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YOU CAN TRY
TIPS ON BECOMING
A BETTER DM

VERSION 2

You Can Try!



Tips on becoming a better DM

by R. P. Davis

Version 2.0



Introduction

This is a collection of thoughts and ideas from 30+ years spent playing D&D and other tabletop RPGs as both player and referee. They're things that have worked for me, made my games infinitely better. This is not to say I'm some Genius Wizard DM of Awesome. It's just to say I've been doing this a long time. It's to say that I was **terrible** at DMing when I started, I've learned a thing or two about what works and what doesn't, and if you can learn something from that, well, here you go. Maybe you try some. Maybe not. If any of this helps you be a better DM, we can call it a win. The biggest caveat is that this is stuff that works *for me*. It might not work for you. That's okay!

Most if not all of these musings are aggregates or restatements of stuff I've learned from other DMs, whether in person, at con panels, or on the internet. Roleplaying games have been popular for more than 40 years. It's highly unlikely that any DM or player will come up with anything original at this point, least of all me. It's all tropes. I hope my implementation(s) of those tropes is at least slightly original. Certainly the aggregation is. A list of sources has been placed at the end, those I remember, at least. While one hesitates to invoke Newton, for I am by no means a genius, it must be said that if I appear to have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.

When game-specific stuff is mentioned, it's D&D 5e mechanics. The concepts, though, can be used in pretty much any RPG.

Why "rules"? It's a simple way to organize the thoughts. Don't think they're in any order of importance, because they're not. They simply *are*. Some of them are contradictory. Good. Learn from that.

- Bob Davis



Figure 1 - "Myth God" by Luigi Castellani

THE RULES

Rule 1. Don't be afraid to fire players.

The most common question I'm ever asked is, "I have a player who [insert disruptive behavior here]. What do I do about that player?"

I've been trying to think of a tactful answer to this question for the better part of two decades. I can't, because it's so simple that tact gets in the way. Here is that answer, in italics and all caps. Commit it to memory. Write it down if you have to.

Ready?

FIRE THAT PLAYER.

Yeah, it really is that simple.

If you have an acquaintance who insists on chattering on her phone during the film, you stop inviting her to movie night. If you have an acquaintance who likes to punch police horses when he's had more than two beers, you don't invite him on a pub crawl. Come on. No-brainer time, here.

At this point you're probably whining about this or that excuse. I never said it's easy. Sometimes firing a player can have far-reaching consequences, like if the disruptive player is your little brother, or your best friend's boyfriend. In that case, you have a tough choice. But when you're done rationalizing, the choice still boils down to ***FIRE THAT PLAYER.*** The alternative is to deal with a disrupted table. You have to decide if the out-of-game consequences are worse than your game being disrupted.

Tangentially, I've been trying to think of a reason the question is repeated so regularly when the answer is so blindingly obvious, and I think I've figured it out: Gamers to a greater or lesser extent are those for whom "normal" social interaction can be difficult. We enjoy our confrontation and conflict in an imaginary setting, not where it can get us a very real, and very sticky, face full of Mountain Dew and a massive pay-per-angry-SMS mobile phone bill. We're not equipped to handle difficult social interactions with real-world consequences.

All of the other Rules are basically ways to prevent or at least reduce the invocation of Rule 1. That's why it's Rule #1. This is the only Rule that **is** where it is because it's important.

Rule 2. Manage expectations.

Before you even start character generation, have a discussion with your players about where they want to go with the game. Let's call this "Session Zero." Talk about whether they want hardcore, immersive, collaborative storytelling – that's one extreme – or a miniatures-based wargame with some throwaway flavor text – that's the other extreme. Talk about character concepts, because it does no good if a player shows up with a carefully-constructed half-bear, half-elf bard/druid with fifteen pages of backstory when your campaign is set exclusively in an urban environment. If you're going to use any of the optional rules, be very clear which ones are in use and which are not. Be prepared to negotiate with players who want optional rules you don't, and vice versa.

When discussing expectations about game mechanics, recognize if you have players who haven't mastered the mechanics of the game you're playing. If you do, that player's expectations about how the game will go *will* change as they get used to the game engine at work. You may have to have discussions about that later in the campaign.

Talk about everything you can think of, not just game mechanics. Just as important is deciding who's responsible for bringing the soda, what day of the week is best for play, what time is best, what happens if someone misses a session, *ad infinitum*. It may seem mundane and OCD, but if you want to reduce stress and strife later on, you must endure it, or you'll be herding cats trying to get Jerry and Annie to stop going PvP because both thought it was the other's day to bring the Doritos.

The point of this is to nip in the bud as many possibilities for strife as crop up later on. They *will* crop up. The wise GM manages expectations to reduce her crop of headaches.

Rule 3. Manage combat wisely.

There are basically two types of player when it comes to combat: The Tactician and The Thespian. The names are fairly self-explanatory, but they deserve a bit of detail.

The Tactician is the one who carefully plots out every permutation and sequence of the combat, carefully managing her character's skills, powers, and resources to maximize her

impact on the combat. Don't be surprised if she uses a ruler to compute line of sight and cover. The Thespian will just say, "I leap off the balcony, swing over on the chandelier, and drop on the ogre's head." Don't be surprised if he doesn't even know what die to roll.

The key to managing combat is engaging both types of player (and other players in the spectrum, because yes, it's a spectrum) and *keep it moving*.

The sweet spot is giving the Tactician enough crunch and the Thespian enough dramatics. Exactly how much is beyond the scope of this work, because it's dependent on so many variables, every player is different, and every table has its own dynamic. You'll have to recognize it, and you will, because when you hit the sweet spot, it's immediately obvious.¹ The awesome part is that, if you use Rule 3 properly, both will take something cool away from the combat. The Thespian might say, "Oh, that's cool, I didn't know you get a bonus if you're in front of him and I'm behind him." The Tactician loves it when you verbally describe how his clever use of rules and strategy splatters the foe across the room. Both end up in inside-joke stories they'll tell for years.

Either way, you need to be descriptive. Which leads us to...

Rule 4. If you're going to be descriptive, take the time to be good at it.

Nothing is more boring to both the Tactician and the Thespian than describing combat like this:

"Okay, uh, the monster does 5 points to you, Annie. Jerry, you're up."

Foes are more than bags of hit points that do n damage per x strike or y ability. Be aware of what they are, what they do. It's all right there in the monster description, so use it. Let's use Drow Elf as an example, taken right out of the SRD.

Actions

Shortsword. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) piercing damage.

¹When everyone starts talking about "...how much fun that session was, oh, wow," STOP. Don't let anyone leave. Ask them what made it awesome. Make a note of that. That's how you repeat that. By the same token, if a session ends poorly, ask why and note *that*, so you can find a way to mitigate or avoid it.

Hand Crossbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, range 30/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) piercing damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for 1 hour. If the saving throw fails by 5 or more, the target is also unconscious while poisoned in this way. The target wakes up if it takes damage or if another creature takes an action to shake it awake.

All the mechanics are there. The monster can do 5 points of damage to Annie's character. But that's *so lame, so boring*. All you have to do is describe how the 5 points are done. It's easy.

"Annie, Einreb sees the female Drow whirl toward him. She smiles evilly as she raises her hand. You see a tiny glint of metal before you hear the *snap* of her hand crossbow firing. The small bolt zips toward you. You try to dodge but it finds a gap in your armour, and you feel a sharp pain which begins to spread like fire throughout your body. Take 5 points of piercing damage and make a Constitution save, please."

All of that is based on the hand crossbow information in the monster description. It's nothing difficult or out of the ordinary. But it's exciting, isn't it? At least more exciting than "5 points. Next."

Rule 5. Limit table size.

You may find yourself with a surfeit of players, making play unwieldy. That's good! It means people like your style as a GM. But too many players at the table has an adverse effect on the game. Things bog down, people get bored and distracted, and the next thing you know they're watching porn on their phones and not listening to your carefully-scripted description of the BBEG's lair.

GMs differ on an optimum number of players. I dislike more than six. Combats get really hard to manage. A long wait between turns means people get bored from one of their turns to the next, no matter how engaging and entertainingly descriptive I try to be. Most importantly, I lose track of too much of the stuff that triggers Rule 7. That really makes me feel like a failure as a DM, so I impose a player cap of six.

Rule 6. Pull out your Creative Writing 102 notebooks.

When you start as a DM, the first thing you have to figure out is that you're making a story. You're engaged in the creation of speculative fiction. It's just that it's not only you writing the story – it's you and a table full of co-authors collaborating.

Like other story collaborations, each participant brings different things to the work. You provide the skeleton of a plot and the antagonist(s). Your collaborators – the players – provide the protagonists, their conflicts, and their drives.

It makes sense to treat your work with the same story-construction techniques used by fiction writers. There's a very basic formula to creating a satisfying story. Larry Brooks talks about it on his website (see Sources); there are countless versions of the basic formula, and I found his easiest to digest. Going into further detail is beyond the scope of this work. Go to his website, buy his e-book (or print book), read it, and take it to heart.

Here's the basic formula. You **must** have these things in order to create a merely *satisfying*, that is not to say *good*, story.

1. Part 1 – Setup
 - 1.1. Opening Scene
 - 1.2. Hook
 - 1.3. First Plot Point
2. Part 2 – Response
 - 2.1. First Pinch Point
 - 2.2. Midpoint
3. Part 3 – The Attack
 - 3.1. Second Pinch Point
 - 3.2. All Is Lost Lull
 - 3.3. Second Plot Point
4. Part 4 – Resolution



Figure 2- "Scholar" by Nikola Avramovic

His focus is on novels, so in terms of specifics he goes in a different direction than is useful for us. But this basic outline is what makes good stories, whether novels, plays, films, or D&D adventures. I'll expand on parts of it to align it to adventure design.

We all know what 1.1 and 1.2 look like. 1.3 is often missing from D&D adventures – that's the Point of No Return for the heroes; that's the point where they discover they couldn't just quit the quest even if they wanted to. Many adventures lack this quality, probably from a desire to avoid the smell of "railroad." But it's crucial.

Part 2 is entirely the heroes' initial response to the quest. They don't need to be heroic yet; in fact, it builds dramatic tension if they get their asses handed to them in Part 2. This reminds everyone that the antagonist(s) are also at work. (See below for villains and NPCs.) They also combat their inner demons (see Rule 7!).

The Midpoint is where the heroes receive new information that changes the heroes. It's a catalyst activating new decisions and actions.

Part 3 is where the heroes transition from flailing at the problem/quest – or even being hunted – to attacking with purpose, to becoming the hunter. They're not merely reacting anymore, they're empowered enough information to proceed by making their own plans. They also begin to cope with or overcome their inner demons.

Part 4 is basically the leadup to the boss fight.

Rule 6A – Treat your encounters as scenes.

Whether it's a combat or social encounter is immaterial. Treat each of your encounters as scenes. As scenes, it's easier to judge them with a fiction author's eye.

There are very few hard-and-fast rules about story creation, but there are three you really, really, really want to observe, because breaking them is fraught with peril:

Everything your heroes do has to happen for a reason.

Do not let things just *happen* to your heroes.

Everything that happens must move the plot forward.

Let's take them each in turn.

“Everything has to happen for a reason” is arguable. You can waste days arguing about this at your local writer's circle. I think it's true, though, and this is my goddamn ebook, so shut your cake hole. It's true for two reasons: coincidence is just ... unsatisfying. It stinks of *deus ex machina*. Also, coincidence does nothing to advance the plot.

“Do not let things just happen to your heroes” because it's not heroic if things just *happen* to them. The action is only heroic if it derives from the heroes' choices. If they lack agency, they're *reacting*, never *acting*.

For the last, as James Gunn notes in The Science of Science Fiction Writing, “[O]mit everything that doesn't advance the plot. That doesn't mean description or essential exposition,² but it does include unnecessary scenes [...] Everything must work; everything must contribute.”

In adventure design, this means you have to ask yourself if what you're thinking about adding advances the plot. If it doesn't, cut it. That goes for your supposedly “random” encounters, too; they at least must have the *potential* to advance the main plot or subplot(s).

Rule 7. Integrate character backgrounds and stories.

The 5th edition of D&D specifically invokes backgrounds, giving characters benefits in terms of game mechanics. A common mistake DMs make is letting it stop there.

Use character backstory. Make notes in your DM's Notebook (more on that later) of each PC's background and backstory. If nothing else it's a gold-plated gift for adventure hooks.

Say a character's backstory says he had a sister who was killed by an arrow as they fled orc raiders and he wept while he ran after he saw her killed. After they gain a few levels, make sure the party encounters the orc band, and she's alive, a slave of the orcs. She walks with a limp and is still nursing a grudge against her jerky big brother who abandoned her and kept running when she got shot. Bam. Drama. Alternately, she limps into town, interrupting the party's revel in the tavern, giving them the job of exterminating the orcs. Afterward, they have to deal with a very pissed-off NPC who may get them into hot water with the fuzz.

²You do need to ensure that you don't go from “exposition” to “information dump.” “Exposition” happens precisely where it's needed to move the story forward. “Information dump” is a massive pile of data most of which doesn't make sense when it's given. Telling the difference can be challenging; watch your players' faces for clues. If they start to look/get confused, you're dumping, not exposing.

Recognize that some players are no good at backstory (see The Tactician, above), and that some players are no good at it yet. Work with those players during character creation; collaborate on it, generate yourself some fuel to work with. The Backgrounds in the Player's Handbook are a made-to-order framework. For some players, you'll need to help them select a background to fit their backstory. For others, especially noobs and Tacticians, use randomly-generated Backgrounds (and Flaws and Ideals and all that) as idea generators to create a backstory.

Which reminds me, also note all those Flaws and Ideals and stuff. Those are outstanding ways to add drama to your sessions. Indiana Jones wouldn't have had a problem with the flooded tunnels in *The Last Crusade* without a fear of rats. It wasn't life-threatening by itself, but it added a level of excitement to that action sequence. A little bit of work here will pay off in spades later. Use that stuff! The designers gave us a tremendous gift when they put that into the game.

At the same time, don't spend too much time on one character. That might seem like a no-brainer, but I've seen DMs make the mistake of highlighting one character over and over again. That can be very difficult, especially if it's one player really buying in to the roleplaying and others don't. You'll have to remind yourself to balance your attention. Balancing your attention and designing encounters/adventures thereby is covered neatly in the DMG. Read that part.

Rule 8. Never stop creating.

Recognize you're really a writer. Yeah, you're motherflippin' Tolkien, baby! When your players open up their Crown Royal bags and dump out their dice, they're stepping through the wardrobe into Narnia. That's what they want. You owe it to them to provide it. Own up to it and work hard at it. Remember Rules 6 and 6A?

Carry a notebook with you at all times (or use your phone or tablet or phablet or whatever). That's your DM's Notebook.³ When an idea occurs to you, jot it down.

Do this especially if they're rules-based things that'll help you get better at complying with Rule 4. If you imagine a scene where the hero separates the villain's head from his torso, write it

³I buy a pile of those black-and-white speckled school notebooks every year when they go on sale a month after school starts. When the "back to school closeout" shenanigans kick off you can get 'em for a buck or less each.

down. Write down spectacular fails, too, for when the dice betray their masters. More on those later.

Add descriptive things, like the example given in Rule 4. Create descriptions for otherwise mechanics-only stuff. Let's say you give your party's Fighter a *+1 longsword*. Don't just call it a *+1 longsword* and leave it at that! That's so *boring*. Give her "Whitefang," sword of the famed mercenary Tal-Gerda, who guarded a Halruaan mage a century before the Spellplague. Yeah, it's +1 to hit and damage. That's important. But it should also be a passport to adventure – an old foe of Tal-Gerda's might want Whitefang as a trophy, or a passing Halruaan mage might recognize it and treat you to dinner, or that mage might perceive you as worthy because you have Whitefang and hire you for a perilous mission to retrieve a different artifact.

Don't be afraid to steal from other sources like a kleptomaniac Rogue. If you read something you like in a novel, or see it in a movie, steal it! If you use *Forgotten Realms*, find the Wiki online and trawl it for ideas. Write it in your DM's Notebook. Embellish it.

You get the idea. Roll with it.

Rule 9. Carefully approach house rules, for they are treacherous.

Some DMs think house rules are something they have to do for "street cred." Suppress this inclination. House rules are a last resort, something to be devised only if you and your players want something out of the game the rules as written (RAW) cannot possibly provide. Before you avail yourself of that last resort, consider the following.

There are a lot of optional rules in the 5E sourcebooks already, enough that house rules probably aren't necessary. Explore those first and see if they help you get what you want out of the game.

House rules need to be balanced. They shouldn't be a burden to your players or to you. They should have at least potential for both positive and negative outcomes. You'll notice that all the rules in the books can have a downside. For example, a Barbarian hits very, very hard. That's good. But at the same time she's pretty squishy – easy to hit – and the harder she hits other people the easier it is for other people to hit her. Does your proposed house rule have that kind of balance?

Establishing balance takes a lot of play-testing, so be prepared for your house rules to break. They *will* break. You'll have to tweak that house rule a lot before it's settled, unless you get really, really lucky, and you shouldn't count on that. That means implementing the house rule in the first place becomes a chicken-egg scenario: There's a possibility your "clever fix" might break the game more than the situation you think you need to house rule your way out of.

To be perfectly honest, most house rules stink. They do too much, or too little. They're hardly ever play-tested to the extent the RAW are. Always at the front of your mind when considering house rules should be that D&D 5E is the most extensively play-tested version of the game to date. It's the most extensively play-tested tabletop role-playing game ever. Literally *thousands* of people played the "D&D Next" materials and submitted feedback to the designers, who then carefully judged what made it into the resulting game. There's errata on the Wizards D&D website – Sage Advice and Unearthed Arcana – which fixes less-than-awesome things that *still* made it into the books even after all that playtesting. The stuff that goes up in those areas is also extensively play-tested. Make sure you check those out before you house-rule, because the designers probably have a workable, play-tested fix for what you perceive as a problem.

And for pity's sake don't use too many house rules. "Too many" is a subjective term which you'll have to define for yourself. However, there will come a point when you look at your stack of house rules as compared to RAW and the house rules will have modified the game so much that it won't be "D&D 5E" anymore. It'll be something else. At that point, it's time to go looking for a game that better suits what you want to play, port the characters into that ruleset, and start playing the game you *want* to play.

The moral of the story is it's almost always better to *not* house-rule. If you *really* think you've got the way to "fix" something you think is broken, chances are you don't.

There are some exceptions. At our table we use a house rule for critical hit damage. But that came from a late version of the D&D Next package, so it was heavily play-tested. We've determined it works for us. Your mileage may vary. Not valid in all states or Puerto Rico. Void where prohibited. (Yes, that's how you should approach house rules: With a wall of lawyer-speak.)

Speaking of critical hits...

Rule 10. Critical hits should be more awesome than they are.

One of the things people love best about D&D is that the crit became embedded in the game. In RAW, it's expressed as double damage (i.e., roll damage dice twice, then add bonuses), but I find that to be unsatisfying on some occasions. Feel free to be more creative than mere double damage if the story demands it.

Let's say the party is in the boss fight for this part of the adventure, and the boss is on the ropes. The Ranger rolls a natural 20 on a bow shot. The critical hit damage under RAW doesn't *quite* kill the foe. At that point, screw it and go for drama – just say “You whisper a prayer to your goddess as you let fly your arrow. It flies straight and true, skewering the Goblin King in the left eye socket and blasting out the back of its head. It thunders to the floor stone dead, and its crown rolls toward you to clatter to a stop at your feet.”

Congratulations. You've just turned “Meh. Double damage. Yay,” into “OMG THAT WAS TOTALLY RAD” and the Ranger's player will talk about it for *months*. Best of all, it doesn't mean a house rule; you can play totally the game as written *and* use this method. Remember, *you* decide what happens when a player wants her character to do something. That means you can just make it up if you see the need.

Rule 11. Critical success also means Critical Failure, but Critical Failure should have a positive effect.



shit.

Here we deviate pretty far from RAW (and that means you need to discuss it with your players first; see Rules 2 and 9). This is a house rule. It's also a house rule to cover a controversial subject on which many players, GMs, and game theorists disagree with sometimes surprising amounts of invective.

But it's a pretty awesome house rule, if I say so myself. And it's my ebook, dammit. Anyway.

People talk about game balance all the time. It's true: Rules need to be balanced. That rule holds for critical success and critical failure. If a natural 20 is OMGTOTALLYRAD, a natural 1 should suck.

The trouble, as such eminent designers as Monte Cook point out, is that fumbles make players feel bad. That's not a good thing, by and large. But it has its moments.

Failure should never suck so much that characters look bad or players feel stupid. Some DMs think that botches should result only in a harmful effect, but that should be avoided. We're playing a game that's supposed to be about thrilling heroics. Every gamer who's had botch mechanics at her table has a story about the PC who got killed because someone fired into melee and botched. Or a valued piece of gear breaks, like the Ranger above, when he rolls a 1, his +1 *longbow* breaks. That is stupid. No hero should screw the pooch that badly, and RPGs like D&D are all about thrilling heroics. We want James Bond, not Mr Bean.

I suggest you use the botch to ramp up the drama. D&D is a game which needs *story* to work. As we've seen, every story has a certain anatomy, part of which is that the protagonist encounters setbacks and roadblocks. Overcoming failure is part of the story's drama. Without drama, the story is uninteresting. So let's do some drama, shall we?

Using the example from Rule 10, let's say our heroic Ranger botched his to-hit roll. Rather than the awesome triumph described above, the arrow misses the Goblin King entirely. What it does hit is an oil lamp on the wall behind the Goblin King. Which explodes, splashing burning oil all over the place. Which sets alight his throne and the curtains behind it. Which quickly spreads to the filthy rushes which cover the floor of the room. Suddenly the Goblin King's throne room is filled with thick, choking smoke, enraged and/or terrified goblins, and – did I mention this? – FIRE. You've got goblins that get some benefit (maybe advantage on attack rolls or temporary HP like a Barbarian's *rage*), or the PCs need to make CON saves for the smoke, or whatever. The bits on fire become terrain obstacles, like entering squares on fire deal 5 HP fire damage. The important thing is an unexpected bad thing happened that *didn't* automatically kill or harm any of the PCs or their gear, but *did* ramp up the drama.

It doesn't have to be combat, either. A skill or stat check botch can have a similar effect. In the short-lived TV series "Firefly," the character Jayne tries to replace a circuit board in a thing outside the ship, while standing on the hull of the ship, while the ship's pilot tries to hold the ship in a hover so Jayne can replace the circuit board. (Does that make sense? It did in my head.) Anyway, he rolls a 1. He completes a ground loop, electricity goes ZAP, and he falls, unconscious. In fact, if he hadn't been strapped to the hull with a safety harness and lanyard, he'd have fallen thousands of feet to his death. His failure meant that other members of the crew had to do his job, at greater risk, and they barely managed to get the job done in the nick of time. Jayne's failure really ratcheted up the drama.

You just have to be creative. Think about what might happen, come up with ideas, steal ideas from other media, write them down in your DM's Notebook, and make them yours so you can use them when the opportunity arises.

Rule 10A/11A – Ensure the players have agency.

Matt Mercer, DM of the webseries *Critical Role*, has a thing he does where, when a PC slays a foe, he says, "How do you want to do this?" The player gives a brief explanation of what she wants to have happen when the final blow is landed, and Matt embellishes. It's pretty much always entertaining.

You can do that with critical hits and botches, too, so long as everyone agrees on the parameters. You don't want someone to say "I kill it," because that might not make sense.

Let's say the party are fighting a giant. The Rogue throws a dagger and crits. You say, "How do you want to do this?" and she replies, "I hit him in the eye." You have to create the story from there, and that gives you several opportunities to do cool stuff. Not just describing what happens – though that's cool enough – but bringing in background and character history. You say:

"You pluck a throwing dagger from your boot and hurl it with all your might. It spins, end over end, and you watch it with the certainty you always feel when you make a perfect throw. The memory of endless hours of practice with Clarissa while you were working on your knife-throwing act for the circus flashes through your mind as you see the dagger sink into the brute's left eye. There is a sickening, squelchy 'pop' as the eyeball deflates. The creature shrieks in rage and pain, clapping a massive hand to its orbital socket. Dave, on your turn the giant's predicament means you have advantage to attack rolls...."

Please note this is a pretty advanced technique that should be reserved for a table that is comfortable with playing together, and where the players are mature enough to realize that if good things happen on 5% of d20 rolls, so can bad things. If you've got a prima donna who can't stand it if his character screws up, or who likes to give his character unreasonable success stories, don't do it.⁴

⁴If you have a player like that, I'd say you have a bigger problem than this little rules issue. See Rule 1.

Rule 12. Always be prepared.

As a player, nothing is more annoying than your DM showing up unprepared.

You've got a table full of people who came prepared to give each other several hours of their short, pointless, empty lives in hopes of entertainment more interesting than Game of Thrones reruns. They brought Doritos and Mountain Dew. You're going to let them down? You utter pillock.

It's better to cancel a session than to turn up unprepared. It's your *job* to give your players a framework in which to engage in collaborative storytelling. Yeah, yeah, life happens. Whatever. Have *something* up your sleeve. Keep a one-shot with pre-generated PCs in your Bag of Holding. That way if your boss at the burger joint works you so hard you can't keep up with your normal DM standards you'll still be able to give your players an enjoyable session.

By the same token, realize that your players are capricious. They don't care about the starting village you've created with painstaking detail, right down to how many *potions of healing* they can get from the temple. Nope, they'll either ignore it entirely or just immediately burn it down so they can sandbox out to that tiny little throwaway "Isle of the Minotaurs" you put waaaaaay out on the border of your map because you'll get to that sometime in the next 6 months. Or they'll wait until they think they've exhausted everything interesting in your village, *then* burn it down. Either way they'll burn it down and giggle with sadistic glee while they do it.

Joking aside, be prepared for them to sandbox. If the plan is for them to quest to the Isle of the Minotaurs, and you have a wilderness encounter with some sahuagin, be prepared for them to sidetrack in order to pursue the sahuagin to their lair for loot! Glory! And XP!

That doesn't mean you have to have everything mapped out, down to the last copper piece of treasure. Because they're *players*; the instant you do meticulously prepare anything, they'll either ignore it or set it on fire. Do your best to have a plan ready for whatever action of theirs you can anticipate.

Rule 13. Game the system.

Okay, look. "RPGs are not adversarial games." That's what all the books say, all the givers of unsolicited advice on internet say, blah blah blah.

Bullcrap. RPGs are adversarial.

Your players are attempting to do stuff. Other forces in the game world are attempting to stop them from doing that stuff while doing stuff of their own (more on that later). Without that adversarial relationship, there is no drama. Without drama, there's no bleedin' *point* to even rolling up characters for collaborative storytelling, because *without drama there is no story*. Harry Potter without Voldemort is an awkward kid trying to fit in. Yeah, there's some drama there, but not as much drama as "kid hero has to save the world from this dude who wants to kill him and take over the world."

Why am I bringing this up? Because you should be trying to kill your player's characters. All the time. Remorselessly.

D&D 5E is stacked toward the players. They have all the advantages. What with death saves, easy and accessible "get out of death and injury" methods, and encounter-building rules weighted toward the PCs, risk is minimized. That's just how it is. It's the risk equivalent of crossing the street against the light. And that's just not as much fun as jumping out of an airplane.

There is therefore no reason for you to be *nice*.⁵

The PCs are operating in a world where other people are trying to stick sharp things into them or fry them with magic. At the most, those people want to kill the adventurers. At the very least, those people want to stay alive just as much as the PCs. So play them as smart as they should be: devious, cunning, with booby-trapped lairs – and approaches thereto – and tactics in combat which take into consideration their strengths and weaknesses.

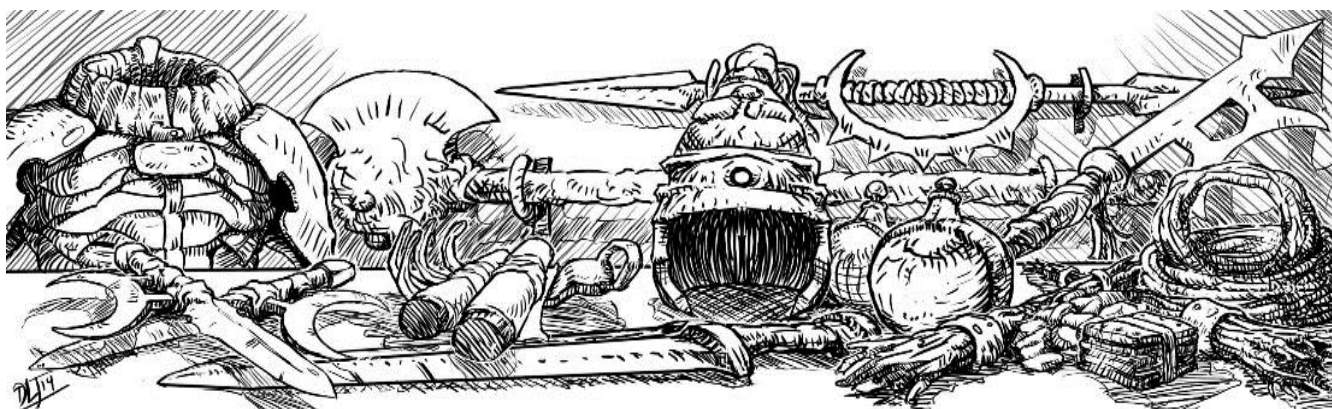


Figure 3 - "Gear" by David Lewis Johnson

⁵THIS IS NOT A LICENSE TO GO ALL TOMB OF HORRORS ON YOUR PLAYERS, YOU SADISTIC JERK.

Let's use the lowly hobgoblin as an example.

Hobgoblin

Medium humanoid (goblinoid), lawful evil

Armor Class 18 (chain mail, shield)

Hit Points 11 (2d8 + 2)

Speed 30 ft.

STR 13 (+1) **DEX** 12 (+1) **CON** 12 (+1) **INT** 10 (+0) **WIS** 10 (+0) **CHA** 9 (-1)

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Common, Goblin

Challenge ½ (100 XP)

Martial Advantage.

Once per turn, the hobgoblin can deal an extra 7 (2d6) damage to a creature it hits with a weapon attack if that creature is within 5 feet of an ally of the hobgoblin that isn't incapacitated.

Actions

Longsword. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d8 + 1) slashing damage, or 6 (1d10 + 1) slashing damage if used with two hands.

Longbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, range 150/600 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d8 + 1) piercing damage.

Most DMs will just play the hobgoblin as a bag of hit points, reducing its interaction with the players to exchanges of numbers. Avoid this proclivity. Not only is it not doing you any favors, exchanges of numbers are boring for everyone involved, especially the players. Stop it.

First, what are the hobgoblin's strengths? They're not terribly robust, they're not terribly smart, but they can deal some extra damage and they can see in the dark. That's useful information.

Hobgoblins are probably best on the defense. Defense is easy, even for creatures of average intelligence. You want to channel your enemy into prepared positions which are disadvantageous to him, where you can inflict maximum destruction on him with minimum risk of harm to yourself. Even a relatively stupid hobgoblin knows *that*.

You have ranged attacks, as well as melee attacks, with the ability to deal extra damage for free, so long as you have a not-incapacitated friend adjacent to the enemy. Use your bows from cover at maximum effective range. Melee enemies won't be able to close with you for several rounds, essentially giving you free opportunities to damage them. If you can engage the enemy with friendly melee fighters before they get near you, both you and they can deal extra damage.

Rule 14. Make the next encounter the result of the previous.

I got this one from Will Hindmarch (see Sources). It's beautiful.

If you have a table full of murder-hobos who won't leave the village's tavern without asking what's in it for them, show them how that kind of behavior isn't heroic. Here's how: If they won't rescue the little old lady's nephew because she can't meet their price, have the next encounter be the entire village coming to tar and feather the greedy buggers so Granny can sell their equipment and use the dosh to hire *real* adventurers. And nobody can say it's a "rocks fall, everyone dies" DM fiat, because you gave them choices, including – finally – the choice to kill the entire village and flee.

In other words, the next encounter or adventure is the result of the choices they made before. Making good/appropriate choices will become important to the players.

Rule 15. Keep game mechanics *moving*.

Not just combat, everything that involves uncertainty. Uncertainty breeds excitement and drama. Whether it's the Rogue picking an important lock or everyone fighting a horde of goblins, it's tense, it's dramatic.

Most DMs who complain about slow movement are talking combat taking "too long." That's both true and false.

Yes, combat can take a while to resolve. That's understandable, because the game engine is primarily oriented toward resolving the uncertainty of combat, simple as that. You only have to look at the character sheet, for Pete's sake; most of the information on there is only useful in combat. The majority of the skills and powers and spells in the game – in other words, the mechanical ways with which the players interact with the world – are combat-oriented. It takes a while to get through all the possibilities and permutations in a combat encounter.

On the other hand, non-combat encounters usually consist of “I pick the lock.” [rolls d20] “27.” And the DM replies, “You open the lock.”

There's your opportunity. But you have to fix **both**.

The Rogue picking the lock should be as tense and dramatic as the safecracking scenes in *Ocean's Eleven* or *The Italian Job*. If they're not, put some heat on it. Something or someone is chasing them, the clock is ticking for the villain's plan to succeed, *something* that puts pressure on them. That'll take a bit longer to resolve, and it *should*, because you want to slow it down.

For combat, you want to speed it up, while retaining enough description to keep it interesting. The easiest way I've found to keep combat moving crisply is simply to not allow players (or yourself) to hem and haw. More on that in a bit, because first we need to talk about transitions.

Transitions are something I read about on The Angry DM's blog (see Sources)⁶, though I've been using them for years. I'm going to paraphrase how a player's turn in a combat round usually goes:

DM: Annie, your turn.

PLAYER: Um, er. Where's the nearest bad guy?

DM: *POINTS TO FIGURES ON MAP*

PLAYER: Oh, okay. [Shuffles through handbook] No, not that spell...not that one, either... [ten minutes later] Okay, I guess I attack the hobgoblin with my mace. 16 to hit.

DM: That's a hit. What's the damage?

PLAYER: Six.

DM: Anything else?

PLAYER: [Shuffles papers] No, I don't think so.

DM: Okay, Chuck, it's your turn now.

What drama. What excitement. I'm on the edge of my...SNXXXXKKK, sorry, I must have drifted off.

Now, compare that to this:

DM: Annie, four goblins are charging the party. What do you do?

PLAYER: I'm 20 HP down, so I'll use a *potion of healing*, then I'll run up and hit the goblin with my mace. 16.

DM: Damage?

PLAYER: 6 bludgeoning.

⁶You ARE reading blogs and stuff, right? You're reading this ebook, so you must care about stuff like this. Go read more stuff. Now.

DM: Snerd, Chosen of Mystra, pulls a healing potion from his belt pouch and chugs it before charging the lead goblin and smashing it with his mace, crushing it to the flagstone floor. Its allies are hesitating. Chuck, Dinistra has an opening...

First, Annie is engaged. She begins her turn ready to act, with things planned out. Second, the DM has some description ready. Third, he introduced another dramatic consequence for the entire party, not just Annie's character. This is better, more interesting play.

Rule 15A – Keep the players focused.

As noted above, a thing that plagues many tables is people not paying attention. The most obvious manifestation of that is, when their turn comes up in initiative order, they're surprised and spend a terminally-boring amount of time figuring out what to do. With a smaller table, say four players, this isn't as much of a problem as when you've got six to eight. It's also less of a problem when the characters are low level; when they advance to a point where they each have a bunch of powers, skills, and abilities, it's best if they get into the habit of paying attention, so they're ready to go when their turn comes up.

A large part of avoiding this situation can be solved when you establish the table's expectations before the game ever kicks off. (Remember Rule 2?) Establish your expectation that players begin their turns ready to act. Establish a consequence for violating that expectation – like if they don't act because they weren't paying attention they default to the Dodge action.

At the same time, be reasonable. If the combat progresses such that Chuck's carefully-laid plan goes "poof" just before his turn comes up, give Chuck a reasonable amount of time to figure out something else to do.

A workable method to keep everyone on track is to use index cards. Fold them in half along their short axis. Write each player's character name on one side. Write the character name and some relevant combat stats on the other – AC, passive Perception, class/level, etc., whatever's useful for you – on the other. Make some for the bad guys, too. Drop them over your DM screen in initiative order, with the PC name side facing the players, so everyone can see who goes when.

You can also use a whiteboard and dry-erase markers. If you have one of those super-awesome vinyl battle mats, you can write it directly next to the action. The best part is you can put a player in charge of writing it down and keeping track!

Regardless of which method you choose, pick one and use it religiously. That way there'll be no excuse for lack of preparation (other than the aforementioned everything going pear-shaped, of course).

Don't forget to reward approaches to encounters which further the story and involve character background, flaws, and ideals. Inspiration works really well for that.

Rule 16 – I meant to do that.

Make everything seem like you intended it to happen. This is, quite possibly, the hardest skill for a DM to master. It takes preparation – a **lot** of preparation – but you can do it. In all but the most complicated of instances, it simply means having a couple of maps and encounter areas hashed out and prepped for slap-it-on-the-table-and-go play for when your players decide to take the game in an unexpected direction.

Rule 17 – Buy a crap-ton of dice.

Dice are cool. Lending dice is cool. Collecting dice is cool. You never know when you're going to need 17d6. Just buy at least one pound of dice, which are available from all kinds of vendors online. If you're like me, you buy a new set every other time you go into a FLGS⁷ or a convention, because OOO PRETTY MUST HAVE **NOW**. There are people who have built businesses around artisanal dice. Support them.

Matter of fact, support the gaming industry. Period. There are no megacorporations in gaming, no matter what you may have heard about WoTC. Most of them are a couple of people, tops. They're people just like you and me, putting stuff out there to make our lives a little less tedious. Buy their stuff.

Rule 18 – Make better NPCs.

Index cards are great for this. Keep notes on NPCs – who they are, their names, what's important to them, their relationship to the party, that sort of thing – so you'll have their

⁷Friendly Local Game Store

information at hand when you need it. You don't need to have combat information on them unless you think you'll need it; you (probably) don't need to know the village sage's combat stats, after all.

What you *do* need is information that will impact how the PCs will interact with the NPC. Jot down a basic idea of the NPC's morality, for example. If the PCs are on the run from the local authorities, will the sage sell them out to the fuzz? With which other NPCs is the NPC allied? Does the sage share tea with the local priest? You don't have to do this with every NPC; start with the ones the PCs will be dealing with most often.

Of course, remember your players have the attention span of a mayfly in heat. They **will** send everything sideways given half a chance. You *think* you don't need full background on the butcher, and you *do* need it for the local bishop. Now watch as your players decide that the bishop is a twerp and the butcher should be their best friend and patron. Be ready to improvise. The good news is you can often just swap names on the index cards. The butcher can't give them potions of healing or raise them from the dead, but he can give them the same wise counsel as the bishop would have, and point them to new quests.

It's also wise to note roleplaying cues. What accent does she have? Does she have a high-pitched voice? Does she have a facial tic or some other unique mannerism? Is she well-disposed to the party or have they angered her? If you have all of that on an index card, when they encounter her again six real-time months after their last interaction with her, you won't have that concussed-duckling moment when you realize you have no idea how to role-play her.

If you're into minute detail, give the NPC a quirk or two. The sage, to continue the example, has an irrational fear of owlbears. So when the PCs bring him an owlbear *figurine of wondrous power*, he freaks out just looking at the chess-piece-sized piece of stone.

Take notes on the NPC's attitude toward the party, and how what happens during the game can influence that. Is the sage well-disposed to the party? If so, why? Have they alienated him by their actions? Make a note of it. When they come back to town after looting an abandoned monastery, he might be angry that they ignored the monastery's library full of rare tomes and instead brought him a terrifying miniature owlbear.

The point is to make the NPC *memorable*. Making your NPCs memorable will help to limit your players' tendency to set fire to every hamlet and town they pass through.

You don't even need to do all that much creative work. You can get any number of pre-generated NPCs from DMs Guild. Just search for them.

Rule 19 – Social interaction as encounters

This one's going to be long, A., because it's important, and B., because it's complicated.

Many players find non-combat encounters boring. This is exemplified in the film *The Gamers: Dorkness Rising*. “Yeah, yeah, whatever, I seduce the archbishop's handmaiden. Can we go now?” Non-combat encounters are still important, and can be exciting, like we saw in Rule 15. But now we're not talking about picking locks. We're talking about ... talking.

Yeah. We're going to talk about how to set up situations in which your players – players of a **role-playing game** – have to actually **role play**. It's harder than it sounds. Most don't do it at all. Most of those who *do* do it do it badly.⁸

First off, an encounter is an encounter is an encounter. You can call them “scenes” if you like. That's actually very useful, because as I've noted elsewhere, you're creating drama. Drama is what makes RPGs exciting and fun to play. Drama comes from conflict.

Every encounter needs conflict. The protagonists require something to defeat, which conversely requires something that might defeat *them*. For combat encounters, that's easy. Most DMs can seat-of-pants that, no sweat – just find a creature with the right CR and roll initiative. Social encounters need conflict, too. It's just that you don't have a neat set of rules and criteria laid out in the DMG for that. You'll have to take the same criteria from combat encounters and make them work.

You'll have to answer some questions: What's at stake? What do the PCs need to overcome? What threatens them? What consequences do they face for failure? Those are the basics.

⁸NB: If you have a table full of “kick in the door and kill things” enthusiasts, you probably won't need to worry about this. You're not DOIN IT RONG, by any means. If that's how you play, awesome. Have fun, because there is no BadWrongFun. I play differently, and this work is about how I play. Feel free to skip this section.

You'll need answers for those regardless of what type of encounter you're designing. For social encounters, you'll need to do a considerably more.

First, figure out the initial setup. Why are they in this encounter? Why do they *need* to be? (See Rule 6.)

Second, define the NPCs and their individual characteristics. Decide who can provide what. Give each NPC goals and motivations, as well as ideals, bonds, and flaws (just like PCs!). One of each should be enough; you don't need to work up a complete background for each, though you'll find that of immense help. These details will inform how they'll react to interaction with the PCs, and make die rolls rare.

Third, have the NPCs actively pursue their goals while avoiding painful topics or areas of conversation which pose a danger to the successful completion of their plans. Let at least some of their traits be immediately apparent in how the NPCs act, and let appropriate tests discover the rest.

Fourth, make your NPC's traits *matter*. Chances are you'll have to resort to the dice eventually, so reward clever and/or skillful role-play. If they paid attention to and want to use the NPC's traits, award advantage on a die roll or simply allow the attempt to succeed. Make learning the NPC's traits and using them the heart of the conflict. Convincing a noble whose motivation is "cover my ass" to help overthrow the evil grand vizier won't be easy. But if the players trade on his "become the king's advisor" and "take revenge on my rival" goals, convincing him to help the PCs becomes much more likely.

That said, die rolls are to be avoided as much as possible. Set up opportunities for *interaction*, not opportunities for d20 checks. It's better to let the players make plans and execute them. Only roll skill checks when you simply can't avoid them, like when a player comes up with a good plan but isn't a skilled-enough role player to act out the interaction.

You also want to keep it fair to players who invested in social skills on their character sheets. So when you set DCs, make sure to include some crunch. Assume everybody "takes 10," for example.

Avoid having the whole thing hinge on a single die roll. That flies in the face of wanting to make the scene drip with drama, but it's just too random. It's too easy for a failed roll to screw the

pooch after 45 minutes of really rewarding, satisfying role-playing. I use a very simple version of the 4e skill challenges, and it works wonderfully: Everyone gets to roll a check against their best applicable skill, and the party has to get x successes before y failures against DCn.

Finally, when the players succeed, the payoff *must* be as obvious and substantial as those from combat encounters. If they're not, you're telling your players that social encounters aren't worth engagement. Award XP commensurate to what they'd get if they'd defeated a monster of the appropriate level. Look at where you set the DC for the interaction: Is it Easy, Hard, Very Hard, or Formidable? That gives you correlation for Easy, Medium, Hard, and Deadly encounters. If you know a Deadly combat encounter for your party is 1600XP, that's what you award for a Very Hard or Formidable social encounter. I like to use loot as carrots, too, but that's up to you.⁹

Rule 20 – Players are part of world-building

You shouldn't have to shoulder the entire burden of building a campaign world. Bring your players into the action. For one thing, it takes some of the creative load off you. For another – and most important, in my opinion – nothing makes the world you've built more “real” than players embracing it. Oh, and giving them ownership of the setting helps make them less likely to burn it down. Have I mentioned they like to burn things down?

This came to mind reading an online discussion about building religions. Religions are necessary in any campaign world, but it's really easy to go overboard, especially if your players don't really care. But there's good news: Chances are you have at least one player playing a cleric. Bring that player into your creative process. Sometimes this works and sometimes it doesn't. Your cleric player may embrace the opportunity to help define an entire faith structure. Another might be content to whack things with her mace and heal people. But you should still try, because allowing the player to buy in to your creative process builds a stronger sandbox.

Above all, never forget that anything you create will be almost entirely ignored by the players except to the extent that they can interact with it to have their own fun. It all depends on your players. If all they want to do is dungeon crawl, kill baddies and loot the corpses, developing

⁹ I know this is against the rules as written, where XP only comes from monsters defeated. Awarding XP for non-combat encounters has worked for me since D&D Next, so I design adventures around that. If you choose to run a “canned” adventure, recognize that it's very likely been designed to advance the PCs based on monster-defeat XP only and adjust accordingly.

an intricate celestial dance of deities is a colossal waste of time. If you make religion a core part of your campaign's story structure, they *might* pay more attention, but at that point you have to ask yourself if you're forcing the issue. They're *still* not interested in what your religions look like; they're only interested insofar as it gets them to the next dungeon. They're only interested in the *mace of St Cuthbert* so it can help them kill that demon, not because St Cuthbert welded seven disparate lines of quasi-heresy into a consistent theology and ended the Second Schism.

Session Zero – where you establish backgrounds – is an awesome time to get creative with your players and engage them in your world-building. Let's say your Fighter chooses the Folk Hero background, and has the "I stood up to a tyrant's agents" bond, and the flaw "The tyrant who rules my land will stop at nothing to see me killed" flaw. Ask her "How?" Let the player spin a tale about how Genista, the human fighter, stood up to the corrupt officials of her baron, who tried to extort bribes from her poor wood-cutter father. In standing up to them, she cut off their ears and made them carry them back to the baron with a note which said, "Sod off you fat fartweasel." Now she's hunted by him and his agents. Together, you can establish who he is and why he's corrupt.

She says his name is Tarren Dorr, and he's corrupt because he's a lazy coward who's trying to curry favor at court by living far outside his means. You say that to pay for it all, he taxes the hell out of the poor peasants. On top of that, he demands "gifts" on high holy days, and kneecaps tend to get broken if you don't give a large-enough gift. Genista had her "Falling Down" moment when Dorr kneecapped her father who, still mourning the death of Genista's mother and sister due to malnutrition and plague, died shortly thereafter. Genista has been on the run ever since.

That's a good chunk of your starting settlement created in about three minutes – who rules and how they rule, what life is like for the common people – plus you got player buy-in, and you have dramatic tension with at least the seed of adventure built right in.

Rule 21 – Meta-gaming Version 1

As is probably clear by now, I prefer role-playing vs. "roll-playing." I'd rather the players dictate what happens than the dice. But not all players are created equal, as I pointed out very early on. Some players are really enthusiastic role-players. They're eloquent, skilled or just talented

at improv, and enjoy verbal sparring as much as or more than any other aspect of the game. Some players are none of those things, and would just rather let the dice speak for their characters. As above noted, both approaches are perfectly valid, and the vast majority of players fall somewhere between those poles on the spectrum.

Why am I repeating all that? Because lots of people bitch about mechanical meta-gaming, where the player knows stuff like “trolls regenerate and are vulnerable to XYZ damage types” and use it when their characters don’t. That’s a valid bitch. But nobody ever bitches about players meta-gaming non-combat encounters. Nobody ever asks, “Is the character as eloquent and knowledgeable as the player?”

In other words, Glenn may be erudite and charming, but is his Half-orc Barbarian with 6s in INT and CHA? Should he get to use his real-world charm and erudition? Most DMs are so happy to have a player actually role-play for once that they’d let it slide. Selûne knows I’ve reacted like that. But *we shouldn’t*.

Best case, you nip this bud in Session Zero, where you establish expectations. Establish that you expect Glenn to play Thag according to his attributes. Glenn is very likely to readily agree, but in the excitement of the moment may forget, and you’ll need to remind him. Worst case, let Glenn role-play how he likes, but when you roll the dice to determine success, adjust the rolls for the *character’s* social ineptitude. That’s unpalatable, but it might be the best you can manage.

Rule 22 – The Three Most Important Words

Many moons ago, I offered to run an OSR campaign for D&D players who hadn’t played anything other than 4e. They took a long time to learn that they could try to do stuff that wasn’t on their character sheets. They took a long time to learn the three most important words a DM can say to a player: “You can try.”

“You can try” is your answer to just about everything a player wants to make her character do. “I want to leap the chasm.” “I want to shoot the ogre in the eye.” “I want to surf down the stairs on a shield.” Pretty much any time a player says “I want,” you can reply with “You can try.”

In order to facilitate their “try,” you need to be able to do adjudicate off-the-cuff skill checks, assigning a reasonable DC to what they want to do.¹⁰ “I want to leap the chasm” is Athletics, DC variable based on the physical characteristics of the area. “Shoot the ogre in the eye” is a basic attack roll, with a crit giving the desired result. “Surf the stairs” is Acrobatics.

Now, be forewarned: Once the players figure out they can *try* whatever they want to do, they’ll start chaining stuff together: “I want to leap on a discarded shield, surf it down the stairs, and shoot the orcs.” You’ll be tempted to simply say “No.” Resist this impulse. Let them try! Rather than “No,” say, “Okay, Legolas, sure. Let’s do this. But it ain’t gonna be one roll.”

This rule can be restated as **Assign a skill or other check for every comma in the player’s stated action.** “I want to leap on a discarded shield” – Athletics/Acrobatics – “surf the stairs” – again, Athletics/Acrobatics – “and shoot the orcs” – standard attack rolls. Write it out if you have to, with *your* grammar governing where the d20 rolls happen.

Also, keep it within reason. You must not let players abuse doing cool stuff. Remember RAW for what a creature can do on their turn: Basic/minor/free, Move, Action. The stair-surfing stunt is no more than that! “Leap on the shield” – minor – “surf the stairs” – move – “shoot” – attack action. If the player wants to do more than that, you’ll have to have her split it up. Usually, “more than that” equals wanting to simply do too many things or move too far in one turn.

NB: I have been known to let players spend Inspiration to try something more complicated than Minor/Move/Action, but it has to be **super rad**. That’s a judgment call, and I make it clear that players are *not* to invoke that too often. Try it, but do so at your peril.

Rule 23 – Make your dungeons coherent

When designing a dungeon (or any above-ground stronghold combat area, for that matter), work hard to make it make at least a certain amount of sense. Having a room with a troll right next to a room with three kobolds doesn’t make sense. That doesn’t mean the inhabitants can’t be diverse. It *does* mean they can’t be apparently random, like you just got out the DMG and some dice and started rolling.

¹⁰I’d say you need to be able to describe the result well, too, but that’s my playstyle.

Question your choices – do the inhabitants make sense together? Why aren't they eating each other? Why aren't they fighting each other? Are they working together? If so, how? Have they established territories? What do they eat? How do they acquire food?

Simply put, *why are they all living together in a dungeon?* I find it helps to have a story in mind which explains it. You can make the dungeon more interesting for your merry band of murder-hobos if you sprinkle the complex with clues they can use to piece together that story.

The larger the dungeon, the easier it is to make this happen. There can be an area for kobolds and an area for goblins, both of which steer clear of the corridors roamed by the gelatinous cube. Maybe the kobolds and the goblins are at war, and the gelatinous cube's area is a no-man's land, like the Forgotten Realms version of the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas. To use the example I first gave in this rule, perhaps the troll is kept in a life of luxury by the kobolds, worshiped as a god.

You can make it work, but it *must* work, and your players must be able to discover the whys of how it works.

You know, if they care, and don't just try to set it on fire.

Rule 24 – Vary your challenges

A complaint I often see on RPG internet discussion groups is from DMs concerned that their players have fallen into a rut, reacting the same way to everything. They're getting bored, what do I do?

Stop throwing the same stuff at them.

If they're getting bored fighting monsters, step away from the tactical wargame and start getting them into social encounters. And vice-versa; if you've spent the past four months of game time schmoozing courtiers, they're going to start itching for some clobberin' time, so give it to them.

Sometimes you're not in a position to switch gears. If the party is halfway through the second level of a three-level dungeon complex two weeks' travel from a settlement, they're not likely

to fall into a complex political intrigue without it feeling very contrived.¹¹ If that's the case, how about you stop making every fight "to the death"? Speaking of which...

Rule 25 –Even monsters want to live

Not every fight is to the death. Every sentient being, deep down, wants tomorrow to look pretty much like today; maybe a little better, but pretty much like today. They're not interested in martyrdom. Even kobolds want to live!

So why do you keep groups of creatures running into the party's Cuisinart Of Death[tm] heedless of their own survival until they're all dead?

First, if a group of six kobolds attacks your party of four PCs, remember Rule 13 and give them some tactics. Ambush is paramount; they're not going to attack the PCs in a frontal assault unless forced. They're going to attack from range unless it's absolutely necessary. They're intelligent. *They want to live through it.*¹²

Second, when the odds start going against them, they're going to suddenly want very badly to get home to Mrs. Scalycreep and little Timmy. Unless compelled by some outside force or circumstance to fight to the death, they're going to break and run.

Or surrender. Imagine the fun you can have with a party which has to accept the surrender of two grumpy kobolds because the paladin won't let them murder the little buggers out of convenience. What happens when they encounter the lizardfolk in the next cave? Do the kobolds warn the PCs that they're about to blunder into the territory of the Slssyk tribe?

You've just gone from yet another boring exchange of die rolls and hit points to a whole can o' worms the PCs didn't expect.

Rule 26 – Keep improving yourself

Keep reading stuff. You're reading this, aren't you? Why aren't you reading blogs, watching videos, going to con panels, all that stuff?

¹¹But you can do it. Maybe they are captured by the goblins in Rule 23, and have to act as intermediaries in truce negotiations with the kobolds. It's possible.

¹²I spent some years in the US Army. One thing I learned from my NCOs was "A fair fight is one where you done f*cked up. You make sure you have the most unfair advantage you can in every fight you pick. Now do some pushups." Kobolds will do the same thing, probably without the pushups.

Keep up on rules changes and errata. Wizards keep all the 5e errata and Sage Advice rulings online. Make sure you keep up on it. Players will ask. If you're an Adventurer's League DM, you *really* need to know that stuff, because it isn't in the books. Know where they are (see Sources).

DM as often as possible. Like any other pursuit, the only way to get better is to practice. DM outside your comfort zone. DM at cons. DM for your local game store's Adventurer's League sessions.

NEW STUFF FOR Version 2.0 FOLLOWS

Rule 2.1 – Reskin things for flavor

Cover game mechanics with skins that supplement your world. For example, the PHB gives you two choices if you want to play a human: Basic (all stats get +1) and Variant (add +1 to two abilities, gain a feat, and gain an extra skill). Necessary information at character creation, but boring, because it reduces the character to math. Here's an approach from user "Hemlock" at the ENWorld D&D 5e forums (which I've edited somewhat):

"My preference is instead to use variant human as a chassis on which to define the subspecies of human. E.g. Valerians get +1 to Str and +1 to Con, and are Heavy Armor Masters. Machakans get +1 to Dex and +1 to Con and are Mobile. C'tissians get +1 to Int and +1 to Wis and are Skilled. Etc.

"This doesn't necessarily have to constrain players from allocating their variant human traits however they want, unless you want it to, but it does mean that when someone comes up with a unique combination (+1 to Str and +1 to Dex, Alert) they are encouraged to give it a name ("Cimmerian") and there is implicitly a tribe of people out there somewhere who are somewhat like them, even if no other Cimmerians ever come onscreen.

"Then you can just basically forget about the regular, non-variant human, because stat bonuses by themselves are boring to me as a DM, not something I'd want to use to define a culture. In fact, if I did want a civilized vs. barbarian divide, I'd be tempted to say that it's the civilized humans who get +1 to all stats but no feat, because proper nutrition/hygiene/education/etc. makes them overall healthier, but also leaves them without the evolutionary selective pressure that makes Machakans Mobile and Gordurans Tough, etc."

This is a fantastic way to give your campaign world a very distinct mechanical reason for players to design origins. If they want the mechanical privileges being a Cimmerian provides, they have to develop a reason why they're part of a group of adventurers in the Big City. That, combined with Background, can give a very well-rounded character who can contribute hugely to your story in creative ways.

Rule 2.2 – Where a bunch of Rules are put into practice

Periodically I get correspondence from readers of this monograph. Some of it has to do with clarification. Some is just praise. Some is just snark.¹³ Sometimes, I get something completely new. I want to tell you about that.

Recently, a chap called Bryan wrote me an email:

"I am currently running my group of 6 work friends/family through the Curse of Strahd campaign with a little homebrew elements incorporated into it. I've been seeking feedback from my friends and they say they are having fun and all, but one guy says he feels like he is being forced into situations rather than making choices that are meaningful. So, my questions to you as an experienced DM is:

"How do I make the content that I develop and work on less of a railroad that they follow and more of a choice between characters?"

"Should I create random maps for random encounters that they may have when they go off the rail?"

I found that incredibly interesting, and it really made me think. I chewed on it for a bit, marshaled my thoughts, and sent this reply:

I understand your predicament. I've been there. That's the trouble with published adventure materials - it's **all** pretty railroad. It **has** to be, even if it's a huge \$50+ book like Wizards keep dropping. Storm King's Thunder was the first thing I've seen from WizKids that wasn't chugga-chugga railroad. At least it gave some scope for sandboxing.

The trouble is it's really hard to give the players the ability to sandbox while trying to maintain a story arc. I've found you have to give them the *feeling* of sandboxing while actually putting them on the Express to Plotville. See, that's the thing - they can't see behind your screen. They

¹³ You can contact me via the email at the end of this monograph or my website/blog: www.r-p-davis.com

don't know what you have in store for them. If your plan is to have them defeat Bad Guy X in the Castle In The Mountains, and they decide to go be pirates 500 miles away from that Castle, put the bad guy on another boat and have him attack their boat. Change the flavor, change the location, let them *think* they're screwing up your plans – because let's face it, some people get off on that – and hit them with what you *want* to hit them with anyway. Then eat their Cheetos.

Anyway, that doesn't help you with CoS. Unfortunately, your player isn't going to be satisfied. Barovia is the Demiplane of Dread. Used to be really hard to get out of that place. Once you were there, you were pretty much stuck; even Strahd can't get out, and he runs the damn place. So it's not like your players can be all, "Screw you and your Neverwinter bullcrap, we're going to Waterdeep." It isn't that simple. CoS **is** a railroad, a "choose your own adventure" plan with limited choices.

Practically, I don't think it's on you to make the adjustment. I think your player needs to adjust his expectations. For the following reasons:

1. He's the odd man out. The rest of you are satisfied with what's happening.
2. CoS is what it is. If he *really* wants to sandbox you'll have to abandon the campaign and start something from scratch.
3. You're new. It's a learned skill to be able to react to sandboxing and provide a high-quality experience for your players. You're working toward that by working in more than the material in the book.

I think you need to make it clear.

Now, into the future: Developing your own sandbox. My advice is...

...don't. There's so much content out there. Play through published stuff. In terms of "it'll work really well out of the box," go with Official D&D, converted Old School modules, and highly-rated 3rd party content, in that order. You will learn SOOOO MUCH about running games AND designing your own adventures from that experience.

Designing adventures is **hard**. I've been doing it for thirty years and I still make stupid mistakes. Sit at the feet of masters and osmose some wisdom before you set out to do it yourself.

Now, if they go off the rails, and they will, let 'em. They're reacting to what you're telling them, after all. This is your chance to be creative. Be honest with them, though - tell them they're going off the reservation, into the Land of I'm Not Prepared, and ask them for five minutes to come up with something interesting. Send 'em out for a smoke break. That'll give you enough time to figure something out.

Let's say they fixate on the barmaid, who doesn't even have a name, much less anything to do with the Evil Sorceror of Evil whom they're supposed to be taking on. Ask them for a few minutes. While they're drinking Coke and stuffing themselves with pizza, make her into Bandera, a distant relation of one of the characters. This gives them a reason to care about her. If they don't, role-play about how she got a letter from the character's mother, why doesn't he write, she worries about him, that sort of thing. Then have them notice a strange inky stamp on the back of her hand: The mark of the Cult of Extreme Badness. Turns out she's not really a convert; she's romantically involved with a True Believer, though, and GOSH, he's so DREAMY, and they don't *actually* sacrifice innocent maidens, no not at all. That night, she's not there. The tavern owner, who's run ragged because he's short-staffed, tells them Bandera said she was going to a church service with her boyfriend and she should have been back an hour ago.

If you've done everything right, they're connected with Bandera enough to want to see what's happened to her. Now they need to develop a daring and complicated rescue op, which should be very exciting. They have to find the cult's lair - and you'll have to create the circumstances of finding the lair and the lair itself, which is exciting and creative, even though you can use any old house map and put it a block away (see the following Rule).

This is classic sandboxing. I hatched that in less than three minutes. The trouble is it has nothing to do with the main adventure other than impacting tactical resources (like spell slots). So tie it in. Chances are the Evil Sorceror of Evil has a plan. He's not just waiting for adventurers to come kill him. Oh, no. He has his own plans, which have a schedule. The PCs taking the evening "off" the main adventure to rescue Bandera mean he's a leg up on them. They need to realize this, of course. You can emphasize that by putting their patron in their way as they go to the cult base, berating them for not immediately rushing off to Evil S's tower to turn him to paste. Put that tension, that drama, into it. Make them realize their sandboxing might have consequences they cannot anticipate.

Rule 2.3 – Get some props

If you play 100% in “theatre of the mind,” you can ignore this Rule. Sometimes, though, you get the hankering for a set-piece battle. If you do that, you’ll need props.

In days of yore, every DM worth the name had a [Chessex battle-mat](#). I still have mine after decades. You do need to pause the game to draw the map, but that might not be a problem.

VITAL IMPORTANT NOTE: Chessex mats and dry-erase markers Do. Not. Mix. They specify wet-erase markers, which you can get at any office-supply store. Personally, I use dry-erase, because they’re infinitely less expensive than wet-erase pens. But, I hear you veteran DMs cry, how do you keep your Chessex mat so squeaky clean? Easy, my friends! The only Real World magic item I’m aware of: [Mr Clean Magic Eraser](#). Takes the stains right off.

Some of us were lucky enough to be playing in the days when Wizards supported their Wednesday-night “D&D Encounters” with actual printed materials, which included maps. If you ran games at the store, the store would give you the maps when they were no longer relevant or useful. I have a stack of maps from those days, and I’m always re-purposing them. You can sometimes find them on eBay or other auction sites for cheap.

You can also get free or pay-what-you-want battle maps on DMs Guild. [Deviant Art](#) and the [Cartographer's Guild](#) are also great places to find battle maps and tiles to print yourself for your personal use. They’re usually quite large image files, though, which makes you jump through hoops to print them. If you have the ability to make the image files into PDFs, you can split them with Acrobat into 8.5x11” or A4 sheets and tape them back together. You should also be able to take them on a memory stick to an office-supply big box store and have them printed on a plotter, though that might run to money.

Speaking of tiles, link-em-together map tiles are utterly awesome. You print them on cardstock, and trim off the excess with a hobby knife and a metal ruler. Link them together however you need them. You can also just buy map tiles; the best part is they’re not usually game or setting-specific. I like [these](#), but there are others. If you’re good with Photoshop or GIMP, you can get [file sets from the Internet](#), pull them into your software, and create maps. I can’t, because I’m clueless with image-manipulation software. But maybe you can.

You might also want to take a stab at modeling. This is a fantastic way to make really memorable encounter settings, as well as basic map tiles. I highly recommend YouTube tutorials for

this, because the process of making them is very visual and hands-on. [Here's a really good channel](#), and his first few videos are tutorials on making basic dungeon map tiles, so you get a great start. The best part is it's really, really cheap to do, if a bit labor-intensive. If you have the spare change, you can [buy 3d dungeon files](#), and if you have a 3D printer, the world's your file-creating oyster.

Miniatures are going to be necessary if you're using battlemaps. That's the bad news, because you can sink literally hundreds of units of your currency of choice in little plastic or metal figurines, plus all the paints and brushes, and the dozens of hours to paint them. The good news is you don't have to do any of that, at least for your players, because they're far better suited to choose the physical representation of their characters. So pass that buck. Make a deal with them in Session Zero: They have to provide their own miniatures to represent their characters, and you'll supply the monsters and maps.

There are any number of places you (and they) can get minis, from the Internet to your FLGS. As you might expect, I recommend the latter. As DM, you're going to need a **lot** of little whats-its, but you don't need to have an authentic, painted mini for everything when you start. Paizo have awesome boxes of NPCs and monsters called [Pathfinder Pawns](#), printed on heavy card-stock, which you slot into plastic bases as needed. They're not exactly cheap, but they work really, really well. That's what I personally use.

In the meantime, you can use everything from what's in your spare-change jar – pennies for minions, other coins for NPCs or bigger monsters – or extra dice, which has the added benefit of giving you a nice metric to track the bad guys' hit points – or even go to your local dollar store and get a bunch of green plastic “army men” to stand in as baddies.

A really neat idea I got from a local DM is to use Starburst candies as monster tokens. You can write on them with the dry-erase pens you use on your Chessex mat, numbering them for different monsters, and using different colors for different types of creature. The cool part is, when one dies, you can chuck the candy at the player as instant gratification for getting the kill.

Rule 2.4 – Get your nose out of the book

Spell cards are one of the best things available for your game. You need a set as DM, for those times when you have a foe which uses spells. Your players need them, because it's a hell of a

lot less time to use them than flipping through the rulebooks, plus it's easier to do a side-by-side comparison to speed up gameplay.

Lovely, glossy, pre-printed decks of spell cards are [available from Gale Force 9](#); they're [available on Amazon](#), but try your FLGS first, because if they don't have them they might be able to order them for you. They're slightly spendy, but well worth it, in my opinion.

You can also roll your own, using any number of enthusiast-generated fillable PDFs. There's a good one [here](#); I've used it myself. There's another on DMs Guild [here](#). No matter which you choose, you'll have to write the spell info in, or copy-and-paste it from the SRD or something, but free equals you have to do **some** work, so kwitcherbitchin.

Rule 2.5 – Automate Your Character Sheets

Nothing sucks more than when one of your players has a character sheet they've played from 1st to 10th level. It's full of scribbles, it's rubbed transparent in spots from erasing, and I 100% guarantee it's a red-hot mess. You can fix that for free and look like a hero to your players with automated character sheets. Make sure you give them one that's self-populating with PHB abilities for class/race/whatever, because the file will do all the heavy lifting for bonuses and stuff. That way there can be no confusion.

Such sheets are available on the DMs Guild – I'm a huge fan of [More Purple More Better's](#), because it's awesome – and you can find more just by Googling. There are also character sheets and generators which run in Microsoft Excel which are very thorough; I use the [ForgedAnvil one](#) myself for when I get to actually creep out from behind the screen.

Some players use apps on their smartphones or tablets. I have no personal experience with such things, so I can't recommend any of them. I am, however, watching the officially-licensed D&D app – [D&D Beyond](#) – with great curiosity. As of this writing (Spring 2017), it's in beta.

Rule 2.6 – Manage Your Campaign

What do you mean, you don't keep a campaign log? That's dumb. You need to do that.

Managing your campaign can be complicated or as simple as you want it to be. It depends on how deeply immersed into it you get. I know some DMs who spend more time fiddling with their campaign management tools than actually running quality games. Don't become a victim of that.

The basics of managing your campaign are straightforward. You need to know where the PCs are now, where they've been and what they've experienced, and where they're going in the next session. That's the gameplay side of it covered. You also need to coordinate the real-world issues like scheduling and who's bringing the Cheetos and Mountain Dew. If you always meet on Thursdays at 7PM at Brian's, you're lucky. Most groups have flexible schedules and commitments.

Keeping track of where the PCs have been, where they are, and where they're going is pretty simple. At its most basic, it's as simple as crossing out each section of an adventure as you play through it. At its most complicated, it's a cross-referenced Wiki of everything in your world the PCs have seen or might know about.

You can go whole hog and buy a membership at [Obsidian Portal](#); that's the most powerful campaign manager I've yet found, though it requires a paid account to access the really useful features. [Scabard](#) is another campaign manager. You can also do a website if you like.

I highly recommend a calendar of some sort. I use Google Calendar, because all my players have Google accounts. Obsidian Portal has a calendar built in to its organization scheme.

Keeping a basic outline of what's happened is also an excellent idea. Again, it can be as simple as "Party killed the Goblin King" or as complicated as telling the story from Rule 10. I prefer the latter, as it lets me come up with the kernels of stories which I might later expand into fantasy fiction that I'll never sell but writing that damn novel is a thing I keep telling myself I'll do someday see if I won't. Besides, some players really like that sort of thing. If they do and you don't, hell, let *them* write it out. They'll keep track of it for you. Which is awesome.

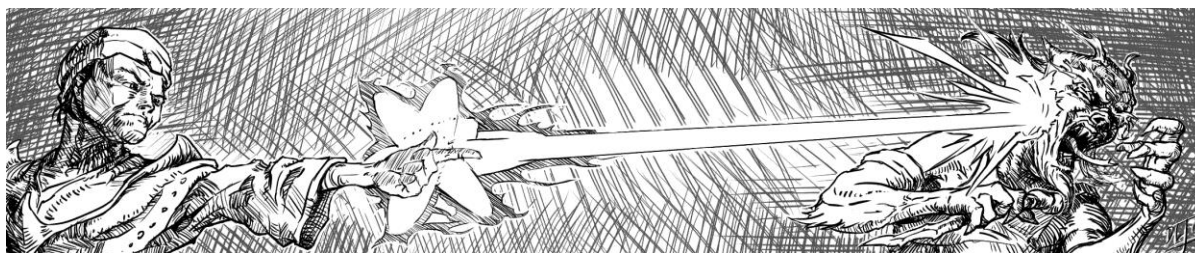


Figure 4 - "Spot" by David Lewis Johnson

Conclusion

I hope I've at least given you some things to think about. If you decide to use some of these ideas, or have more ideas of your own, let me know by email at bobnq3x@gmail.com – I promise I'll at least listen.

Now go play D&D!

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