

# I AM THE GAME!

---

Let's get this straight, Oalin: as the DM, I am the game. I am the world and everything in it. I am the reason the game happens every week. I am the reason you have a playground for your awesome 30th level paladin/assassin with his *+6 holy avenger that also shoots fireballs that are holy*.

You're right. Without players, there is no game. But without someone willing to step up and get behind the screen, you can have all of the players in the world and you still won't have a game. And if that person isn't willing to put in twice the work, twice the effort, and be thrice as invested, the game isn't going to be much fun. I am elevated above the players because I'm the player that took up the screen. I took that role. And sometimes, it's a major pain in the ass. You know what I am doing on my Saturday nights. Getting ready for Sunday's game.

And what you call arrogance and ego, I call confidence. Because a DM isn't just participating in a game, he's putting on a show. And he's being judged every week. If the DM does a bad job, even if the players don't open their mouths, the DM can see it etched in the faces of every player. He knows he's failed. It's work. It's hard. It's scary. And anyone willing to get behind the screen deserves your thanks and your respect.

So I call tripe on you. Tripe, tripe, tripe!

But I also agree with you. The DM isn't special. Anyone can do it. Any player sitting at the table can take up the mantle and become a DM. Any player can, but few of them do. Few of them stick it out. At my own table, I have two people who have tried it and given up and four more who have never tried it. At least some of them are afraid to. So, you know what that makes me? Special. Elevated. First among equals and probably better than that.

I get it. I understand that any given moment, my players can decide they've had enough and then some other sucker can step up and take over. If I abuse them, if I get drunk with power, they are going to... well, they are going to quit gaming. Because I know none of my players are going to do this crap. But either way, yes, you're right. They could run away. The DM who makes his players miserable isn't a DM for long. But there's another side to this: that a DM has needs too, and his needs often have to come first. And the DM also has to represent the needs of the game as a whole.

As the DM, I am the world. At least, I am the force of gravity that holds the world together. If you want a description of a scene so your awesome PC can be awesome at it, I need to imagine that scene first. I need to imagine it with enough clarity that I can communicate it to you. If I can't, there is no scene. There is nothing to do. When a DM's ability to envision the world fails, it is like *The Nothing* from *The Neverending Story*. The world starts to vanish in a big, black, scary void. And for me to envision the world, I have to be able to wrap my head around it. More importantly, I have to care about it. I have to be interested in it. So, if I tell you that I'm forbidding psionics or those ridiculous shardminds or that genasi are not playable because I'm using elementals differently in my world, there's a reason for it. It's

not abusive. It's not arrogant. It's so that I can keep a world in my head intact and so that I can fall in love with that world.

Oh sure. If a player can't visualize a scene, that player loses investment. But the player can always approach the DM. He can ask for clarification in the short term or seek a change in the long term. And the DM should be willing to compromise. But the DM has nowhere else to turn when the world starts to fall apart. He has to find a way to hold it together himself or else its game over, man. Game over!

More importantly, the DM sets the tone for the table. If the DM doesn't love the world, if he's not invested, no one does. That world is going to be flat and dull and uninteresting. He can't make you care because he doesn't care. But if the DM loves the world and can bring it to life, that love is almost always infectious. You may not be invested as the DM (players NEVER will be), but it'll still feel more real and more immersive for the DM's love.

And the DM is not just there to create a world for you to play in. He's also there to be the source of conflict and challenge so that you can actually win something. That's right: so you can win D&D. Sure, we could all sit around and tell stories about awesome people never failing to do awesome things, but at the end of the day, there's no satisfying sense of victory in that. You want to feel as if you actually won a battle or solved a puzzle or negotiated a tough settlement or won an impossible court case? Well, that satisfaction only comes if there was a chance you would fail. And that means I had to make it hard for you. But not too hard. Just hard enough. Because gods know if I make it too hard, I'll hear about it.

You know what? I've seen my players high fiving and backslapping and whooping it up when they pulled a tough fight out in the eleventh hour somehow. Those are the things they talk about. Those are the thrilling memories. When they all felt like a team and they were proud of themselves. And those happened because I was hard on them. I was tough. I made them work for it. And I made damn sure they knew they might not win this one.

Oh, and get this. This is something they don't tell you in the DMG. Sometimes, letting your players lose actually hurts. It hurts a lot. And sometimes the players blame you. Sometimes it puts an emotional strain on you. Not me, because I am not capable of human emotions, but other DMs. Hypothetically. A DM who truly wants his players to feel like a team of champions sometimes has to take the role of villain, and sometimes, that's hard. And sometimes the players just assume that the DM is unfair or cruel because they lost and they aren't afraid to tell him so. At length.

It's all about trust, Oalin. Do you trust your DM? Do you trust your DM to be fair? To put the game first? To not intentionally hurt you for fun? If you are having a good time, you should trust your DM. He or she is doing it right if you're having fun. And with DMing, that end truly justifies almost any means. If your DM says something doesn't fit in the world, don't question it. Accept it. If the DM says a feat is unbalanced, he's not trying to screw you. He's trying to challenge you and the party so that you can have those thrilling victories. He's trying to keep things under control and keep the world in his head. And if he says he can't compromise, he has a reason. If he says a challenge was a fair challenge, it probably was a fair challenge, even if you lost. If you like what your DM is doing, if you're having fun, his reasons are sound.

The DM is an elected official, but D&D is a republic. A representative democracy. The moment you elect the DM (and keep reelecting him by coming back), you are willingly handing over some of your freedom because you think the DM is the best guy or gal for the job. If the DM isn't handling the job well, your only recourse is to have a recall election. Find someone else willing to take the job and vote that person in. But don't hand the DM the reigns and then force him to steer the cart by committee. Trust the DM or don't elect the DM in the first place.