicks and obstacles, and a bare concept for a story (which I'd probably look to the monster selection for inspiration).

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

Typically as I read game products and/or listen to podcasts I see or come up with story ideas that are calling out to me to be told. As for influences there are ones internal to the campaign and ones that are external. My players, their choices (both mechanical choices and story choices) help inform me what to do next (although not always in the expected way) internal. And externally, I consume media I come up with ideas, as I read game products/blogs, conduct podcasts, and listen to advice from others I often ask myself "am I doing that in my game?" and if I'm not "is there a way I could to make things better?".

**What are your most useful tips, tricks, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

Find inspiration from the things you have to do anyway. Look for the monsters to use and then come up with a story as to why they would all be together and why the PCs might be coming after them. Draw your map with odd and interesting things on it…THEN come up with what those things are and lastly, what mechanical effect they have. Get help from others. One of my favorite things to do that works really well for me is bouncing ideas off of other people, be it in a BtDMS recording, by writing about it on THP, or just asking Twitter or whatever friends happen to be on Skype that night. Fresh minds with less stake in the larger campaign will often help me come up with ideas that I never would have thought of

and, because I'm hyper-focused on story, I know will be made to work well in the larger campaign.

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## James Grummell

James Grummell is the 2008 Iron Dungeon Master and third-place winner of the 2011 PAX East Dungeon Master Championship. He's been a Dungeons and Dragons dungeon master since 1990; running 2nd, 3rd, 3.5, 4e, and Pathfinder games.

### What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?

Despite my love of the story I am giving the players, I feel the most core element to running a game is knowing your monsters. Their tactics, their powers, etc. You can improvise a lot of aspects to your game and get away with it. But the math of the game is hard to fake. If you just run a monster without a stat sheet in front of you, the players for the most part pick up on it. When they realize you are not being bound to the same rules they are playing by you lose some of the trust they place in you. And that makes for a bad game.

### What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?

Trying to come up with every possible scenario the players can do in the game session. You should not railroad your dungeon encounter into a one-way path. Players want the freedom to know they can explore your world no matter the story you have prepared. By the same token you should avoid naming every building in a farming village in case the party ever asks about the name of the blacksmith. Unless the party has absolutely

announced prior to the game they are going to do something, you need to generalize as much of the game as you can. I heard a theory once on time travel that the universe would compensate for a paradox. If you killed Hitler in an attempt to take his place and win WWII for Germany, the universe would adapt. After you killed Hitler, possibly to keep the German army following your leadership, you had to impersonate Hitler. In the end you will most likely die defeated in possibly a slightly different location from the original Hitler. Aside from a few minor details. the future will turn out somewhat the same. Your games should be the same. If you plan the party to meet a Wizard in a Tower, but the players choose to never go there, have the Wizard out on some errand later on for them to meet up. Do not force your players to go to the Tower but also avoid coming up with an entirely different person to impart the information you wanted to give them.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

One of my personally favorite moments involved a gateway being opened by a group of players. Some of the players entered the portal to find a world overrun by undead. Eventually the party discovered that time moved slower, making 1 round on the undead plane equaling 5 rounds on the Material Plane. When a Demigod level Lich entered the scene, the players in the (fast) Material World watched in horror as their friends ran for the portal in slow motion as very slow fireballs and rays of energy came at them. The conditions of the portal and the Monsters were planned, but the players reactions to the conditions were totally spontaneous. One such enjoyable outcome was players shooting spells into the

portal only to see them reduce speed. The players on the slow side were forced to dodge when the spells came right at where they were intending to go. The casters had not taken the delayed time into account you see. The scene built in tension to one player sacrificing his life to close the portal. Not able to get to the other side in time, he stretched his arm out, extending it ahead of him through the portal long enough to activate a magic item at the accelerated time of the Material plane. And of course you know the Scene where you ran into the Huntlands and avoided Arthurs traps was completely unplanned.

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

I cannot think of many games I have felt went poorly due to lack of planning other than considering preparation for the player's reactions. One of my players was searching for her brother, a dwarf, who apparently was kidnapped. They spent several sessions chasing down the trail only to discover the Dwarf in bed with another Man engaging in risque acts. I had made a backstory about the Dwarf was in love with a town Chef. Knowing their love would cause a scandal, the dwarf had engineered the kidnapped story and ran away with his lover. Before I could explain that to the player, she walked out, refusing to ever play in my game again. She had assumed I had made a joke out of her character's quest and it is still one of my DM regrets. I should have considered my audience reaction more. I will say games I have done zero prep time on have given me the least satisfaction. Just sitting down and running with nothing prepared, I felt like I was a drowning man trying to tread water. From looking up monsters, to describing a

scene, I can do it if pressed but the game is solely for the players benefit. I feel drained afterwards and feel bad about a poor effort on my part even if the players have fun. The best game sessions I found have typically had at least 2-3 hours prep time (less if I did a lot of work prior to the campaign), had an idea (like two planes running on different time flows) that I really wanted to see play out, and was flexible enough to adapt to the players actions.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

- I would decide on the level to run.
- I would randomly roll some monster types (Natural, Aberration, Fey, Etc).
- I would randomly decide to do a City, Wilderness, or Dungeon Adventure.
- I would randomly pick 2 treasures for the game and 1 consumable.
- I would pick 1 Minion and 1 Solo level appropriate.
- I would then pick 2-3 Brute/Soldiers/Controllers and/or Artillery to use.
- I would then take all of that and break it down into some encounters.
- If I had time I would work in some terrain or traps. If not, I would add it as I go.
- I would tend to also draw the maps as I went.

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

Usually the ingredients I put together randomly prior to the start of

the campaign decide the story for me. I am just packaging them up into a fun adventure. I think it speaks to my love of food network reality shows like Chopped and Iron Chef.

Still Prior to any campaign I usually have a special event I want to play out. Like a table sized Maze. I tend to build the adventures leading up to that big event.

**What are your most useful tips, tricks, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

An Excel Spreadsheet detailing what game elements I will be using for each session (Treasure, Key Monsters, Enviornment Effects, Factions, Etc).

MSPaint to screenshot the monster stats from the Compendium. Then pasting the stats side by side in MSPaint to make a large PNG file. Then I upload that to an iPad for easy reference for an encounter. Legos with sticky putty under dungeon tiles to give the map a 3d look.

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## Tracy Hurley

Tracy Hurley is the creator of Sarah Darkmagic, co-producer of The Tome Show, one of the members of the 4 Geeks 4e, and a freelance columnest for Wizards of the Coast. Tracy began her dungeon mastering experience with Dungeons and Dragons 4th edition, running both a home campaign as well as numerous introduction to D&D events at both Gencon and Pax East.

Note: this interview was conducted face to face at Gencon on 18 August 2012 at the JW Marriott in Indianapolis, IN. Tracy reviewed and approved the following transcribed notes.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

Tweaking and modifying monsters to add fun powers and powers that match synergies between monsters and improve the enjoyment of the game for the PCs helps a lot. Tracy had no experience running modules previous to 4th edition so paying special attention to encounter design helped considerably. Tracy drew maps a the table and is pretty good at improvising NPCs with little preparation needed.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?**

Like many DMs, Tracy found that preparing a game well in advance had little improvement to the game later. She would find herself modifying an adventure idea right before running it. She found that thinking about an adventure hard for a while, then forgetting about it, and then returning to it added a lot of creative impact.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

It is a mix. There's an advantage in building an interesting story between sessions that has an impact based on the spontaneous events near the end of the previous session. Sometimes the most interesting and memorable stories happened from refining and moving forward an improvised origin.

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

Lack of module preparation led to the least successful games. Modules require a good bit of reading and understanding before they're used at the table. When the goals of the game between the DM and the players break down, it leads to a bad game. For example, if a DM is very story-focused but the players want a more combat-focused game, the game won't be enjoyable to either group. Running a game over the internet also makes it very hard to gauge how invested the players are.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

Choose some monsters, build a story around those monsters to put them in the game, build environments on the fly that fit the capabilities of the PCs and interests of the players.

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

Everywhere. CSI works well for investigative games. My Little Pony works for building an RPG for children.

**What are your most useful tips, tricks, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

Use the Monster Builder and a random encounter chart to choose which monsters might fit in your adventure. D&D isn't always about fights. Listen to the players, they will tell you what they want to do.

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## Matt James

Matt is a freelance author for Wizards of the Coast, having co-authored the Monster Vault, Threats to the Nentir Vale as well as numerous D&D Insider articles. Matt's been running D&D games

since 1987.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

When I prepare for my games, I find that it is important to outline what I think will transpire during the session and how that will interact with the overall campaign. I rarely run a linear campaign, regardless of size, and prefer to have the players influence how things will transpire. That being said, preparing very, very wide rails for them to play around in is important. More specifically, I will jot down some key points on how I see the story developing. After mulling over the points and refining them, I will then transfer them to colored index cards for organizational purposes: red for combat, yellow for political intrigue, blue for long-term (or campaign-wide) plot, and green for side treks. For me, organizing this way helps me to visualize my story in a way that is more spacial. In the end it helps save me time (you shouldn't spend time creating walls of text), and helps to organize how my players traverse through my story.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?**

For me, when I detail every bit of information into a document, I find that the players ultimately mess up anything that I have prepared. I find that the more I tighten the rails of the story, the players wiggle their way out. This can be an incredible waste of time if you're like me and prefer to allow the story more room to breath. It is also important to key in on what you're players want to do with their characters and focus on their desires when possible. Even the greatest DMs in the world sometimes create content that

just doesn't interest their players. If you spend an exorbitant amount of time preparing something the players just won't enjoy, you might find that it has a very negative effect on your game, and your time.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

I think there needs to be a balance. As I explained earlier, you should aim for very wide rails for your game. You want to provide guidance, but not force your players into predetermined pathways. You need to craft your story in a way that both satisfies your enjoyment as much as the player's interest. Remember this: The best DMs make their players think it was their idea all along.

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

Lack of preparation can be mitigated with some experience as a DM. Unfortunately, this skill comes mostly with time. I have been playing D&D since 1987 and started DMing in the mid 90s. To this day, I still get bit when I inadequately prepare. You're players will know when you are not prepared, and it will cause your campaign to suffer as a result. By refining what works best for you, and molding that into a process that is simple and not time consuming, you will start to prevent any poor outcome from coming up. Be warned, however. It is a perishable skill. Keep working at it, and you'll improve in no time. But always remember to keep it up.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

I always keep possible plots in my head and in a journal. There are basic tropes and situations that all gamers are instinctively familiar with. The more that you run, the more easily it will be to improve at the table. If you only have 30 minutes to prepare, do as I suggested earlier and draft out a bulleted list of key points. Also, if you are more visual (like I am), you can draw bubbles and fill in the plot points, Have them connected via lines based on how you want to see it play out.

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## Michael Mallen

Michael Mallen runs the Id DM website and twitter feed. He's both a dungeon master and practicing psychologist who authored some exellent analyses of Dungeons and Dragons including the Penny Arcade Combat Encounter Analysis and I am the Entertainer and I Know Just Where I Stand. Michael was first exposed to D&D in the 80s and has been running a weekly campaign since 2009.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

I need to first mention the wonderful tool that is Masterplan. The software, which can be obtained online for free, assists me with creating adventures. In the software, I can organize many plot points and possible avenues the party could take in future sessions. I can store NPCs and monsters the party may encounter and the software also has features to run encounters more smoothly at the table. It really is a lifesaver for me since it keeps all of my notes about the campaign in one place that can be easily accessed while at the gaming table. If you are a DM of 4th Edition and have not tried to use Masterplan, then you owe it to yourself to

download the software and experiment with it to determine if it can help your preparation.

As for specific activities, our group has the rare benefit of having *many* sets of Dwarven Forge terrain. While this is a luxury, preparing to use terrain and props ahead of time can result in the party being railroaded into an encounter because the DM already built it. As the DM, I spent time creating the terrain and preparing for the encounter, so I'm more likely to steer the players in that direction. It is wonderful to prepare an elaborate map with terrain and allow players to take advantage of it, but there is a potential drawback of taking away the player's choice of where they want to take the adventure.

I have found that one area I struggle with is improvisation. To remedy this, I prepare possible lines of dialogue for important NPCs for the next gaming session. I shy away from reading this dialogue at the table, but it gives me a foundation to work from instead of relying on my ability to come up with snappy language for each character every session. I also write flavor text ahead of time for locations and even monster powers. I find combat can get stale and turn into a litany of attack and damage rolls; I enjoy elaborating the monsters' actions and powers with descriptive language. When I do not prepare flavor text ahead of time, it can get lost in the shuffle of running the session.

Overall, I believe my preparation activities related to specific flavor text including dialogue aimed at bringing the world to life for the players is the most effective use of my time. Combat encounters can be quickly thrown together (Masterplan helps in this regard) but the players need specific details on locations and characters to make decisions and CARE about the world.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?**

The first thought that comes to mind is the mistake I have made in the past about planning too far in advance. For example, before a session takes place, I will consider where the party is likely to go not only in the next session but also in the coming weeks and months. In my mind, I have planned out a super adventure with various plot twists, locations and NPCs. While preparing for this long game is helpful to give me a sense of scope, it does little to make the NEXT session run well.

The players have not spent the same amount of time "living in the world" as I do between sessions. Most of them time, they need detailed summaries about what happened during the past session, so expecting them to focus on long-term goals and issues in the world is not realistic or productive. I have certainly made mistakes inserting too many long-running story lines that have developed over many levels and even *gasp* Tiers of play in 4th Edition. Learn from this error and focus as much as possible on the next session. Where are the players starting? What are their options? Who might they meet?

Even if I plan the plot out many sessions in advance, the players will certainly throw me a curve anyway and the story will develop in a way I never anticipated. Working on what MIGHT happen months down the road in the campaign is not a good use of my time because it does not do anything specific to make the next session more engaging and interesting for the players.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How**

**often were they spontaneous?**

I hope there are memorable moments that are generated from pre-planned and spontaneous situations. One example of a pre-planned moment was I asked a player who has a penchant for roleplaying to create a ghost story to tell around a fire to the party. I knew they would be in the wilderness and needing to rest during the next session and it was a game that was played during the week of Halloween; I figured it would give him a chance to shine and be something different for the party to experience.

He really hammed it up and told a spooky tale about a witch and a rather nasty bowl of soup. The other players were guffawing a bit as they were ready to move on with the adventure - there were some good-natured moans and groans as the story was told in the deliberate fashion! It is a situation that is still talked about by the group. They joke about the story and the player who told the tale threatens to regale the party again with his exploits.

It has taken practice, but learning when and how to use "set piece" combat encounters can take a session to another level. I used a combination of Dwarven Forge terrain and a large portal prop for the concluding battle with a major villain to end the Heroic Tier of our campaign. Laying out the terrain and the environmental effects of the portal were great to grab the players' collective attention. During the path to the set piece, the players were presented with a variety of roleplaying opportunities to learn about the history of the villain; she became somewhat of a tragic figure and the Cleric went so far to attempt to save her corrupted soul.

It was not a set of encounter that I could have created "on the fly" and it led to good results. But there have been many moments

when unexpected things happen at the table that add to the enjoyment of everyone - roleplaying moments by characters, style points in combat, decisions that change the track of an adventure - really too many to count. I once introduced a potion vendor along a street side that sold potions; this turned into a 45 minute battering session with the players as they sought out potions, poisons and antidotes. I used another free program, Power2ool, to sort through items and the players happily spent their well-earned gold to stock up their supplies.

The important thing is that the DM rewards players for engaging in spontaneous and creative actions. I personally give players +1 tokens for creative actions and entertaining roleplaying. Over the past two years of running games, I've learned to embrace the spontaneity more often and allow it to take over instead of getting "back on track."

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

Ironically, the worst session I have ever run was one of the sessions I felt most prepared to run. Before the session, I realized there were too many dangling plot lines and the players were losing track of their goals and motives for completing their current quests. I wanted to ensure that the session contained enough exposition to realign the party with their goals and empower them to make informed decisions.

To this end, I prepared dialogue for a variety of NPCs to clear up points of confusion with the storyline including a "Bond villain" speech by a major bad guy that the party would meet while they

were undercover infiltrating a criminal organization. In addition, I planned out two encounters thinking the party could respond the information in one or two ways. I created an elaborate Dwarven Forge room that could be used for either encounter (another trick I have learned with the pieces) and figured I was well-prepared for the session.

Wrong.

The players did gain a clearer understanding of the plot connections of different quests in the campaign, but they still felt uncertain how to act. In retrospect, they did not have a trusted NPC to consult even though they learned exactly what the villain was planning. And while I planned for two possible outcomes for the evening, the players managed to find a third and fourth option I never anticipated. The session was a disaster!

Learning from this, I think one thing I should have prepared was a NPC the party could trust to consult and provide guidance about "what to do next." Even though I thought I laid out the options very clearly - again, the players are not spending the same amount of time thinking about the campaign world and how all the characters connect.

The final lesson from the poor session is to avoid thinking that every possible angle is covered. Having this false sense of security can completely throw off a session when the party does not zig or zag but zegs, zogs or zugs! Even when you think everything is as prepared as it could possibly be allow for the reality of blank stares and uncertainty from the players. One can never prepare for every possible outcome before a session.

And that is okay.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

I would focus on the first encounter of the session. I would reflect on where the adventure ended last session and consider how to either continue the momentum from the previous session or jumpstart the adventure once again early in the next session. If the players need a combat encounter to get the session started, then I would spend time creating the specifics. If the players need a new quest, then I would spend time creating different NPCs to populate a location nearby to the players. I would do all of this in Masterplan, which allows me to detail potential encounters, NPCs and plot points to be used in the event that they are engaged by the party.

I would rely on published adventures, which is something I've done more of in recent months. There is no need for me to work to create home-brewed adventures all the time when there are so many readily available in manuals and modules. Save yourself the time and peruse those resources to find quests and characters that are intriguing and fit with the type of campaign you want to run. Lately, I have used a combination of The Shadowfell box set with the Tomb of Horrors super adventure. I have taken bits and pieces from the published settings and infused them into my home brew world.

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

My ideas are generation from a combination of sheer panic and fear that my players will realize I'm overmatched and don't belong behind the screen!

I take ideas from everywhere - television shows, movies, blogs, published adventures, real-life news stories and video games. Much of my inspiration for how to structure the campaign and how the players interact with the world is from video games. I create a variety of NPCs that act as "mission hubs" similar to games like Grand Theft Auto and Red Dead Redemption. The players learn about the specific NPC, the campaign world and can anticipate the type of quest they will undertake if they meet with a certain individual. This approach was very useful early in the campaign when I wanted to keep the scale of the adventures small. The players knew they could meet with any of the following:

**Dorwin Farringwray** - the sneaky dwarven rogue who promised great rewards but with high risks

**Brother Laurence** - the pious human cleric who served as a mentor for the party and offered missions to help the local citizens

**Hornan Dawntracker** - the disgruntled human fighter who is captain of the guard and seeks to protect the city from external and internal threats

**"Silver"** - the gregarious dragonborn pirate who is always found enjoying the seedier aspects of nightlife down by the docks and offers questionable tasks for the party

I was able to bring an entire city to life through the personal stories of these four NPCs. Instead of writing background on a huge number of possible NPCs, I funneled the party to one of the four NPCs above. The players were able to work on their personal goals while learning about other quests available in the world. This approach is not different from the presentation of plot hooks and important NPCs in a published adventure, but thinking about it in

terms of a video game really helped me to conceptualize how to use the NPCs at the table.

A primary influence during preparation is the fear that I will not have enough material for a four-to-five hour gaming session. I know each player has a busy life outside of our campaign so I value their time and do not want to waste it. The least I can do is be prepared to have something ready for them to interact with once they arrive. Lately, I have relied more on published content instead of creating my own encounters and adventures. Even though I rely more often on published material, I still spend time reading through the adventure and encounters to familiarize myself with the content. Studying the published modules allows me to react quicker to spontaneous actions from the players; I can allow things to go off track if I know a few ways to get things back on course if need be later in the session. My preparation continues even as I'm driving to the gaming session and preparing last-minute before the players get settled into their chairs - what can I say, I procrastinate!

**What are your most useful tips, trick, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

First I will cover the relevant tools that every DM should experiment with. I discussed the merits of Masterplan earlier, but they are worth mentioning again. It gives a DM of any system - but especially 4th Edition D&D - a wide variety of tools to prepare content and run sessions more efficiently. It also allows you to use the features you enjoy while ignoring those that do not apply. I personally run Skill Challenges in a loose format and ignore Complexity; but for those that enjoy those mechanics, Masterplan allows you to construct a detailed Skill Challenge with adjustable

Complexity, DCs and outcomes. It really is a wonderful piece of software and its creator is a terrific guy! A second tool I often use is Power2ool, which allows me to create custom monsters and magic items. The format of the stat blocks takes a bit of trial and error to achieve the desired results; once those lessons are learned, the program allows the user a great deal of freedom in building stat blocks.

The most useful tip I can give is something I mentioned above, and that is to focus your preparation on what lies directly ahead of the party. Planning massive story arcs is fun - I daydream all the time about how the campaign will unfold and all the great things the party will encounter - but that does little to make the next session enjoyable for the players. As much as possible, keep your mind on what you are going to do once the players take their seats and they are ready to begin. How do you get the session started? Your preparation should truly begin there.

I have found it enjoyable to spend time on one prop for an encounter I know will be involved during the evening; this could be a letter the party discovers as a clue during exploration, a unique terrain environment for combat or a potion a prominent NPC asks them to drink during roleplaying. It can be useful to have one physical thing for the party to latch onto during a session. The theater of the mind is wonderful, but a tangible reminder of what is happening in the world can be useful.

If you also have the luxury of Dwarven Forge or other terrain pieces, then consider how you can build out an area that can be used for multiple encounter options during the next session. Perhaps the terrain can be used as a venue for a combat with an evil band of Tieflings in their hideout or a misunderstanding with

the town guard in their barracks. It can easy to funnel players into an encounter area you've constructed so it's best to have at least two potential uses for the area going into the session.

The final tips are related to interacting with the players. First, enlist their support! No one says that that DM has to perform 100% of the preparation and world building. Ask players to roleplay through email between sessions. Ask them to develop character background to tie into current events in the campaign. Inquire if they are willing to make props or bring other unique additions to the gaming table. Earlier in the year, I started to ask players to organize the sessions through reminder emails to see who could attend. Previously, I performed those duties but delegating to the players freed up a small chunk of time while engaging them in the campaign. I often conspire with one player regarding plot elements before a session and rely on that person's character to lead the party in one direction or the other. And if the party disagrees, then it creates a good sense of drama and allows the relationships around the table to develop. In summary, know that preparation does not only need to fall on the DM's shoulders.

Second, communicate directly with the players. Find out what they prefer in the game. Do they enjoy elaborate props and terrain or detailed interactions with interesting NPCs? Gauge their preferences and this will provide you with valuable information to tailor your preparation for future sessions. Roleplaying games are a group effort; remember that and be sure to share the burden with your players.

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## Davena Oaks

Davena runs the website The She DM and goes by theshedm on Twitter. Davena has been running D&D games for 11 years.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

Encounter building: a poorly built combat encounter is no fun for everyone and a great combat can make up for a lackluster roleplaying session. It's not particularly hard to build good combat encounters with a little time, but it's more than a little difficult to improvise a great encounter on spur-of-the-moment. I'd rather not improvise if I don't have to.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the last positive effect on the game?**

Treasure planning. I've always been terrible at it in any system that has equipment. I agonize over the task and as a result my parties are chronically under-equipped and my encounters lack that glee of finding unexpected rewards.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

It's an interesting question because some of the very best moments have started planned and turned into spontaneous. Its well known no plan survives contact with the players, so it usually starts off with a plan for a good session when the players do something completely unexpected and I have to start improvising heavily. Certainly some planned sessions have been fairly memorable, but the improvised ones are always the ones that stand out to me.

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

In a game I haven't fully prepped I can usually manage to improvise enough to keep the session above water. My worst sessions that have failed spectacularly were because of fatigue. Sessions I prepared weeks in advance have bombed because I was running on four hours of sleep in a 36 hour period.

When I'm tired from a long day at work or if I'm sleep deprived, everything suffers regardless of preparation. If I realize how badly things are going I become desperate to do something to "rescue" the bad game and make extremely poor judgements on how to steer the roleplaying - judgements I later suffer for as I have to reconcile any drastic consequences later in the campaign.

As simple as it is to say "be well-rested" its probably the most ignored advice out there. Caffeine doesn't restore energy, it just blocks the feeling of fatigue. If you're low on energy then your brain will still show it regardless what you try to do to compensate for it. If I had no option to cancel/reschedule on a day I was lacking some Z's, I'd choose to take a nap first, prepare later.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

On short notice I usually whip up 'creature feature' type of encounter. I pick a gem of a monster - an elite or solo that is interesting, add a few supporting creatures. Lacking preparation, single monsters are easy to drop into most campaigns or situations with very little excuse. Then I focus on a premise for the fight and any interesting hooks I can possibly work in. If I can work

in anything particular to the campaign - great! If not, well… random monsters do attack on occasion.

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

I get my ideas from all over. I read a lot, and watch a lot of Netflix. I also listen to other live-play D&D podcasts, other DM's ideas can often be re-fitted to suit my campaign.

**What are your most useful tips, tricks, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

1. Having a third party perspective. I always take a little time to discuss my game with a friend who isn't involved with my table. It's easy to get all wrapped up inside my own head and forget to consider an outside point-of-view. A friend can help generate ideas, act as a sounding-board, and know when to tell me "that's a terrible idea". Because they're not involved at my table, I don't have to conceal anything from them to avoid spoiling their fun, which makes open analysis and feedback much easier.
2. Listening to recordings of my previous session. This is new for me, but it has quickly become my favorite. Better than reading notes (although I take those too), I listen to my recording while working. Reviewing my session recordings has done a lot to make me aware of many things I'd forget or miss inbetween sessions. I can also scrutinize what my group responded to the most, which players might need some more spotlight time, and what areas of my own DMing could using improving (e.g. "I didn't describe that room very well, I should work on describing my environments better").

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## Steve Townshend

Steve Townshend is a published Wizards of the Coast freelancer with co-author titles on Heroes of the Feywild, Madness at Gardmore Abbey, and the Monster Manual 3. He was also a professional actor with formal training in improvisation. Steve has been playing D&D since 1982 and running D&D games since 1991.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

I ask myself what, in general, I can get done in the session and I've tried to narrow it down to basically three parts that form the beginning, middle, and end of the adventure. I do this usually while taking a walk somewhere I'm not distracted, oftentimes on my lunch break. I figure out where I want to leave them at the end of the session and then try to figure out what the beginning should be like (ideally a different feel so that the game feels like it has motion). The hard part is then figuring out what I want to put between those points. Roughly three things happen in the session, with a couple minor things that happen along the way. Having that kind of rough framework helps me keep my mind on the session as a whole and keeps the game moving. In the old days I'd just sort of go and see what we accomplished in a night. There's a beauty to that kind of slow play, but more often then not, I'd end up letting the players obsess about things that weren't important or pursue tiny details that were, quite frankly, boring in the scheme of things. Having an idea of the shape of a session in my head has been hugely beneficial.

That's more heady stuff. The practical things I do are:

- The time I tell the players we're starting is actually half an hour prior to when I plan to start. That way we're actually ready to start on the schedule I have in mind. Even if people come on time, there's a certain amount of chatting, catching up, and arranging things that needs to happen prior to play. People need to order food and get comfortable, or do their pre-game ritual whatever that happens to be.
- I set up all the stuff I need a half hour to an hour prior to when I've told the players to come over. This way, when they come over I can pay attention to them instead of rushing to get my stuff set up. Nowadays, I eat before they arrive. I don't mind if they eat while I'm running the game, but it can get distracting if we're all eating at the same time.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?**

I'm not sure how to answer this except to talk about stuff I don't do anymore. I don't fiddle with the mechanics too much, just adjust on the fly. I don't write down whole adventures, just notes. If I overthink a session, more often than not it will be stiff, dry, and boring. When I have a few rough ideas and ready-to-use mechanics, I'm more open to whatever the players want to do.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

Ah, coming right off the last question! There have been a couple pre-planned bombshells I've dropped on them in all our many years of gaming, but by and large the best stuff comes about in the moment and surprises me as well. For me, the best moments have

almost always been the spontaneous ones because they have player input *and* DM input. We've all created them together. Only very rarely are the players gobsmacked by my genius (I can only think of twice off the top of my head, and they required extensive manipulation by me).

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

I'm thinking of a 4e game we played in fall 2011 that was the first time back for the players after a long hiatus. I was on a time table because one of the players only had a few sessions to play before he would have to drop out of the game, so I was rushing things along. There was a relatively minor encounter that turned into an hour and a half of combat. The players spent a lot of time looking at their character sheets trying to figure out what to do. They said they had fun, but I was left with vast feelings of dissatisfaction. It's hard to say what should have been different. The players should have looked over their character sheets again since it had been so long since they'd played. I could have taken a longer look at how long the encounter would go and made almost everything in the encounter a minion. There was too much grind, grind, grind in that encounter. I wanted them to feel threatened, but it ended up just being slow.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

End, Beginning, Middle, and 3-5 character sketches of NPCs.

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

Everything. Movies, books, life. It's all very organic to what's going on in the campaign. I look at what each character wants and what would be an interesting way to challenge that character-not physically but emotionally. Any character can kill a dragon given the right rolls, equipment, and abilities. But making damning choices is what I love the most. I'm pretty well aware of what the players think of their characters and who they think their characters are and who they want their characters to be. A lot of times I'll further those ends by giving them stuff to do that makes those characters shine. But what I really love is to put them in difficult moral circumstances. Character is conflict, conflict is drama.

**What are your most useful tips, tricks, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

All of the above. Plus, as we've talked about before, thinking of your group as your team, your source of ideas and inspiration, your fellow storytellers in the incredible tale you're weaving together. When the players agree to agree, furthering the story threads as they're laid out, that's sometimes all the prep one needs.

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## Randall Walker

Randall Walker is a co-host of the 4 Geeks 4e podcast, co-author of the blog This is My Game, and has been running games since the late 80s. His most recent regular campaign group, the Dead Orcs Society, has been running since 2000.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the most positive effect on your game?**

Anything that smooths combat along has been best received. Having monsters ready to go, miniatures prepared, terrain or maps prepared. etc.

**What D&D game preparation activities have the least positive effect on the game?**

It's hard to say. While it's not a negative effect, my story prep seems to have little impact on my players. Currently, my group seems to be far more "kill & take their stuff" focused. In fact, most of the impact prep time has seemed to be on my players who are almost never prepared to game.

**Thinking back on your most memorable and enjoyable D&D moments at the table, how often were they pre-planned? How often were they spontaneous?**

It's run the gamut. Back in my 3.5 days, I built about 1/2 of the Tomb of Horrors from Hirst Arts stuff. The attention to detail (including working pit traps) was very well received. On the other end of the spectrum, I ran a completely ad-hoc wilderness travel game session where I pretty much had nothing prepared (other than the knowledge that the party would be traveling down a river in a raft). That session was spontaneous and we all enjoyed it quite a bit.

**Thinking back on a D&D game that went poorly, how much of the outcome was due to a lack of preparation? What could have you prepared to avoid the poor outcome?**

When our group was doing Keep on the Shadowfell, I tried to use as much terrain as possible (in addition to the provided maps). However, the set up for each section was laborious, and it showed in how the players responded in game. Each take-down/set-up of

a new encounter completely broke immersion. From then, I learned not to have a terrain heavy session if I didn't give myself appropriate prep time. Instead, I started to use published maps that I could "hot swap" quickly.

**If you had only 30 minutes to prepare for a D&D game, how would you prepare?**

Depends on the version, really. For 4e, I'd grab a module (either hard copy or DDI), a copy of the Monstrous Compendium, and a pre-published map and run that way. With any other version, I'd grab a copy of that version's Monster Manual, Blank Map Paper, and a tome containing a number of random tables. I might also do a brief town adventure with very little prep.

**Where do you come up with your ideas for your game? What influences you as you prepare to run a D&D game?**

Tough to answer concisely. During 4e, I've been running a lot of published adventures to cut down on some prep time. Of course recently, I've been inspired by my favorite video game series of all time, the Myst/Uru series of games by Cyan. I tend to try to take non-traditional genres like Westerns, or Sci-Fi and convert them to fantasy tales.

**What are your most useful tips, tricks, and tools when preparing for your D&D game?**

Use a mind-map of some kind. There are great tools online for this kind of thing, but you can just as easily mind-map on a legal pad or whiteboard. Isolate the components of your adventure/campaign, and take a little piece at a time. You don't have to tackle anything in "order" either, although you want to know enough about what's coming immediately ahead so you're not stuck with that "Uhhhh"

moment. I'm lousy at it, but you should also be prepared with some stock encounters in case your players decided to take your adventure off the rails. An ad-hoc town square brawl, river voyage, or cave exploring experience can keep things fresh and make it seem like your world is far more developed than it really is.

If you want to use elaborate sets, go for it! However, make sure they're special events (boss fights, major conflicts, etc.). The players will think they're special and you'll have less a chance of your players ignoring your beautiful terrain in favor of some other event. I recommend ALWAYS planning at least 2 weeks ahead when you want to do an elaborate set up. Make sure it is created in such a way that it can be moved, or replaced quickly if the players finish it quickly or if they go off the rails.

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Michael E. Shea is a writer, gamer, and technologist and creator of Sly Flourish, a website dedicated to building the better Dungeons and Dragons dungeon master. Mike is the the author of Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips and Sly Flourish's Running Epic Tier D&D Games and is a freelance author for Wizards of the Coast. Mike has been playing Dungeons and Dragons since 1987.

Mike Shea lives with his wife, Michelle, and their dire-warg Jebu in Virginia.