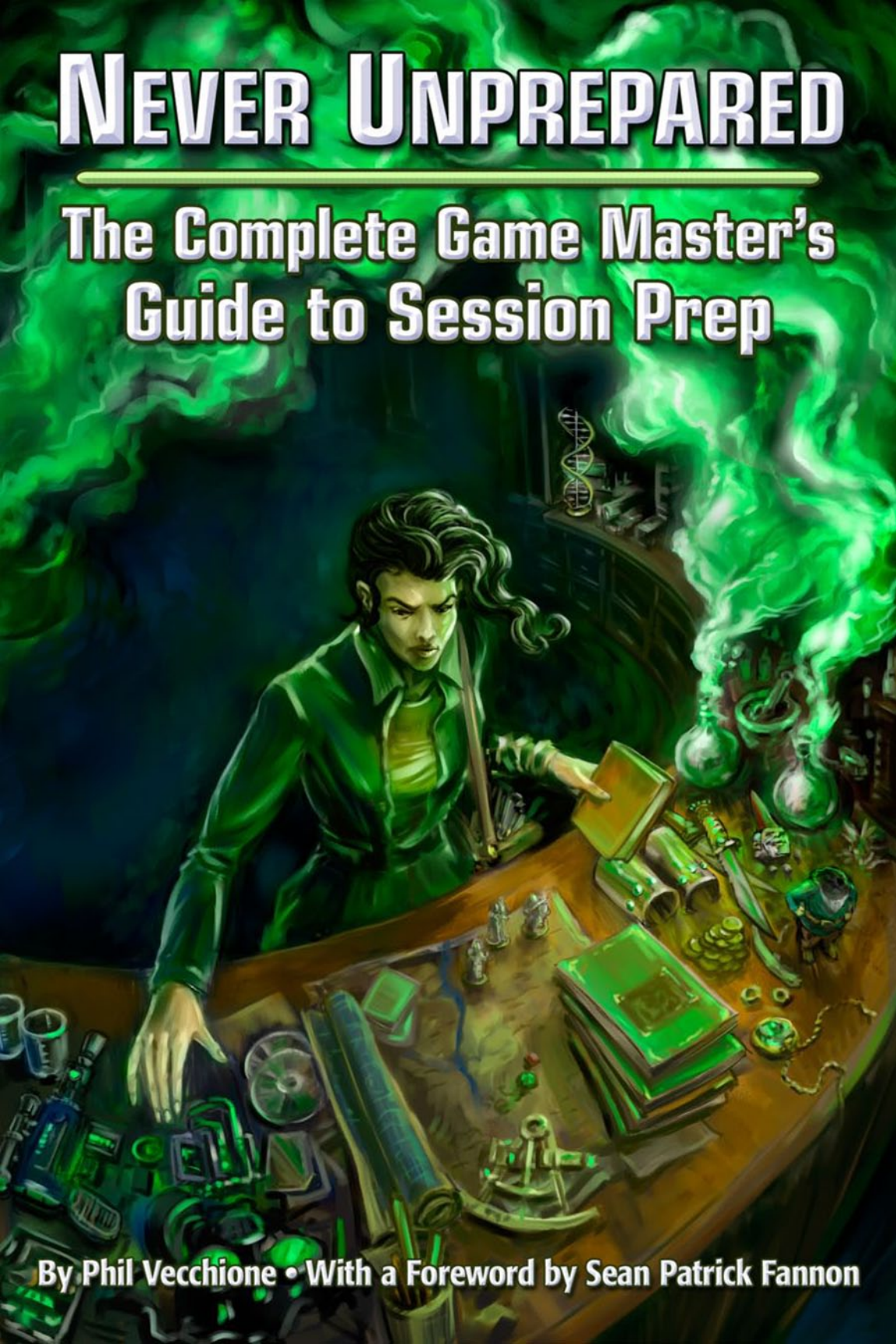
Never Unprepared

The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep



By Phil Vecchione • With a Foreword by Sean Patrick Fannon

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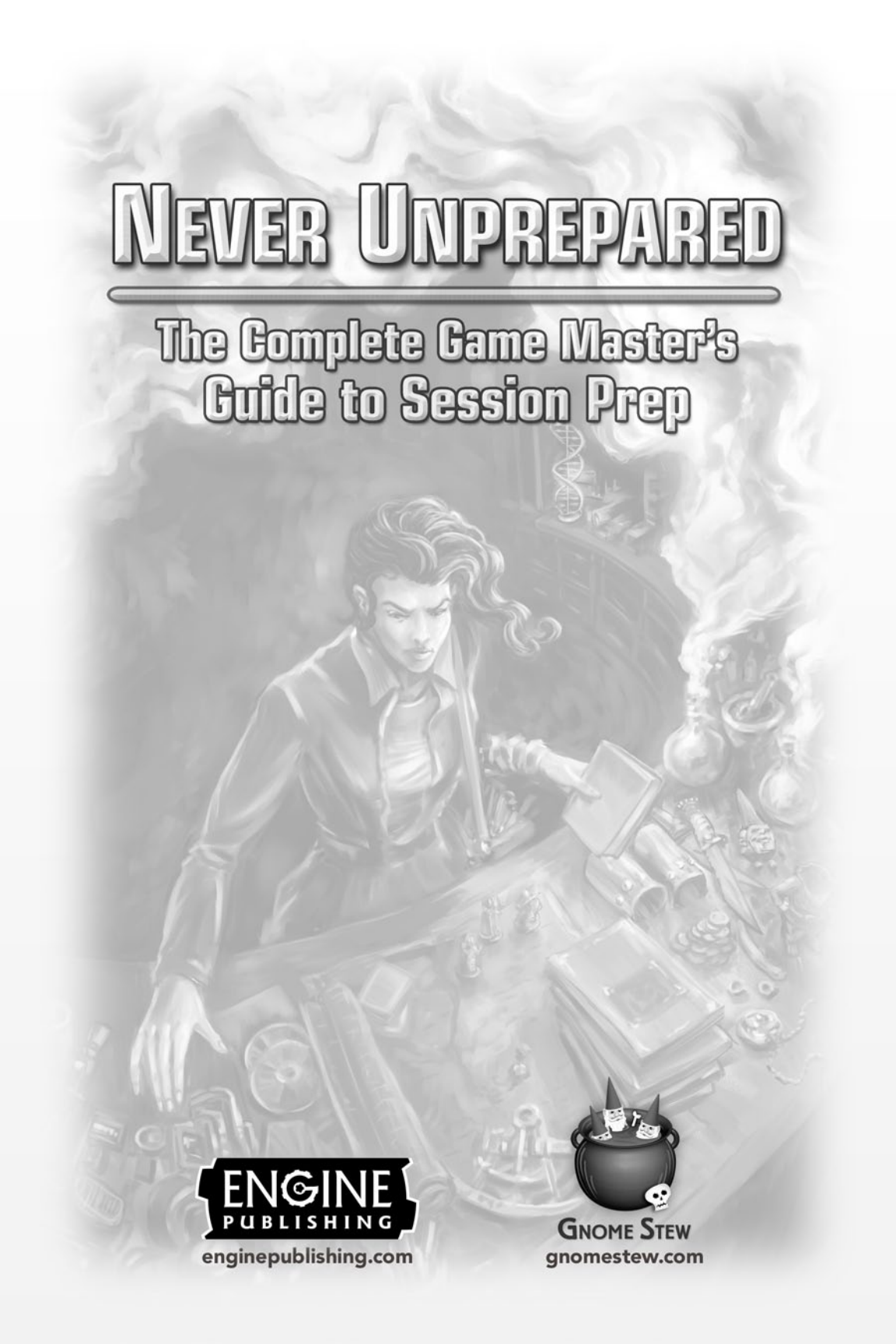

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With special thanks to my Keurig and my "fatman" chair, who supported me throughout my writing. –P.V.

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Dedication

To my wife Florence, for putting me onto this path, and supporting all my gaming and other endeavors over the years.

To my children, Dante and Rose:
Embrace your creativity in all you do.

To my gaming group, who were the lab rats for all my tinkering and experimentation as this process evolved. –P.V.

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Foreword

"Why didn't I think of this?"

That's the first question I asked myself when Phil asked me to write this foreword. As I read through his introduction and took a good, hard look at what he's accomplished here, there was a strong urge to slap my hand to my forehead.

This book is a **great idea!**

Fortunately, I *didn't* think of it first because**,** as it turns out, Phil is exactly the guy to do it the right way.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I've got plenty of ideas to share, plenty of insight on the concept, and plenty of experience in the field. What I don't have, however, is a process—at least, not one that is thought out well enough to share in any meaningful way.

Phil, on the other hand, has taken his expertise as a project manager and his genetic predisposition to nigh-obsessive preparedness and applied these qualities to an entirely systemic and effective treatise on the matter. He's broken down the whole of the concept, applied a step-by-step presentation of all of the factors you need to consider, and presented it all in a clear, concise, easily grasped way.

Most importantly, he's demystified the whole concept of "game prep." It's no longer the boogie-man waiting at your desk a couple of hours before game time, ready to stress you out beyond measure before people start showing up for your game. It's also no longer that arduous, tedious task you have to force yourself to close the latest MMORPG or YouTube video to drudge through during the week. It's a reasonable, manageable task that will actually be fun to perform, and it will take a *lot* of stress off of you by the time that first player arrives.

The best part of this book is that Phil doesn't just lay out a list of steps that every GM must follow to the letter. Honestly, that would be fairly useless as well as pretentious. A wiser man, Phil, in that he instead guides you in evaluating your needs as a GM, based on your style of play. From there, he helps you figure out the steps that make the most sense for you.

Look, I'm fairly known in some gaming circles as a classic example of the improvisational game master. In fact, the concept of the "anal vortex" was coined by friends of mine years ago to represent how I seem to be able to pull *something* out of *somewhere* to make my games work the way they do. There was, in fact, a time I could literally just drop a game out of my head at a moment's notice (there's a rather famous incident where I was handed nothing more than the GM's screen for the first *Star Wars* RPG—the West End Games one—and, having never run or played before, I ran a complete scenario at a game club meeting because there was no one else to do it).

Here's the thing, though. I want to run the kinds of games that people enjoy, remember, and talk about. With all that I have going on in my life these days, doing that means I *have* to spend some time and effort getting things ready. I need bad guys written up, I need a sense of what story arcs are at work, and I need to have some important scenes roughed out that I know will pay off my players' expectations. I've started improving my preparation process to a degree, because I've had to.

One thing I can tell you, though, is that I really appreciate this book. I'm getting some great ideas from it, and I believe my players are going to benefit a lot from what I learn from Phil.

Your players will, too. Trust me.

Sean Patrick Fannon
Creator of Shaintar,
Author of *The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer's Bible*
Huntsville, AL
April 2012

Introduction

I've never read an RPG or supplement that has told me how to prep for my sessions. Most of them talk about encounter building and campaign planning, but none of them lay out what information needs to be in my session notes, how long my notes should be, or even the best way to record them. I don't know if that's an unrealistic expectation to place on game designers, but since the dawn of the hobby we GMs have been left to wander in the desert trying to figure out how to prep our sessions.

The RPG blogging community has done some work to help advance this aspect of GMing, but the number of articles on how one should prepare their session notes is drowned out by a deluge of articles on how to speed up combat, the best class combinations to take, and the reasons to love/hate every version of *Dungeons & Dragons*™. If you're lucky, you may stumble on the occasional article with some nuggets of information which, through trial and error, can be cobbled together into some kind of system to prepare for your game.

The end result is that many GMs hate to prepare their session notes. I have yet to encounter a GM who is excited to prepare their notes—at best, they have made some kind of uneasy truce when it comes to getting their prep work done. Not me: I am a GM who likes to do my prep. Not because I like to give up time for other forms of leisure to write encounters, but rather because I have come to appreciate that the time I spend on my prep will make the games that I run so much better. I have also created a personal system whereby I am not a slave to my prep; instead, my prep is a minor to-do accomplished in the course of my day.

My goals in writing this book are to share my own experiences with, and techniques for, session prep; and to make prep much less painful—and perhaps even pleasant—for GMs. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first gaming book ever written exclusively about game prep.

What I share in *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep* is not a specific method for how to prepare for a game. That kind of approach is novel but inflexible and will become stale as our hobby continues to evolve. Rather this book looks at prep in a more holistic way, identifying its role and your specific needs, but will require you to determine how to meet those needs. Don't worry, though: There are plenty of tips and suggestions on how to do exactly that in this book.

When you have completed the book, uncovered those needs, and worked to solve them, the end result will be *your* prep system—and you will know how to grow and adapt that system as you run different games and embark on different campaigns.

Phil Vecchione
Buffalo, NY
March 2012

How to Use this Book

Never Unprepared is designed to be read, internalized, and adapted for your own use as a GM. Whether you've run a few games, never run one, or have run hundreds or thousands of sessions, you'll find things in this book that you can put to use right away to improve, streamline, and better understand your prep process.

Why a Book about Game Prep?

I'm hardwired at the genetic level to prepare for things: Through my maternal bloodline I am half-Scottish, and come from the Johnston clan. Our clan motto is *Nunquam non paratus*, "Never Unprepared." And while this trait does not carry through to all of my relatives, it is strongly expressed in me. I am rarely without a pocketknife, and I always have just what I need in my work bag. I hate to be caught unprepared and am at my most comfortable when I have done my research before any significant event.

I have been a gamer since 1982 and have been a GM for nearly all of those years. I cut my teeth on the Moldvay D&D Basic Set and crafted my first dungeons on graph paper from the stationery store. Over the years I have run numerous campaigns under a variety of systems, and I've written out my session notes in many

Artist: Christopher Reach

different ways. I have written and run thousands of sessions, and have been underprepared, over-prepared, and sometimes just prepared enough. In the course of running those games, I've developed a good feel for what common elements appear in the prep for any game.

When I am not in my basement gaming (yes, I game in my basement), writing gaming books (I was one of the authors and designers, as well as the project manager, of Engine Publishing's two first books, *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters* and *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game*), or writing articles for the GMing blog Gnome Stew (*gnomestew.com*), which I've done since 2008, I am a project manager by profession. As a project manager I have experience in time estimates, scheduling, and planning. I have an understanding of how to take something complicated, break it up in to manageable parts, and then tackle them over time in order to achieve a goal.

The culmination of all of this has been a journey, undertaken over the past 10 years, to understand session prep and how to hack it for best effect. It is through trial and error that I have assembled the concepts and elements presented in this book, with the hope that the things that I have learned can benefit other GMs.

The Breakdown

Here's what you'll find in each section of *Never Unprepared*. Each section builds upon the others.

Understanding Prep

To really dive into how to build your own system for prep, we have to understand the nature of prep. First we'll look at the role of prep and its phases, and then we'll break down those phases and look at each step and its importance. In this section you will come to understand your own prep cycle and to identify the phases where you're strongest, and those where you need to develop your skills.

Prep Toolbox

In the next section we'll look at some of the components that go into creating your notes. We'll look at various tools to create prep notes; we'll also talk about creative cycles and energies, and how to do the right things at the right time. Then we will address creating a personal prep template that complements your style.

Evolving Your Style

In the final section, we'll talk about how to evolve and adapt your style as you gain experience. We will also address how to re-evaluate your tools when you switch games and as technology changes.

Understanding Prep

Artist: Christopher Reach

Chapter 1: Prep is Not a Four-Letter Word

When you say "session prep" to most GMs, they imagine a pile of handwritten notes spread across a table; a kudzu of loose-leaf and ink attempting to consume any free space it can find. They have blood-chilling visions of sitting at a desk like a monk penning a copy of the Bible, writing endlessly in silence. They have flashbacks of high school and college term papers, pulling all-nighters to get them finished in time, and the fatigue and the low-level self-loathing that comes from making yourself stay up all night for nothing more than homework.

Session preparation is the act of preparing oneself as the GM for an upcoming session where you will run a game for your players. Session preparation (which I will call prep from now on) is related to campaign preparation, which is the act of organizing information for a campaign, or series of sessions. This book addresses session prep, but some of the concepts presented are applicable to campaign prep as well.

Prep has become a much-maligned part of the GMing process, with many GMs confessing that they enjoy running games but not doing the prep for them. This in turn leads some to follow the path of the improvisational GM, who doesn't prep anything but instead lets the game organically flow from her mind. While that's a fine skill to have, for most of us some kind of notes are necessary, be it a map, a few note cards with some plot points, or 15 pages of story material.

There are also types of stories that are best not run off the cuff. An intricate mystery with numerous red herrings, a complex political thriller, and a game centered on an ancient conspiracy are all types of plots where having notes about what is going on is beneficial to the GM and the players. Running those sorts of games without notes carries a high risk of not correctly conveying the small details and facts that are the key to making those kinds of plots work.

As for not liking prep, it is my belief that the reason that many GMs do not enjoy it is because they are doing it wrong. That may sound bold, and I will defend that point later on in the chapter, but I think that prep has been given a bad reputation over the years. In the way that many parts of our hobby are passed down from experienced GM to new GM, I think that we older GMs have perpetuated the belief that at best prep is some kind of necessary evil and not an enjoyable, creative process.

The Goal of Prep

Every GM, experienced or new, has been in this situation: on the spot, facing your players, when something unexpected has happened in the game and you are searching for what to do next. It could be that the players have attacked the king, or the party has decided to explore the hex to the west and not the one to the north, or the mage attempted to bluff the villain into revealing his master plan and succeeded. In those situations, we freeze up for a moment as our minds scramble to

determine how to resolve the event. In that moment of thought, as time seems to be crawling and the attention of your players is running out like sand in an hourglass, wouldn't it be great to look over at your backup GM and have him whisper the answer to you, allowing play to resume?

In essence that is what our prep is: It's our backup GM. The outcome of good game prep is the organization of the information we need to keep our game running and our players immersed in the game.

GMing is in many ways like radio, where silence is death. When I was in college I was a DJ at the college station, rocking out metal at 10:00 in the morning. The first lesson they teach you is that having dead air is the worst thing that you can do. If someone is listening to your station and the song ends, and another song does not start right away, people reach for the dial and move to the next station. You're taught to do anything to avoid that silence, from timing your songs so that one flows into the next, to jumping on the mic and jabbering away until you can get the next song going.

GMing is no different: Silence is death. When a session is in full swing and you are narrating the scene, judging the players' actions, and playing the roles of the NPCs, your players are hopefully following you. When this is running at its best, there are moments when the walls of the gaming space melt away, when you see your players as their characters and they see your narrative as the world around them. In those moments you have reached true immersion, the zone of RPGs. When you reach that zone, you want to stay there as long as possible; those are the moments that we all—players and GMs alike—remember for years to come.

The last thing you want to do in one of those moments is to fall silent because you're unprepared. When that happens, immersion is broken and the gaming table slowly devolves into building dice towers, book flipping, and sidebar conversations. The longer the silence goes on the more disruptive those behaviors become, and the harder it will be to return to that immersive state when play resumes.

Prep is what prevents those moments of silence. The more prepared you are, the less often those moments of silence will occur in your game and the better your chances are of reaching that immersive state and remaining in the zone. In other words:

The goal of prep is to give the GM a level of comfort through the understanding that all the information they need to run the game as smoothly as possible is readily at hand.

Prep is not just about written notes; it is a mindset for being prepared to run your game. Are there written notes involved? For most of us, myself included, there are—but there are other GMs who require only an index card, or even just the thoughts in their head, to run a session. Regardless of how many notes you have, you still need to be prepared; to have done your prep. Many factors go into your prep,

Artist: Matt Morrow

including your experience as a GM, the game you are playing, your ability to memorize information, etc. What the final product of your prep looks like will be determined by you, and will change as you grow as a GM and play different games.

What Makes Good Prep

Prep must have four basic attributes in order for it to be useful. First, it must be accessible. You must be able to get to your prep when you need it. Second, it must be organized. You need to be able to find a specific item at the moment you need it. Third, it must be effective. The information that you locate must be helpful to you when you find it. Fourth, it must be reliable. You need to know with confidence that when you need the information it will be there and not have vanished.

What I just described are the high-level requirements for any database system from a recipe app on your smart phone to the most complex banking servers. Our prep is a database. It contains information that needs to be organized, stored, and retrieved. When one of the above attributes fail, then our prep may fail us at a crucial moment during the game.

When someone designs a database, they identify requirements in advance: what platform it will run on, what data it will contain, how data will be indexed, etc. In the case of prep, it has been my experience that we don't put the same structured thought into our notes, and thus we may overlook a critical requirement that our prep needs to fulfill to be the most useful to us. It's not really our fault, though, because prep isn't something we as GMs talk much about.

The First Rule of Prep Is: We Do Not Talk about Prep

As gamers we often talk a lot about our hobby. We can spend hours discussing the best class and feat combos, share tips on how to make the best horror adventures, or argue until the sun comes up about rolling the dice in front of or behind the screen. What we don't spend a lot of time talking about is how to prep for our games. We all have our own way to do it, but we often don't share tips on how we actually do it. It is a solemn ritual that every GM seems to have to discover on her own.

We should talk more about prep, and should share our ideas, tips, and tricks. Many GMs who stop running games—or worse, stop GMing all together—often cite not having enough time to prep their game as the reason they quit. In a hobby that needs every GM it can find, prep should not be a reason to turn in your GM's screen.

My own style of prep was conceived largely without input from other GMs. Some of the tools I use were suggested by friends, but the contents of my notes, and the system I use to plan the time to write them each week, were discovered by trial and error—a *lot* of errors. Over the years I evolved a style of prep that I became comfortable with, but I never really understood why it worked. I just stuck to it because it did.

When I became a father, something wonderful happened: Being a dad is insanely awesome. Something terrible happened as well: My free time vanished. Suddenly my tried-and-true approach to prep was falling victim to a massive time crunch. With no real resources to draw upon, I started to *work* at my prep and find ways to make it fit into my new, much tighter, schedule. Along the way I learned some valuable lessons.

You're Doing It Wrong

The pain that people feel when they prep their game is due to the fact that their system of preparation isn't aligned with their needs. I've run a lot of games in my tenure as a GM, and I've talked to hundreds of other GMs, both successful and struggling. When I hear complaints about prep, they often fall into one of four categories.

Writing Too Much

This is the most common reason that GMs dislike prep: They are simply writing too many notes. They often do this because when they first learned to play, they took copious notes to make sure they were well-prepared for their sessions. Over the years they have grown as GMs and their skill at handling the game on the fly has improved, but they are still writing volumes of notes.

A common question that I'm asked when I am on GMing panels at conventions is "How long should my notes be for a session?" My answer for this is always the same: As long as you need them to be to comfortably run your game. Less experienced GMs often need more (and more detailed) notes because it makes them feel comfortable GMing. More experienced GMs often require fewer notes because they fill in the gaps with their improvisational skills. What GMs often fail to do is to review their skills and attempt to trim down their notes as they grow in experience.

Poor Tools, or Tools You Are Not Excited About

Another common issue with the way people prep is that they are either not using the proper tools to do their prep, or not using tools that they actually enjoy using. There's no denying that prep is a form of work, and like any kind of work the proper tools are required to get the job done. Your tools need to be matched to the way you work. When you use tools that match your style of prep, and find tools that are interesting or even fun to use, it makes the act of creating your notes more exciting and can remove the frustration that many GMs feel when doing prep.

Not Understanding Your Creative Cycle and Schedule

The final issue that I have seen GMs encounter is one that is often overlooked by most people: understanding their creative cycle. Our ability to be creative ebbs and flows throughout the day—some people are more creative in the morning, while others are more creative in the evening (and so forth). Trying to perform a creative activity when you are at a creative low point can be a very painful process—and one where the fruit of your labor pales when compared to what you could have done when you were at your creative peak.

In addition to understanding your creative cycle, you need to understand your personal schedule. Many people fail to leave themselves enough time in their busy schedules to get their prep done, so they either feel stressed from rushing or they fail to finish their prep and wind up canceling game sessions. By being aware of your personal schedule and the commitments that are part of your life, you can then properly plan to get your prep done in a relaxed manner.

It's Time to Make Peace

Prep is not a terrible thing. If it's part of the foundation of having a great game and the experiences that come from running a great game, then prep is a valuable ally. In order to make peace with prep, we need to better understand our creative processes, our needs as GMs, and the things going on in our lives. When we make the time for prep, give ourselves the most comfortable tools, and know what we need to accomplish, prep becomes a natural and painless process and our games will benefit from being more prepared.

Chapter 2: The Phases of Prep

A common misconception is that prep is the thing you do when you write your notes or draw the maps for your upcoming game. Prep begins before that, and it goes through a series of phases that can eventually yield a stack of notes and maps. Different people place emphasis on different phases, and people have varying skill levels in each phase. Mastery of each of the phases of prep will make you very good at this critical aspect of GMing.

When we talk about the prep process we are talking about starting with nothing and progressing to a set of notes, maps, and other useful tools that we need for an upcoming game. This is not only the written material we require for the game, but also the mental preparation that allows us to run the material in a session. How we get from nothing to notes is a process that can be broken down into a number of discrete phases. At each phase we move closer to being prepared to run the game.

How This Came About

I did not set out to define the phases of prep; I came across them naturally as I began to take an interest in productivity and life hacking (the latter being the practice of using tricks, shortcuts, and various other methods to increase efficiency in different

Artist: Christopher Reach

areas of one's life—see *lifehacker.com* for more). I began to read a lot of articles about the creative process and how people in various creative endeavors, from artists and designers to those in advertising, actually worked. At the time, I was a software developer; this too is a creative endeavor, even if the medium you work in is somewhat more structured.

I began to take things that I read and apply them to my gaming, specifically the creative process of coming up with an adventure (or story or plot, if you prefer). The more I did this the more I began to see that the overall process of prep was much more than just writing my notes. I began to notice the early phases, the intangible stage of the creative process where ideas are born. As this introspection continued I started to see the boundaries between one process and the next. I explored the meaning of each one, and looked for how each phase contributed to the whole process.

The outcome of this process of observation was a more full understanding of a particular creative process for prep. Based on talking to friends and fellow GMs, I believe that this is a natural process that many of us follow, in most cases without really understanding it.

The Phases

Prep has five phases. Collectively, these take the roughest of ideas and hone it into a scene or story. Your brain naturally goes through these phases, and it's possible that you might not always be aware that they are occurring. The phases of prep are:

1. Brainstorming
2. Selection
3. Conceptualization
4. Documentation
5. Review

Brainstorming

This phase is when ideas are spawned. At this stage they are rough, unrefined thoughts about the story or a given scene, or sometimes even just a line of dialog within a scene. Ideas are just that: small and incomplete. They lack the refinement of a fully formed thought. They don't always make sense; they can be silly, serious, or even inappropriate. Their power comes from their nearly limitless potential. Because of their imperfection and incomplete nature, they don't have to conform to any rules. They are what they are: possibility in its rawest form.

Brainstorming can happen nearly anywhere and under a wide variety of conditions. It can happen spontaneously while driving to work, talking to a friend, or even sitting in a meeting. Some people rely on ideas appearing randomly, calling them flashes of insight or strokes of genius. Others learn to refine this exercise and are able to enter a highly creative state in which they generate lots of ideas about a given topic (or many topics). The best example of this is in the field of advertising, which

combines a highly creative process with crushing deadlines and competition; if you don't churn out a lot of ideas, and quickly, you lose.

When we brainstorm we generate a host of unrefined ideas, each of which has a chance of being something that we may use in an upcoming game. Not every idea can be used as soon as it springs to mind, though, and that's where the process of selection comes in.

Selection

This is the phase where we select the ideas that we want to use in our upcoming game. Every idea generated during brainstorming has the potential to be a good idea. In this phase, we apply a dose of reality to that pool of ideas and narrow the field to one idea—or a handful of ideas—that we will then refine.

In this way you become like the gem cutter who examines several rough stones, analyzes them, looks for characteristics that make for a favorable stone, and selects the best candidates to cut. Some stones will be so obviously high-quality that you know they should be cut immediately, others you'll hold onto to cut another day, and some you'll discard because they will never yield a worthy gem.

How you sort your ideas and select the best ones will have a lot to do with understanding the kind of game you are running and the players who are participating in the game. You will need to understand what fits within the campaign world and what breaks the fourth wall. You need to be aware of what kinds of stories interest your players and what stories will disengage or even upset them. You will also need to understand your own abilities as a GM and determine if a given idea is something that you think you can pull off in a game.

At the end of the sorting, your idea isn't really any more fully formed than it was when it was conceived during brainstorming, but now it has passed through a few logical filters and been found worthy of additional thought and consideration. You then need to build out this idea into something more usable in a process called conceptualization, the next phase of prep.

Conceptualization

In the conceptualization phase we now take each idea and expand upon it; we apply logic, give it a description, and fit it into the overall game. Where the brainstorming phase was about limitless possibly, conceptualization is about making your idea work within the reality of your game.

For an idea to be useable within a game, you need to make sure that it fits into the logic of the story. What characters or groups are involved in this idea and what are they doing? Do those things make sense based on what you already know about your game? How will you mechanically express some of the actions or elements of the world? Do those fit within the rules of the game?

The answers to these questions are what frame the idea and and allow you to integrate it into your story and your game. At times this process is as straightforward as putting a few orcs in a cavern, but at other times it is the challenging task of determining why an NPC ally may wish to betray the PCs. In some cases the great idea that you conceived isn't strong enough to hold up under closer scrutiny and must be discarded.

Once you have fully conceptualized an idea and know it's strong enough to use in the game, the next step is to capture and organize a number of details about that idea during the documentation phase.

Documentation

Documentation is the part of the prep process that most people associate with prep, but as you can see it is really the fourth step in the overall process. In the documentation phase, you write down your concept in a way that's meaningful to you. What medium you use and what you write down is determined by your needs as a GM.

You may prefer to handwrite your notes, or perhaps dictate them to a voice-to-text editor. Some GMs like an elaborate binder with multiple sections, while others only want a few sticky notes. In terms of what's written down, some GMs write full descriptions of locations and NPCs while others write a bulleted list of key identifiers. Sometimes a GM will do her entire documentation in one sitting, while another GM prefers to break his documentation into multiple sittings.

The documentation phase encompasses many parts of preparing for a gaming session. The most common item created during this process is your session notes, the details of the encounters and scenes that comprise the session. Documentation also includes creating maps, generating monster and NPC stats, and creating any counters, tokens, or similar tools you might need. This phase encompasses the creation of all of the physical or digital components that you may need in the session.

Many GMs consider the act of documenting their notes to be the end of the prep process, but there's one more phase that will keep you from missing key elements that might cause problems during the session: the review phase.

Review

In the final phase of prep, your documentation gets refined and any errors or problems are identified and fixed. This often-overlooked phase can have a big impact on the quality of the material you present during the game. This process identifies things like plot holes, bad dialog, or an over- or underpowered encounter.

The review phase is the dress rehearsal for your prep. With all of the ideas selected and fleshed out into concepts, and those concepts documented, you can then review your session notes in their entirety and check for issues. Perhaps there's

a missing clue without which you can't get the players from one scene to the next, or you overlooked the spell list for the evil wizard. This is the time to find those errors and correct them.

Besides looking for errors, the review phase is the time to look at how prepared you are to run the scenes that you've prepped for the upcoming session. Perhaps one scene involves a bridge over a raging river. Do you know the falling and drowning rules for this system off the top of your head? If not, this would be a good time to look at them and perhaps put a bookmark in that section of your rulebook.

It's More Natural than You Think

With the phases of prep broken out like this, you may think that the process sounds unnatural, but it's just the opposite. In many instances, this is exactly how our minds work, and we often progress through this process naturally. When presented with a problem, we usually generate a pool of possible solutions, select the strong candidates, elaborate on a selected solution, test it out, and refine it based on our initial test. So if this process is natural, why even talk about it? For two reasons: command and consistency.

Being a good GM means not being a slave to your creative process; your imagination isn't a mental desert and you don't need to wait for drops of inspiration to rain down upon you. As GMs, we need to be able to prep for our sessions on demand, whether for the game next week or the game you're running an hour from now because a good friend showed up unexpectedly. Your ability to come up with good ideas and to be sufficiently prepared to run a game should be under your command, able to be summoned at your will.

When you bring your creative process to bear, you want to be as consistent in the process as possible. In the next few chapters, we'll discuss each phase in more detail and will address what happens when you complete a phase poorly or not at all. By studying each of the phases and working to improve ourselves in all of them, we can move towards a more even creative process that yields a stronger product—the sum total of your prep—because each phase was executed properly.

It Can Happen Anywhere, Anytime

The beauty of breaking prep down into phases is that this process doesn't need to happen in a special or specific environment. While you might not be able to write your session notes while driving to work, you can brainstorm, select ideas, and conceptualize even while sitting in traffic. When you have command of the process you can engage in it wherever and whenever you have time. Having mastered each phase, you can move your ideas along the continuum until they are fully formed.

Artist: Christopher Reach

I have done brainstorming while waiting in line to pay for groceries, gone through the selection phase while standing in line at a fast food restaurant, and conceptualized ideas while in the waiting room at the doctor's office. I have documented my session notes between meetings and mentally reviewed them in the shower. While that may seem like overkill, when you have a spouse, a career, and children, the ability to prep a game during small slices of free time can be invaluable.

The Order of the Phases is Flexible

While the overall prep process progresses from the brainstorming phase to the review phase, there will be times when you'll need to move in the opposite direction. The most common time for this need to arise is during during review when you find something that just isn't going to work in your upcoming session. You can then slide back to documentation or even up to conceptualization to make the necessary changes. Or you might find that you don't have enough ideas for a complete story or adventure, and solve this problem by sliding up the scale to brainstorming in order to come up with an idea or two to fill the gap.

There's nothing wrong with doing this; it's a natural process. In fact it's a strength of this prep process that it enables you to go from concrete to abstract and back to discrete when needed. We often do this as a reflex: It is summed up in the phrase "back to the drawing board." When we get stuck on something specific we need to back up, expand our possibilities, chart a new course, and then proceed.

Chapter 3: Brainstorming

The greatest stories that have ever been told all started with an idea. We start with nothing and then from the empty expanse of limitless possibility comes an idea, then another, and if we're lucky they keep coming until a swarm of possibilities surround us. Some will be great ideas and some will not. Now isn't the time to judge them, though; rather, like children running through a summer field in the evening chasing fireflies, we need to chase down those ideas and catch them in a jar.

Brainstorming is an exciting mental exercise, but one that doesn't always come naturally to everyone. For every person who can close their eyes and let the ideas pour forth, there's a person who just stares at the wall in frustration. On top of that, many people feel that inspiration must come to them at its fickle whim and not when desired.

The truth is that brainstorming is a skill, and like all skills it can be learned and practiced. If you have trouble believing that, consider the world of advertising. Advertisers have to create multiple ideas for marketing a product on a tight schedule, often under pressure. They are able to deliver because they've trained themselves to be creative on command. When your ability to brainstorm is properly developed it can be used on demand as well. The first step to mastering this skill is to recognize that it is just a skill and that it can be practiced and improved.

Making Something from Nothing

In terms of session preparation, the goal of brainstorming is to come up with the idea or ideas that will eventually become the session you're going to run. Every game session or adventure can be summed up as one or more ideas. One idea may be the basis for a whole adventure: "The agents will sneak into the hidden lab and steal the deadly virus." Another idea might be a sub-plot for a specific character: "Jean Baptiste will encounter a female musketeer while off-duty." Or you might have an idea for a single scene: "Tabris will sneak into the fortress and assassinate the Demon Knight."

When you are brainstorming for a new session, ideally you want to come up with the big idea that frames the entire adventure—but don't discount a single scene or sub-plot. While I prefer to come up with the big idea, I have centered sessions on a smaller scene and built the rest of the session around that idea. You may also be able to combine a big idea and a few smaller ones into one session, with the big idea forming the main goal of the session and the smaller ideas forming scenes within that adventure.

Making the Rain

Brainstorming requires only a few ingredients: a clear mind, a place to think, some time, and something you can use to capture ideas. When people are learning to brainstorm or are not very proficient at it, they often need to be somewhere quiet, with some time set aside. The act of brainstorming can be boiled down to posing a single question—"What should I do in the next session?"—and then listening to the answers that follow.

When I brainstorm I start with exactly that question. If nothing comes from that process, then I ask myself an additional question, such as:

- **What kind of session do I want to have? (As in a chase, a rolling fight, a heist, etc.)**
- **What would the major NPC be doing right now?**
- **Do I want to focus on a specific character?**
- **Is there a type of event I want to occur? (A big battle, a flood, a zombie outbreak.)**
- **Is there anything my players wanted to do?**
- **Is there an NPC or monster that I want to use?**
- **Is there a goal that I need the PCs to accomplish? (Acquire a holy artifact, get the big break in the case, steal a secret weapon.)**

Often one of these questions will set off the brainstorming session. When the ideas start coming I try to think of as many as I can and not focus on any details. I like to capture these ideas in a list, either on paper or electronically. As I am making my list there may be ideas that I'm drawn to more than others, but I try to avoid any bias and just collect all of them. There is no set number of ideas I aim to collect in a given session, but I don't stop until I have more than one. Having options is better than having just one idea.

When I collect my ideas, I keep it simple—often just a sentence or two written down in a bulleted list. For a long time, the Moleskine® notebook was my medium of choice for note-taking; I have stacks of worn black notebooks filled with various RPG ideas. Within those pages were the seeds of a number of memorable adventures, but they were greatly outnumbered by the hundreds of ideas that were never touched (we'll talk more about that in the next chapter).

When I first started brainstorming explicitly as an activity, I did so in a quiet room with a pad of paper and a pen. I needed that quiet room to keep me from distractions. As time went on and as my skill level improved, I learned that I could brainstorm in

lots of places: between meetings at work, waiting at the doctor's office, while grocery shopping, etc. All I need now is a time when I don't have to speak; from that baseline I can clear my mind and begin the brainstorming process.

Spontaneous Bursts of Inspiration

Even after you hone your skill at brainstorming, there will still be times when flashes of insight hit you like strokes of lightning. Those flashes are still of great value even though they're not part of the formal brainstorming process, as they often represent your subconscious delivering to you an idea that was processing in the back of your mind, waiting to take shape.

In those situations, it's best if you have something on hand where you can write down your new idea. Originally it was my little notebooks that were never far from my reach, but as I've transitioned to digital tools that role is now occupied by Evernote® (*evernote.com*).

Brainstorming for a Purpose

In the previous examples of brainstorming I focused on having an open mind, exploring all sorts of ideas by allowing your mind the freedom to create spontaneously. There are times, however, where you need specific ideas. For instance, you could be writing a follow-up adventure to a previous session where the PCs were captured. In this case, you don't need every idea in the world—you need ideas about what the PCs will encounter in prison and how they can escape.

In these cases you can rein in your brainstorming by setting some initial parameters. The best way to do this is by changing the initial question that you ask yourself. By making that question more limiting, you can focus your creative process on generating ideas within specific confines. You may still get a few "rogue" ideas, and you should write them down; great ideas are sometimes born out of strange associations. If your mind wanders and you find yourself in a place completely outside your original confines, pose the initial question to yourself again, or ask a follow up question, to focus your thoughts.

Another time where focused brainstorming is a valuable tool is when we have to move backwards through the prep process. You could be in the conceptualization phase when you realize that there are some areas of a scene or story that are incomplete, and you now need to generate some new ideas to fill in the gaps. Once ideas have formed you can move back through the phases and incorporate them into your developing scenario.

When We Do Too Little

As in all phases of prep, when we don't brainstorm enough our prep suffers. When we don't perform enough brainstorming we have a shortage of creative ideas for the games we run. The first problem that creeps up is that when it's time to prep for a game, the well is dry and you're out of ideas to develop. When this happens there are two things a GM can do: try to get something written by brute force, a painful and tedious process, or cancel the upcoming session. Canceling can be dangerous for the long-term health of a campaign; too many cancelations and a campaign can collapse.

The other side effect of not doing enough brainstorming is an overall lack of originality in our sessions. When we don't brainstorm enough, we retreat to ideas that are established and safe for us. We draw upon ideas that we may have used in previous campaigns or we dress up ideas from other GMs. We can become desperate and blatantly take ideas from TV, movies, or books. While there are good ways to take ideas from other media and use them creatively, desperation often leads GMs to take ideas without obscuring their origin.

When We Do Too Much

It's hard to make a case for brainstorming too much, but it can happen. We can get overly excited about coming up with ideas and overexert ourselves in this phase. Really, the only downside to brainstorming too much is that you may not be spending enough time working on other phases, which will cause problems in those areas. If you're going to brainstorm heavily, make sure you have the time and a way to capture all those ideas. It's terrible to put in the effort to come up with a mountain of ideas only to forget them because you didn't have a good way to capture them all.

Techniques for Improving

If you don't feel like your brainstorming skills are strong, or are just looking for ways to get better at it, there are ways to improve in this area. The ultimate goal is to be able to start generating ideas on command and to be able to come up with a short list of ideas during a few minutes of concentrated effort. Here's how you can become better at brainstorming.

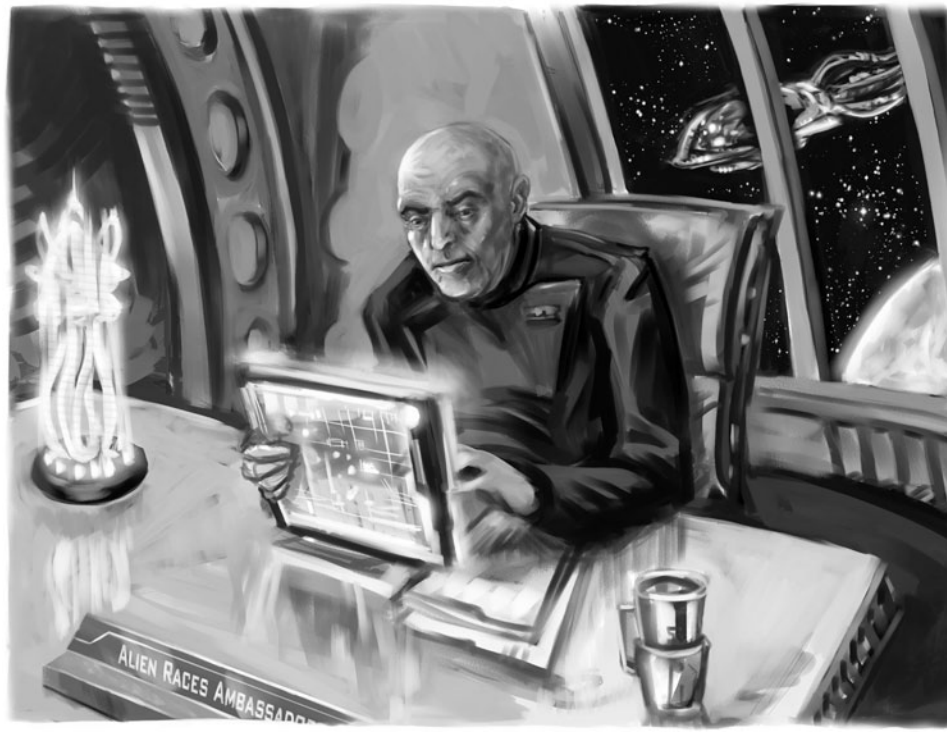
Brainstorm on Command

Like getting to Carnegie Hall, the trick to being able to brainstorm on command is to practice. Dedicate some time to sitting down and writing ideas each day or a few times a week. Do some freeform brainstorming by asking open-ended questions, and do some focused brainstorming exercises as well. The more often you do this, the more practiced your mind will become at getting into that creative space quickly.

Brainstorm Anywhere

Once you are comfortable brainstorming on command, take it out for a spin. Get comfortable with brainstorming in different places, such as standing in line at the grocery store, or on the drive to work, or when your co-workers are late for the next meeting. The goal here is to get out of needing to be in a quiet place or specific location to brainstorm. The reason why you want to be able to do this is so that you can utilize those little slices of time during the day to work on your prep. (We'll talk more about that later on.)

When brainstorming "out in the field," you will need to make sure your focus remains tight, as distractions from the things going on around you can easily derail the process. When I find my focus slipping I repeat the opening question to myself over and over until I get my focus back, or I read the list of ideas that I've come up with so far. The other thing that you will need to address is how you're going to capture your ideas. If you're sitting in a classroom waiting for class to start, getting your ideas down is easy—but driving on the highway in the middle of the afternoon commute is going to require a good memory or some digital tools.



Artist: Matt Morrow

Brainstorm Faster

Practice will make you faster at generating ideas, but there are two additional ways to pick up the pace at which you brainstorm. The first is to work hard not to critique or second-guess your ideas (see the next chapter for more on that). If you're unconsciously combining brainstorming with the selection phase, then your overall speed will be slower than if you were just brainstorming. Don't pass judgment on ideas as they surface; get them captured and move on. Once you've captured them, you can come back and be more critical about them.

The second way to speed up your brainstorming is to keep your mind fed with books, movies, songs, and other media. In essence brainstorming is coming up with associations between something you need, in this case the framing question that kicks off the exercise, and the potential solutions you conceive. Those solutions come out of making associations between things that are rattling around in your brain. So when you read an article in a magazine, watch a movie, or listen to the lyrics of a song, those elements, themes, and ideas are digested and, at some level, stored in your memory. The more of those elements that are floating around in your mind, the more quickly associations are going to be made and the faster ideas will come together.

True Story: Storm Clouds on the Express Lane

During the summer of my junior year of college, I was a cashier at a grocery store by day and ran an *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* campaign for my friends twice a week in the evenings. My prep time for having a full evening's session (with up to four separate storylines) written up and ready to run was no more than three days. To accomplish this task I began brainstorming at work while ringing up groceries. I would stand with this semi-blank stare, my hands grasping for items to drag across the scanner while my mind churned out ideas. While the customer paid or wrote a check (yes, I am that old), I would write my ideas down on the backs of a small pad of price correction forms. I would fill several pages with ideas during the course of a day and come home each night with a sheaf of these small papers in my pocket. When the campaign finished at the end of the summer, I had hundreds of these little papers. If it wasn't for that mental free time to brainstorm, there's no way I could have kept the up with the pace of that campaign.

Years ago when I was trying to come up with an idea for a campaign, I got the notion to use elements of *Gone with the Wind* as the foundation for the game. There's no way that I would have been able to do that had I not watched the movie—not one I would normally have watched, but I was trying to impress my girlfriend (now wife) at the time. Feed your mind and you'll have more—and better, and different—ideas to choose from in the next phase: selection, the subject of the following chapter.

Rate Your Skill Level

Now it's your turn. For this book to be of the most use to you, you're going to have to do some introspection. How will you know what you want to improve until you understand your current skill level? This simple two-question test will give you some guidance. Take a moment and consider the following:

Frequency

On a scale of 1-5, how often do you brainstorm ideas as the first step of your prep process for the sessions you are planning to run?

1 - Never (I never brainstorm; rather I hope for sparks of inspiration)

2 - Infrequently (I only brainstorm if I'm totally out of ideas)

3 - Occasionally (I brainstorm between every few sessions)

4 - Regularly (Brainstorming is an established part of my prep process)

5 - Always (I am constantly brainstorming ideas, and I do it anywhere I have free time to think about my game)

Strength

On a scale of 1-5, when you brainstorm how would you rate your skill level at coming up with ideas?

1 - Non-existent (When I'm done brainstorming I still have a blank sheet of paper)

2 - Weak (I get a few ideas after considerable work)

3 - Competent (With some dedicated time and some quiet, I can get some ideas down)

4 - Skilled (I can brainstorm in most places and can come up with a list of ideas with little effort)

5 - Master (When I need ideas, I can come up with them anywhere and in a very short amount of time)

Adding those numbers together will give you a rating between 2 (unskilled) and 10 (mastery), with 6 being an average score. That's a rough representation of your current skill at brainstorming.

Now take a look at the difference between your Strength and Frequency scores. If there's a big difference between the two, focus your efforts on evening the scores out. If there is little or no difference between the two, then focus on improving your Frequency score first to get a bit more out of brainstorming, as an increase in Frequency will have the side effect of increasing your Strength score.

Chapter 4: Selection

In a swirling sea of options and possibilities, the path to greatness can be obscured. Your path to a great session lies in finding an idea that will grow into that great session. Some ideas are truly inspired; some are good but will require effort to yield their fruit; others are interesting to consider, but will never hold up to the rigors of full development; and some are poison—bad ideas which tempt you with promises that will never be kept, and which can drive enjoyment out of your next session.

How you sift through your many ideas and separate the wheat from the chaff depends on your ability to understand the game you're running, the strengths and weaknesses of your GMing skills, and the players and characters that will be involved. From that foundation you can assess which ideas are viable and focus on them.

In the brainstorming phase you generated all manner of ideas, without judgment or bias. That freedom was necessary to allow your mind to reach beyond its comfort zone to come up with truly inspired ideas. In this phase you need to regard those ideas with a critical eye and embrace the notion that some ideas are better than others.

A Discerning Mind's Eye

The selection phase is where you take your unfiltered list of ideas and review it—mindful of your game, your players, and yourself—with the goal of selecting an idea that is strong enough to become a great gaming session. Whereas brainstorming is a skill, selection is more of a discipline. It's something that requires a level of detachment, requiring you to check your ego at the door and to make selections that are best for the group rather than for individuals—including yourself as the GM.

During the selection process, you will take a list of ideas and look for one or more that will be a sound foundation that you can develop into a session. Ideas will be evaluated against a set of criteria, and the good ones will be those that best fit the criteria. Lesser ideas will be those that aren't a good fit for one or more criteria, whether they're not quite right or they just plain stink.

Your criteria need to include areas that are important in your game. By understanding each of those areas, you'll be able to evaluate external ideas and look at them critically from several different angles. The ideas that look the best from multiple perspectives are the ones that have the best potential to be developed into great sessions.

Four elements form the basis of the major criteria: players, GMing, the game, and the campaign.

Know Your Players

Within a given group of people, individual taste in movies varies greatly. Some people love action movies, some enjoy science fiction, and others love political thrillers. When it comes to roleplaying games, players are no different: Some players love a long dungeon crawl while others want to play out trade negotiations. Understanding what your players enjoy during play will help you determine whether or not a given idea is going to work for your group.

While there are many sources of advice on understanding what kinds of players you have and the various player archetypes, the definitive source is still *Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering*. Absent this book, you can of course come up with your own categories for your players. Virtually all roleplaying games encompass at least these three activities:

- **Roleplaying** (Acting and speaking in character, talking to NPCs)
- **Combat** (Getting into fights, defeating monsters, starship battles)
- **Problem Solving** (Coming up with the big heist, running the long con, solving the mystery)

Artist: Christopher Reach

Think about your players and what kinds of things they like to do in the game. Most players enjoy all three elements above, but it's not uncommon for someone to get the most out of just one facet of the game.

Knowing what types of players you have will help you select ideas for your sessions. You might have a great idea for a complex mystery, but if none of your players are really into problem-solving then this is likely an idea that they won't enjoy—at least not in its current form.

Know Your GMing Style

All GMs have strengths and weaknesses. Some GMs love to act out every NPC, some love to plan and play out huge combats, and others like to run political dramas. We're always most comfortable when we play to our strengths, and always less comfortable when we leave our comfort zones. I'll revisit this topic in a moment, but for now take a moment to think about the kind of GM you are, and about your strengths and weaknesses, by answering the questions below:

- **Do you like to convey lots of details in-game, or do you skim over the little things?**
- **What are your favorite types of adventures to run (thrillers, dungeon crawls, political dramas)?**
- **Do you enjoy acting out your NPCs' actions or are you more subdued in your delivery?**
- **Do you prefer adventures that fit into one session or those that last for several sessions?**
- **Do you enjoy running a slower-paced game, or do you prefer a more frantic pace?**
- **What are your favorite parts of a session (combat, roleplaying with your players, creating challenges)?**
- **Do you like to present challenges for your players and then sit back and watch as they try to overcome them, or are you more collaborative in working with your players to create a story?**
- **Are you good at managing a lot of details and moving parts or do you prefer things to be more streamlined?**

Based on your answers to these questions, you should have a good feel for your comfort zone as a GM. When you review your ideas during prep, consider that any idea you develop, you'll eventually have to run as the GM. You are likely to be naturally attracted to ideas that fit within your comfort zone and repelled by those that fall outside of it.

As one example, my personal preference is for complex stories with simple combats. I have never enjoyed coming up with a full spell list for an NPC, and the order they will cast spells, and on whom, and on what turn. When I select ideas I tend to shy

away from those that will force me to design a complex combat, but I'm drawn to ideas that lead to complex narrative scenes.

Getting Out of Your Comfort Zone

We all have comfort zones, but we shouldn't let ourselves become content with staying inside them. As a GM you should, from time to time, push your boundaries and expand your comfort zone by running the types of games (and sessions, and stories) that you aren't comfortable running. That being said, there are times when doing so isn't ideal. In the first few sessions of a game, for example, you should play it safe so that you lay a solid foundation for your campaign. Also, when you get close to a climax in the story, it's better to use plots that have a high comfort level for you so that you can deliver strong sessions during this critical part of the campaign.

When you do step out of your comfort zone, be sure to account for some additional time in your prep so that you can do a little extra work to support the areas where you are weakest. For instance, in order for me to run a complex fantasy combat I know I'm going to have to devote extra time to reading up on spells, and I might even want to create a spellcasting cheat sheet. I'll allow myself extra prep time to accomplish this additional work.

Know Your Game

Games, like players and GMs, are better at some things than others. Not all ideas can be *elegantly* played using any game system. I stress the word "elegantly" because you can play most styles of games under any set of rules, but some systems will make your job a lot easier depending on what you want to do with them. Consider the game you're running and the strengths and weakness of that system. For example, does your game feature:

- **A highly tactical combat system or a lighter one?**
- **A social combat system (i.e., rules for verbal sparring and convincing other characters to do what you want)?**
- **Rules for aerial combat?**
- **A fear/horror/sanity system?**
- **Good rules for creating a heist?**
- **A robust skill system?**
- **A fluid magic system for creating effects on the fly?**
- **A system that enables players to take narrative control of the story?**
- **Rules for mass combat?**
- **Rules for kingdom building?**

When you're evaluating an idea, consider the question "How will the rules support this idea?" You don't have to discard an idea because your rules aren't a good fit, but you might want to discard it if there's no solid basis for handling that idea in your game of choice.

For example, consider an idea for a complex treaty negotiation between two kingdoms. If you're running *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*® 2nd Edition it can be done, but mostly outside of the rules. In *Dungeons & Dragons*® 3rd Edition, there are rules for using Diplomacy in this situation, which may make that system a better fit. In *Burning Wheel*®, however, there's a Duel of Wits system for playing social combats that's a perfect fit for this premise. You can run the treaty negotiation in any of those systems (or countless others), but it will likely work better in some than others.

Know Your Campaign

The campaign that you're running is another area of consideration when selecting ideas. Any campaign, from a packaged setting like *Dragonlance*® to a homebrewed world, will place constraints on what does and doesn't fit into the setting. That's why it's important to look at whether or not your idea fits the game world, not just the game mechanics.

Ideas which fall outside of the expectations of the game world can destroy player buy-in, and can prevent your players from being able to immerse themselves in the game because of the logical inconsistencies that they introduce. For instance, having space aliens invade your *Dragonlance*® campaign in flying saucers is likely to cause a disruption at your table.

While some genre blending can lead to great gaming moments (the classic AD&D® module *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* is a perfect example of this), it's best to focus your selection on ideas that conform to the logic of the campaign world. If you want to push those boundaries, it's a good idea to discuss this with your players in advance in order to make sure that they're interested in playing that kind of game. You don't have to reveal your whole idea, but you can tease them with something along these lines: "What if your police detectives were to uncover clues that lead to them discovering the existence of alien life forms?"

From Multiple Angles

With some understanding of your players, your own style, and the game you're playing, you can now look at your ideas objectively. When I do this, I run my ideas through a mental filter that looks something like this:

1. **On the surface, do I think the idea is interesting? (Most likely I do, since it's from my brainstorming list)**
2. **Is this something that my players will want to play? (As a personal rule, I put my players' desires before my own)**
3. **Is this something that I want to run and, if so, is there anything special I need to take into consideration?**
4. **Does this idea fit into my campaign setting?**
5. **Do the mechanics of the game support this type of idea?**

There are only two deal breakers on the list: If my players wouldn't play it, or if I don't want to run it, then the idea won't work. If I don't think the idea is that interesting, there's still time to punch it up in the next phase, and if the mechanics of the game don't support it I can always work around that.

When We Do Too Little

When you grab any old idea you've come up with and run with it, that's doing too little selection. Sometimes the only thing that drives the selection process is its alignment to your comfort zone and that presents a few problems.

Letting Bad Ideas Slip In

When you don't objectively look at how an idea will compare to the desires of your players, your GMing style, and the game you're running, you run the risk of putting development time into a bad idea. The idea will have failed in one or more areas: it may be boring or offensive to your players, leading to a bad session at the table; it may be an idea which you can't effectively pull off as a GM, causing stumbling during your next session; or it could be an idea that isn't well supported by the rules, leading to breaks in the action or arguments over rules and rulings. If this happens too often during a campaign, interest in the game will wane.

Running the Game Solely for Yourself

When you pick an idea based on a gut feeling or how cool you think it is, you run another risk: running the game you want to run, not necessarily the game your group wants to play. Whether by accident or, less likely, out of hubris, you stop accounting for your players' interests; the game is the game, and they can get on board or not. If things reach this point, you've failed in one of your core GMing duties: helping to create an enjoyable group experience.

When this happens, it's often accompanied by a huge disconnect: The GM is having the time of his life running a great story which he has fallen in love with, while his players are having a boring or terrible time because parts of the game—or the whole campaign—don't appeal to them. This type of game can't be sustained and will eventually implode as players withdraw their support.

When We Do Too Much

Spending too much time on the selection process is often the result of one of two issues: an inability to select an idea or the elimination of too many ideas. In both cases the end result is that potentially good ideas are being left behind. When you're too selective you wind up rooting yourself firmly in your comfort zone, and while that doesn't necessarily mean that you'll run a bad session, it does mean that you aren't growing as a GM. It also means that, over time, your stories will show a lack of originality.

Artist: Matt Morrow

The problem with not selecting ideas efficiently is that it delays the start of the rest of your prep, causing you to have to rush through the other phases; this in turn creates stress. It can also force you to cut corners as you speed through subsequent phases, which can lead to other problems (as we'll discuss later on). When a game feels rushed, it's often due to a lack of polish during prep or to the GM's visible uneasiness about not spending enough time preparing the adventure. Players notice these things.

Techniques for Improvement

If your ability to select good ideas is rusty or underdeveloped, fear not: There are ways to improve your skills. Here are a few specific areas that you can work on.

Keep 'Em Separated

The most important thing to do is to first recognize this skill—selecting good ideas—as a formal part of your prep. GMs often blend brainstorming and selection together: They start coming up with a list of ideas, but then jump on the first idea that looks good and run with it. This can lead to two problems.

The first is that because a full round of brainstorming wasn't completed, the first good idea might not be as good as one that would have arisen out of continued brainstorming. The second is that jumping on an idea right away short circuits an

important part of the process: looking at ideas objectively and from different levels. Skipping that element can lead to the issues described in the section When We Do Too Little, above.

Be Introspective

Your ability to recognize an idea that will work for your group and your game is based on the personal filter you create for sifting through your ideas. The way to create, or refine, that filter is to increase your knowledge of your players, your GMing style, and the game you're playing.

If you don't know what types of gamers your players are, it's worth figuring that out. *Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering* does an excellent job of categorizing players into understandable archetypes, and I recommend picking up a copy. Once you know the makeup of your group, it will be clear what kinds of adventures they'll like and dislike, making selecting ideas much easier.

To learn your GMing style, ask your players for feedback. Your players, especially if your group has been playing for some time, know exactly what type of GM you are. We never see ourselves the way others see us, so it's likely that you don't know what you're like as a GM. If you're not thick-skinned or used to objective criticism, this can be an uncomfortable process, and one that many people avoid. If you're nervous about asking directly, send out an anonymous survey and get your feedback that way. Once you know your style you'll know what ideas play to your strengths.

Take some time to look at the game you're running and consider what it does well and what it does poorly. If you've played a lot of different games, you'll probably recognize what aspects of the rules are strong, weak, and non-existent. If you haven't had exposure to a lot of other games, then do some research: Read reviews of the game and see what reviewers have said about it, or visit gaming forums like RPGnet (*rpg.net*), or those hosted by gaming companies and fans, and ask for help.

Construct Your Filter

Once you know what makes an idea worth spending development time on, the next thing to do is to prioritize them and decide what's most important to you. For example, is it more important that the idea will be fun for your players, or that the rules support it well? Or is it more important that the idea fall within your comfort zone, after which you can consider whether or not your players will like it? Those priorities will refine your ability to make your selections.

If your issue is that you're making the wrong selections, then go back and check your priorities to see if putting them in a different order would result in better selections. If the issue isn't your priorities, then review what you know about your players, your GMing style, and your game to see if you're making assumptions based on bad data.

Rate Your Skill Level

How are your selection skills? Take a moment to quantify your skill level using the criteria below.

Frequency

On a scale of 1-5, how often do you formally select ideas from your list of brainstormed ideas for the sessions you're planning?

1 - Never (I just grab the first idea that looks good and run with it)

2 - Infrequently (I only think about selection when I have more than one good idea on the list)

3 - Occasionally (I go over the list, flag a few good ideas between sessions, and stick with those until they run out)

4 - Regularly (I make sure I pick the best idea on the list before I start writing)

5 - Always (I evaluate all of my ideas before I pick one for a game)

Strength

On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your ability to be objective about selecting ideas?

1 - Non-existent (I run what I think is going to be cool, and don't worry about what others think)

2 - Weak (I run what I want as long as I don't think my players will hate it.)

3 - Competent (I look for ideas that are going to be fun to run and that I think my players will like)

4 - Skilled (I know what kind of GM I am and I know what types of players I have, so I look for the best fit)

5 - Mastery (I know my players, myself, and the game I am running and I make sure an idea will work in all areas)

Adding those numbers up will give you a rating between 2 (unskilled) and 10 (mastery), with an average being a 6. As before, look at the difference between your ratings in each area and focus on raising the lower score. If both are equal, then start by improving the Strength of this skill, so that when you do take time to select ideas you'll select better ones. As your ability to make good selections improves you will reject more ideas, which will force you to review and select ideas more often. Your initial list will take on a whole new life.

True Story: Some Ideas Get Better With Age

When I start a campaign, I do an initial round of brainstorming to come up with ideas that seem appealing for the game I'm going to run. At this point I don't know much about the characters or the game world. My selection of the idea that will form the basis for the first session gets made based on a gut feeling rather than a more refined set of criteria.

I always keep that initial brainstorming list, adding to it in subsequent brainstorming sessions; I never take anything off the list. Later on in the campaign, when it's time to select more ideas, I go back to my list and start from the top.

What I have found is that as I revisit the list, those same initial concepts become more and more interesting as I know more about the characters and the campaign. After a session where the PCs were betrayed by the local baron, that half-formed idea about overthrowing the local ruler suddenly becomes more appealing. Brainstorming is naked and raw, creating something from nothing. Selection is all about context, and the longer your game runs the deeper your context becomes—and the more likely it is that weaker ideas from your initial list will take on a whole new life.

Artist: Christopher Reach

Chapter 5: Conceptualization

An idea is just a seed; it is compact and immature. For it to grow into something that you can use, you're going to need to plant it in the soil of your mind, let it take root, and allow it to grow and to eventually flower. The act of expanding an idea into something that can be played, be it a scene or a full session, is called conceptualization.

This process began with a flood of ideas, and by applying some insight based on your knowledge of your players, GMing style, game, and campaign, you plucked out an idea to be used for your upcoming session. Now that idea must be expanded and transformed into a logical session, adventure, or story through a series of questions and answers.

When you conceptualize an idea you need to think it through like a story that you're going to play at the gaming table. Like any story, it will need to begin, progress along a logical path, and come to some conclusion. That doesn't mean it has to be linear, or that story trumps player choice; rather, it's a framework for conceptualization. If your session were a story, what would it need to include? You'll need locations and key NPCs, scenes that flow well (and, if applicable, into each other), a dramatic possible conclusion, and more—with no plot holes or other inconsistencies.

In this phase you'll be coming up with a lot of information. Depending on how good your memory is, you may want to take some notes. The goal for this phase is not to create detailed, structured session notes, but rather to become familiar with the full scope of the session. If taking notes helps you to do that, there's nothing wrong with that.

It's In the Details

If you're like most people, you learned the process of conceptualization at an early age—when you learned to write. At its core, this process can be summed up by five classic questions: Who? What? Where? Why? How? (In gaming "When?" is generally a foregone conclusion: "When the adventure takes place," usually in the next session.) These questions taught you to create details based on an idea, which is the perfect place to start.

Take the idea you selected in the previous phase of the prep process and ask yourself the questions below. In order to provide clear examples, the questions in this section are geared towards a traditional fantasy game (good guy PCs vs. bad evil villains), but that's not to imply that they only work for that genre or style of game.

Who—Who's after the MacGuffin? Who's trying to stop the PCs? Who are the NPCs who will be involved?

What—What are the PCs looking for? What will happen to move this session along? What will make this scene more exciting? What will happen if the PCs fail? What will the villain do to retaliate if they succeed?

Where—Where will the PCs be when the session begins? Where do they need to be when it ends? Where will the session take place? Where are the villains lurking?

Why—Why would the PCs want to help? Why does the villain need to succeed? Why is there a powerful curse on the temple?

How—How will the PCs get to the dungeon? How will the villain set his defenses? How is the trap triggered? How will the NPCs be changed after this session?

By asking these questions you're prompting your mind to come up with answers that expand the original idea into a story. Through this process of questions and answers you not only expand the story, but also become comfortable with it. When your players go off in an unexpected direction, that level of comfort will aid you in keeping the game exciting and bringing the session to a fun conclusion.

In addition to the basic questions above, there are some specific questions I like to make sure that I can answer about an idea. These questions help me to formulate the logical reasoning behind the story. When there's a logic gap in a session, you run the risk of a player noticing it and having it jar them out of their immersion and enjoyment of the game. The more logical your story is the better it will flow. In some cases the answers to these questions don't need to be presented to your players—just knowing them will help you run a better game.

Goal—What is the struggle within this story?

PC Motivation—Why are the PCs going to want to partake in this story?

Opposition—Who or what is the person or force that is preventing the PCs from completing the story?

Opposition Motivation—Why is the person or force opposed to the PCs?

After understanding the logic of the story I then like to do my casting. This is where I figure out what interesting locations and NPCs will be part of the story. Some of this will have been worked out by answering the questions above, but not all of it.

PCs' Allies—Who are the friends of the PCs? Why would they help? What can they do?

Opposition's Allies—Who are the friends of the opposition? Why would they want to help? What can they do?

Other Interesting Characters—Who else will the PCs encounter during the course of the session?

Locations—What are some interesting locations where this story could take place? Where are those places located?

Seventh Grade Composition

Now with some understanding of what's at stake, the motivations of the major parties, and some interesting locations and NPCs, it's time to lay out the session. There are as many ways to plan an adventure as there are to write a story, but I like to stick with the basics: The tried-and-true dramatic structure that I learned in seventh grade.

Introduction—How does the story begin? In a tavern, on a routine patrol? Based on player and PC motivation, we know that once the PCs encounter the problem they will want to see it to conclusion.

Rising Action—What steps will the PCs take to confront the opposition? Is there going to be combat? A tense negotiation? Some social manipulation? Depending on the length of the story, I like 3-4 of these scenes.

Climax—Where will the PCs confront the opposition to determine who will win and who will fail? What will the opposition do to prepare for that confrontation?

Dénouement—What happens if the PCs succeed? What happens if they don't?

When I feel like I can outline the entire session, I know I've reached the end of this phase of prep. I like to allocate a day or two of real time to think about it, because it's rare for me to be able to conceptualize the whole session in one sitting. I prefer to answer a few questions while driving to work, answer a few more while waiting for a meeting to start, and get the rest of my thinking done the next day while at home. I make as much time for the conceptualization phase as I do for the documentation phase (phase four, which we'll cover in the next chapter).

Knowledge is Power

As in the selection phase, the better you understand your players, your campaign, and your game, the better your answers to the questions covered in this phase will be. An idea can grow into a session in many different ways, each with their own unique path from introduction to dénouement. When you ask and answer the questions in this chapter, keep these things in mind:

What kind of players do I have? Knowing that your players prefer combat to negotiation will lead to one type of session, while gaming with a group that prefers elaborate social plots will lead to another kind of session.

How does this idea fit into my campaign? A campaign is a collection of stories. You want this story to fit the tone of your campaign, and you want it to be something that would be believable within the game world. For example, would a session about a plot to overthrow the emperor work in a kingdom that has known peace for a thousand years? Probably not—but it might work well if all wasn't what it seemed, and the kingdom were actually seething with discontent.

What mechanics will be used in this session? The story you create is going to be expressed in part through the mechanics of the game. You will want to make sure that your game provides the mechanics needed (and that you know them well enough to use them without stumbling), or be comfortable enough to create what you need within the system. For example, a story about a tense shipboard race through dangerous waters is going to require more work to pull off with a system that lacks chase mechanics.

Conceptualizing Scenes

The techniques for conceptualizing sessions described in this chapter can, with a bit of tweaking here and there, also be applied to conceptualizing individual scenes. Sessions are made up of a series of scenes, whether those are planned or arise organically during play, and when you prep a scene you need to know the answers to most of the basic questions:

What's the purpose of this scene?

Who's in this scene, and what are their motivations?

Where is this scene taking place?

When is this scene taking place?

Answer the questions that make sense for the scene, ignore the ones that don't, and you'll be well prepared for every scene. You can even circle back to this phase during the documentation phase, and use these tools to refine a specific scene that you're outlining.

When We Do Too Little

When conceptualization is shortchanged or eliminated it's often the session itself that suffers. On its own, an idea isn't enough to be a story. An idea is a great start, but without additional details it will lack the dramatic elements necessary to create a positive and memorable experience at the gaming table. Your players will quickly identify, often through painful experience, the corners that you cut during prep. Here are the three most common problem areas when it comes to conceptualization.

Logic Gaps

Logic gaps are one of the most obvious signs that you didn't do enough conceptualization. If you forgot to consider the opposition's motivations, your players won't understand why the opposition is involved in the adventure. If you overlooked the connecting elements between scenes, causing the opening scene to be set on Earth and the next scene to be set at Moon Base Delta, that's going to be jarring for your players.

Artist: Christopher Reach

Another common issue is creating an obstacle without considering the tools the PCs have at their disposal, allowing them to circumvent it in a way that isn't much fun for anyone. For example, you might create a villain and his lair in a hurry, including a few traps and several encounters to wear down the PCs, but you forget that the PCs possess teleportation and remote viewing magic. The PCs use scrying to locate the villain, teleport there, and sidestep the entire adventure. Whether you let them do it or make up an excuse for why that approach doesn't work, neither solution will feel satisfying for most groups. (Contrast this with a scenario where the PCs didn't have those capabilities but spent time and effort acquiring them in order to accomplish the same goal; that's a clever solution to the problem, and everyone would have had fun in the process.)

The most painful logic gap arises when you don't ensure that the PCs have reasons to undertake an adventure. Once your players start questioning why their characters should care about the mission, crisis, or situation that's on the docket, you're left with very few options—all of them bad. You can ask your players to just go along with it, dump the material you prepped and improvise a new adventure on the spot, or railroad the PCs into the adventure. All three options will sour your players' enjoyment of the game.

The Blahs

It's all too easy to cover all of the important areas of conceptualization without doing so in a creative or imaginative way. With time running out to prepare the session, or because you've slipped back into your comfort zone, you take the easy way out instead of coming up with creative and imaginative answers to the questions in this chapter. The result is a logical, consistent story that's also whitewashed, less exciting, or—worst of all—boring.

For example, imagine a sci-fi game where the PCs are going to battle a band of space pirates in the cargo hold of a ship. Which version of the cargo hold sounds like more fun?

A. The cargo hold is full of boxes.

B. The cargo hold is full of boxes that are being picked up, moved, and set down by automated drones. The drones ignore the combatants, but as the boxes are moved they reveal, conceal, and provide cover to both the PCs and the pirates. Clever PCs may be able to hack into the drones, ride them, or otherwise put them to creative uses.

Both are cargo holds, both are reasonable locations for a combat, but the first one is going to be just another fight while the second will lead to a battle your players will remember.

Slow to Document

When you take an idea and immediately start writing session notes around it—in other words, go straight from brainstorming to documentation, skipping this phase—it doesn't usually go well. There are too many details missing, so you have to stop and think about what to write for each part, pause to consider each detail, etc. The end result is a slow, frustrating documentation phase during which you write, then must pause to collect your thoughts and come up with new ideas before writing some more, and so on.

This process is painful and time-consuming. It takes much less time to document something you've fully thought out and are comfortable with than it does to haphazardly document an underdeveloped idea. The longer it takes to document your game the more you run the risk of not finishing in time, which leads to not having all your notes for a session or to canceling the session altogether. To avoid canceling the session you may push harder to keep writing, raising your frustration and stress levels about the game.

When We Do Too Much

When we conceptualize too much we begin to over think the session or scene. There are two major pitfalls related to over thinking your prep.

Too Much Detail

A problem has an infinite number of solutions, but your players will only ever pick one. As a GM, you shouldn't try to consider every possible solution, but rather to cover the most likely one. When you try to account for every possibility, you're using up mental energy on things that most likely won't come up in the game. It's better to expend energy on the most likely solution, plus perhaps the two next most likely contingencies if you have time.

This can be tricky to figure out at first, but when you're comfortable with your players it becomes obvious what solutions they'll try first in most situations. As you come to understand that, you will know which solutions to focus on and which ones to avoid thinking too much about.

Bloated Session Notes

The other downside to over thinking a scene or session is the need to document all the additional details that are involved. When you do this, you create bloated, overly long session notes, only a small fraction of which will get used during the game. Those notes will contain useful elements as well as unnecessary detail, of course, but you'll have to sift through the chaff to get to the wheat during play—and that takes up even more time.

Techniques for Improvement

Conceptualization is like any other skill: It can be learned and improved. Here are a few techniques that can help you enhance your ability to create great adventures.

Conceptualization Is Its Own Step

Much like brainstorming and selection are too often combined into one hybrid step, it's easy to do the same with conceptualization and documentation. To improve at conceptualization you need to dedicate time to this step and make it separate from documentation. Because most of conceptualization is a mental exercise and doesn't require writing, this process can be performed anywhere you like as long as you have some time to think.

We'll cover how to utilize downtime to prep for your game in more detail later on, but like brainstorming you can conceptualize while driving, waiting for a dental appointment, or standing in line at the grocery store. When you have a few minutes to think, just take the idea or scene and start to work it out in your head. Ask yourself the questions and listen to the answers. The more mental prep you do by conceptualizing the scene, the more prepared you'll be when you sit down to document your notes.

Go in Circles

Sometimes the answers to the questions in this chapter don't come easy. One or two will come quickly, but the others are slow to form. You can smooth things out by making conceptualization an iterative process: Answer some of the questions, sum up what you have determined, and then ask the next questions. For instance:

> *"The fight with the space pirates will take place on the ship. Okay, on the ship, but where? Engine room? No, too secure. Bridge? No, how would they have gotten there? Cargo hold? Yes. Cargo hold is good.*
>
> *Okay, so the fight takes place in the cargo hold. What's happening in there while the fight is going on? Maybe the boxes are moving around? How? Automated lifts are picking them up and moving them. Why? The ship's AI is optimizing the cargo for unloading at the next stop."*

That exchange of internal dialog could have happened all at once, say while driving to work, or you could have thought through the first paragraph while waiting in line at the coffee shop and the second paragraph while out grocery shopping later in the day. If you can retain what you came up with in your head, that's excellent—but if not, be sure to jot down a sentence or two so that you won't forget any details.

Artist: Matt Morrow

True Story: The Columbo Question

As an IT project manager, I spend a lot of time working with teams to design systems and software. In most cases my job is just to ask questions and keep everyone talking. Rarely am I the guy who has the answer to the problem; I'm the guy that gets the person who does have the answer to make that solution surface. When things get quiet at the table I often ask what I call a "Columbo question." In the TV show *Columbo*, which first aired in the 1960s, the titular character would ask a series of innocuous questions to get suspects to drop their guard before slipping in the real question, which was simple and asked in a self-deprecating way. This question always prompted the killer to blurt out something they shouldn't have said. A good Columbo question provokes an almost involuntary response.

When I conceptualize, I often play the same role in my own head. I ask simple questions and then answer them, filling in the surface details for the story or scene. I will keep going in this fashion until all the details are covered, and then I'll drop a Columbo question. Most often, this is either "Why would the PCs be interested in doing that?" or "What would make this scene more exciting?" When I can answer that question, I know that I understand the story or scene.

Rate Your Skill Level

How are your conceptualization skills? Using the same categories and rankings from the previous chapters, rate how often you conceptualize and how skilled you are at this activity.

Frequency

On a scale of 1-5, how often do you carry out conceptualization separately from the act of writing up your session notes (documentation)?

1 - **Never** (I don't do any upfront thinking before I write)

2 - **Infrequently** (I think about the overall story before I write, but leave out the details of the scenes until I start writing)

3 - **Occasionally** (I think about the overall story and a few key scenes, but the rest I work on when I'm writing)

4 - **Regularly** (I make some time to think about the overall game and all the scenes before writing)

5 - **Always** (I'm thinking about my upcoming game all the time)

Strength

On a scale of 1-5, how much detail do you go into during conceptualization?

1 - **Non-existent** (I never think about details ahead of time, I wing it when I write my notes or run the game)

2 - **Weak** (I make sure that the overall story follows a loose narrative, but that's it)

3 - **Competent** (I ask the basic who/what/where questions)

4 - **Skilled** (I ask the basic questions and look at motivations within the story and/or scenes)

5 - **Mastery** (I analyze my ideas from multiple angles, looking for logical flaws, and don't stop until I'm satisfied that the story and/or scenes are sound)

As before, add up the numbers to get a score ranging from 2 (unskilled) to 10 (mastery), with the average being a 6. If you scored lower in Frequency, work on planning some time to make conceptualization a normal part of your prep process (and on doing it during downtime, like when you're driving). If your Strength score was low, focus on coming up with a set of questions you should run through when you're working through this process. That way, when you conceptualize you'll get the most out of your efforts.

Chapter 6: Documentation

Ideas become concepts and concepts become documents. Writing things down has been important to most cultures since the dawn of civilization—cave drawings became symbols, symbols were joined by syntax, and written language followed. At the same time, humans have always used verbal communication as well, with its phonemes and similar syntax. Why have two forms of communication unless both were equally valuable?

Verbal communication is the medium of the now. It's how we convey concepts to those around us, and to those connected by technology such as the phone or a video chat. It's fast, but it can be messy; it's fleeting, and it lacks reproducibility (think of the children's game "Telephone"). The written word is the opposite: It is an everlasting medium. It's slower to produce, but clearer; it's fixed, and it's reproducible.

What does that have to do with RPGs? Being a GM is a very hectic job. During the course of a game you're likely to be doing more than one thing at any given time, or doing things in rapid succession. Things like:

- **Narrating a story**
- **Making a rules judgment**
- **Interpreting the outcome of the dice**
- **Reading the mood of the table**
- **Responding to player questions**
- **Making tactical decisions**

That's a lot to do moment to moment, and doing it requires a great deal of mental processing power. Now imagine that you have to hold the whole plot for a complex mystery, with all its red herrings, clues, and the identity of the true killer, in your mind while doing all of the above. It's very likely that something is going to get missed, and the complex mystery will become a confusing mess.

This is where written game notes come in. Your written game notes are static; they're your anchors for the game. When you lose focus because of a player question or other table event, they allow you to pick up where you left off. When your players throw you a curveball by making an unexpected choice, it's your notes that enable you to review what you planned and let your brain make the necessary adjustments. In a campaign that spans months or years, it's the everlasting nature of the written word that allows you to keep track of everything as the game progresses. That's the purpose of the documentation phase—the stage of prep where you write everything down.

This chapter doesn't focus on the specific content you record or the tools you use to write or create your session notes; those topics are covered later on. Instead, this chapter focuses on the process of documenting your ideas and how that process fits into your prep.

It's Personal… Very Personal

Documentation is the phase where you record your ideas in a format that will allow you to access them at a later time. Oftentimes that means written notes, but you're not restricted to that format. There are as many ways to document a session as there are GMs in the world. Some GMs like index cards, others prefer to use a wiki, and some use sticky notes—if it can be written on or in, chances are a GM somewhere has tried to use it to record their notes.

Your documentation has a purpose that is often overlooked by many GMs, though. The true goal of your session notes is to make you comfortable enough to run your session. As long as your notes enable you to run your game with confidence, it doesn't matter what medium you use or how many or few words you write.

There is no magic number of words or pages to write for a session. If writing 20 pages of detailed notes is what it takes to make you comfortable at the table, then that's what you need. If all you need are a few ideas on an index card to be ready to improv your way through an evening, that's just fine as well. The worst thing you can do is need 20 pages of notes but only allow yourself the index card.

There are many things that can be documented in your session notes, including:

Scenes/Encounters—Discrete, usually connected, parts of the session. Scenes are more common in story-focused games, while encounters are more common in sandbox, tactically-focused, or location-based games. Both scenes and encounters include:

- **Description**—To explain the environment to your players
- **Dialog**—Specific things for NPCs to say
- **Objects**—From a rolling boulder to a magical sword, scenes often include important objects

Stat Blocks—The game statistics for various NPCs and/or monsters that will come up during the session can be jotted down, or you can reference the page number in another book where the full stats can be found.

Maps/Drawings—Pictures of the sites that will be involved in the session, from crude sketches to elaborate illustrations. Maps can depict anything from a single bedroom to an entire orbital complex.

Rules—Specific game rules that may come into play during the session. These can be rules that you don't use that often or homebrewed rules that apply to a specific situation.

Your comfort level with each of these areas will determine how detailed your notes need to be. If you can recite the most esoteric rules in the book, then you won't need to document rules in your notes. If you're weak at coming up with good dialog for your NPCs, then you'll want to have more notes dedicated to important dialog. (We'll talk more later about how to figure out your specific strengths and weaknesses and how to reflect them in your documentation.)

Documentation is writing, and as such requires something to write with and upon, somewhere to write, and time dedicated to the writing process. Depending on the tools you use and your ability to focus on writing despite distractions, this process may have to occur in the quiet of your home office using your favorite pen and leather-bound notebook, or you might be able to tap out notes on your tablet while riding the train to work.

Because of the varied ways that this process can be undertaken, there is great room for experimentation; it's worth trying out different writing media and note taking methods to find the combination that you're most comfortable with. That combination will be different for every GM, but one thing is true for all of us: When you find the right combination for you, the documentation process will become comfortable and enjoyable.

Over the years I've experimented with about every medium I could find for taking notes. Like many GMs of my age group (read: old), I started out using loose-leaf and graph paper and writing with a pencil. Since then I've tried bound journals, index cards, word processing programs, web pages, wikis, and note-taking software. I've written my session notes while lying on the couch, at lunchtime at work, during meetings, on airplanes, in hotels, outside, etc. Currently I use Microsoft® OneNote and write mainly at home or during my lunch break at work, but I'm always evaluating new options.

The Conceptualization/Documentation Blob

The hardest part of documentation is separating it from conceptualization. The two are distinct activities that often get lumped together. In the conceptualization phase, an idea is expanded and fleshed out with additional details. In the documentation phase that detailed idea is recorded in the form of written notes. But often a writer will come up with an idea, and then sit with a blank piece of paper (or in front of a blank screen) and work up the whole story.

There isn't necessarily anything wrong with this approach, but it's not as efficient and generally isn't the best use of your time. When you merge documentation and conceptualization into a single effort, there will be gaps during your writing time as you conceptualize the next element before moving on. This process can be made to work—think of essay tests at school, where you're given a topic and expected to write an essay on the spot. But how much easier is it to write that essay if you've had a day to think about the topic beforehand and can show up with an outline?

While conceptualization and documentation can be done at the same time, you're missing a great opportunity to improve your ideas by thinking about them solely during the conceptualization phase. Documentation requires a place and time to write, but conceptualization can be done anywhere you can clear your head to do some thinking. Take advantage of the different requirements for these activities and leverage the free time between games to conceptualize your ideas, and then see how much faster the writing comes when it's time to work on documentation.

The Conceptualization/ Documentation Cycle

No matter how well you separate the two activities there will always be some natural overlap between documentation and conceptualization. But remember that you're not locked into traveling in order through your phases of prep; you're free to move backwards and forwards through the "prep continuum" as needed.

There will be times when you start documenting a conceptualized idea and realize that you're missing a detail that would make the scene complete. It could be that you forgot to come up with a good motivation for an NPC, or that you forgot to fully describe the location you want to use in the scene. When this happens, it's natural to disengage from documentation and slide back to conceptualization to work up the details you're missing, and then return to documentation.

Artist: Christopher Reach

At present, I run a game every three weeks. I use the week after my game to do my campaign prep and brainstorming. I then take my idea and spend the second week casually conceptualizing it. The week before the game is when I write my notes. After a week of conceptualizing on and off, I sit down to write with an outline of scenes and most of the scenes framed out. This makes documentation pretty painless, as all the hard work has already been done.

When We Do Too Little

How much documentation is too little? It's not about page count—it's about comfort levels. Too little documentation means that you haven't written down enough details about the session to be comfortable running it. There's too much information in your head, and it isn't present in a way that is accessible and useful. For some GMs this means every little thing gets written down, while for others it means just an outline on a card, but when you do too little for either GM the effect is the same.

When you aren't comfortable running the session, or are caught off guard, you begin to stumble. You pause too often, shuffle papers, or crack open your books. Your players will sense this at once and then mentally disengage from the game. This is a killer when you are GMing. Doing solid prep in each of the phases will help to avoid this.

Let's go into more detail about these problems and how to avoid them.

Missing Notes

The productivity guru David Allen says that the mind is a terrible tool for remembering things. "Psychic RAM," as he calls it, will hold something for you, but won't always bring it back up when you need it—especially if you're distracted. The act of GMing is a constant distraction. If you have stored all the critical details of your game in your mind, and are trying to retrieve them while handling the action at the table, you're going to struggle. When that happens, you start to miss things.

Depending on the game you play and the types of sessions you run, missed details have different levels of impact. If you're running a classic dungeon crawl and you forget to mention the door to the right, your players may have only missed a few encounters, some XP, and a bit of treasure. If you're running a gothic mystery and you forget to give the players an important clue, though, then it may be impossible for the players to solve the mystery, or you may be required to pause the game and retcon (short for "retroactive continuity," changing something in the game after the fact) finding the clue—a painful process.

If you find yourself struggling to manage the details of your session, and are having frequent pauses where you are mentally scrambling to figure out what to do next, then you need to document more details.

Caught Unaware

As discussed in the conceptualization chapter, an adventure has a progression from start to finish. In literature, the author is in complete control of how the characters will progress through an arc. GMs don't have that luxury. Your players have free will to decide how to progress through the adventure. At the same time, no matter how much freedom the players have, GMs often expect them to take a certain path and do their conceptualization and documentation with that path in mind.

But no matter how well you know your players, there will be times when they do the unexpected (which is one of the things that makes GMing so much fun). When they do, as the GM you're expected to adjust the adventure and keep going. If you don't have a written version of the adventure on hand, then you're much more likely to be at a loss about how to move forward.

If you're storing the entire adventure in your head and are thrown a curve ball, you run the risk of freezing up as you try to remember where the story was going so that you can account for this unexpected change. Documentation gives you something to refer to so that you can focus on the adjustments, not on remembering every last detail.

If you find that you often react badly when caught unaware by your players' decisions, you may not be documenting enough details about the game to use as reference.

Rules Fumble

Nothing cools a game like flipping open a rulebook during a tense or dramatic scene. Imagine an epic battle on thin, cracked ice between the PCs and the big villain. Suddenly the ice under a PC gives out and she goes under! The player looks at you anxiously, waiting to find out what happens next. Do they have to make a Swim check? Do they take damage from the icy water? How long can the character hold her breath?

If you're unprepared, you knew that the battle was going to take place on the ice but figured that the rulebook had all the relevant rules in it—you could just look them up. But which section tells you how long someone can hold their breath? Is it covered with environmental threats or in the section about the Stamina attribute? Where are the rules for Swim checks, again? Does armor affect swimming, and is that rule covered in the armor section or the chapter on skills?

If you're prepared, you knew that the battle was going to take place on the frozen lake and planned ahead for the mechanics that might come into play. You wrote down a few notes about Swim checks, characters holding their breath, how armor comes into play (including the modifiers for the armor the PCs are wearing), and included page numbers from the rulebook just in case.

The prepared GM won't miss a beat, and will be able to keep the action moving and the players engaged. The unprepared GM will break out his rulebook and grind the game to a halt.

If you find that you're relying too heavily on rulebooks during the game, you may not be including enough notes about relevant rules in your session documentation.

When We Do Too Much

Is there really such a thing as too much documentation? If documentation helps you be prepared, can you be too prepared? The short answer is no, you really can't be too prepared—but there are a few downsides to over-documentation.

All You Do Is Write

Documentation takes time, and it also requires you to be sitting and working with your writing medium of choice. So when you over-document, you use up a lot of time that might be spent working on other aspects of your game, or not working on your game at all. If you have a lot of free time, then you likely don't feel the crunch from this because you are just working on your notes. When you have more time constraints due to work, relationships, and/or children, this time crunch can be crushing.

In many cases GMs who feel like they can never get their notes written before a session are writing too much. This then leads to a downward spiral:

- **Stress from not getting notes done**
- **Game not fully prepped**
- **GM not fully comfortable to run incomplete session**
- **Not running sessions with full confidence**
- **GM's desire to run the game decreases**
- **Group play suffers**
- **Campaign canceled**

The worst part of this spiral is that it's not tied to any specific campaign or game, but rather is a cloud that hangs over that GM that goes from game to game. Not over-documenting will help you avoid this situation.

On the Cutting Room Floor

Another side effect of over-documenting is that some of your material won't get used. Your players will take the session down a particular path, and some of the choices they will make will render some of your documentation moot. For instance, consider a game in which you've written down names and personalities for everyone in the town near the dungeon. When your players visit the town, they can interact with absolutely anyone and you'll know who they are, their goals and aspira-

Artist: Christopher Reach

tions, their secrets, etc. Then during the session, your players decide to skip the town and just head right into the dungeon because they don't need any supplies.

A good GM chalks up that extra documentation to experience and picks up the pieces with hopes of incorporating it into the game at a later date. Perhaps the PCs will visit the town after exploring the dungeon, or if they avoid the town altogether then the material can be used for a town somewhere else.

A bad GM resents the players for not using the material he created, and railroads the PCs into town so that the material can be used. This might be satisfying for the GM, who can now justify his hard work, but can lead to frustration or resentment among his players. If you don't over-document, you'll avoid the temptation to do this.

Techniques for Improvement

You can refine and improve your techniques for documentation. Here are a few techniques to make your documentation more efficient and effective.

Split Up Thinking and Writing

To be more efficient with your documentation, avoid the conceptualization/documentation blob: performing both activities at the same time. Instead, make sure you dedicate time to conceptualize your ideas, so that they mature and grow in detail. Use the tips in the previous chapter to hone your conceptualization skills, so that by the time you sit down to write you're just putting the details from your mind down on paper. This will greatly speed up your documentation process.

Write for Effect

We'll talk a lot more about this in subsequent chapters, but make sure that you're documenting only the things you need to make you comfortable when running your session. Avoid flowery writing and skip details that you're comfortable making up on your own. The things you put in your notes should be the things that are going to help you once the game is running. The less you have to write for a given session the faster you are going to complete your documentation.

Be Proficient at Your Writing Medium

Documentation is a physical activity, and it does require some level of physical aptitude and skill. Make sure that however you document your notes, you're comfortable with the activity and proficient at it. If you handwrite your notes, but you have terrible handwriting and your hand cramps every two minutes, then documentation is going to be slow and painful. If you type 90 words a minute, then typing your notes is going to be a much better choice for you. Handwriting and typing are both skills that can be worked on and improved with practice.

This also applies to understanding any software that you choose to use in your prep. If you want to make maps electronically but aren't proficient with your mapping software, you're going to have a hard time turning out a map for your game. If you're using software to generate NPCs but you aren't that familiar with it, it's going create documentation drag. Take the time between games to learn your software, and until you get proficient with it allocate extra time for your prep.

True Story: Speling Mistkes and Extra, Commas

I've never been very good at spelling, and grammar isn't my strong suit either. I've had editors joke about charging me by the number of commas they have to remove from my manuscripts, rather than by the page. I am one of those math/science people who are better at coding a programming language than finding a participle in a sentence.

I used to waste a lot of time during the writing of my session notes by trying to make them perfect. I would look up words, rewrite sentences, and do all manner of editing. It then dawned on me that in all likelihood no one would be seeing my notes but me, so why waste the time writing properly structured sentences or spelling every word correctly as long as I could read what I had written and use it in my session?

So if you're a perfectionist when it comes to writing, let it go. I'm not saying you should abandon the rules of grammar entirely, but don't waste precious time combing through your notes to check for proper sentence structure. Get your ideas down and get playing instead.

Rate Your Skill Level

Let's find out how proficient you are at the art of documentation—at taking the concepts for your session and scenes and putting them down in writing.

Frequency

On a scale of 1-5, how often do you perform documentation as an activity separate from fleshing out ideas (conceptualization) for your sessions, leaving you enough time to focus on documentation?

1 - Never (I never write up the material I need before a session)

2 - Infrequently (I write up my material but always finish very close to the time when I'm running the game)

3 - Occasionally (I write up my material and finish in time, but I always feel under pressure or stressed out afterwards)

4 - Regularly (I am good about getting my material written with some time to spare)

5 - Always (I'm never in a rush, my notes are always done a few days before the session)

Strength

On a scale of 1-5, how well do your notes serve you during sessions?

1 - Non-existent (What I have documented is too little, and there are gaps that need to be filled)

2 - Weak (Some of my material is useful, but I am on my own quite a lot)

3 - Competent (All the major parts of the session are covered, but I typically have to stop once or twice during the session to look something up)

4 - Skilled (My notes give me a very high comfort level to run the session, and I rarely have to stop to look anything up)

5 - Mastery (With my notes in hand, I'm ready for anything)

Add the numbers up to get a range from 2 (unskilled) to 10 (mastery), with the average being a 6. If your Frequency is low, work on dedicating time to documentation and make sure that you have separated out conceptualization and documentation into discrete activities. If your Strength rating is low, focus on looking at what's going into your notes—and more importantly what you're not putting into your notes.

Chapter 7: Review

Mistakes happen. Things are overlooked. Nobody's perfect.

The creation of your session notes is an involved process that can have many components, from writing scenes to crafting specific dialog, generating NPC stats, drawing maps, or even making props. It's a process that's sometimes done in more than one sitting, and for some even in different locations. There are a lot of places where mistakes can crop up. Before you run your adventure, which grew from an idea that was then conceptualized and documented, you should take some time to make sure that you didn't make any mistakes along the way before running it for your friends.

Mistakes range in size from miniscule errors that hardly warrant attention during a session, to colossal monsters that can make you scramble like crazy to patch them up mid-game. Small errors are things like misspellings, incorrect amounts of treasure, and minor omissions. Medium-sized errors are those that won't derail the game, but do still require a quick fix—things like missing dialog for a scene, forgetting the stat block for an encounter, or omitting a reference to a rule that you might need. Large errors are the ones that can halt you in your tracks, the worst offenders being logic gaps within the adventure. These often require you to stop the game and can require you to rewind a scene or retcon the error.

Any time the flow of the game gets interrupted, your players' attention will drift. The time required to regroup and get everyone back into the flow of the game is time lost from having fun. As a GM, part of your job is to keep the game flowing. Since the bulk of the narration of the game stems from you and your documentation, you need to be mentally comfortable about your session, and your notes need to be complete. To achieve this level of preparation, both mentally and in your notes, you need to review what you've done so far.

The Three Reviewers

During the review phase, you will look at the material for your session as a whole—what's in your mind as well as what's written down. This phase considers those two elements together and evaluates their completeness, as well as giving you a chance to catch and fix errors and omissions. A common mistake is to think that reviewing your work just means checking your spelling and grammar. While that will be a minor component of this phase, the process involves much more than that.

When you review, you need to approach session prep from the perspective of three reviewers, each with a different focus: the proofreader, the director, and the playtester. Imagine that these are all different people, each one of them reviewing your work.

The Proofreader

The first role you should take on is that of the proofreader. This is the oldest reviewer you know, because you were introduced to her back in grammar school. The job of the proofreader is to look for the written errors in your documentation. The most basic are spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. While these aren't that important (as we discussed in the previous chapter), if you spot them, fix them.

The proofreader also looks for transcription errors and omissions—things like forgetting to note an NPC's hit points or what sort of treasure is in a particular dungeon room—as well as for glaring mistakes like leaving out a stat block in a mechanics-heavy game.

In your role as proofreader, read your session notes for accuracy and completeness. A good set of notes, free of distracting and problematic errors, gives you a strong foundation for running your game.

The proofreader's skills include knowledge of basic grammar and spelling, attention to detail, and familiarity with the game rules.

The Director

When going over your prep in this role, think of yourself as being part GM and part movie director. The job of the director is to read through your notes and examine the structure of the session to ensure that there are no logic gaps, that it flows well, and that it makes sense—in essence, that there's continuity. Check to see that scenes flow into one another, if it's that kind of session; examine the motivations of your NPCs and consider whether they're acting as they should in the story. Look at locations and make sure the PCs and NPCs have interesting places to go, and consider whether your language is as descriptive as it could be.

As the director, you're looking at both written documentation and the concepts in your head. Make sure you feel comfortable with the adventure, that you're familiar with all of its pieces, and that you have an overall feel for how it's likely to play out. Mentally rehearse climactic scenes, work on your NPC voices, and evaluate your dialog to make sure it doesn't sound silly.

If you find problems, make revisions and change elements of the adventure as needed. Work to make your adventure the best adventure it can be. When you've done your job as director, you'll be mentally prepared to run your game because you know the adventure is sound.

The director's skills are imagination, creativity, and an understanding of literature and storytelling.

Artist: Christopher Reach

The Playtester

The final reviewer is the playtester. If the director is your inner GM, then the playtester is your inner player. The job of the playtester is to move through the adventure like a player, to look at the session from the other side of the screen. From that perspective, look at what the GM presents and see if it makes sense. As a player, does the hook motivate you? What decisions might you make during the session? Try to anticipate those decisions and make sure you've prepared the necessary material and thought through contingencies.

The playtester, like the director, reviews both your documentation and the ideas in your head. Look for blind spots and logic gaps that your players might exploit in ways that may make the game less fun. Try to solve the problems that are presented not as you yourself expect them to be solved, but as a clever player—look for loopholes, ways to bypass challenges, and devastating combinations of powers that crush the opposition.

If you, as the playtester, find an obvious loophole in the design of the adventure, put on your director hat and close the loophole while maintaining the flow of the adventure. When the playtester has done a good job, the adventure is challenging to your players and you're prepared for many things that they might do during the game.

The playtester's skills are the summation of your group's knowledge and experience as players, which will vary from group to group.

A Dress Rehearsal for the Mind

I treat my review of my session and its associated notes as a dress rehearsal for the game. Typically I reserve the day of the game for my review. I sit down with my notes and put myself into the role of the proofreader, going over my notes to clean them up and format them in a manner that's easy to read. When I'm done cleaning up my notes, I go through the content of the session as the director, imagining each scene, working through how to describe the scenes, and speaking any NPC dialog. When I feel that a scene is polished enough, I set the playtester loose to run through the scene and imagine how my players will interact with the material, to anticipate the decisions they will make, and to make sure that my documentation and my mental prep cover those decisions.

In my role as the proofreader, I need to be able to work with my actual documentation, so that requires me to be at my desk or on my laptop. I usually proofread in the morning before my game. My work as the director and the playtester can be done at my desk or away from it, and I typically tackle those reviews during the day while getting ready for the game.

When We Do Too Little

When you're under a time crunch, the review phase is an easy target. It's the last step, and when time is of the essence most GMs value getting more material written down over making sure what they have is of the highest quality. Also, many GMs are overly confident that they captured the session in its entirety during documentation. When you shortchange the review phase you give up the chance to make sure that your session notes are as good as they can be. And when you ignore one or more of the three reviewers (proofreader, director, and playtester) three things can happen, as you'll see below.

Where Did I Put That?

When you fail to proofread your notes you run the risk of missing information that you will need during the session. A minor error might be forgetting to note what's in the armory's gun locker; a more serious gaff would be forgetting the stat block for the major villain who's central to the climax of the session. In both cases, these omissions can cause you to lose your focus and to stumble during the game. Depending on how serious the omission is, you may be able to ad lib your way past it. If you can't then you may need to take a break to sort things out, interrupting the rhythm of the game.

Lack of proofreading can give your game a disorganized look and feel. A GM who hasn't done enough proofreading flips through books to find that stat block or rolls up random guns for the weapons locker on the fly. She stops and starts a lot during

the game, stumbling over the things that are missing and trying to compensate for their absence. Her games rarely get into a good groove and if they do, they don't stay there for long.

I Thought He Was in the West Room

When you don't review your notes for consistency, you will often discover logic gaps within the plot. Small errors, such as forgetting what room the body was found in, can cause confusion for your players, which can result in player frustration or stall the game's progress. More significant plot holes can derail a session, forcing you to halt the game and make larger corrections, possibly including a retcon. Other types of logic errors often show up when transitioning between scenes: The PCs start in the bar in one scene, and in the next they're in the mayor's office, with no explanation of what happened in between. Story errors, logic gaps, and plot holes are hard to smooth over in the middle of the game without being noticed.

Games with a lot of story errors in them have confusing plots that seem to jump from scene to scene, without smooth transitions. Plots don't hinge on appropriate motivations, or the NPCs seem to act in arbitrary ways. GMs who don't consider consistency won't necessarily seem disorganized, but their players will be confused about what's going on in the game, and at times they may blame the GM for railroading them through the session. It's hard to get into a groove in this kind of game because of the confusion caused by its lack of consistency.

I Didn't See That Coming

GMs who don't mentally playtest their material are often blindsided by their players' actions. They will present a situation that looks like a challenge, only to have their players devise an unforeseen and problematic solution. Sometimes the GM rolls with it, and a challenging scene becomes very easy and anticlimactic. At other times the GM will protect his challenge and shoot down the players' idea. Scrambling for a plausible explanation for why the plan doesn't work can be done well, but if done poorly the GM uses his fiat to squash his players' creative solution. Players notice when their ideas get shot down, even if it's done well.

A lack of playtesting leads to games that players find too easy or anticlimactic, and can create the perception that the only way to solve a challenge is the GM's way. Players then feel, justifiably, that their contributions to the shared narrative are not respected. These kinds of games leave players frustrated and unsatisfied.

When We Do Too Much

It is possible to review your material too much. Too much review can raise doubts in your head and cause you to second guess yourself. You see errors that don't exist, you obsess over a single point in the session, or you begin to doubt that the adventure will be good. When those doubts creep in, you redouble your efforts to root out

problems but never accomplish what you set out to do. Instead you create a mental feedback loop that only raises more doubts and sows further confusion. Here are some common pitfalls associated with over-analyzing your work.

Nitpicking

Should the goblins have daggers or short swords? Are there six people or 2d6 people in the tavern? Should the store owner say, "The men were here last night" or "Those men were here yesterday"? Nitpicking is when you obsess over minor details of the game to the point of either wasting time or distracting your attention from more important aspects of the review phase.

Subtle changes like the ones mentioned above aren't going to be noticed by your players. GMs often think that their players pick up on every detail, but the truth is that players have a lot to think about; they're more concerned with the big picture, or with details that are relevant to the life or death of their characters, than with whether or not the goblins are carrying the "wrong" weapons. So don't obsess about the small things—instead, put your energies toward the more substantive elements of the session.

True Story: TMI

One of the things I love before game night is a hot shower and a shave. This ritual makes me feel more professional; it's like getting ready for work. The reason I bring this up is that the shower is my Fortress of Solitude: My kids aren't around and it's nice and quiet. I usually tackle my director and playtester reviews during the shower. I find that I do my best thinking in the shower, with no distractions. I walk through my session, practice some of the key dialog, and rehearse some of the descriptions. I often get out of the shower and head straight for my session notes to make my final adjustments.

Second Guessing

Often when you look very hard for an error, you find one—whether it's actually there or not. In being critical you need to be cognizant of not being overly critical. The plot of a session is like a sweater with a loose thread in it: When you tug on the thread, you unravel the sweater. The same is true with adventures. A small change in one place can have a ripple effect throughout the plot, and suddenly that one little change leads to wholesale changes to the structure of the session.

The worst time to become overly critical is when you're running out of time before a session. Changes need to be made with care and precision, and that's hard to do the closer you get to game time. The other downside to second guessing yourself is that it can lower your confidence about running the session. Having spent time and energy questioning all or parts of your adventure, you then come to the table filled with doubts. Those doubts become barriers during the game, which can prevent you from fully engaging your players.

Techniques for Improvement

You can become a better and more effective reviewer. Shortcomings in this area typically fall into two categories: time and technique. The assessment below will help you decide whether or not you need improvement in one or both of these areas.

In terms of time, as with the other phases of prep it's important to dedicate enough time to the review phase if you want to be able to do it well. I find that the best time to review your prep is in the hours before the game. Reviewing your material during that time not only helps to improve the quality of your material, it loads the session into your "psychic RAM" and makes everything fresh in your mind.

With regard to technique, remember the three reviewers—the proofreader, the director, and the playtester. Are you performing all three review activities when you prep? Are you performing them evenly, or focusing more on one than another? If you have the time, start your review process in one role, move on to the next role when that review is completed, and then take a third pass in the final role. By making each review a separate activity you can focus on a single task and work to master each of them. As your skill improves, you'll find that you can perform all three roles without thinking about it as you review.

Artist: Matt Morrow

Rate Your Skill Level

This will be your final skill review. Let's figure out how proficient you are at the art of reviewing your session prep.

Frequency

On a scale of 1-5, how often do you perform a review of the material you're going to use for your upcoming session?

1 - Never (I write it once and then I just run the game)

2 - Infrequently (I might take a quick look just before the game while people are settling in at the table)

3 - Occasionally (If I have time before the game, I'll take a look; otherwise I don't bother)

4 - Regularly (I make sure that I go over my notes for most sessions; it's rare I don't review them before a game)

5 - Always (I never run something that I haven't reviewed first)

Strength

On a scale of 1-5, how thorough is your review?

1 - Non-existent (I never find mistakes)

2 - Weak (I catch obvious things like missing stats, but there is plenty that I miss)

3 - Competent (I'm very good at one of the three review types and do okay at the other two)

4 - Skilled (I am very good at two of the three review types, and okay with the third one)

5 - Mastery (I'm very good with all three review types)

Add your scores together to get a range of 2 (unskilled) to 10 (mastery), with the average being a 6. If your Frequency is low, you need to set aside some time to review your notes before the game begins. If your Strength score is low, rank your skill at each type of review and sort them from best to worst. Work on developing the worst one first, and then the second-worst one, so that your skills even out.

Prep Toolbox

Artist: Christopher Reach

Chapter 8: Tools for Prep

Over the years I've tried every medium for writing my notes. I've gone through phases where I favored one type of medium and/or tool over another, written my notes on everything from laboratory books to leather-bound notebooks, and used a range of computers and software. Along the way I learned what went into making a good tool, and how to match the tools I used to the way that I like to prep for my games. Because prep is more than just writing your notes (i.e. the documentation phase), you can use different tools for the different phases of prep. You may want to use one platform from brainstorming through review, or you may employ one tool for capturing your brainstorming and another for documentation.

My take on prep tools comes from two sources: David Allen and my borderline addiction to office supplies. In *Getting Things Done*, David Allen talks at length about the criteria for selecting the right tools for building a productivity system. He doesn't endorse a specific system, but rather encourages the user to explore and develop their own system based on several criteria. In writing this chapter, I've taken a similar approach.

I'm also an office supply geek—there, I said it. I have loved office supplies since I was a kid. My favorite thing about going back to school was going to the store to pick out my school supplies. As a child, my parents would take me to their offices and let me raid their supply rooms for binders, folders, paper, and pens. To this day, I'm the kind of person who goes into an office supply store and looks at every item with an eye to how I could use it for my current game, or for some future game. Needless to say, I've tried organizing my prep in lots of different ways using all sorts of office supplies.

What Makes a Good Tool?

A good tool can be the difference between a cumbersome prep process and a smooth and efficient one. When you have good tools, you're able to execute your prep with ease and without trepidation. I would venture to say that with a tool that matches your style, the process of prep can even be enjoyable. Good tools have three important qualities.

It Fits Your Work Style

The first thing to consider about every tool you use is this: Does it fit the way you like to work? When it comes to writing implements, do you have good penmanship, or are you a fast typist? That will help to determine if you should be using pen and paper or a word processor. When you work on your prep do you have Internet access or are you somewhere without a connection? This will determine whether you should use a cloud-based service or local software. Is your prep done in one location, such as a home office or game room, or are you preparing your games in many different places? This will determine how portable your tools need to be.

You need to take into account these kinds of questions as you select your tools. The answers to the questions above will favor certain tools over others. When a tool doesn't seem to be working, don't force it; that will only make your prep process more difficult. You need to find a tool that works best with your prep style, even if it wasn't your first choice. Find the tool that best fits your style and you'll always be ready to prep.

I love nice pens and journals, but I don't use them for documentation in my personal prep system; I use Microsoft® OneNote. I have so-so penmanship and I'm a terrible speller, but I'm a fast typist so I benefit from working with electronic tools. Initially, OneNote wasn't an ideal solution because I do most of my prep at home or during my lunch break at work, and I use a PC at home and a Mac at work. Once I started using Dropbox (*dropbox.com*) to hold my OneNote prep file, and Parallels to run OneNote on my Mac, everything clicked and this became the best solution for me.

It's Exciting to Use

This one sounds strange, but it's true. The best tools are the tools that you find exciting to use. If you don't have some level of interest or excitement about the tools you use, or worse yet you regard them with disdain, then using them will be tedious and you'll resist doing your prep. That resistance will slow your prep, and could lead to not getting your prep done or even to canceled sessions. When you look at possible tools, imagine how you'll feel using them. Will that notebook lay flat on the table and be easy to write in, or will it be a struggle to use? How user-friendly is your software of choice?

I like using OneNote because it's so flexible. If I can capture it, whether in text, images, drawings, tables, or screen caps, I can put it into OneNote. To me that's exciting because I love having the ability to take any kind of material for my game and put it in one place for easy access during play.

It's High-Quality

Consider how much time you're going to spend working on prep during your GMing career, both for your current campaign and your future games. It's not a trivial amount of time. Like a crafter in other trades, if you're going to be spending a significant amount of time working on something you should have the best tools possible. Your tools should be well made, and you should be able to feel their quality in your hand or in their performance. They should also be reliable. If your main tool is your laptop, you don't want it to crash at unexpected times, causing you to lose your work. If you use a notebook, you shouldn't have to worry about the pages falling out, or about your writing pressing through them.

When I'm brainstorming, I like to write my ideas down by hand. I use Moleskine® notebooks for this because I love the quality of the paper and the feel of the notebook in my hand, and because they're quite durable. I pair my notebooks with

a Cross® Morph pen with a fine black ballpoint tip. The Morph is a nice weight and very comfortable in my hand, and I love writing with it. There's something about holding that pen, feeling the weight of it in my hand and watching it glide along the pages of the notebook, that is tactile and pleasurable.

When it comes to creating maps, buy some drafting tools and a good mechanical pencil and draw them on nice paper. And if you use electronic tools, always have a backup plan. If your notes are in OneNote and your laptop dies, how will you run your session? Always have a second way to access your notes; Dropbox is a perfect tool for this, and it's free. You should also be prepared to migrate to new hardware or software periodically.

Paper versus Electronic

It's worth saying a few words about the two major types of prep tools: paper and electronic. Both types have their strengths and weaknesses, and they both meet the criteria outlined above. Which type you use comes down to your overall comfort level with them, and on what fits best with your life. Here are a few factors to consider.

Paper Tools

Strengths:

- Always available
- Don't require power
- Don't require an Internet connection
- Fairly ubiquitous; if you lose your favorite pen, another pen will do in a pinch
- Can't crash
- You can use them nearly anywhere
- Fairly inexpensive

Weaknesses:

- Editing isn't as easy as it is with an electronic tool; you have to erase or cross things out
- Can't capture audio or video
- Can't be backed up—if you lose your notebook, your notes are gone
- The quality of text and drawings is limited by your own penmanship and artistic skill
- Can run out of space

Electronic Tools

Strengths:

- Easy to read
- Can capture all kinds of media
- Easy delete, cut and paste, and edit
- Hold more information than you're likely to need

Weaknesses:

- Can run out of power
- May need Internet access
- Software and hardware compatibility issues
- More expensive than pen and paper

If you're a student or knowledge worker with continuous access to a computer, power, and the Internet, then electronic tools are likely to be a very good fit for you. On the other hand, if you're not comfortable with technology, have a job where your Internet and computer access is locked down, or work in a field where you don't have ready access to a computer, then paper-based tools may be a better fit for you.

Identify Your Needs

"When all you have is a hammer, every problem is a nail" is one of my favorite sayings. It reminds me that having only one tool is often not enough to solve every problem. This holds true for the tools you use to create your prep. In order to know what tools you need, you have to understand what you require for prep and who's going to see the output of your work.

The first step is to inventory everything that goes into your prep in each phase of the prep cycle:

Brainstorming: This phase requires a tool that allows you to capture ideas in different locations and at various times. It is best if it's something portable that fits in a pocket and can be carried around without being cumbersome.

Selection: This phase requires a way to sort ideas and to archive good ideas that aren't going to be used right away. A tool for this phase needs to be easily edited and needs to offer a way to archive things.

Conceptualization: This phase requires a way to jot notes down to expand upon the idea that was captured during the selection phase. A tool for this phase should allow for the capture of short notes, lists, and perhaps a sketch or two.

Documentation: This phase requires a tool that allows for the capture of the full details of the session. You will need to capture your session notes as well as maps, stat blocks, and images. The tool for this phase should be flexible, allowing it to be used in a number of ways: to write notes, draw a map, etc.

Review: Since the review phase doesn't involve generating ideas, most of your work will be done using the tool you use for documentation. If you use a separate review tool, it needs to enable you to amend other documents.

One, Two, or Many?

It's entirely possible to have one tool that supports every phase of prep. A single notebook could be used for every phase, but it may not be the most efficient tool, since the needs of each phase are slightly different.

Using two tools gives you the option of having one tool for brainstorming and another for documentation. In many cases the tool you use for brainstorming can carry through to conceptualization, and the tool for documentation can also be used to review. For example:

> *You capture your brainstorming in a pocket notebook, one idea to a line. During the selection phase, you put a star next to the idea you want to use. You jot notes down in the notebook as you conceptualize until you come up with an outline. Then for documentation, you sit down and use a word processor to type up your session notes. Later on you review that file before your game.*

At the far end of the continuum, you can also have a system where most of the phases get their own tools:

> *You capture your brainstorming on index cards, one idea per card. During the selection phase you sort the cards and select your idea, putting the others into a card box for future consideration. You then use sticky notes and a corkboard to conceptualize the session and come up with a flowchart for the plot. You then write your finalized notes in your favorite notebook, and later review that notebook.*

Artist: Christopher Reach

Using a different tool for each phase will add complexity to your system, but if it meets your needs (see below) then there's nothing wrong with that approach. It's important to balance your need to operate in every phase of prep against the complexity of being able to use the system in an efficient manner.

I rely on two sets of tools. For brainstorming through conceptualization, I like using a notebook and a pen because this offers me the most flexibility in terms of where I can write, and it allows me to draw arrows, make small sketches, etc. My ideas don't need to be neat or readable in the long term. For documentation, I tend to be in places where I have access to a computer, so I use OneNote. I like my session notes to be neater than my handwriting, and easier to read. For maps, I'm not proficient at any electronic mapping software, so I usually draw something in my notebook, take a picture of that page, and add it to OneNote.

Comfort and Mastery

No matter what tools you use, you need to be comfortable using them and be proficient in their use. When a tool is uncomfortable to use it becomes a distraction, and the longer you work with it the more of a distraction it becomes. Over time, you'll start to avoid the tool, and may be filled with apprehension when you have to use it. Then when you can't take it anymore, typically in the middle of using the tool, you'll have to launch into a search for a new tool.

In terms of paper-based tools, you want something that's comfortable to write with and that writes smoothly, and you want paper (or index cards, etc.) that doesn't rip when you try to erase something, and that ink doesn't bleed through. When it comes to pens, fight the tendency to just pick up something hanging on a rack in an office supply store. If you write frequently, investing in a good pen will make all the difference. In terms of electronic tools, comfort is a factor when it comes to how well a laptop sits on your lap, the action in the keys of a keyboard, or the glare on a tablet.

The more proficient you are with your tools, the more efficient you'll be at performing your prep. When you're not comfortable with a tool, you wind up spending a lot of time trying to figure things out or correcting mistakes you make. This is even more relevant for electronic tools, which often require you to be proficient in a number of areas: general computer use, system knowledge, and knowledge about the specific application. It's possible that between sessions you may need to devote time to improving your skills with your tools, usually through some combination of reading up on them and practice.

For electronic tools, you want to become skilled in the applications you're going to use for your prep. For your general text that may mean understanding a word processor, which isn't that difficult, but if you plan on using a cartography program

for making maps for your sessions, then you may need to invest considerable time practicing with the software before you can make a map in a reasonable amount of time. I cannot stress this point enough: If you're relying heavily on electronic tools, make sure you're a proficient typist. When it comes to documentation, the difference between someone who is a full 10-finger typist and someone who hunts and pecks is huge. If you're an especially bad typist, seek out software that can help you improve.

For paper-based tools there are two basic skills involved: penmanship and drawing. If writing is going to be your main form of documentation, then you want to make sure that your penmanship is excellent so that your notes are easy to read, and that you have the writing stamina to write page after page of notes. If you draw your own maps, you're going to want to develop some basic drawing skills so that your maps are legible.

Adding and Removing Tools

Everyone's chosen prep tools are personal, as personal as the thoughts and stories they create with them. Some people prepare their notes the same way they have since they started the hobby, be that last year or 30 years ago. Others change up how they prepare their games with every new campaign.

You may find that you want to try a new tool as part of your prep. I'm always looking at different kinds of software and office supplies with an eye to incorporating them into my prep toolbox. Adding a new tool can be a great way to take advantage of some new feature that you don't currently have in your toolbox. When you find something that catches your eye, give it a test drive. Use the tool and try to re-create some prep you did for a previous session. If this tool is non-electronic, see how comfortable it is to write with and decide if the paper size fits your current style of prep. If the tool is electronic, then see if it's comfortable to type with and whether it has the software features you need.

There will also be times when you find that you no longer want to, or no longer can, use some of the tools in your prep toolbox. When you think you're ready to phase out a tool, think about what tool you will need to replace it with to perform that part of your prep. It may be a tool you already have, or you might need to find a new one. Often, removing a tool means making a trade-off, and you need to be sure you're comfortable with what you are giving up and what you're getting in its place.

For example, I tried for some time to use cartography software to make maps for my games. I wasn't very good at it, and I really didn't have the time to dedicate to becoming more proficient. I eventually decided to stop using the software and go back to hand drawing my maps. I lost the clean, professional look of a full-color printed map, but I eliminated some frustration and saved time in the process—a fair trade.

True Story: Written in "Blood"

In the late 1990s I ran a *Vampire: The Masquerade* campaign, and I wanted the tools I used for the game to convey the feel of goth horror as a way to help me stay focused when I wrote. For my brainstorming, I kept it simple and used a normal pen and steno pad. For my documentation, I went to the bookstore and found a large, unlined journal; I paired it with a red gel pen. I needed something more romantic and ancient-feeling than a keyboard and mouse, and what's more ancient than pen and paper? When I wrote my notes, I wrote them by hand in "blood." And funnily enough, it really did help me stay in the right mood when I wrote, and even now when I look through that book and see the red text on the page, it still looks pretty cool.

Selecting Your Tools

Choosing your prep tools based on the criteria discussed in this chapter will be a personal process. This section is here to get you to think more about prep tools. If you're in the process of looking for new tools, use this section as a guide. If you have tools that you like, this section can be used to confirm your selection and to make sure that the tools you've already chosen are the best fit for you.

Consider the following questions:

- **What phases of prep do you already have tools for?**
- **Does your tool for each phase meet your needs, or are you using a tool that isn't a good fit for that phase?**
- **Are there any phases you don't have tools for or that you think you need one for?**
- **Do you have too many tools for your prep?**
- **Are your tools comfortable to use?**
- **Are your tools reliable and available when you need them?**
- **Where do you perform each phase of prep that requires tools?**
- **Do your tools work well in those locations?**
- **Which do you prefer, writing or typing?**
- **Do you need your personal notes to be well-formatted and clean-looking?**
- **Do your tools need to be portable?**
- **Do you have concerns about losing things?**
- **Do you like to have things backed up?**
- **Do you have easy access to the Internet and your data?**
- **Do the devices you use have long-lasting batteries?**
- **Are your tools fun to use?**
- **Are there any tools that you need more practice with?**

Chapter 9: Mastering Your Creative Cycle

There is never quite enough time to get done all the things you want to do, be it in a day, a week, or even a lifetime. We are creatures of obligations and responsibilities, and our lives are framed by a series of commitments that are made to ourselves and to other people. It's a condition that only increases in both volume and complexity as we get older and more responsibilities are given to us in our careers and the families we build.

In a sea of responsibilities, it's hard to find the time to work on a game. After all, many non-gamers will say, "It's just a game..." If we listen to those people too closely we might start to believe them. What we need to remember is that our games are our hobby; they're an outlet for the stresses in our lives, and a reward for the hard work we do. Hobbies, in general, are necessary for people to have full lives, and need to be treated not as a throwaway activity, but rather as a key element of what makes us who we are.

It's equally important to remember that gaming *is* a hobby, and that we do have all those other obligations and responsibilities. So while we must carve out a place in our lives for our hobby, we must also be realistic, give it a reasonable amount of time in our daily lives, and not overindulge in it at the expense of our other obligations.

Getting Prep Done

To adapt and paraphrase David Allen: Prep has to get done. From the moment you finish your session until your next session starts, the clock is ticking. All the phases of prep—brainstorming, selection, conceptualization, documentation, and review—have to happen before the next time you sit down behind the screen. It can be a lot of work.

You know what happens when prep doesn't get done: You arrive at the game unprepared. Some GMs will run what they have ready, and just play a short game—after all, some gaming is better than none. Others will run what they have and wing the rest; this can be hit and miss for everyone involved. And some will balk and cancel the game; do this too often, and you won't have a game to cancel.

As a GM, then, you want to be able to get your prep done in a timely manner without being stressed. Let's break those two elements down a bit.

"In a timely manner" means you want to have enough time to get your prep done between sessions, along with meeting all the other obligations and commitments you have as a partner, parent, professional, and/or friend. You want to have enough time so that if something unexpected comes up, and it always does, you can adapt and still complete your prep.

When you're doing prep, you generally feel stress for one of two reasons: not having enough time, which we've covered already, and doing your prep when you should be doing something else (mowing the lawn, playing with your child, working, doing homework, etc.). When you steal time from a competing task in order to do your prep, you feel stress and guilt. When you prep, you want to know that you're doing it not at the expense of other things, but rather in the time you've set aside for this activity.

Free Time (Hint: It's Not Free)

How much free time do you have in a day? In a week? Most people can't answer that off the top of their heads. I can. I'm not bragging—what I mean to say is that I know what all my responsibilities are in a given day, and throughout a week, and I know what times of day are truly free time. On weekdays, I have about four hours of free time, and only two of them are productive (more on that later).

In order to know how much time you have to work on your game, you really have to know all of the other things that you have to do every day of the week. You need to take an inventory of all your activities and obligations. Once you've done that, you'll see how much free time you really have.

The best way to create that inventory is to create a spreadsheet and make columns for every day of the week, and rows for hours of the day from 12:00 a.m. at the top

Artist: Christopher Reach

Blank Free Time Inventory Map

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
12:00 am							
1:00 am							
2:00 am							
3:00 am							
4:00 am							
5:00 am							
6:00 am							
7:00 am							
8:00 am							
9:00 am							
10:00 am							
11:00 am							
12:00 pm							
1:00 pm							
2:00 pm							
3:00 pm							
4:00 pm							
5:00 pm							
6:00 pm							
7:00 pm							
8:00 pm							
9:00 pm							
10:00 pm							
11:00 pm							

Download a blank free time inventory and creativity heat map online:
http://goo.gl/v5ugf

down to 11:00 p.m. at the bottom—this will be a map of your obligations. You can also do this by hand on a piece of paper, if you prefer.

Now starting with Monday and working your way through Sunday, block out your obligations by the hour. So if you work on Mondays from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. draw a big block in the Monday column. Do this for all the activities and events that you have every day of the week. Consider all of the following:

- **Sleep**
- **Work**
- **Taking care of kids**
- **Gaming events**
- **Religious/social activities**
- **Meals**
- **Commuting**
- **Family obligations (breakfast with Dad on Sundays, etc.)**
- **Time spent with significant other/spouse**
- **School**
- **Studying, study groups, etc.**
- **Sports, gym, working out**

Now take a look at your map. My guess is that it's pretty full. If you're a professional, married, or a parent, it's likely to be very full. Here's what mine looks like:

Completed Free Time Inventory Map

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
12:00 am	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep
1:00 am							
2:00 am							
3:00 am							
4:00 am							
5:00 am							
6:00 am	Get Ready For Work	Get Ready For Work	Get Ready For Work	Get Ready For Work	Get Ready For Work		
7:00 am							
8:00 am	Work	Work	Work	Work	Work		
9:00 am							
10:00 am							Church
11:00 am							
12:00 pm							
1:00 pm							
2:00 pm							
3:00 pm							
4:00 pm	Family Time	Family Time	Family Time	Family Time	Family Time		
5:00 pm							
6:00 pm							
7:00 pm							
8:00 pm							Gaming
9:00 pm							
10:00 pm							
11:00 pm							

By looking at the map, you can start to see where you have free time in your schedule. These gaps are the times when you could be working on prep. Take a quick inventory and see how much time you have in a day and in a week.

If you look at my map, you can see that on weekdays I have from 8:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. free, about 20 hours a week. That would be more than enough time for prepping a weekly game, but gaming isn't the only thing that competes for those 20 hours.

All That Other Stuff

You do plenty of things that aren't set obligations and activities—things like mowing the lawn, taking your cat to the vet, troubleshooting your computer, playing video games, and going out with friends. In other words: the rest of your day-to-day life. These are the other things that compete for a slice of your free time, and there are always more of them than there is free time. Some of these you will know about in advance and some will pop up out of the blue. All of them are going to demand to be done, and the time to do them will be during those blocks of free time. This means you need to manage your free time, otherwise you'll find that it all gets used up.

There are stacks of books out there that talk about time management. This book is not one of them. (If you want to read one, my personal recommendation—as you can probably guess by now—is David Allen's *Getting Things Done*.) The thing to take away from this section is an understanding that in order for you to find time to prep for your game, you need to have discipline and take control of all of the other things that will compete for this time. If you can't manage them, then they'll consume your free time and leave you none for prep.

Creative Highs and Lows

Alongside your map of obligations and commitments, you need to take into account another factor: creative energy. Humans are creatures whose energy ebbs and flows in a circadian rhythm; our bodies go through peaks and valleys during the course of the day. There are points in the day when our energy is high and we're at our full creative potential, and then there are times when our energy is low and we can hardly complete even the most mindless tasks. Our creative energy is on a cycle, and many people don't pay attention to its ebbs and flows. By understanding your creative energies, you can then plan to do certain phases of your prep at different points within the cycle.

Creating a Personal Heat Map

In order to understand your creative peaks and valleys you'll need to map them out, in much the same way you did with your obligations and activities. You need to get an hour-by-hour account of those energies. The best way to do that is to create a heat map—essentially, a visual representation of a data set (in this case, your creative energies) wherein values are represented by colors.

This heat map will be a color indicator of your overall creative energy. You can use the following colors and/or numbers to represent your creative energies (or use more vibrant colors—I chose these because this book is in black and white):

- **Black (0)**—No creative energy. Use this for the times when you're asleep.
- **Dark Grey (1)**—Low creative energy. This is for the times when you're awake but not overly creative or energetic.
- **Light Grey (2)**—Average creative energy. These are times you don't feel especially low or high; the middle ground.
- **White (3)**—High creative energy. These are times when your energy is up, your mind is active with ideas, and you feel at your most creative.

You can make your heat map by adding one or more columns to the obligation map you made earlier. Fill in each row based on how you're feeling at that time, either from memory or by adding to your map throughout the day, hour by hour. Here's what my personal heat map looks like, and a graph of those energy levels.

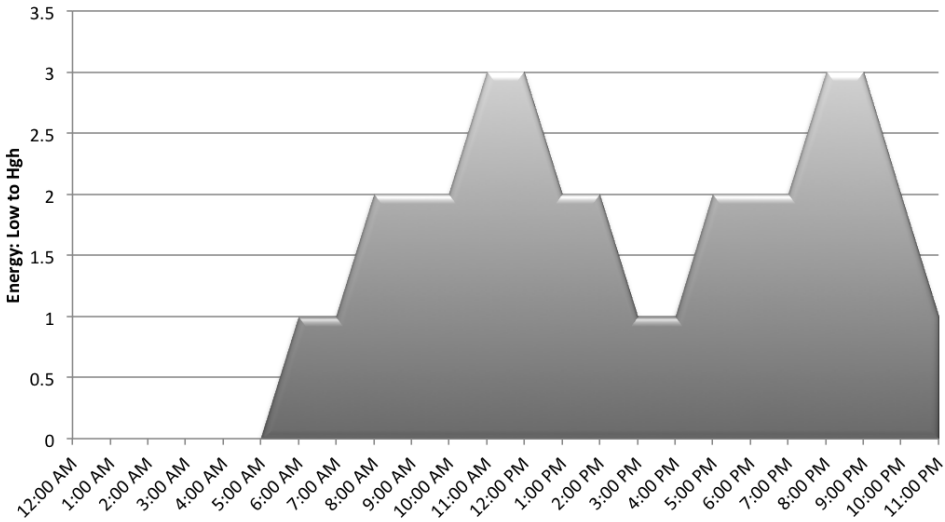
What you can see is that I am very creative in the morning, I have a valley around 3:00 p.m., I peak again in the early evening, and then I have another valley around 11:00 p.m.

I have found that while my activities and obligations change over the course of a week, my creative energies remain about the same throughout the week. I recommend that you start by filling out one day completely, and then see how it applies over the course of the week. If you find day-to-day differences, then map other days as well.

Creativity Heat Map

Time	Rating	Color
12:00 am	0	
1:00 am	0	
2:00 am	0	
3:00 am	0	
4:00 am	0	
5:00 am	0	
6:00 am	1	
7:00 am	1	
8:00 am	2	
9:00 am	2	
10:00 am	2	
11:00 am	3	
12:00 pm	3	
1:00 pm	2	
2:00 pm	2	
3:00 pm	1	
4:00 pm	1	
5:00 pm	2	
6:00 pm	2	
7:00 pm	2	
8:00 pm	3	
9:00 pm	3	
10:00 pm	2	
11:00 pm	1	

Creative Energy Graph



Doing the Right Things at the Right Times

Now that you've created your heat map, you can see that there are times of the day when you're more creative and times when you're less creative. It's important to take that into consideration when you start to look at how you're going to get your prep done. You don't want to try to brainstorm when your creative energy has bottomed out, and you don't want to squander prime creative time doing non-creative things.

Here are some suggestions for matching your creativity level to the phases of prep:

High Creativity

Brainstorming—The best time to get ideas to flow forth is when you're at your most creative.

Conceptualization—It takes a lot of creativity to take an idea and expand it into a solid concept.

Middle Creativity

Documentation—You can write dialog and describe scenes when you're in a creative period, but not at your peak, because most of the heavy lifting should have happened in the conceptualization phase.

Review—When you're playing the role of the director and the play-tester, you need a measure of creativity.

Low Creativity

Selection—This phase doesn't require you to be very creative; in fact, you need to be more pragmatic than creative.

Documentation—When you're doing the mechanical parts of your prep (generating NPC stats, creating random tables, identifying and noting rules), you don't need to be very creative.

Review—There's no need for creativity when you're proofreading your notes.

Scheduling Your Prep Time

So now that you have a complete picture of your obligations, free time, and creative highs and lows, you can start to see the best times to prep and which phases of prep will fit best based on your creative energies. Plotting this out will guarantee that you set aside time for your prep, and that when you prep you're in a good creative state.

As you look over your free time there are two important questions you need to answer, and they will both play a big role in figuring out when you want to prep. The first question is "How often am I going to run this game?" This will tell you how many days you have between sessions, and determine how much free time you have to work with. If you run the game weekly, you have just one week to get all of your prep done. If you don't feel that you can get it all done in that time, consider running your game every other week, once every three weeks, or once a month. Each week you add gives you that much more free time you can use in scheduling out the times when you want to prep.

The next question is "How much time do I need to complete each phase?" Take a moment and think about the phases of prep and how long each of them takes you. Documentation is likely the longest one, but you should consider the other phases as well. Estimate the time involved based on games you've run in the past, and if you remember feeling stressed, under the gun, or unable to get everything done in time, then add some hours to your estimate. Once you have an idea of how much time you need for each phase, see if your numbers match up with the blocks of free time you have available. Do you have enough time to prep your game, as well as maintain your other obligations? If not, something's got to give—and again, session frequency is a good place to look.

Finally, with both of those questions answered, add 20% to each of your estimates and include that time in your schedule. In project management we call this "slack." Slack is extra time that can be used up if something should arise (see the next chapter for more on that topic). By having a little slack time in your schedule, you can have something come up unexpectedly, deal with it, and still have time for your prep.

Stealing More Time

By now you may be a bit disheartened at seeing how many things fill up your time each day. You may be wondering how you're going to fit your prep into the free time you have. One way to get more time is to steal it from other parts of your day. As we talked about in earlier chapters, some of the phases of prep can be done in different places.

Here are some examples:

- **While in the car**
- **Waiting in line at the store**
- **Before a meeting/class**
- **On a lunch break**
- **Waiting for the bus**
- **While working out**
- **Taking a shower**

There's a lot of underutilized time throughout the day while you're doing things that don't need your full attention, or while you're waiting for something to start or finish. Being able to capitalize on that time will help you get your prep done, and then you'll still have your free time to get other things done. In order to best capitalize on these wasted blocks of time, you need to make sure your prep tools are handy and your skills at the different elements of prep are well-honed. Then when you have an unexpected wait in the doctor's office, you can grab your notebook and knock off a dozen ideas for your upcoming session.

Here are my favorite places to steal time for each phase:

Brainstorming—On my drive to work. I turn off the radio and just talk myself though the process.

Selection—Also on my drive to work. I sometimes blend brainstorming and selection, so this activity often happens while I'm driving.

Conceptualization—Between meetings or before a late meeting. I keep my notebook close at hand to capitalize on these little gaps.

Documentation—During my lunch break. I typically eat my lunch quickly and then take the remainder of the time to work.

Review—In the shower. I love to do my mental walkthroughs of the game in this "quiet zone."

Building Your Total Prep Cycle

At this point, you have a lot of pieces in front of you. You have your map of activities and obligations, you have a creativity heat map, you know what other things are competing for your free time, you have some ideas about where to steal some extra time, and you have an understanding of which phases of prep are best done at which points in your creative cycle. You now have all of the building blocks you need to come up with your total prep cycle.

Start by reviewing your map for windows when you have free time and good creative energy. Think of which blocks of time are reasonable for you to commit for your prep. You might want to do a little each night, or you might choose to do it all in one day.

Looking at the time you have blocked out, is it enough time to get your prep done in a timely manner and without stress? If not, consider adjusting the frequency of your sessions to gain more time. Don't forget to add a little slack time.

Next, plan out each phase of your prep. When will you work on it? Where will you be? When does it need to be done so that the next phase can happen?

When all this is done, make the commitment to yourself to follow the plan you have laid out—and relax, secure in the knowledge that you've thought this through, and have given yourself enough time to get your prep done. Once you're relaxed, you'll be amazed at how easy your prep will be, and at the quality of prep you will produce. Also, having set aside time for prep and for your other commitments, you'll find that you can strike a good balance between your gaming and the rest of your life.

From time to time, evaluate how your current prep schedule is going. Are you finishing very early? If so, you might be able to give up some prep time. Are you rushed or unable to complete your prep? Then try to find more time in the week, or change the frequency of your sessions.

True Story: How I Prep

I have free time from 8:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. on weeknights, and on Saturday evenings. Saturday and Sunday during the day are the times when I tackle all my other work and obligations, as well as additional time with my family. I also have to get things done during the week, so I can't use that entire 8:00-12:00 block.

My heat map also indicates that I'm highly creative from 8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. and then I drop into a deep valley. So for me to get anything creative done—prep a game, write a blog article, work on a book—it has to happen in those first two hours. The last two hours I can use for less creative endeavors. For me the best tactic in the weeks that I do documentation is to work for an hour (sometimes two) each night.

So if I ran my game weekly, I would need to be able to prep my game in about four hours from brainstorming to review, with an additional hour set aside for slack. For me, that's not enough time. So I moved my games to every other week, giving me eight hours with two hours of slack. I used the four hours in the first week for brainstorming through conceptualization, and then the four hours in the second week for documentation and review. It really worked for me.

After I had kids and started other writing projects, I found that coming out of a game and going right back to brainstorming the next day was a bit too much, so I moved my game out to every three weeks. I took the first week off and used that time to catch up on other obligations, and then went through my two weeks of prep. I am fortunate in that other GMs in my group run games on the weeks I'm not running mine, so we game weekly but each GM has three weeks to get their game prepped.

Evolving Your Style

Artist: Christopher Reach

Chapter 10: Your Personal Prep Templates

Up to now I've avoided talking about what actually goes into your session notes. I've discussed the creative process, the tools required for prep, and understanding and managing your creative process, all of which has built up to this moment. It's time to talk about what makes up your session notes.

Most GMs have developed some method of prep through trial and error using instinct as a guide. When GMs tell me that their prep is tedious and takes too long, it's often because they're putting too much material into it. The design of their approach to prep was not a conscious process. They don't have a feel for what needs to be in their prep and what could be removed, because they haven't designed their prep system. Their uncertainty forces them to include more and more material in their prep, until it becomes a chore to prepare.

This chapter takes a very deliberate and focused approach to determining what should be included in your prep. The end product will be written templates for sessions, scenes, and special cases that you can use to prep more effectively and efficiently, because they're built around your specific strengths and weaknesses as a GM.

The Purpose of Prep

A quick review: Your prep—that is, what's in your head and what you have written down—is everything you need to feel comfortable running your session. When your prep fails you, whether that failure is related to what's in your memory or on the page or screen, your ability to run your session smoothly is compromised.

In Its Simplest Form

Your documentation is the notes which detail the adventure that you're running for your players. Your notes are most likely going to be in chronological order, with the adventure starting at the beginning and concluding at the end.

Your adventure is likely to be broken up into smaller parts—scenes or encounters. Each of these elements encapsulates a part of the story: a dialog with the king, a battle with the rat men, or a chase through an asteroid field. Scenes also have a beginning and an end. Your documentation should also be broken down into scenes or encounters.

In addition to your scenes there will be supplemental material which supports your adventure. Most often this takes the form of NPC stats and maps, but depending on the game you run you might have some other material as well. This material is often tied to one or more of the scenes, and thus exists outside of their chronological structure; that often means it's at the end or on separate pages from your main notes.

There are three levels to your documentation, and at each level there are multiple elements you need to document and prep. The highest level is your session notes taken as a whole. What elements need to be included when you start your session notes? The next level down is the scene. What kinds of elements should you include in your scenes? At the lowest level are the needs of individual scenes: a combat scene will have different needs than a social scene. What elements are important to those scenes?

In order to account for all three levels and all of the necessary elements, you need to set yourself up to succeed.

Setting Up for Success

Your prep needs to be designed to set you up for success. Yes, *designed*. By thinking about what should be included in your notes, you'll be undertaking a design process; your personal prep template is the outcome of that process. The design of your prep template hinges on several factors:

- **What are your strengths as a GM?**
- **What are your weaknesses as a GM?**
- **What kind of game are you running?**
- **What type of campaign are you running?**

By understanding and then answering the questions above, you can then determine what elements should be included in your prep. Once you know that, you can build a template around those needs. The template will be a tool for your documentation, one that's designed to set you up for success by highlighting the elements you need to define at each level. By focusing on those elements you'll create better adventures and your documentation will be more helpful to you when you are running your game.

The rest of this chapter will highlight things that should be included in your prep, and show you how to assemble your personal prep template. Using that advice, you will be able to design a prep template that fits you.

Your Strengths as a GM

Every GM is stronger at some aspects of running a game and weaker in other areas. When you're strong in a specific area, you don't need to look at your notes that often during the session. That strength means that you're in command of that particular GMing skill.

What are your strengths as a GM? During which parts of a scene or a session do you feel most comfortable behind the screen? Do you deliver great dialog? Or maybe

awesome room descriptions? Do you excel at clever NPC tactics during combat, or know the duration of every spell in the game? Take a few moments to jot down the areas where you feel most comfortable.

Personally, I'm most comfortable describing locations. I can generally see the area in my mind and describe it to my players in an evocative way through words and gestures. I'm also comfortable with NPC dialog. When a PC engages an NPC in discussion, I'm good at playing off that character and going back and forth with the player. I'm not a master in either area, and I always strive to improve at those skills, but I am comfortable with both activities.

Your template should include the least documentation in the areas where you're strongest as a GM. If you include these elements in your template, they should be minimal; just a few bullet points or words as reminders. After all, these are your strengths—why waste time writing them down when you don't need to reference them when you run the session?

As an example, because I'm comfortable improvising descriptions, I don't include a section for descriptions in my template. Rather, I usually include just a small note with some tags to remind me of what I want to describe. For instance, if I were to document the description of a forest clearing it might look like this in my notes: "Forest clearing: mist, moss on trees, dense canopy, light breeze." That would be all I'd need to describe this location to my players during the game.

Artist: Christopher Reach

Doing documentation related to your strengths (or worse, doing too much documentation in those areas) won't help you prep, and will likely be a waste of time.

Your Weaknesses as a GM

Okay, it's just you and me right now, and I'm not really there. No GM really likes to talk about their weaknesses, but we all have them. We're going to talk about your weaknesses now, and it's okay because I'm not going to tell.

There are things that, when they come up in a game, give you that sick feeling or that shock of adrenaline—you know the feeling I mean. They're the things that you avoid doing as a GM—or if you have to do them, you know that what you're doing is either barely adequate or not working. When you're weak at a GMing skill, that's when you stumble in your speech and your mind goes blank mid-game. By identifying those areas, you can compensate for them—and improve your skills.

To figure out your weaknesses you're going to need to do some introspection. You're going to need to be honest with yourself. Failing that, you'll need a very honest player—you know the one, the one who will tell you the truth no matter how much you don't want to hear it. Go and ask them.

Take a moment and think about your weaknesses. If you say that you don't have any, place one hand on a table and rap your knuckles with the spine of this book (or your tablet or laptop), and try again.

For me, one of my big weaknesses is tactics during combat. When combat gets going, there are so many things that I am managing that I often underplay my NPCs. I forget to use their special attacks, or I fail to give them a measure of intelligence. My NPCs often stand in one spot and get beat on rather than retreating or regrouping.

Got a list of weaknesses yet? Okay, good. Now that you do, guess what? These are the most important elements in your template. Your documentation should always include these elements, when applicable, in every scene. Remember that your prep is designed to make you more comfortable when running your session, and what's more comfort-inducing than knowing that all the things you're weak at are covered?

If you're weak at something, how can you prep it? Often, being weak in an area just means that you need more time or work to get it right. Time is something you have much better control of during documentation than in the middle of a session.

The way I counter my weakness in combat tactics through my documentation is to work out ideas for my NPCs in advance. While no plan survives contact with the enemy (or your players), as long as I give some thought to the purpose of my NPCs and how they will act, I can adjust those plans on the fly.

For example, the tactics for one NPC, Captain Vosin, might look like this:

- **Relies on tricks to get his opponent to lower their defenses.**
- **When an opponent loses defense, then all-out attack.**
- **He will fight only to a few wounds and then escape.**
- **He will use a trick to slow down his opponent and then escape.**

Now, in the heat of combat, I know how Vosin generally fights and when he's going to run. I can adapt those principles to the situation Vosin finds himself in once the battle is joined.

Compensating for Weaknesses

Below is a list of common GMing weaknesses and some ways to compensate for them. If one of your weaknesses is on the list, then add this to your template.

Descriptions—Include a section in your scene template where you can write a description of the location or NPC. Don't be shy about reading it to your players.

NPC Dialog—Include key NPC dialog in your scene template. Include some sample phrases that the NPC may utter as well, to get a feel for how that character speaks.

Weather—If you don't use weather enough, add a section to your template so that you always write down the weather during each scene. Writing it out for each scene will remind you to vary it from time to time. If you do vary the weather, consider how it mechanically affects the game.

Date and/or Time—If you don't do a good job of tracking time during play, then add the date and time of the scene to your template so that you'll remember to convey it to your players.

Tactics—Include some basic motivations and some special or signature moves for your NPCs in the combat section of your documentation.

Special Power Rules—Be it spells or super powers, if the rules of their use trip you up, write the key things you need to know (range, area, duration, damage, special effect, etc.) into your template for a quick lookup.

NPC Names—Use free online name generators to create a list of random names. Keep the list in your notes, or if you GM with your laptop bookmark the page in your browser.

If your weaknesses don't appear on this list, then think of what would be the most helpful thing to have written down or to be able to reference during your game; that's what you want to put in your template.

For example, after some reflection, you determine your key weakness is that you never give your NPCs any mannerisms. To compensate for that, you need to think about what information would be most handy to have in your session prep. In this case you would want any major or minor NPCs to be written up with a mannerism you can convey during play. You would then add to your NPC template a section for mannerism. Your template might look something like this:

- **Name:**
- **Physical Description:**
- **Personality:**
- **Mannerism:**
- **Stats:**
- **Powers:**
- **Equipment:**

Now when you fill out an NPC you'll be reminded to come up with a mannerism for her, and when you're running your session, you'll be able to look up the mannerism rather than being put on the spot to come up with one.

The Game You're Running

The type of game you run is also going to influence what goes into your prep, and specifically into your documentation. Different games have different requirements for play, and thus different elements that need to be covered for you to be successful in running the game. For example, if you're running a *Dungeons & Dragons*® 4th Edition game, there's a specific format for how to document a skill challenge.

One of the best ways to find out what kinds of things you'll need in your prep, especially for a new game you are preparing to run, is to look at the introductory adventure—even if you don't plan on running it. Look at how the designers prepped the adventure for you. These are often the only hints you will get from the designers as to how you should prep your own notes. Look at any templates they used. Is there one for NPC stat blocks? Do traps or obstacles have a format?

As you identify those elements that the designer has found to be important, look to see how you can incorporate them into your template. My favorite element to take from the game's designer is the NPC stat block. Often I will take the stat block from the game, add a few more descriptive elements to it, and then incorporate it into my template.

If you find yourself referring to your rulebooks frequently while running your session, then it's likely that some mechanical elements of the game are missing from your documentation. For me the missing elements are most often rules like combat maneuvers or special conditions. They're not used in every session, but when they

do come into play I get tripped up by them. One way to combat that is to either put the page for that rule from the rulebook into your notes, or if you're on an electronic platform, to cut and paste the specific rule right into your prep.

For example, when I ran an *Iron Heroes* campaign, that system included a mechanic for "zones" that was designed to make the areas where combat takes place more challenging and interesting. Zones included things like terrain, traps, and magical effects, and they were written in a format that covered their difficulty and effects. I added zones to my combat scene template in order to make sure I included them in all my fight scenes. I also made a template for zones so that I was certain to write them down in the proper format.

Type of Campaign

There are other elements that need to be included in your prep based on the type of campaign you're running. Even different styles of campaigns for the same RPG will have different prep needs. For instance, a *Dungeons & Dragons*® campaign that's focused on courtly intrigue and one that's all about dungeon crawling both use the same game system, but detailed maps are going to be a lot more important in the second one. They share a system, and they have similar mechanical elements that need to be included in your prep, but the nature of the campaign dictates what elements are going to be important for running the system the way you want.

Sometimes, an element of your prep that's vital to one game won't be useful in any others. In my prep for a complex, investigation-heavy *Conspiracy X* game, I always included a page that contained a "clue web." This was a freehand drawing of all my clues with arrows linking one to another. The purpose of the clue web was to help me understand the relationship between the different clues the PCs could find, and what they were leading towards. For that style of game, this was a key element of my prep, but I've never used it in another game.

Two Essentials for Your Template

Before we get to building your templates, I want to briefly discuss two elements that are essential to that process. While everything I've talked about up to this point is derived from your needs based on your GMing skills, the game mechanics, and the campaign you're running, these two elements should appear in your session and scene templates no matter what:

1. **Purpose**
2. **Closing**

In my session template, I include a purpose and closing in the top section of my notes. In my scene template, I also include a purpose at the top and the closing as the last element.

Purpose

It sounds simple, but I have found that GMs often overlook having a purpose when they prep. Without it, scenes and sessions can wander or go off in strange directions. When the purpose is understood, you can make on-the-fly adjustments because you know where things should be going.

At the macro level of your session notes, your session should have a purpose. What is it that the PCs are trying to accomplish in this adventure? Are they seeking an ancient relic? Trying to prevent a list of spies from falling into the wrong hands? Attempting to forge a peace treaty between two warring solar systems?

You should be able to write up the purpose of the adventure or story in just a few sentences. If you cannot, then you need to go back to the conceptualization step and do a bit more prep. Having the purpose of your story written down at the top of your notes will help you stay focused as you write and keep your notes from wandering.

Every scene should also have a purpose. There should be something that is happening to the PCs in that scene, or some goal for the scene. Perhaps the PCs are there to get information from the bartender? Or to find clues to reveal the true killer? Or even to steal a prototype starship from the hangar?

Artist: Matt Morrow

You should be able to write a single sentence to sum up the purpose of the scene. If you can't describe the scene in one sentence, the purpose is either too long or too convoluted. If your scene is too long you should break it into multiple scenes. If you can't define the purpose, it's doubtful that your players will understand it when you run the session, so go back and clarify it before you document it.

Closing

Every session and scene should have an end condition or two—the closing. The end condition is what tells you that this scene or story is done, and that you can move on to the next one. When a clear closing is not in place, then the story begins to drag on. The closing is always tied to the purpose. If the purpose of the story is to steal the onyx totem, then the closing for the story comes when the PCs escape to safety with the onyx totem (or, possibly, without it).

At the adventure level, the closing lets you know what loose ends need to be wrapped up for the adventure to come to a conclusion:

- **The NPC gets captured**
- **The relic is stolen by the PCs**
- **The dragon is forced away**
- **The townspeople evacuate the city**

At the scene level, the closing lets you know that the scene is done and it's time to move to the next scene. When this isn't clear to the GM, a scene may achieve its purpose but then linger on until the PCs are at a loss about what to do next. A scene closing might look something like this:

- **After McJinx gives them the codes they can ask him questions about the emperor**
- **Once the characters have the disk in hand**
- **When McJinx is killed or knocked unconscious**

Every scene has a natural ending, and it's always related to the purpose. Often it occurs just after the purpose has been achieved. In some ways the purpose becomes a mini-climax, and there needs to be a mini-denouement (falling action) to bring the scene to a close. In my first example closing, the purpose of the scene would be to get McJinx to give the PCs the codes. That satisfies the purpose, but then they have a chance to ask a few more questions. If they've asked all their questions, then I know I can end that scene and transition to the next.

Building Your Templates

So far we've covered all the possible elements that will go into a template, but we haven't talked about what the template will look like or how you go about building one. In this section, I'll address four topics:

- **Session Template**—Building the template for your session notes
- **Scene Template**—Creating a template for your scenes
- **Specialty Template**—Templates for specific purposes (NPC, combat, etc.)
- **Paper vs. Digital**—How to build your templates using your tool of choice

Session Template

The session template has the following general structure:

- **Header**
- **Scenes: 1 through X**
- **Supporting Material**
- **NPC Stats**
- **Maps**

The header contains the information that will define this specific adventure or story. It serves two purposes. The first is that it will be the first thing you fill out when you start your documentation, so the act of writing the header will help bring focus to your adventure. Second, the header acts as a quick look-up for the major elements of your session, and a good reference when your players have done something unexpected and you need to retool the adventure on the fly.

The elements that can go into the header are:

- **Title**
- **Campaign Start Date**
- **Purpose (always included)**
- **Closing (always included)**
- **Major NPCs**
- **Major Locations**
- **Adventure Summary**

Based on your specific needs, what elements in the header will be the most helpful for you when you first document your notes? Those are the elements you should focus on.

Scene Template

The scene template will be used for every scene within your adventure. The scene template captures the elements you need in order to play out the scene. While the template itself is constant, the length of each scene's write-up will vary depending on the purpose of the scene.

The elements that can go into the scene template are:

- **Title**
- **Purpose (always included)**
- **Location**
- **Date**
- **Weather**
- **Opening**
- **Dialog**
- **Descriptions**
- **Combat (tactics, notes, etc.)**
- **Special Rules**
- **Reward/Treasure**
- **GM Notes**
- **Closing (always included)**

Think about the scenes in your game. What elements should you include to ensure that you can properly run each scene? What elements should you add to the scene template based on your GMing weaknesses? What game mechanics from your system do you need to include? Finally, based on the kind of campaign you're running, what elements do you require?

Once you have a list of elements, try to arrange them in an order that makes sense to you. I prefer chronological order whenever possible, so that the template opens the scene, progresses through it, and then concludes the scene.

Pick an order that seems logical based on the way you run your scenes and how you like to organize things. Ultimately you're the one who will be reading these notes during your game, so they should be in the order that's most predictable for you. That way, your eyes instinctively know right where to go when you're in need of a specific piece of information.

You can also create a scene template for different types of scenes. I often use two scene templates: a generic scene template for non-combat scenes, and a combat scene template that includes combat-specific elements.

Specialty Template

This is the catch-all template type for the other material you need to prep besides your overall session and basic scenes. The two most common specialty templates are those for NPC stats and combat scenes. In most games, it's rare to have a session where one or both of these aren't required. Here are the elements of those two types of specialty template.

NPC Stats

- **Name**
- **Physical Description**
- **Personality**
- **Mannerisms**
- **Stats**
- **Equipment**
- **History**
- **Combat Tactics**

Combat Scene

- **PCs' Objective**
- **Opposition Objective**
- **Location Description**
- **Tactics**
- **Opposition**
- **Starting Location**
- **Special Terrain**
- **Special Effects**
- **Victory Conditions**
- **Failure Conditions**
- **Purpose (always included)**
- **Closing (always included)**

Think about the types of information you need during the game you're running (or are planning to run). Are any of them the kind of thing that could benefit from being turned into a template? For each type of information that needs a template, consider the elements that will make running that aspect of the game easier for you and include them.

Paper vs. Digital

At this point you should have at least two, and probably more than two, templates you can use for your sessions. So how do you actually construct them?

If you're using a paper-based tool for documentation, there are a few possibilities. If you prep in a journal, then you can write your templates down at the front or back of the journal so that you can reference them while you write your notes. You can also put your templates on index cards and carry them with your notes. If you're using loose paper, then you can put your template on a piece of paper and store it along with your other loose pages in a folder or binder. Finally, you can create a template by hand or using a word processor, print it out as a form and then fill it out as you write your notes.

If you go the digital route, your options are going to vary depending on the platform you use. If you're using a word processor, then there is likely a feature for creating a template (as opposed to a simple file) within the program, enabling you to create a template file that you can use every time you start your session notes. If you're using a wiki, some platforms allow for the creation of template pages. Worst case, you create a master file that has all of your templates in it, and then copy and paste the ones you need into your file for the session.

Template Maintenance

After you build your templates, you need to take them out for a spin. The first test will come during the documentation phase, when you can evaluate how easy it is to enter text into the templates. Consider the following:

- **Is the medium you've chosen conducive to using a template?** (Consider trying a different medium)

- **Did the template take too long to fill out?** (Consider simplifying some elements)
- **Are there elements you don't fill out every time?** (Consider removing them)
- **Are there elements you add every time?** (Consider adding a new permanent element)

The second test of your templates will come after you've run a session using them. Consider the following questions after your session:

- **Did your notes flow logically or did you have to jump around from section to section?** (Consider reorganizing sections)
- **Was there any information that you needed that wasn't in your notes?** (Consider adding elements)
- **Was there information in your notes that you didn't use?** (Consider removing elements)

It typically takes a few sessions of using a template to get it tuned to a specific game and campaign. Make adjustments between sessions until you dial in the right mix of information and complexity/simplicity.

Once you have your templates established, they can last you for an entire campaign. Though if you find yourself bored with a template or if your campaign changes direction, revisit the template, consider the questions above, and then make some changes. Remember the template serves you; you don't serve the template.

True Story: I Love Titles

I give every adventure or story that I create for my campaigns a title. I love to give them colorful names like chapters in a novel or issues of a comic book:

- **Love In A Bottle**
- **The Boy with One Green Eye**
- **Operation: Red Horizon**
- **The Vault of Souls**
- **Ho! Ho! Dough!**

In many ways, for me, titles are like true names: They have power. Once I give a story a title, it begins to take shape in my mind. Like a true name, I rarely share the titles with my players before we play, because I'm afraid that the title will give something away.

I also title my scenes. The scene titles are never quite as colorful, but they do help me mentally frame each scene. When I'm running a session, the scene titles become a shorthand reminder of what the scene is about, and they help me jog my memory as I scan my notes during play.

Chapter 11: The Prep-Lite Approach

My path to discovering my prep cycle and its tools started 10 years ago. I was a very different person then than I am now. For starters, I was single, I was in an entry-level job, and I had ample free time. There were very few demands placed upon me and I had few serious commitments. In those days, how long it took to prep a game didn't matter. I would work on my game for several hours a night. I would do all sorts of crazy research for my games—like the time I called a shipping company to find out how many days it would take to ship a liquid chemical container car across the country, just so I could figure how long it would take for it to get to Iowa. Time… *lots* of free time.

Just 10 years later, my life is very different. I'm married, and I'm the father of two autistic children. That right there involves a tremendous amount of time. My career has advanced in the past decade, and I'm now firmly in middle management. My free time is not what it used to be. In fact, back in Chapter 9, you got to see just how little of it there actually is. Time has become a precious commodity. And a couple of years ago I realized that prepping my games the way I had in years past wasn't going to work—things had to change.

Prep-Lite Philosophy

I came to the realization that the main factor holding me back from gaming more often was my ability to prep for games. I had evenings when I could game, and players who would play, but I've never been an improv GM—the kind who can walk into the game with no notes and just wing a full session. I've always needed notes and had to do some prep, and up until fairly recently prep had always taken me a lot of time to do well. Putting a quick game together was out of my reach.

I embarked on a quest to find ways to reduce my prep time without compromising the things I needed to do to run a good game. The Prep-Lite philosophy was the outcome of that process, based on the idea that I was likely overdoing my prep and that I really could improv better than I was giving myself credit for. I began to look at how I did my prep and how I ran my games, and I started to notice that there were things that I could remove—and more importantly, that there were things which I'd thought were critical as a GM that went largely unnoticed by my players.

More Introspection

Prep-Lite, like the rest of this book, is not a single formula for reducing your overall prep, but rather a mindset. By understanding your own needs, you can apply the Prep-Lite philosophy and find tricks to reduce your prep time.

Artist: Christopher Reach

Hopefully, through the other chapters of this book, you have come to learn a lot about yourself as a GM and your needs when you prep for a game. We're going to put that information to good use. Before you take your journey, let's talk about the guiding principles of Prep-Lite.

The Four Tenets

In my quest to reduce my prep, I discovered four things that represent the core of Prep-Lite. When applied to your prep, these four tenets will allow you to find ways of streamlining your prep without compromising the things you really need to comfortably deliver a good game. Some of these tenets have been discussed in other parts of the book, as they have become core beliefs for me when it comes to prep. I could have saved them for this chapter, but that would have been a disservice to you; it was important to cover them as they became relevant. I hope you'll forgive me if parts of this sound familiar, and in return I promise I'll tie it all together and show you how you can use Prep-Lite to streamline your prep.

Rely On Your Strengths

As a GM, you know that there are things you do well. We explored what they were in the previous chapter, and talked about not over-prepping your strengths. This practice applies in the first level of Prep-Lite, as well.

This isn't to say you should eliminate the things you're good at from your prep, just that you should streamline them to the point where they involve the least amount of writing possible. I do this with two tools that I love: lists and tags.

I am, in general, a person who loves lists. I find lists easy to navigate, and I find the individual items on a list easy to mentally process. So for the aspects of GMing that I'm strongest at, I rely heavily on lists. No flowery prose, no detailed descriptions; just a bulleted list. I don't use whole sentences either, just phrases that will jog my mental prep.

For example, say that I'm working on filling in a scene template and I need to write down the motives of several NPCs involved in a meeting. I could easily write several paragraphs covering their motives—or I could quickly make a list that's much more useful to me:

- **Tabris** - Upset that the king ordered the prisoner killed
- **Kelven** - Trying to keep the peace
- **Rogarth** - Annoyed with Tabris always ordering him around
- **The King** - Standing by his decision

I also love tags—a single word or two used to encapsulate a concept. When tags became popular in software, wikis, email, and other areas, I instantly took to the concept. Tags work because your brain naturally fills in blanks as it processes things. So when presented with several tags, your mind can fill in the gaps. When you use tags for an aspect of GMing that you're skilled at, your mind will take care of filling in the details. Whenever possible, reduce information down to a handful of tags for documentation to save time.

I especially like using tags with location descriptions. I picture the location in my mind, establishing a good mental image. I then focus on the main elements of the image, and write them out in a list of tags.

For example, say I need to describe the Eiffel Tower in my next session. I look at a few pictures of it online and generate the following tags: tall, lattice, three levels, bigger in person, lights at night. From that list, I can re-construct my mental image of the Eiffel Tower and describe it to my players.

This works equally well for NPC descriptions and NPC personalities. The bottom line is that you should write as little as possible in the areas where you're strongest as a GM. The less writing you do, the faster you prep. Trust your brain to handle the heavy lifting when you're at the table, and record only placeholders that will help your mind fill in the rest.

Support Your Weaknesses

I've said it before in this book, but it's worth saying again: Prep is there to support your weaknesses as a GM. This was true in the last chapter, and it's true now.

Following the Prep-Lite approach, you never cut in areas where you're weak; you always want the most information in your notes for those areas.

Don't be afraid to have more detail in your notes around these aspects of GMing, and don't rely on your mind to do the heavy lifting for these areas. Instead, do the opposite: Your best support material should be provided here, where you need it most. Creating templates, which we covered in the previous chapter, enables you to build a framework to compensate for your weaknesses. Those templates are the best way to make sure your prep supports you where you need it.

They Can't See Your Prep

For a long time, I operated under the premise that my players had some kind of insight into what was written in my notes. I felt that if I in any way failed to include something in my documentation, or used something that wasn't original, that somehow I was going to fail my players. I included every last thing for my sessions in my notes, and did a tremendous amount of work trying to be original, especially in the areas of NPCs and maps.

It wasn't until I was a player, on the other side of the screen and paying attention to what was going on, that it occurred to me: Players don't experience the GM's prep, but rather what the GM conveys in the game. Players don't check the GM's work by reviewing her notes. That small and simple revelation gave me tremendous freedom to borrow from other sources, and from myself. In terms of streamlining your prep, this tenet states that you can borrow (read: steal) ideas from other places, including from yourself, to cut down your prep.

In the case of NPCs I quickly learned that I could take the same stat block and, by changing out the weapon (a cutlass for a spear) and describing that NPC differently to my players, create a new NPC. To my players, this NPC was a totally different one, but for me this was just last session's pirate with a new "skin." I also realized that I did not need to spend a ton of time drawing my own original maps. I could find a map in another game, or via a web search, and just put it into my notes. My description of the area, and any drawings I made on my battle mat, would make it a unique place.

This realization also gave me the freedom to not be perfect in my notes. In the past I would be concerned about grammar and spelling—two problem areas for me that, without the aid of a modern word processor and an editor, you would be experiencing right now. I would spend time trying to make sure that my documentation was cleaned up and neat; easy enough to do electronically, but nerve wracking with pen and paper.

After I realized that no one would be reading my notes, I gave myself the freedom not to worry about perfection, and instead focused on getting my ideas down in a

usable format. While I still do some level of proofreading as part of the review phase, I don't spend a lot of time doing it—and when I'm crunched for time, I can let it slide.

In terms of streamlining your prep, be liberal about picking things up and using them, but always take the time to re-skin them so that your players don't figure out where they came from. Nothing jars your game quite like the moment when your players figure out that some element of it was lifted from another source. Do a little extra work to re-skin them and make them feel original. Let your players think that you handcrafted each little element, and feel the sense of mystique that engenders.

Abstract Mechanical Elements

The last tenet builds off of the previous one. If you believe that your players only experience what you describe to them, then you're not bound to the same mechanical rigors that they are. This isn't to say that you should cheat, but rather that you can streamline things by simplifying some of the mechanics of your game. This will speed up your prep, and you can compensate for the simplification through your descriptions at the table. Your players will never know the difference, and the time saved can be considerable. As with the previous tenet, both NPCs and maps can be abstracted into much simpler forms.

Say that characters in your game have six main stats. Want to simplify that for NPCs? Reduce those six stats down to just two: Important and Unimportant. Then just use the stat that describes that NPC: For a warrior, her physical strength and coordination are important; for a wizard, it might be his intellect. With just two stats, you can use the same pair of numbers for both of those NPCs. I call this a "wireframe," and with a wireframe and a new skin you can create what will appear to be an entirely new NPC without doing much work at all.

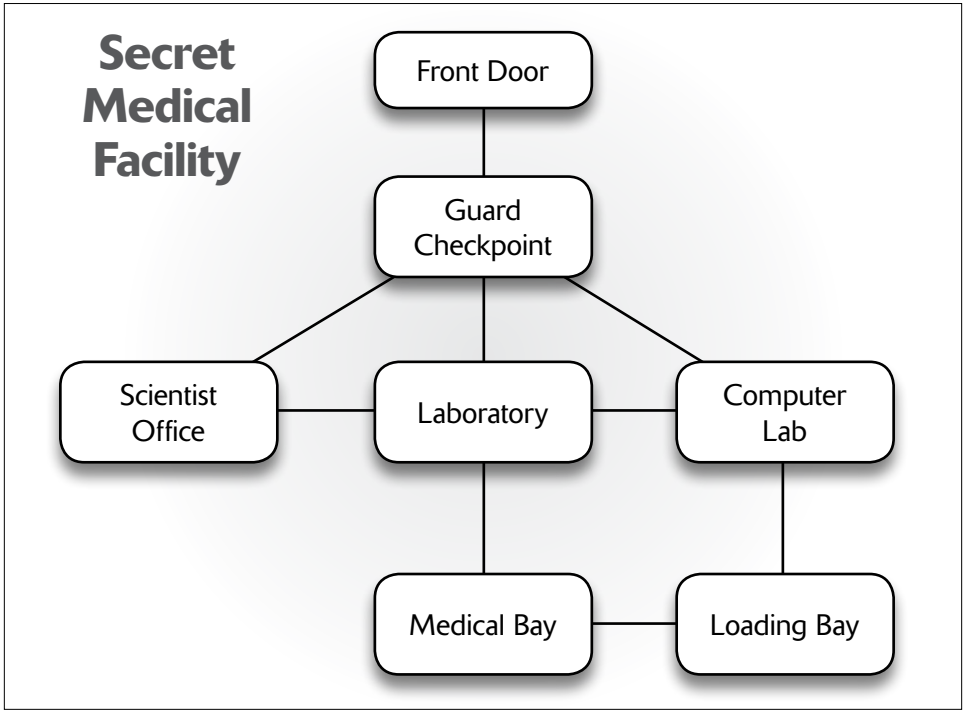
I first tried this when creating NPC stat blocks in a game of *Corporation*. I was able to reduce their stats down to a manageable number, and then build five "levels" of simplified stats to represent everything from a normal human to the most cybered-up maniac. I later used this same technique in *All for One*, and it worked just as well. (For additional details, including a full example for *Corporation,* check out my original articles on this topic on Gnome Stew: *goo.gl/WzVvi* and *goo.gl/7xZtM*.)

When it comes to maps, my realization was that if I wasn't going to lay a map out for my players to see, then I didn't really need a map in the classical sense. Rather what I needed were the locations of importance, and a way to connect one to the next—essentially nodes on a web of lines. The movement from one location to the next would be handled through narration, and my players would never really know (or likely care) that they weren't moving through a detailed map. Their experience was that they moved from one important area to the next.

For example, a secret medical facility might include the following areas:

- **Guard checkpoint** (several guards)
- **Computer lab** (where the research data is located)
- **Laboratory** (where the samples are kept)
- **Medical bay** (where the subjects are held in cages)
- **Loading bay** (where subjects and equipment enter and leave)
- **Scientist's office** (where the chief scientist is located)

I can quickly connect these areas in a simple location map, as seen below.



I didn't need to create any storerooms or bathrooms, or figure how long the hallways are. If my players ask about anything like that during the game, I can fill in those details on the fly. (For additional details and examples, see my article on this topic on Gnome Stew: *goo.gl/AoQNo*.)

Your Own Prep-Lite Path

As you think about what Prep-Lite means to you, consider your own prep, especially your documentation. Follow the tenets above and think about how they would apply to your notes. Are you writing too much in areas where you're strongest as a GM? Can you reduce those elements to phrases, lists, and tags?

In the areas where you're weak, does your template provide you the support you need to make sure you're doing the kind of prep you need? Do you need to modify your template to better address your weaknesses?

What parts of your prep are the most time consuming? Can you borrow from other sources to speed up your prep in those areas? If so, go find a few sources, stockpile useful things, and then re-skin them and use them in your prep.

What game mechanics eat up your time during prep? Consider how those can be simplified. Do you really need a full stat block for every NPC, or can you use a wire-frame to boil those numbers down to the essentials?

For tasks like abstracting mechanical elements, you may put in more upfront work to crunch the numbers, but you'll save time in the long run because you can reuse that material in multiple sessions. In this way abstracting mechanical elements is like writing a macro or a script for a software application: It takes time to set up, but when you need it, it's quick to run.

Prep-Lite is as much a mindset as it is a technique. After you have made some initial changes to your prep, always be on the lookout for more ways to streamline what you're doing. As your GMing skills improve you'll find more things that you can streamline. By taking advantage of your strengths, recycling good material, and abstracting complex ideas into simple ones, your prep time will keep on getting shorter.

True Story: The Pirate Stat Block

In my *Iron Heroes* game, I had a pirate villain who was to be a strong opponent for an encounter with my players' 5th level PCs. The pirate was designed to be a duelist of sorts, handy with a cutlass and a strong melee fighter. The PCs had their encounter with him and, in time, were able to defeat him.

Later on I needed another duelist type, but a warlord who was on par with the PCs. I figured that my pirate stat block would work just fine. I changed out the cutlass to a long sword, came up with a new description, and used the stats again.

Before that campaign was done, I used the pirate stat block five more times. Each time, I changed out the weapon and description. Each time the NPC got weaker and weaker relative to the PCs, but that fit the situations where I used the stat block. It also saved me a ton of time, since I didn't have to create a whole new NPC every time.

Chapter 12: Prep in the Real World

Things go wrong. In a perfect world, everything I covered in the previous 11 chapters would work every time, just like I wrote them. Some days, that just might happen, but there are going to be times when something unexpected crops up and you'll have to change what you're doing in order to get your game prepped on time. This chapter looks at some real-world examples of things that can arise, how they impact your prep, and how you can adapt your prep style to overcome these challenges.

It's worth mentioning that I was a designer and author of two other GMing books that can save you time in several of the situations below, both published by Engine Publishing. The first, *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters*, presents complete start-to-finish adventure outlines, each of which includes enough scenes for an evening of play. The second, *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game*, gives you a thousand NPCs complete with motivations, quirks, and backgrounds, all suitable for dropping into your game. Both books are system-neutral, and I believe they complement *Never Unprepared* well. You can find out more about them at *enginepublishing.com*.

Make the Ideal Your Norm

In a chaotic world, it's tempting to accept constant interruptions in your prep as the norm, forcing you to alter your prep in a way that may not be the most beneficial to you, your game, and ultimately your players. Understand that exceptions occur, but you should always strive to get back to your ideal prep system after the interruption.

Don't become upset at an unexpected change to your plans. With all things in life you need to be flexible. If the interruption cannot be avoided, then accept it, look at how you can adapt your prep, and keep on moving.

If you find that the same interruptions are occurring session after session, then you need to reevaluate how you're doing your prep and make some adjustments. If you're always working late and it's cutting into your time to prep, then you may need to revise your time map, extending your work time, and find a new time to work on your game. Evaluate the issue, come up with a solution, and make the correction; those three steps will always serve you well.

Playing Is Better Than Not Playing

Except when it comes to logical exceptions—family emergencies, your health, work, and all the other things you recognize are more important than gaming—it's better to be able to play something than to cancel your game. Canceling a game hurts its

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chances for longevity. Cancel a game too many times and it's likely that you won't play that game again.

The strategies and solutions presented below look to salvage your session by streamlining the prep process in response to unexpected events. Some corners have to be cut, and some prep phases will be compressed. The goal is to be able to arrive at the table with something to play. It may not be the length you planned on, or it might be missing the level of detail/quality you normally deliver, but you will be *playing*.

And now on to life's little disasters…

That Thing on That Night

Lots of things can be That Thing on That Night: meeting your parents for dinner out, a friend coming to town tomorrow, tickets to a great concert, etc. The key is that it's a planned event that will occur during a time when you'd normally be prepping for your game. You know about it in advance, unlike Something Came Up (see below), and you're aware that it falls during a time you were planning to prep for your next session.

In these cases, the best thing to do is to see how much prep time you're losing and look over your schedule to see where you can make it up. If you're losing three hours

one evening to see a movie with friends, you then look to see where you can pick up three hours. You could:

- **Extend one of your other blocks of prep time**
- **Plan to prep at a time when you don't normally prep, using up some of your other free time**
- **Make up the time by using some of that in-between time (between meetings at work, during your lunch break, etc.)**
- **Start your prep a few days early**

The goal is to retain the same amount of time to prep your game by finding and using some other free time in your schedule—trading one for one. Because your event is planned, you should have enough time to make adjustments to your schedule to make the accommodations necessary. If you can't find any additional time because all your time is accounted for, or the event came up too quickly to plan around, then treat this situation as Something Came Up.

Something Came Up

Events that fall into this category include a minor emergency at work, catching a 24-hour flu, a last minute offer for dinner, and the like. To qualify as Something Came Up, the event needs to be one you didn't plan for which interrupts your prep time, and there can't be a way to get more free time—you just have less time to prep. If the event is planned, or if you can convert free time to prep time 1:1, then it's That Thing on That Night (see above).

The first thing you need to do is to figure out how much time you are losing or have lost; the second is to figure out where you are in the prep cycle. Depending on how far you are into the prep cycle there are a few different ways to approach the problem. Let's look at Something Came Up events before documentation, during documentation, and after documentation.

Before Documentation

When something comes up before you've started writing your notes, that's the worst case scenario—you still have all of your notes to prep. At this point you need to start writing as fast as possible, so that you have the most time for documentation.

The first thing you need to do is to move quickly from brainstorming to selection, and then to conceptualization. Selection is the best phase to reduce. Grab an idea from the brainstorming phase and start working it out in your mind. Limit your conceptualization to the basics; just make sure the scene makes sense.

Once you get to documentation, it's okay if you need to roll back to the conceptualization phase for some additional ideas; at least you're writing at this point. Once

your notes are written, take any time you have left and tackle the review phase, focusing most on the director and playtester roles.

In this situation, the problem is that you didn't vet or fully detail your ideas, so you've increased your risk of having a scene that isn't as detailed or logically strong as what you normally produce. Make up for that in the documentation phase by mixing some conceptualization with your writing, and during your review by focusing on the details of the scene.

During Documentation

If you're in the middle of writing your notes when you get interrupted, the good news is that you've already conceptualized your scenes and you have some of your notes taken care of. Your focus should be on getting the rest of your material documented.

In this case, see how much material you have left to document and determine if you really need it all for your session. GMs often prep more material than players will get through in an evening, so you may be able to eliminate a scene or two that you haven't written yet, wrap up your notes, and move on to your review. This is ideal, because the material that is prepped is of good quality and is a product of your normal prep process. The risk is that your game may run a bit short.

If you can't eliminate any scenes, then focus your time on producing good documentation and minimize the review phase. Good documentation will aid you as you run the game, so don't cheat yourself out of those notes. Speed up your review first by dumping the proofreader, and then (if necessary) the playtester. If you have any time to review, do it as the director and make sure your scenes are well structured. In this case, the risk will be that you have some errors or problems in your remaining prep that you didn't catch during documentation.

After Documentation

If you've completed your documentation, then you're down to just one phase, review. In this case, you can save time by dropping the following review techniques/roles in this order: proofreader, playtester, director (at which point you're skipping this phase entirely). The main risk is that for each role you drop, you won't catch the mistakes that role is designed to catch.

Without the proofreader you may have some typos and grammatical errors, which is a minor problem; where it becomes a major one is when you're missing things like stats for an encounter. With the removal of the playtester, the risk is that your players will short circuit a scene in an un-fun way by thinking of something that you missed. When you cut out the director, you run the risk of having logical errors in your story that you might have difficulties narrating around.

Not Feeling It

Sometimes despite your best efforts, you're just not feeling it. Maybe you're low on energy, the kids were up all night, or you pulled an all-nighter yesterday. In this case you have adequate time and no interruptions, but your personal or creative energy is drained. You know you need to be working on prep, but you don't want to do it. The best thing to do is to not force yourself to be creative. Trying to be creative when your energy is low is what I call "writing through molasses," and it's a painful process that always produces lower-quality work. Fortunately, there are a few approaches you can take…

Tackle the Non-Creative Work

Instead of forcing yourself to be creative, work on some of the less creative aspects of your prep, even if that means doing some things out of order. Here are a few examples:

- **Roll up the treasure for your encounters**
- **Write up the stat blocks for monsters and NPCs**
- **Do basic research**
- **Review relevant rules for the session**

The idea is to get whatever you can out of the way now so that later on, when you're feeling more creative, you can address the creative stuff: writing dialog, room descriptions, etc.

Take the Night Off

Sometimes your creative batteries need recharging. Give yourself the night off and rest or do something else to take your mind off of your prep. Depending on how soon your next game is, you can treat this as That Thing on That Night or Something Came Up (see above for both). Once refreshed, you'll be able to return to your work and engage with it fully.

There is one caveat, though: Taking a night off is good, but taking a string of nights off because your batteries are drained will create a Something Came Up situation, which can be stressful to overcome. If you find that you're just not feeling it for a number of nights, your problem may be your feelings towards the game, and not a personal energy issue. You may have lost your engagement in the game, and are slowly losing your resolve to run the campaign. While that issue is beyond the scope of this book, it does happen, and when it starts it often looks like a run of Not Feeling It.

Hard to Starboard

When you find a glaring plot hole or a rule you thought worked one way that in fact works another way, or a player who's critical to the session can't make it that night, that's a Hard to Starboard situation. These are cases where you've been doing your prep and you suddenly discover that some assumption you made about the session isn't true.

Maybe it's something about how you designed the plot, like finding out that your scenes can't lead to a successful conclusion. Or perhaps you were centering the session on a specific PC, but that PC's player is the one who can't attend the game. You have some prep under your belt, but it won't work at the table in its current form.

There are two ways to approach this problem: change course or excise it.

Change Course

When you encounter one of these failed assumptions you can simply write around it. To change course, you need to assess the problem, alter part of the plot in a way that will correct the problem, and then work the change into your prep. The goal is to figure out what it is you need and then find a substitute that will fit the plot better than the element you currently have.

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Sometimes the change will only affect the material that is to come, which makes the change easy to implement. For example: The plot is a mystery and your series of clues pointed to the butler, but after reflection you find a reason he couldn't have done it. You ponder the situation and decide that the gardener is a much better choice. None of the clues are too specific, and they can fit the gardener just as well as they did the butler. You then continue your prep, but now the conclusion focuses on the gardener.

When the change requires some tweaks in parts of the plot that have already been prepared, you'll have to review your material and look for any new inconsistencies the change has created, and adjust them as well. It's important to change as little as possible, since a change in early material can spawn more changes until, like a sweater with a pull in it, the whole thing unravels.

Here's another example using the same problem with the mystery, the butler, and the gardener. This time, you realize that one of the early clues was that someone had to have the key to the study; that makes perfect sense for the butler, but not much sense for the gardener. Now you need to come up with a reason why the gardener would have the key, and then go back and make sure that the earlier scenes support this idea.

Depending on where you are in your process these changes could result in a Something Came Up situation, and you may have to decide if you can get all your documentation done in time. In either case, a Hard to Starboard always introduces the risk of a plot error, so if time permits you need to focus a little extra attention on the director role during your review to root out any problems.

Excise It

There are times when a problem cannot be worked around, when the flaw is too great to correct. The once-good idea is now a cancer within the plot, and there's no other choice but to remove it. While it sounds simple, excision has some of the same challenges as Change Course.

When you're going to excise part of the plot, first consider what the absence of that element will do to the overall story. Can the adventure be run without this part? If it cannot, then you need to Change Course instead, and attempt to salvage the troublesome bit. If it can, look at what parts of the plot preceding and following the excised element are affected by its removal.

For example: You have a scene early on in your session notes where the PCs are going to be attacked by the Red Hand ninja clan. You realize that if the PCs beat the Red Hand, you won't be able to use them for the climax. If the opening combat scene didn't really matter, you could just excise it and save the Red Hand for later on. If you needed that early combat scene for another reason (e.g., to kill a bystander to raise the tension), then you need to Change Course, swap out the Red Hand, and then find another suitable group who could be involved in that combat to generate the same effect.

Your main risk when you excise something is that by dropping some part of the game, you may not have enough material for a whole session. In my experience this is typically not the case, since players can chew up extra time planning and the like. You can also slow the tempo of the game to stretch things out a bit.

The Shiny

The Shiny is a variant of Hard to Starboard, but instead of finding a flaw you need to fix, you suddenly have an idea that sounds better than your original plan. This can come as a stroke of genius while writing, a great thought during the review phase, or because you just read the coolest thing and you have to use it. Once you have this idea, it begins to dominate your thoughts and you start thinking that perhaps you need to make some changes…

In many cases The Shiny is a problem because of poor impulse control. If you feel that you have to act on every great thought you have, you will forever be sidetracked. Here's what to do when you encounter The Shiny.

Capture

The first reason GMs often act on every great idea that comes along is because they're afraid to forget it. When inspiration strikes you need to capture that idea for future use. This follows David Allen's advice about having a ubiquitous capture device, a way to capture ideas no matter where you are. We've talked about that in this book, as well: You should always have a way to record your ideas handy, be it a notebook, a smartphone, or another tool.

When you have a great idea, capture it in your brainstorming system and then try to let the idea go, knowing that you can use it in a future game. Once your brain knows that you're not going to forget the idea, it's more likely to let it go and allow you to get back to work.

Evaluate

Once the idea is captured, leave it alone for a little while and then revisit it later on. Think about the idea; is it really as good as you thought it was when it first came to you? People often love ideas when they first think of them, and a cooling-off period will reveal whether an idea has merit or if you just got caught up in the moment.

If you're lucky, that's the end of the dilemma. The idea is captured, and it's good, but it doesn't need to trump whatever you're currently working on. It may make good fuel for a future session.

It Really Can't Wait

If, after you've captured the idea and assessed it, it really is that good and you just have to use it in your next session, you now have a Hard to Starboard situation.

You'll need to Change Course and/or Excise It to alter your plot accordingly, and those changes have to be sorted out before game night.

The worst-case scenario is when your idea is incompatible with your current material, and you now have to dump what you've written and start over. Depending on how much time you have until your session, this situation is either That Thing on That Night or Something Came Up, and you're going to have to hustle to account for all the risks involved in following your chosen course.

You Want to Game When?!

An old friend is in town unexpectedly, the GM for this week's session can't run the game, or a key player can't make it and the game won't work without them—the common ingredient here is that you're not engaged in game prep at all, but you're called upon to put a session together quickly, often in a day or less. In order to meet this goal, you're going to need to compress all of the phases of prep into a very short timetable. The ground rules for a pickup game aren't the same as those for a full session, though, so there are ways to cut corners.

When you put together a pickup session, keep these things in mind:

No character development—A single-session pickup game shouldn't focus on character development.

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Simple plot—Keep the plot uncomplicated; sophistication in a pickup game is not required. A nice linear plot with a single surprise is all you need.

Skimp on originality—This kind of game doesn't require you to create your plot from scratch. Cut and paste anything that will help you along.

Action-packed—Make sure that the session has plenty of action. First, action is always fun for players. Second, action can hide a thin plot. Third, action scenes often take up a lot of time, so you'll need to prep less material.

With regard to compressing the prep cycle, here's how you should approach each of the steps:

Brainstorming—Jot down five ideas for the game; no more. If you can't think of an idea, find a source for plot hooks or plots and pick a few at random.

Selection—Go with your gut. Scan your short list and select the one that jumps out at you. That's the one that is going to be the easiest to write, because subconsciously your mind made a connection to it.

Conceptualization—Go light on this step. Just get an outline down for the session and some ideas for the key scene(s).

Documentation—Get writing. Utilize the Prep-Lite techniques of tags, lists, and bullets to keep your writing simple. Grab maps and stat blocks from other material to avoid those time consuming steps; this is no time to be original.

Review—Ditch the proofreader role and then be quick about the director and the playtester.

The end result of this compressed prep process isn't going to be an intricately plotted adventure, but it can be a lot of fun to run. You will get to game and, like pizza and sex, even when it's bad a pickup game is still pretty good.

Disaster Strikes

Your hard drive crashes, you lose your notebook on the train ride home, your kid colors on your session notes—these are all examples of prep disasters. You did everything you were supposed to do: You planned out your time and you completed every phase of prep, but at some point in the process you lost your documentation. It's gone, and there is no way it's coming back. Don't panic, because you can salvage plenty of your hard work.

When disaster strikes, you need to take advantage of the prep that's still in your head. While you may not remember every detail, remember that when you document you're actually doing both physical prep and mental prep. The first thing you should do is write down everything you remember about the session—the outline, any parts of the map you can recall, lists of NPCs, etc. Try to capture as much as possible. If you do your brainstorming and/or conceptualization in another notebook or file, use that to help fill in any gaps you have in your memory.

Depending on how far into your notes you were, this can be a Something Came Up situation in terms of how much you lost and how much you have to make up. If disaster struck early on in the process, then this is likely a minor setback; if you manage your time well you can catch up. In this case, make sure when you review that you pay extra attention to any material you had to rewrite, particularly in the area of potential plot errors.

If your notes were finished and you don't have much time before the game, you may find yourself in a You Want to Game When?! situation. Take the rough notes you recovered and use the Prep-Lite approach to put your session together, but in a more streamlined format. It won't be ideal, but you will be able to pull off the upcoming session and get back on track afterwards.

No matter what has happened, by understanding the phases of prep and doing a little time management, you can almost always come back from a real-world setback and get your game to the table on time.

True Story: Just Add Hit Points

When my son was born, like most fathers I lost a lot of sleep, and it was taking its toll on my prep. By the time I put him to bed after a full day of work, I was so tired that I was lucky to get an hour of prep done before falling asleep at my desk. I would do what I could but my material was often a bit too short for a full session. In order to stretch out a session, I would look at two things: the time, and how many hit points the creatures in the current battle had left. If the game was ahead of schedule, I would just add some extra hit points to the creatures, or throw in another wave of monsters, and keep the battle going. Battles chew up a ton of time, and players are usually too busy trying to keep their PCs alive to notice.

As a more long-term solution to my prep problem, I eventually moved from running games every other week to every three weeks. That gave me more time to prep, and required me to add fewer hit points to my monsters.

Chapter 13: Conclusion

When I started this endeavor 10 years ago, I didn't have a journey in mind. I certainly never thought that it would lead to writing a book about prep.

Ten years ago, I was 29 and sitting on my then-girlfriend's couch as she told me that in the future I wouldn't have as much time to work on my games, nor be able to game as much as I did then. In my head, I was panicking.

Gaming had been a core part of who I was since I was 10 years old, when my mom's friend's son—in whose house we were temporarily living at the time—introduced me to *Dungeons & Dragons*®.

In the 20 years between making my first character and sitting on the couch that night, gaming had played a major part in my life. It helped me cope with some hard years growing up, it was how I made friends, and it was how I dealt with the stresses of life. It made me read more, it made me better at math, it made me highly creative, and years later I learned that it had made me very capable of working with and leading groups of intelligent and passionate people.

Sitting there on the couch, I realized she was right. We would get married, I would advance in my career, and we would have children. Yes, all of those things were more important than gaming—but there was no reason to give it up entirely. Rather, my gaming was going to have to change to make room for these new things in my life. So without knowing it, the journey started there. I had only one goal: Keep gaming.

A few years later, when I discovered life hacking and personal productivity, it was a short mental hop to figure out how to apply them to gaming. If I was going to keep gaming, I was going to have to ratchet up my personal productivity so that I could maintain my new obligations at the same time. While everything I learned helped me both professionally and personally, I never missed a chance to translate those lessons and techniques to their gaming counterparts.

So far it has worked. It's been 10 years since that night on the couch, my then-girlfriend is now my wife, and all the other things we talked about—house, kids, career—came true. The other thing that's true is that I'm still gaming. I don't run games as often as I might like, but my group has been together for 15 years and we have never stopped gaming.

When I started writing this book, I had serious doubts that people would be interested in a book about session prep. After all, as GMs we don't talk

about session prep. But then I thought that if, 10 years ago, someone had handed me this book and said, "You won't be able to game like you do now, but this book will make sure that you can keep gaming" I would have been a lot less panicked at that moment.

I hope that in some way this helps you in your prep. Perhaps you're an experienced GM, and from it you got a few tips that will help you be a bit more efficient. Or maybe you're a new GM just getting started and are curious about how to get your session prep done, and this book helps you create that system. Or you're an established gamer who just proposed to her partner, or is looking over at his pregnant wife, and isn't quite sure how to keep gaming, and this book helps you see that you can manage a family, a career, *and* gaming.

My personal journey is still underway. If anything, this book was a nice rest stop, a way to reflect on the things that I learned over the years and to see how it has all come together as a way to not only prep my games better, but to allow me to maintain a game-life balance. I will continue to work to master my GMing skills in the years to come. What will my life be like in 10 more years, with teenagers and a growing career? I have no idea. What I do know is that by managing my time, using my creative energies wisely, and honing my creative skills, I will be able to keep gaming.

And so can you.

Chapter 14: References and Inspiration

The following books, articles, web pages, and blog posts were all useful to me as I worked on improving my own session prep—and on this book. Some have been referenced directly throughout the text, while others are reflected in the concepts I've written about.

Life Hacking and Personal Productivity

David Allen Company (*davidco.com*) and ***Getting Things Done***—It's hard for me to encompass in words the effect that GTD has had on my life. It's my productivity system and philosophy of choice, and many of David's concepts formed the underpinnings of what I've written about in this book.

Lifehacker (*lifehacker.com*)—A daily read for me for many years, this site focuses on ways to simplify your life.

***Time Management for Creative People*, by Mark McGuinness** (*goo.gl/38nh*) One of my earliest references about why creative people need to be organized.

***The War of Art*, by Stephen Pressfield**—Another great book about managing the creative process.

DNAphil.com articles (*dnaphil.com*)—Before I started writing for Gnome Stew, I ran my own personal blog, and my first articles about session prep were written there:

Session Writing – Taking It One Step at a Time (*goo.gl/IbKnv*)

Session Writing – Tools of the Trade (*goo.gl/FIVUr*)

Session Writing – It's All In the Notes (*goo.gl/dhKAk*)

GM-Fu Session Prep (*goo.gl/xVuyP*)—Many GenCons ago, I participated in several panel discussions and one workshop about GMing. At the workshop, I presented tips for session prep along with Philippe-Antoine Menard (the Chatty DM), and Vicki Potter from Tabletop Adventures. The workbook from this panel is a free download.

Gnome Stew (*gnomestew.com*)—I've been writing on Gnome Stew since 2008, and after looking back at my list of articles it turns out I've been writing about session prep in one way or another for some time. Gnome Stew is also where I first wrote about Prep-Lite.

> **The Proper Care and Feeding of Your Creativity** (goo.gl/U6X3b)
>
> **A Deeper Understanding of GM Notes** (goo.gl/PUvDE)
>
> **Prep-Lite Manifesto - The Template** (goo.gl/m2xJ)
>
> **Prep-Lite: Wireframes And Skins** (goo.gl/WzVvi)
>
> **Prep-Lite Wireframe How To** (goo.gl/7xZtM)
>
> **Prep-Lite: Maps** (goo.gl/AoQNo)

Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters and ***Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game***—I was the project manager for, and one of the designers and authors of, both of these books from Engine Publishing (*enginepublishing.com*). They can both be prep timesavers, especially if you're crunched for time.

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Contributor Bios

My thanks to Phil for writing *Never Unprepared*, and to everyone on the *Never Unprepared* team for your outstanding work. This is Engine Publishing's first single-author book, and I couldn't have asked for a better first. I encourage you to check out the other excellent work these talented folks have done, because it rocks—and so do they. –Martin Ralya

John Arcadian stumbled into the roleplaying game industry back in 2003 because of a hobby project. It went further than expected and John is now an RPG industry blogger, CEO of a small-press gaming company, and industry freelancer who is proud of his contributions to the gaming industry. John lives in an idyllic, rural area of Ohio. Rumors that he only wears kilts are mostly unfounded, but entirely true.

Robert M. Everson, aka "Spenser," has been gaming for the better part of 30 years, and half of that in the same group as Phil Vecchione. He has been a fan and supporter of Gnome Stew since its birth. This is the second book he's proofread for Engine Publishing, having previously collaborated with them on *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game*. He is currently scratching several writing itches, including a blog and a fiction project.

Darren Hardy is a web designer and gaming enthusiast living in lovely Petoskey, Michigan. His gaming interests run the gamut from puzzle, board, and word games to roleplaying and electronic gaming. His other hobbies include biking, kayaking, hiking, cooking, and reading. He's constantly hunting for the elusive creative flow that gets stuff done. If you find some, he's willing to pay extra for it.

Daniel Milne is a gamer who makes his home in Utah. Whether it's played on a table, through a console, or over the Internet he'll be there to give it a test run. To date, he has thwarted 12 alien invasions, been orphaned 85 times, and saved the world from certain destruction on 163 separate occasions. Despite this, he has never rescued a princess.

Matt Morrow has been creating illustrations professionally since 1996. He worked for a computer magazine as an in-house illustrator until 1999, where he crafted hundreds of editorial illustrations. Since then, Matt has been juggling being a stay at home dad with three great kids and working on freelance projects in various areas such as newspapers, children's books, and RPGs, drawing subjects from hedgehogs to zombies. You can find a portfolio of his work at (*mz9000.carbonmade.com*).

Martin Ralya is a writer, publisher, blogger, and huge GMing geek. A GM since 1989 (with a physique and pallor to match), he's been running and writing for Gnome Stew since 2008, and he founded Engine Publishing in 2009. His first RPG industry freelance gig was in 2004. He lives in Utah with his amazing wife, Alysia, and their beautiful daughter, Lark, in a house with six entire sub-basement levels dedicated to books and games.

Christopher Reach works as a freelance artist, producing illustrations for both pen and paper and web-based games. He creates images utilizing digital media, drawing on his training in traditional painting techniques. He has worked on packaging art, covers, web banners, and various other projects. To contact Chris and view his work visit (*ChristopherReach.com*).

Don't let the tough-guy image fool you; **Kurt Schneider** really does have a soft nerdy core. He's been gaming since the first time disco was cool, writes for the game mastering blog GnomeStew.com, regularly contributes to a number of gaming forums and mailing lists (where he is commonly known as "Telas"), and is a contributing author for Engine Publishing's books *Eureka* and *Masks*.

Phil Vecchione has dedicated 30 years to sitting behind the screen and tossing dice with friends. He is known for his system promiscuity and looking for the "next great campaign." To feed his gaming addiction away from the table he is one of the writers for Gnome Stew, and an author for Engine Publishing. In those moments when he is not gaming he is a husband, father, and project manager.

Never Unprepared

Whether you're new to game mastering or have been running the same campaign since 1974, ***Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep*** will help you prepare for games faster, avoid common pitfalls, and have more fun in the process. To our knowledge, this is the first book entirely devoted to the process of prepping for tabletop RPGs.

Never Unprepared breaks game prep down into its component phases—Brainstorming, Selection, Conceptualization, Documentation, and Review—and provides the tools you need to make the most of each phase. If you hate prep, you'll find ways to make it more enjoyable. If you already have a great system for doing your prep, you'll learn how to make it even better.

Ten years in the making, Never Unprepared is award-winning author Phil Vecchione's epic rock ballad to game prep. A project manager and veteran game master, he draws on extensive experience to present flexible systems for developing or optimizing your own unique approach to game prep. Phil's work has previously appeared on GnomeStew.com (silver ENnie Award winner for Best Blog, 2010 and 2011) and in *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters* and *Masks: 1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game*.

Within ***Never Unprepared*** you'll find prep techniques, utilities, and tips that are applicable to any RPG:

- An in-depth look at each phase of session prep, from brainstorming to review
- Templates for sessions, scenes, NPCs, and combats that you can modify to fit your gaming style
- Practical advice on selecting prep tools, putting them to good use, and scheduling enough time to prepare for every session
- How to identify your strengths and weaknesses, as well as tips for preparing when you're short on time—and what to do if everything goes horribly wrong
- A comprehensive index to make it easy to find what you need

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