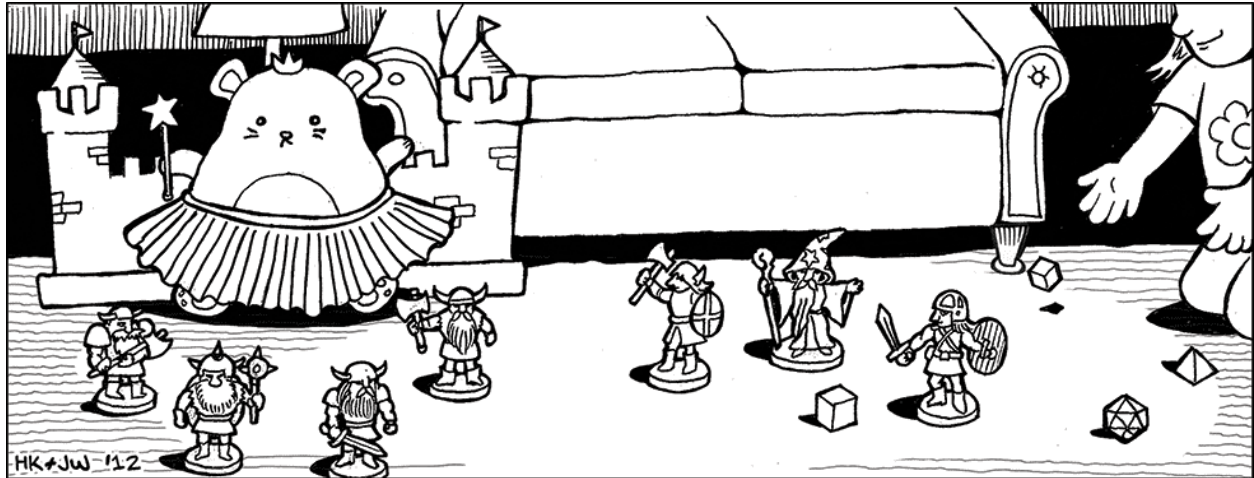


# DMing for your toddler

By Cory Doctorow — from issue 1, Gygax Magazine



My daughter Poesy is only four years old, and she can't read or do complex sums yet, so when I decided to start playing *D&D* with her, I knew I'd need to come up with a super-streamlined set of rules that could hold her attention and enable the kind of imaginative play she excels at already.

Poesy loves to roleplay. Give her a couple of stuffed toys or figurines of any description and she'll invent complex scenarios for them, roping in any handy and willing grownups to play opposite her characters, sometimes demanding that we come up with our own scenarios to play out. I'd intuited that this wasn't so different from the *D&D* games I grew up playing – though I'd been numerate and literate for some years before I started.

I happened upon a set of factory-painted plastic *D&D* minis while looking for a toy to bring home in the dealer's room at a regional science fiction convention in Chicago. After marveling at the astounding advances in robotic toy-painting, I had a brain-flash. A minute later, I'd bought a handsome dice-bag and filled it with a dozen assorted figs and a set of polyhedral dice.

After I got home to London, I performed the ancient ritual of unpacking the souvenirs I'd brought home for the kid. As I'd hoped, she was captivated by the intricate painting on the figs and the jewel-like facets of the dice, and demanded that we play *right now*.

Poesy has a piggy bank full of the small change she's picked up or appropriated from us over the years, and I dumped it out and sorted out the different denominations. Once that was done, I used our Ikea playmat (which has a street-scape laid out on it), some cushions, a shoebox, and a cardboard doll-castle to set up a town, a cave, and a castle.

I put all the "bad-guy" minis on strategic spots on the castle, and stuck one of Poesy's stuffed toys – a winged hamster she calls "Fairy Hamster" – in the middle of its courtyard. I gave her

two minis to play, and set them down on the playmat's ice-cream parlor, declaring this to be the "tavern." I put two more bad-ass-looking figs next to them, and declared them to be my NPCs.

I improvised a very quick background. My NPCs are in the tavern, planning to rescue their friend the Fairy Hamster, who is being held hostage in Castle Doom. Did Poesy's characters want to help? They sure did!

I rolled up the mat while talking about the party's long walk in the woods, then set out the party's figs in the vicinity of the "cave," (the shoebox) on the "hill" (the cushion). My NPCs made some suggestions for besieging the castle. I had an archer and a magic-user (M-U), and Poesy had a fighter and a magic-user of her own. We brainstormed out a mix of ranged attacks and melee, and went to town.

I gave the party the initiative for the first turn. Poesy rolled dice for movement for each of her characters. The elf magic-user got a d6, the armored fighter got a d4, the totals corresponding to the distance in inches on our living-room floor (we used a tape-measure). Poesy didn't get immediately that this meant that on average the M-U was going to be faster than the fighter, but she caught on very quickly.

Once the party got in range of the castle's defenders, we started combat. Each party-member paired with a defender and launched an attack. The M-Us got to choose between *magic missile* and *fireball*. I explained that *magic missile* was harder to hit with, but did more damage than *fireball*. We used a D20, and I required Poesy to roll higher than the number of inches between her fig and the defender she was aiming for for *fireball*. For *magic missile*, we used the same system, but subtracted two from her roll (this being the most complex subtraction she can do in her head).

The first time any of the characters got hit, we generated their hit-points (in other words, we rolled the characters' stats as they were required, rather than rolling them in advance). I wanted Poesy to be able to keep track of the hit-points herself, which let out pen and paper scorekeeping. Instead, we rolled a d8 for each character's hit-points, and took that many coins out of her piggy-bank and stacked them up next to each mini. When characters sustained damage (a d4 for fireball, a d6 for *magic missile* or arrow, a d8 for a sword), Poesy took that many coins out of each character's pile. By varying the type of coin we used for each character – one got pennies, another was marked with 2p pieces, or 5p or 10p, etc) – we made it easy to sort out whose HPs were who's when they were (inevitably) knocked over. I decreed that all the magic users could cast healing spells instead of attacks, each doing 1d4's worth of restoration.

So, this turned out to be a *lot* of fun. The longer we played, the more we improvised. At one point, I grabbed a glass sphere sculpture from a shelf and told Poesy it was a "crystal ball" that the M-U could use to direct the archer's arrows, skipping an attack to give the archer an automatic hit. Poesy loved this, and really got into the roleplaying, "coming to the rescue" of other characters by healing them or helping them with aimhacks. By the time we'd liberated the Fairy Hamster, she was hooked.

We continue to play, about once a month, always with a different campaign improvised from whatever is lying around at the time. By getting straight into the story and going quickly to the combat (or trap-springing, puzzle-solving, or what-have-you), and by saving the character-rolling until it's needed, I'm able to tailor the experience to the attention-span of a four-year-old. Our games last about 45 minutes, and they're very kinetic, with a lot of jumping around, crawling on the floor, and so on.

She's recently leveled up in the drawing and coloring department, so my next project will be to get her started on miniatures painting. I imagine that our games will be that much more fun once she's playing characters she "made" herself.

In the meantime, we've got another activity in our daddy-daughter repertoire, a nice break from playing "school" and the other "realistic" imaginative games we usually play. There's certainly also some sneaky basic math skills acquisition going on too, but that's beside the point: we play for fun, and Poesy would spot it a mile away if I switched to a game that was "good for her."



## How to DM for your toddler —

### the rules of Cory's game

#### **You will need:**

*A set of polyhedral dice*

*A decent-sized pile of coins, of various denomination*

*Absolutely any props, figures, or toys you like. Setting up your scene is half the fun.*

#### **Initiative:**

Let your child go first.

It's always good to see a child show some initiative.

### **Turns:**

Each character can move, attack, or cast a spell during their turn.

### **Movement:**

If any character chooses to move during their turn, roll the appropriate die (1d4 for a fighter, archer, or monster; 1d6 for a magic-user) at the beginning of the turn.

The number rolled is how far that character can move, in inches, during that turn.

### **Hit points (HP):**

HP are determined the first time a character or monster is hit. Roll 1d8 to determine HP, and place a stack of coins corresponding to the die roll next to that mini.

Use different denominations to help track which hit points belong to which character or monster.

As each character's hit points are lost, keep the coins representing lost hit points next to the mini, in case a *heal* spell is cast on the character later.

### **To hit:**

Fighters must be within 1" to attack, and hit automatically.

Archers and magic-users roll 1d20 to hit. The roll needed to hit is equal to the distance in inches. (The magic-user spell *magic missile* has a -2 penalty to hit.)

### **Weapons:**

**Arrow:** 1d6 damage; range 20" max

**Sword:** 1d8 damage, range 1"

### **Monsters:**

Use your imagination, and let the baddies be any type of monster or human(oid) you have toys or miniatures to represent.

You can choose to give them similar abilities to your PCs and NPCs, or perhaps your child will invent a few you hadn't considered.

Monsters cannot be healed.

## **Characters:**

### ***Fighter***

Move: 1d4" per turn

Hit dice: 1d8

Attack: Sword

### ***Archer***

Move: 1d4" per turn

Hit dice: 1d8

Attack: Arrow

### ***Magic-User***

Move: 1d6" per turn

Hit dice: 1d8

## **Spell list:**

### ***Accurate Arrow***

Range: 20"

Duration: 1 turn

Casting *accurate arrow* on an archer guarantees the archer's next attack will hit.

### ***Magic Missile***

Range: 20"

Damage: 1d6

To-hit: 1d20 -2 vs. distance (natural 20 hits automatically)

This spell is similar to an archer's arrow, and requires a "to hit" roll.

## ***Fireball***

Range: 20”

Damage: 1d4

To hit: 1d20 vs. distance (natural 20 hits automatically)

## ***Heal***

Range: Unlimited

The magic-user may choose to *heal* any character for 1d4 hit points.

Characters may be healed at any time, even if they have reached zero hit points. There is no time limit on healing fallen characters.



DMing for your toddler by [Cory Doctorow, Gygax Magazine](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

Based on a work at <http://gyg.ax/poesy>.