

THE ART OF THE DM



BY
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After Dungeon Mastering for a few games and settling on a style of gameplay that suits your narrative, you will soon realize that your “game” is never complete or finished.

Over time you will come to develop and play your favorite NPC’s, adventures, and villains, as they themselves develop as living constructs over the months and years of playing.

It can be interesting to see where you started as a DM, and where you currently are or wound up.

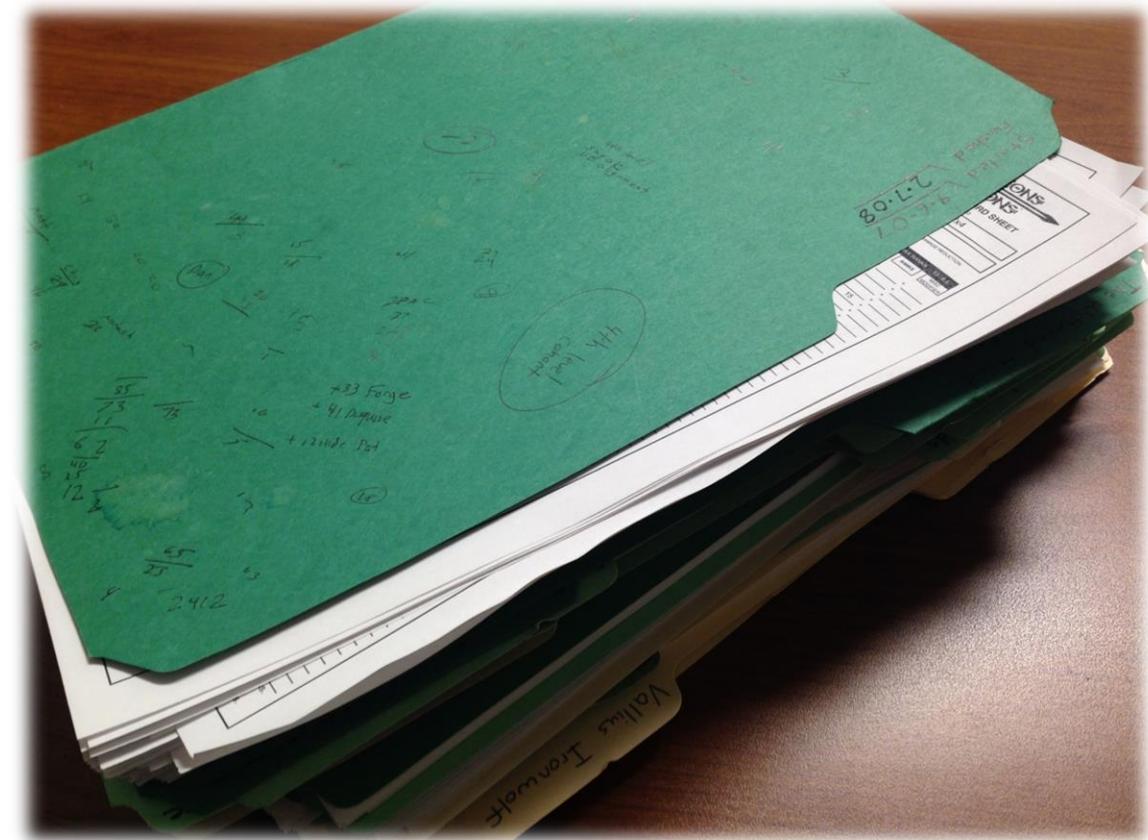
Some ideas work out and become a staple in your future adventures, while others, looking back sounded better than they are.

One of my goals in sharing my own Dungeon Mastering experiences is that I want to challenge and help you grow as a DM. In that growth I don’t mean copy or mimic, but rather see a bit of what I have done, experienced, and take what you like making it better and more expansive than I ever could have done.

In this PDF guide I’m going to walk you through the fundamental skills of being an effective Dungeon Master along with outlining many of the challenges you will face as a new Dungeon Master. The goal of the process is to help you find your vision and voice as a DM, so you can really create your own gaming world and inject your passion and creativity into it

without having to worry if you are going to mess up, get something wrong, or if it isn't good enough.

Following this we are then going to look at a treasure trove of both Dungeon Master and player/adventure notes from some of my older adventures and campaigns. I've scanned these in from my notes as they are a mix of documents, character sheets, and notes- forgive my hand writing at times!



These are going to be used to support the direct skills that we covered in the Art of the Dungeon Master section- illustrating NPC's and adventures in action.

While it's true that the focus of what makes a good adventure is a compelling story- the reason for undertaking the adventure anyway, it is the NPC (non-player-characters) that are the bridge between the Dungeon Master and the players.

Having "good" NPC's is what draws in and communicates that adventure plot to the players.

One of the ways that we develop a compelling NPC is to get them to the part where they are an extension and avatar of who the Dungeon Master is- and one of the ways to do this is to play your "NPC's as player characters in other games to work out their motivations and personalities in a structure outside your own adventure.

Illustrating this are my player notes and adventure summaries for six of my favorite characters who are both player characters in the games I get to play as a player, and NPC's that I use as a DM.

We then look at some Dungeon Master notes from both my homebrew Tales of the Northernland game and The Forgotten Realms- both tabletop, online, and chat based adaptations of the game.

As you read through my notes and exploits try to see where I've applied the Art of the DM skills in driving both the characters and game- take the best, and leave the worst!

Art of the Dungeon Master Introduction.

Welcome to the Eternal Dungeon Master's guide to the Art of the Dungeon Master!

In this PDF, I, Fritz, will humbly take you through the challenges of being a Dungeon Master and running your first few adventures in the D&D game.

The goal of this guide is to help you discover your vision and voice as a Dungeon Master- the what and how of running a game that matches your personality.

When you are comfortable and confident with your role as the Dungeon Master, the adventure and its challenges will both flow together and you will have a great game. I want to take you from just being the person running the adventure, to the Dungeon Master participating and growing the game with your players, so both lines blur and all of you (DM & players alike) are living, breathing, and creating this fantasy world.

I want to share with you my experiences as a DM for the past twenty years or so, taking that experience and distilling it down to really get you excited and started as the DM.

Ready for the adventure?

Prepare for glory!

Three ESSENTIAL Dungeon Master Skills

As a DM there are three skills that we want to cultivate to make the adventure both exiting and fun to play. By keeping these three elements in mind at all times, and moving on the table, it will free you up to inject your personality into the game, and help draw your players into the adventure.

The goals is to take it from playing a game, to watching and experiencing a movie in both the DM & player's mind.

The first essential skill is to always keep the game moving to the next encounter or part of the adventure. Once you and your players get into that narrative of the game, anything that breaks the flow will pull you out of the immersion of the moment and suck you out of that movie like experience back down to the game level.

Let's look at an example...

The players have been exploring a dungeon, going deeper and deeper into the center of it, searching for traps, and moving as quietly as the fighter in full plate armor will allow.

They open a door, and encounter a Rakshasa.

Rather than roll to see who attacks first or for surprise, you stop the game and look up the stats on the Rakshasa to see what spells it can cast, and what it even is.

Or perhaps the party continues down the dungeon and on arriving at the door they don't want to break it down, but rather blast and take apart the wall next to it- how do they do that?

As a DM, there are always going to be moments where you need to look something up, or figure out how to handle a player action off script- and we will look at the best ways to do that, but always you are aiming to keep the game moving.

Anytime you take your direct focus off the players, or they remove theirs from you, there is the potential to break that narrative and kill the immersion. Keep your players focused on you and the game.

The second essential skill is to build tension and mystery in each and every moment of the game.

Keep the players on their toes, always wondering what might happen next, and focusing on taking a course of action as their character over a player in the game.

Example?

Which Dungeon Master narrative builds more tension?

You slowly walk down the hallway and come to a locked iron and wooden door at the end.

OR

You slowly walk down the hallway and come to a locked iron and wooden door at the end. Just as you approach the door you faintly hear what sounds like a whispering voice behind the door which suddenly goes quiet.

As the DM we always read parts of what the players see, feel, or hear in the moment- always leave one of these descriptions to them with an ending that builds tension.

This tension helps feed into the first essential skill of always keeping the game moving. In character the players need to decide what to do now, immediately, or they may lose out on something in the adventure, vs. breaking character and discussing out-of-character what they want to do.

DM Tip #1: The warrior has their sword, the artist their brush, and the writer the pen- you have your set of dice as the tools of the trade.

The dice are more than just random number generators, they are a prop to build tension and keep the game exciting.

Imagine the same scenario where the players come to the dungeon door and are trying to figure out what to do. A few moments to come up with a plan is good- players should always have choices, but if you see it starting to stall the game...ask one of the players to roll a D20, and when they give you the result, note it down, or let them know its ok.

Why is the DM asking for a random dice roll?

Who knows, but that means something is going on, and we better make a decision NOW!

This is also why I'm a BIG believer in the use of physical dice- seeing them, connecting with them, hearing them roll on the table, and sometimes onto the floor- all play on the physical senses of the players injecting real physical feedback into the game.

Not every dice roll as the DM has to mean something.

The last essential DM skill is to know when to use the rules of the game and when to throw them out the window.

Likewise the rules, regardless of edition, are to be used to keep the adventure moving and build the tension of the game. When they stop doing that, let them go. Don't do complexity for complexity's sake! Only keep your games as complex with the rules as they need to be.

As the DM you walk the fine line of ultimate judge (rules) and director or a movie (narrative), there is a give and take between the two.

Anytime you go heavy on one side it will drag the game down. We see this with DM's that are 100% rules regardless of if the players are having a good time or not, and on the opposite extreme DM's who let their players break the game by allowing them to do anything and everything without consequences to their action.

NOW, as we move into some of the more specific highlights of the Art of the Dungeon Master, I'd like you to keep the three skills above in mind and ask yourself how you can balance those in each section of this guide that follows...

World Building Rules

Being a DM is a tough job, and it has the capacity to be intimidating if you let it.

You are there to run the game, enforce the rules, make sure everybody has a good time, and somehow make it through the adventure that you have spent so much time creating, planning, and reading- all while making sure YOU have a good time also.

DM Tip #2: The reason why it is so important that you find your vision and voice as a DM is so that it becomes natural to how you want to run a game, which leads to you enjoying the game, rather than getting "stuck" as the DM when you would rather be a player in the game.

DM'ing is an aspect of the game that should play out as if you are also experiencing the game- you are not some sort of human computer set to run it.

Interacting with the players, challenging them, and seeing how they respond both expectedly and unexpectedly to your adventures is what makes the role of the DM fun.

Keep in mind that the DM is also a “player” in the game through the use of NPC's- non-player characters.

Really throw yourself into the role of that orc-warlord, lich-seeking wizard, or sweet talking thief who just joined the party.

Just as the players have their own goals and agendas for their own characters, the same is for the NPC's under your control.

NPC's are not a type of bot in the game, they might work with or against the party- enjoy that role and use them to explore the game you are creating.

In a very real way they are YOUR characters and you are playing the game with the players also.

The first and MOST important thing you can realize as a DM is that as the DM you can never make a mistake...

...and I don't mean this in that you have to be perfect in your game, but rather, literally, as the DM you can never mess anything up or screw the adventure up.

Now that we got that out of the way you can relax about running your first few games.

Think of it this way- DM knowledge *is not* player knowledge.

From behind your Dungeon Master's screen you have your adventure laid out with all the text, maps, miniatures, dice, and rules marked.

You have a pencil and paper to write things down...or maybe everything is virtual, but it's the same- you have DM level knowledge as to what is going on in the adventure.

On the opposite side of the DM screen the players only know what you tell them as part of the encounter, and what they discover on their own through their character skills, roleplaying, and combat encounters.

If you "forget" something they will never know it, unless you tell them.

Another example?

Say you have been running an adventure all night where the players have been tracking down a set of keys in the dungeon to

open a final warded vault that has an artifact that a wizard wants.

At the start of the evening, a few hours ago, they fought an ogre mage who had the first key, but somehow you forgot that the it had the key, and the players missed it after searching the monster and moving on.

Now they are at the vault, having explored all of the dungeon and are wondering just where the last key is?

Did you mess up?

They don't know that you forgot the first key, so think narrative wise and get them they key- they will think it's part of the adventure!

Have the ogre mage come back and fight them one last time- using that time to taunt and try and trick the players one last time, perhaps faking its death from before, and when they defeat it, the key falls from its hand...

Now that you have been freed from worrying about messing up the adventure and all of your players having a bad time because you messed up, we can take a look at some streamlining ideas in actually **RUNNING** your first adventure.

Running Your First (Or Second) Adventure

The first step in running your first adventure is to back up and take a look at the rules of the game. For now don't worry about memorizing all of them, or even understanding all of them. You can always look something up, or like we just talked about "wing-it".

Understanding the rules in Dungeons & Dragons means understanding the flow of the game and how it works. From casting spells, encountering monsters, and running combat. If it helps to make a step-by-step quick guide write down a few notes as to the different steps in the game.

Next is to pick your adventure- it could be a pre-made one, or one that you have written yourself. Either way, take a few moments to read through it to identify any parts of the story or encounters that you might not be familiar with- then tab these relevant parts and rules in your Dungeon Master's Guide or Monster Manual in case you have to look them up so you can keep the game going with minimal down time.

This goes back to the three fundamental skills that we talked about in the first part of this guide- freeing you to explore the narrative and focus on having a fun game vs. constantly looking stuff up and getting bogged down in the "rules".

Keep in mind that even a pre-made adventure is just that- a set of guidelines and ideas for an adventure. If there is something that you don't understand or a mechanic that seems weird- leave it out or re-write it.

Which brings us to the "timing" of the adventure when you run it with your gaming group.

Think of your adventure as a movie- it has preview, beginning, middle, and final resolution. What would your movie experience be like if you were forced to leave the theater before the end of the movie? Or if the movie just stopped mid-way and the movie theater lights came on?

It's the same effect with your adventure.

Consider how much time you have to play the game, and if you can't make it through the adventure on one sitting, then find a good stopping point in the adventure story and plan to stop at that point.

Remember, your players don't know how long or short the adventure is- only you as the DM have complete knowledge.

You don't want to rush your players through each encounter in the adventure, but at the same time you don't want them to stall.

When I run a game as a DM, I look at how much time we have for the sitting and come up with a half-way point in time. So if we are playing for four hours, at two hours I look at where we are in the adventure and if we can't complete it, what would be a good stopping point in the game- which now becomes the "ending" for the evening, and the "starting" point for the next game.

Example:

Storm giants attack the inn where the players are residing and they beat them off in an amazing display of might and magic. The next part of the adventure has the party tracking the retreating giants through the mountains to their stronghold and then attacking that stronghold.

We are more than half way through the gaming session and now I have a look at the time left- we can make it through tracking the giants and the encounters with that, but we won't have enough time to tackle the stronghold tonight.

So, we do that tracking part, and then when the players arrive at stronghold, we end the game for the evening by having the storm giants taunting the characters and daring them to attack.

You are much better ending with a challenge then starting them inside the stronghold and just ending right in the middle there.

DM Tip #3: While I want to encourage you to be free-flowing with your adventures as a Dungeon Master, having some sort of organization IS important to help keep the game moving.

Before or while my players are arriving I like to set up my stuff behind the Dungeon Master's screen.

Gaming books and references set out to the right. My adventure notes and pen and paper in front of me, and my dice and figures (if I am using miniatures) to my left, all behind the screen so the players can't see them, but they are ready to go.

Let's talk about using figures, and gaming mats or tiles in your game...

The great thing about Dungeons & Dragons is that it can be as complex or as easy as you want it to be, and as much as you and your players enjoy it to be.

Some of my games are VERY old school- just characters sheets, books, and dice.

While others, injecting a bit of my wargaming background get VERY elaborate with figures, terrain, and even battle field or encounter effects such as smoke/fire and spell effects.

Gaming companies like Dwarven Forge can literally hook you up with a complete 3D dungeon to explore.

Should you use these in your games?

Only if you enjoy them, and IF they don't suck the time out of your game.

I see so many Dungeon Masters spend more time setting "stuff" up, then actually playing the game- and that actual in-game set up time breaks the flow of the encounter and the realism of the game defeating the three essential skills we are trying to cultivate! Many players spend their time watching the DM just set up and break down encounters!

Here is how I would recommend using maps, tiles, and miniatures.

Before the adventure starts and your players arrive completely draw out the map or encounter on your dry-erase gaming map, or lay out all the adventure tiles, and then cover them with sheets of paper, ready to remove them as the players explore and open up each area.

This way the flow of the game isn't interrupted, and they only down time spent in running an encounter is you grabbing the monster miniatures from behind your DM screen.

Dealing With Cranky Players

Another big Dungeon Master fear is what happens when your players get out of control. You have spent all this time prepping for your game, finding your vision, and then one person is going to come along and ruin the game for everybody.

Does this happen?

Sometimes.

But thankfully it is pretty rare as the Dungeons & Dragons community is really great.

Two big factors are your group and the type of game that you as the DM want to run- control both and the chances of this happening are minimal.

Many Dungeons & Dragons gaming groups are private or semi-private. What I mean by this is that usually they consist of your friends or people you might know from other gaming experiences.

If somebody was a total jerk, chances are you would not be hanging out with them. Occasionally a good friend might get a bit out of control and excited with their character, but it's easy to bring them back down but just asking them to well, be a normal person.

Other Dungeons & Dragons games, especially store sponsored adventures or encounter night might have you running an adventure for a group or a few total strangers.

Maybe you game at your local friendly gaming store with three of your friends, and the store manager has two more people that would like to join your game. While this is a GREAT chance to make some new gaming friends you don't know their playstyle.

This is where setting the boundary of what you want to play and what your players want to play is important on cutting down the chances of this happening.

As the DM, before the game even starts make a decision with what characters and D&D books you are comfortable playing with.

On the one hand we want to players to have fun playing the race, class, and alignment they want, but as the DM, YOU also have to be comfortable with it fitting into your campaign or adventure and not breaking things in the game.

Are you going to limit your game to the core Player's Handbook races and characters or open it up to some of the other supplements and tomes?

If you set limits with what you are comfortable with, and a player really wants to play something outside that, it open up a

conversation between you two where you will quickly find out WHY they want to roll with that particular type of character.

Do they really enjoy the RPG aspects of it and that why they want to play it? GREAT! It will add to the narrative of the game.

OR

Do they want to best stats, abilities, and crazy stacking powers so they can blast everything in every encounter...perhaps better to pass on it, or at least you will now know what to expect.

Regardless, if you are starting your players out at 1st level, or having them come in with higher level characters with a backstory, work out ahead of time with the choices they will have in starting characters.

Finding Your Dungeon Master Voice

So now while you have the base mechanics to run your first adventure, or two, it's time to start looking at some of the more advanced layers of being a DM.

Let's focus on the "art" of being the DM for a few...

Your voice as a Dungeon Master is KEY. Not in how it physically sounds or in how you deliver an explanation of what they players see to their characters, but in a naturalness of that delivery.

How you convey the various parts of the adventure in a comfortable and relaxed manner is important so you can react to the player's choices when they go off script- which we will look at in more detail next.

Many adventures will have two sets of text for each encounter. The first set is the Dungeon Master narrative and background information- kind of what is happening in the moment and going on so you can better place what you read to the players.

The second set of text is often what you read to the players about the current encounter or situation- what is happening, what they see, and what they can act on.

From there the players tell you what they want to do and you make the appropriate checks, dice rolls, etc.

Now, it's perfectly fine to read this text, but it's equally fine as well to read both sets of text and then tell the players what they see in your own words.

Often this approach is MUCH better since you will be speaking in the tone and vocabulary that is natural for you...which will make you more comfortable with the adventure in the moment since that is how your brain "thinks", thus making the adventure more real and natural.

Making this jump from generic adventure text to communicating it in your own words may or may not be easy- we all come into the art of the Dungeon Master from different angles, BUT this is a skill you want to work on and develop.

Going Off Script

As a Dungeon Master you want to prepare and familiarize yourself with the adventure at hand so you can keep the interruptions and rules breaks in the game to a minimum.

As much as you have an adventure plan, you have to prepare and be ready for the players to go off “script” at any moment- and you want to allow them to do this- we are playing an RPG after all. Video games would call this an open sandbox type game.

Going off script means doing something that is outside of the planned adventure, beyond solving the current adventure text.

As an example if the party comes to a locked door, and rather than have the thief in the party pick the lock, they get creative and have a summoned earth elemental bash it down, this is not going of script.

Yes, it might be a way of opening it up that you weren't ready for, and maybe you have to look something up stat wise for the elemental, but it is a reasonable player response to resolve.

But what if they wanted to do something against the adventure?

Like instead of infiltrating that cult lead by a Beholder, they decide to join it?

What if instead of delivering that locked chest without opening it to the a wizard in the next city they decide to open it?

As a DM you will be faced with these slight or sometimes larger changes in the narrative.

How do we deal with it?

Remember, you are there to resolve the rules, and help tell the narrative- the choices the party makes, you resolve...even if they aren't a good idea.

At times like this, I'll pause as the DM for a moment and really ask the players if that is what they want to do- as there are consequences for both staying on script and going off it.

If they open that chest they are delivering the adventure will continue as planned in the module, but then at the end, when the wizard gets it, we will have to resolve the end story a bit different.

Is the wizard pissed and refuses to pay the party the promised gold?

In this case consider themselves luck and they are out of some coin.

Or, is the wizard REALLY pissed and casts a compel spell on them, and now for the next “adventure” they party is working for the wizard for free.

This is why being a relaxed and confident in your style and narrative is so important- so when the players go off script you can resolve it and actually embrace and enjoy it to build on the next adventure. Part of the fun of being a DM is that even you don't always know where the story is going to wind up at the end of the night.

DM Tip #4: We talked about dealing with cranky players before, and for this DM TIP I want to share with you how I have handled an out of control player in one of my games.

I'm including it here, as it's a perfect example of going off script as both the player and the DM, while coming up with an interesting and fun narrative that impacted the end game more than all of us at the table realized.

As a general rule, I always allow my players to play any race or class that they want in the game- we are going to literally be spending hours and hours together rolling some dice and creating a cool story so I want them to play the characters they want to play vs. what I tell them to play.

My only “rule” in this is that you have to come up with a background biography for your character to make the race/class make sense- so I can use that in the campaign or adventure.

Pretty standard DM stuff...

One of my players who we will call Tattoo Matt (TM) is both one of the smartest guys that I know, combined with a creative mind for crunching numbers and making character abilities work together in ways the game never really considered. I really enjoy the cool character builds that he brings to the game, and many of his characters go on to be legends in the realm when we are playing a campaign. (A series of adventures linked together to tell a bigger epic story.)

This time Matt went a little far and by the time his character was 4th level there was nothing that could stop him based on the challenges I was throwing at the group. He was some sort of half deep gnome/elf magic user rouge ranger person pulling in feats from the tome of battle, (This was D&D 3.5) and now I was in real trouble.

Ramp up the encounters to challenge his character and the rest of the party would get killed, keep that at the level for the rest of the players and TM was walking right through them killing the game.

I spoke to him out of game to maybe explore a bit more of the role playing side of his character and tone down the extreme

combat stat stuff, and he kind of smiled and said he was going to push the min/max of his character as far as he could.

Fair enough.

I reminded him that as the DM, I wasn't going to hold him back, but as the DM I was there to enforce the consequences of a player's action...

So how did I handle it?

Kill him off?

No, that would be weak DM skills, and wouldn't build the tension and excitement of the game.

When something happens in your game like this don't look at it as something bad- look at it as a golden opportunity to really run with the narrative.

I looked at where the party was and how TM's character was acting in the game- using and resolving what he gave me through his in character actions...

At this part in the campaign the party was adventuring around a well-known inn, and after each adventure they would head back to the inn to rest, drink, and brag about their exploits.

TM's character was so full of his powers that he talked himself up at the inn, and bought drinks for everybody, while commissioning the bard-in-residence to follow him around singing tales of his epic deeds...all at level 4.

A few adventures later when the party was ready to move on from the inn and follow some adventuring leads elsewhere TM was hit with a bill from the inn-keeper for a few thousand gold (!).

Matt refused to pay, and the inn-keeper produced a signed contract that his character would be responsible for all the costs of having an open tab, paying in full if the party left.

The party was leaving, and it was time to collect, and Matt refused, then the local thieves guild who had a local stake in the inn would be called in, and not just target him but the party also.

Role playing it out, by asking some of the patrons, the bard-in-residence, this is what the party found out...

When the party would return from an adventure, drinking, and boasting, two other men would hang out near them and act like they were part of the group- two brothers by the names of Eric and David Meyer.

Everybody assumed they were part of the group, and when the party left to adventure they would often stay behind eating and

drinking and running up a tab.

When the tab was a few hundred gold pieces, Eric who is an accomplished thief and forger, produced the contract saying they were the party's manger and TM's character Billby would be responsible for paying any costs.

The contract even matched Billby's signature in the guest book and room rental ledger so how could it not be legit.

A few days later the Meyer brothers skipped out, and left Matt with the surprise...

It didn't end just at the inn...

The Meyer brothers were always one step ahead of the party, running up contracts and tabs all over the city, with Matt's character on the hook for it- pissing off some really powerful patrons if he personally didn't pay up.

Now he had to use his insane PC skills not to just kill monsters, but actually negotiate and make some out-of-combat coin.

We went off script and Matt calmed down a bit, but in addition to the campaign which lasted almost a year real time gaming, the Meyer bothers became a recurring theme.

Just when Matt had thought it was over, they re-appeared and the party actually caught them in the act of more signature forging- this time with actual arcane verification that it was legit.

It took all my restraint to prevent Matt from rolling for combat right there, as the Meyer brothers appealed to the ever greedy thief in the party played by my buddy Jawaballs- letting the party in on their next adventure to score some serious coin, which now had the added fun of the Meyers working with the party and Matt as NPC's for a few adventures.

Don't be afraid to go off script as you never know where it might take you...

Dealing With OOC Knowledge

While we are starting to wrap up looking at the Art of the DM from the player side of the Dungeon Master's skills it's important to have a plan with how do deal with player knowledge outside of the adventure.

Depending on your gaming group, this may or may not be an issue, and often when it is an issue, it is not intentional.

Consider it as a tool you can use as the DM to really throw some interesting stuff into the game...

Out of character (OOC) knowledge is stuff that the player knows, and injects into their character when in the game there is no way the character would know it.

It's not intentional, but it happens.

Imagine you are part of the party and you enter a dark and damp cavern and encounter a monster. Before we roll for combat I as the DM describe the monster to set the narrative- that its eight feet long, has a segmented green body with multiple eyes and tentacles on one end, etc.

You hear the description, and since you have been playing D&D for a while, and perhaps even been a DM, your mind naturally matches it to the Monster Manual as a Carrion Crawler. You know its AC, hit points, base attacks, that is has a paralysis special attack, and even its treasure type and experience point value.

You know this, but how would your character know this, only being first level, and having never fought this type of monster before?

Naturally it makes the challenge less fun, and the monster weaker since the players will avoid its paralysis attack.

You can't stop OOC, but you can use it.

The key is to use it at pivotal moments to play on what the party might now...

Imagine the same encounter only now at the end of the adventure where the party faces a red dragon to claim an artifact in its treasure pile.

As soon as you describe the dragon and its' color a player that might have OOC knowledge will know just what to expect.

BUT, what if the dragon was very crafty, which a red dragon should be, and used an illusion spell or something similar to dye its scales black...appearing to be a "weak" black dragon to gain the element of surprise.

The players see a "black dragon", and they will be quite surprised when it breathes out fire, and has WAY more hit points and spells at will than expected.

PC Death

Potentially this COULD be one of the most important discussion points of this guide as at some point in the game one of your players is going to have their character killed.

Sometimes the (bad) luck of the dice kills off a character, as combat, traps, and challenges do have their risks.

Other times players make questionable or risky character decisions and they die.

Both of these are going to happen if you are a good Dungeon Master.

It's a bad or ego tripping Dungeon Masters who kills off characters to punish the group, or as a way for getting back at a player.

But we are GOOD DM's here, so how do we deal with the first two examples?

First question is how the player deals with it.

Second question is how the group deals with it.

Third question is how do we use it not as an ending point for that player, but something to further the game for them and make it a meaningful part of the over-all game.

Players react to character death in different ways- a good formula is based on how long they have been playing the game (experience) and how long they have been playing their character.

From the player perspective, I've been playing D&D for a long time, and when some of my well-developed characters have died in glorious combat (Khord The Unbroken, we salute you!) it has stung, but I can deal with it having played and understood the game.

What about somebody newer to the game who suddenly finds out there is no save point or reload spawn.

As the DM we can't prevent a character's death, but rather use it as just another transition to the story in the game.

Here are three ways that I handle it in my games...

First is the difference between being knocked out and slowly dying or bleeding out- that can be prevented by the party in either finishing the monster encounter quickly or getting some healing buffs and stuff over there.

When a character gets killed outright- say hit by a 10D6 lightning bolt and takes 30+ points of damage when they only have a dozen hit points or so left, I make that death dramatic- "killing" them but giving them one last action in the game.

Think of it as a die well surge, or final act of vengeance. I'll give them one last attack with a big attack bonus- a final surge of adrenaline, or one last spell to cast.

This makes their death dramatic and lessens the blow by making it heroic- think of a heroic movie death. The sacrifice is sad, but it is a good and noble one.

Second is that I make the player aware, based on the level of the adventure and the party progress that perhaps they can be resurrected. In D&D death is often not permanent even if it does cost a truck-load of gold. However, it's up to the party to make that decision of spending party resources.

Failing that either because the adventure is out of that scope or the party does or can't resurrect I'll then allow the dead PC's player to have a last will and testament- passing on their gear and equipment to the next character as an inheritance.

There will be a few bumpy and emotional moments, but as the DM as long as you have a transition plan for dealing with it, it will work out.

Don't just roll some dice and say BOOM your character is dead and that's it.

Use it as another adventure hook or stepping stone in your story with the group.

Planning & Running Your First Campaign

Now we bring things full circle with the Art of the DM in this guide.

We looked at the skills we want to focus on and cultivate as a DM, from both the DM perspective and the player management perspective, so now it's time to put them both together and harness them to run a truly EPIC game: the campaign.

A Dungeons & Dragons campaign is defined as a series of adventures that are linked together as part of a larger story. Think of them as adventures within an adventure. How the players act, and what they accomplish in each adventure in turn effects the next.

Just as they grow and develop so do the NPC's of the game, both the good and bad guys.

With most campaigns ending in a final dramatic winner take all battle.

The first part of a campaign is of course in the planning with regard to time and location. Just how much time can the players reasonable commit to together as a group.

Can you steadily meet, say one a week, or every other week for a few months?

Six months?

A year?

There is no right or wrong, and campaigns can be long or short, but going in you want to know as the DM how much time you have to build, run, and complete the over-all story.

It would be a big time let-down to play a dozen or so adventures and then run out of time because the group can't continue.

For your first campaign better to keep it short and complete it- planning to run four or so adventures is an excellent start.

Once you have the time frame (or estimate at least) the next step is to determine what levels the party is going to start at, and potentially end up at.

From the DM perspective, it will help you write, modify, or change the adventures you want to run for the party level, and for the players it will allow them a chance to really plan out their characters.

It will make the game smoother if I as the player know I'll be starting out at level 1 and ending at level 10 say. Maybe I want to play one class over another? A recent campaign I played in had our characters starting out at level 1 and was planned to take us on a tour of the Underdark ending at level 15. Knowing I had 15 potential levels I planned to play a sorcerer as I would get access to some really cool spells to have fun with over the course of the game. In actuality we finished up at level 16.

Would I have played a different character if the game went to level 10?

Yes, it would have made a big spell difference- I would have played a wizard over a sorcerer so I would have more spell levels per level vs. the sorcerer.

Once you have an idea of the levels you want to play, it's not quite time to take your campaign public to the players yet as you need to figure out what kind of story you want to run- what is the overall adventure and hooks you will be pulling in?

Besides a running back story you will be running a few different adventures- what kind of adventures will they be?

Will they be a mix of both combat and role playing?

Will some be mainly epic combat and challenge encounters?

How many will be just role-playing with hardly any combat?

What kind of adventure do you like to run?

What kind fit your Dungeon Master personality?

The key to a campaign is to run a mix of adventure types to keep the momentum of the game interesting vs. the same adventure type over four adventures with your players just rushing to finish out the game.

Consider also mixing in both adventures that you and your players personally like- if you like all out combat themed games, good keep that, but also add in a mainly direct roleplaying one, etc.

Now that you have the outline the next question is to figure out the actual campaign you are going to use- of which there are three options.

The first is an off-the-shelf campaign. A pre-written series of adventures ready to go. These are a good choice for first time or semi-new Dungeon Masters as you can focus on the running the game vs. writing it. If you go with this option, you can and should read through it first and consider changing or tweaking parts or encounters to make them a better fit for both you and the players.

Second is taking a series of standalone adventures and linking them together. Often you add a background story that provides a reason for the four adventures- maybe something like a piece of a relic being found at the end of each adventure- said relic being desired by both a good and evil wizard. Which wizard is the party going to work for, what NPC's from the other side will oppose the players?

The third type of campaign is where you write and plan the entire adventure(s) and over-all plot yourself.

DM Tip #5: When I'm with my players at the table I want to have and spend the maximum amount of time gaming and rolling the dice!

There are logistics to running a game, and definitely there are logistics to running a campaign.

Don't let this logistics phase eat up your physical table time!

When I'm running a campaign where we have an adventure a week at our weekly gaming session I use the time in-between sessions to talk with the players and take care of all that stuff that happens before the next adventure.

Sometimes I do this through straight up email, other times I've created a Yahoo Group or used a quickly made forum.

This way we can handle leveling up, buying and selling items,

character research stuff in-between actual gaming sessions and not eating into the time to actually play.

Remember with a campaign both you and your players are going to be developing characters over the long term- there are going to be decisions and logistics to be made about them and that which work perfectly “offline” from the gaming table.

You can also use that down time to email or post any adventure leads or stuff the each player might be doing before the next adventure opening up another level to explore as a DM.

In our last campaign, the game was based around a castle overlooking the border-lands. I would run an adventure where the players were working to stop an evil cleric of Bane who was growing his influence around the lands.

After we finished an adventure, I would email the players a summary of treasure and experience points, and they would send me back what they wanted to buy, sell, and any changes to their character- level, feats, spells, etc.

This got all of the book-keeping out of the way.

BUT, I also used it as a chance to get in some roleplaying...

I also had each player email me what they wanted their character to do for the next few days in “game time” while the party rested up for the next adventure.

Maybe they explored the castle?

Spent some time training?

Gambled or gathered information at the local pub?

Over the course of the campaign the thief in the group (This was AD&D.) used the down time to build up some information contacts at the pub about the activities of the evil cleric, learning where some of the hidden treasure was located, which of course he kept to himself...

...while the fighter in the group trained gaining some extra experience points in-between each adventure, and a suit of full plate armor, and some well-crafted pole-arms from winning some tournaments.

Think of the possibilities of an adventure within an adventure.

Conclusion

As we conclude this Art of the DM guide I ask: Are you ready to be a Dungeon Master?

YES!

Knowing that you can't really make a mistake or mess things up, you should now be on your way to planning and running your first series of games.

As a last piece of parting advice, although it not really parting as you can email me anytime with any questions or ideas to help make your game better, is to always be experimenting and growing as a DM.

Find out not only what adventure types you enjoy, but in each adventure, pick something small and do it differently than before—maybe for this adventure's dragon encounter you plan to speak actual draconic to the players?

Experiment in little ways each time to help you evolve.

See you on the table Dungeon Master!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fritz" with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.