



# 12 SIMPLE RULES FOR DMING

THE MAGIC BEHIND MAYHEM, MURDER, AND MONSTERS

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**For Dave, Peter, and Robert  
Also for John and Peter**

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## A LITTLE BACKSTORY

Like most 13 year olds, I thought I knew everything.

Unlike most 13 year olds, I soon realized I was wrong.

A few weeks after becoming a teenager, I played Dungeons & Dragons for the first time. In a musty basement classroom on a hot, September afternoon, one of my seventh-grade teachers led us through a short adventure, and my tiny Mississippi mind was blown.



Until that day, my favorite games had fallen into two camps: board games like Monopoly, where you went round and round a path picking up money, and arcade games like PacMan, where you went round and round a path gobbling up dots.

But with D&D, there was no path. Apart from some strange-looking dice and a few sheets of graph paper, there wasn't anything to *see* at all: the game took place almost entirely in our heads. "You awake at dawn beside a dwindling campfire in a dense, gloomy forest. A soft breeze blows through the trees, and unfamiliar bird calls echo above. Before you, a cavern entrance yawns." Would we go in? Would we mark it on our map and return when we were stronger, more sure of ourselves? Or would we walk away in search of something else--perhaps a lesser challenge, or maybe a greater one? Anything was possible.

Anything at all.

Whoa.

As soon as my mind stopped reeling, my first thought was, "I cannot WAIT to share this with my friends." It didn't matter that I'd only played once and didn't know an eight-sided die from a twelve-sider. I took all the money I'd saved, raced to the hobby store, and bought the D&D boxed set.

The following weekend, I was seated behind the DM's screen, guiding my younger brother and a couple of schoolmates through a campaign called *The Village of Hommlet*. I tried to make it as exciting as my teacher had, but something felt off--way off. To be honest, it didn't even seem like the same game. My friends failed to see what the fuss was about.

That's largely because I was a complete noob and didn't know what the DM was supposed to do. (In my defense, though, it's also because *The Village of Hommlet* was actually a fairly tough assignment for a first-time DM, given all the social interaction and improv and it requires.)

And yet, I persisted.

Within a couple of months, I'd learned all the rules, learned to create characters, learned how combat worked--and I foolishly thought that was all that mattered. After all, knowing the rules was all it took to play chess or Battleship or Galaga. By that logic:

1. Because I knew the rules of D&D, I knew how to play it.
2. Because I could play D&D, I was a great DM.

As I said: typical 13 year old.

I soon saw the error of my ways. Later that semester, I was invited to play a character in a campaign run by a friend of a friend. He was a couple of years older than me, and already, he was a fantastic DM. He painted pictures with words, he breathed life into one of the same premade campaigns I'd run so poorly. It was like we were playing two different games, and his was a lot more fun.

That's when I realized that I knew nothing about D&D.

Since that night three decades ago, I've tried to improve my DMing skills. I'm still not the world's best, but every time I take players through a campaign, I discover something new about the game, about my friends, and about myself. To me, that's just as exciting as narrating a massive battle or a stealthy jewel heist.

In all my years of rolling dice, though, the most important thing I've learned is this: **the DM and the players are telling a story together. That's what D&D is all about.** Your players may slay the ruthless dragon, they may rescue the mayor from hordes of bandits, they may end their campaign much richer than before. But there's no "winning" in D&D without good storytelling.

What's considered "good storytelling" varies from group to group, of course. But without some kind of narrative, some kind of story arc, D&D is just an unrelated series of murders, money-grabs, and mayhem--like skimming a bunch of chapter titles in a textbook instead of taking time to read the material and understand how topics relate to one-another.

This idea of collaboration between the DM and players may not be how you've approached the game in the past. It certainly wasn't how I thought of D&D during those early years. Back then, I assumed that because the DM knew the campaign, she was in charge. On the other hand, I met players who were convinced that *they* were responsible for bringing adventures to life. But the truth of the matter is that D&D--or any number of similar games--depends on cooperation. The DM may have a better map than the players, the players may be making the decisions, but ultimately, they're all exploring this new world together.

That said, the DM is given a few special responsibilities that the players don't share. The most important of those is that **she's in charge of keeping the story moving**. If a player has to skip a week because of an illness or another commitment, the game can continue, but without the DM, things grind to a halt.

And so, if you're a DM looking to keep your game humming along, here are a few tips that you might find helpful. (Or maybe not: I won't be offended.) Use them well and wisely, and you'll make memorable adventures for yourself and your players.

# BEFORE YOU PLAY

*A little preparation goes a long way for both the DM and the players.*

## #1. Characters need backstories

Dungeons & Dragons is a role-playing game. Players adopt the personas of half-orc fighters, elven wizards, and tiefling rangers as they explore other worlds. To me, a good game of D&D is like the first rehearsal for a play or a film, when actors gather around a table and read through the script. The only difference is, in D&D, there's no script: everything is improv.

Every gamer and every gaming group have different ways of role-playing. Some players speak only as their character would speak, in accents and whispers and shouts. Others speak as themselves, using their everyday voices to explain what their characters do in given situations. Either approach is fine (though it's great if everyone in the group can agree to the same style of play).

But one thing all players need, no matter how they embody their characters at the gaming table, is a backstory. **They need to know who their characters are and how they became that way.** Were they raised in slums and forced to climb slowly, tediously, through the ranks of their order? Were they born into a noble house and pampered from day one? If your players know these things, they'll have a better sense of how their characters will react in given situations. If they don't, here are a few questions to start them off:

- Where did your character grow up?
- What did your character's parents do for a living?
- What sort of house was your character raised in?
- Did your character go to school? If so, for how long?
- What made your character choose this way of life?
- Why does your character get out of bed in the morning?
- When do you expect your character to retire from adventuring?

Knowing your players, you'll probably have other questions to help tease out their characters' narratives.

Those backstories aren't just important for players; they're useful for you, too. After all, you help guide the story that's being told around the gaming table. Sure, you could just pull a pre-made campaign off the shelf and play it exactly as it's written. **But wouldn't it be more fun if you threw in a few elements to personalize it for your group?**



For example, if one of your players' characters has made it her life's work to find her long-lost brother, wouldn't it be interesting if that brother showed up in the story? What if he's become a hermit? A powerful tyrant? The leader of a rival adventuring party? Or what if he's being held captive by the villain?

Similarly, if one of your players' characters was cursed by an evil god long ago, what would happen if he discovered a prayer book to that god in a treasure chest? Or if a missionary on the street of a busy city invited him to a temple dedicated to that god? Or if the character received some sign that the god was, in fact, still watching him?

In short, if players know their backstories, they'll have more fun playing the game. And if you know their backstories, you can tailor the world they're exploring to make experiences richer.

## #2. It's the little things that count

The DM is a writer. Even when you're running a campaign that was dreamed up by someone else, you're still telling a story with your words.

Think about the writers who've moved you with their novels, poems, and short stories. What do you remember most about those works? What do you recall months or years or even decades after you put the works aside?



The answer is probably a vivid detail, not the bulletpoints of the plot. When I think of *Lord of the Rings*, for example, I think of the friendship between Frodo and Sam and the tension that arose between them when Gollum arrived on the scene. Similarly, in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, I remember Lucy reading a book in a terrifyingly quiet house, and the ship sailing across an increasingly shallow sea. From the *Harry Potter* series, I remember things like butterbeer and the maddening primness of Dolores Umbridge.

Those are details that Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling used to add texture to their stories. Most aren't essential to the narrative--I mean, Umbridge could've been a slob and it wouldn't have affected the plot--but they give us a better sense of the world and the personalities we're reading about. **They enrich the story, and as a result, they make us care a little more.**

DMs do the same thing. Sure, you could just tell the characters that they find a silver locket in a jewelry box. But what if that locket had a small painting inside, perhaps a painting of the



owner's beloved? What if it had an inscription--maybe words of love and devotion, or maybe an ancient, infernal curse?

What if a ruined city is filled with the corpses of only men, or only women, or only cats? What characters stumble into a town that shuts down at dusk because of a superstition about the evils of moonlight? What if the players find an ordinary cloak in a dusty dungeon, but inside one of the pockets is a love letter or a note from worried parents or a treasure map?

Obviously, you don't want to provide an endless series of distractions. Many players--myself included--tend to overthink things. We assume that if the DM reveals something, it's important, and we're prone to investigate every detail, no matter how small. A century ago, the famous Russian playwright Anton Chekhov warned against that kind of thing when he said, "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." In other words, **don't leave ominous clues lying around unless they're going to pay off in the future.** Encouraging players to run down rabbit holes can be just as frustrating as giving no details at all.

That said, there's still plenty of room for you to embellish stories. Describing what players smell as they meander down a country lane, the quality of light in an abandoned temple, the color of a potential ally's clothes, how a child smiles at them as they pass in the street: these kinds of details can enhance the players' sense of their environment and immerse them in the story without being distracting. Long after your campaign has ended, the players may not remember the name of the big, bad villain or even how they overcame him, her, or it. Instead, you'll hear them say something like, "Hey, remember when we stumbled into that torture chamber with all those lace curtains and beanbag chairs and a wine bar?"

### #3. Let the NPCs speak

The physical setting of your campaign isn't the only tool you have to immerse players in the story. Non-player characters can be a huge help, too. They can drop hints, seem mysterious or untruthful, or they might simply have some personality traits that make them memorable--a nervous tic or a catchphrase, for example.

Many DMs treat NPCs like redshirts--nondescript characters who serve a single purpose, then drop out of the story forever. (The term comes from the original *Star Trek* series, which would populate the Enterprise with extra characters in red shirts, only to kill them off before an episode was over.) While there's no guarantee that your players will engage with NPCs in meaningful ways or seek them out again in the future, **making NPCs unique will help make your story more memorable.**





For example, it's pretty common for characters to visit taverns for refreshment now and then, or to spend a few nights at an inn. But players often ignore bartenders and innkeepers; they conduct their transactions with these NPCs--order drinks, rent rooms, etc.--then get on with what they perceive to be their business.

In real life, however, waiters and innkeepers are often great sources of information. What if the bartender in your story strikes up a conversation with your characters? What if she's lived her whole life in this small village and wants to hear tales from beyond its familiar borders? What if she's being kept here against her will and needs their help to escape? What if she's a spy for the enemy and wants information about the characters' plans?

Of course, not every NPC needs to become an integral part of the story. Just as in real life, some are merely bystanders. That doesn't mean they're devoid of personality, though. Maybe the local innkeeper loves a bawdy tune and will give the adventurers a free night's lodging if your bard performs a few songs. (If the person playing the bard feels comfortable performing a song for the group--say, the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*--so much the better.) Maybe the clerk at the general store adores haggling and has a secret weakness for dwarven armor. Or maybe the beggar offers the party directions in exchange for healing wounds he suffered at the hands of aristocratic hooligans, who roughed him up a week ago.

At a loss over how to make NPCs and environments unique? Do what professional writers do and **pay attention to your surroundings away from the gaming table**. That woman in line ahead of you at the store with an odd assortment of groceries, the checkout clerk who waits on her and is clearly having a rough day, the man at the bus stop shouting into his cell phone: use people like this as the basis for memorable NPCs.

#### **#4. Start with the bad guy (or gal)**

There are a host of prefab adventures on the market, each with its own distinct storyline, but sometimes, you want something completely different. You want to tell a new story--one that hasn't been told before, or an old one told in a new way.

Building a homebrew campaign is loads of fun, but it can also be a bit overwhelming. Sure, mapping out a dungeon is fairly straightforward, and you can probably dream up the characters' main quest without too much difficulty--recover a magic item, defeat a necromancer, etc. But once you've created the bones of the campaign, how do you flesh it out? How do you produce a setting that offers a



cohesive story your players will understand, buy into, engage with?

For me, the answer is simple: **start with the villain.**

Before you bring out the graph paper, before you decide on the party's main quest, think about who or what the players are going to fight. Is it a dragon? A doppelganger? A cursed king? A bandit queen? A beholder? The creepy twins from *The Shining*, all grown up and ready to party? The choice is yours (though if it were me, I'd seriously consider the creepy twins).

Once you know who the villain is, think about how they became who or what they are today. People may be born to awful parents, but they don't become supervillains unless they're obsessed with a particular goal. Do they seek revenge? Status? An artifact? An alliance? Are they compelled by a higher power to wreak havoc? Can they be redeemed? Do they truly believe that what they're doing is right? Do they understand the harm they're causing? Or will they snap out of it once a charm is broken?

If your villain is a monster instead of a humanoid, take the same approach. Chromatic dragons are all evil, but they're not interchangeable. Some are clearly more powerful than others. How did your big, bad, black dragon become a supervillain? What's driving her to destroy everything good? Ask those same questions of mind flayers, orc war chiefs, vampires, werewolves--maybe even freakishly intelligent gelatinous cubes. (It's D&D, y'all. Anything's possible.)

Once you know your villain, the rest of the story will begin falling into place. Some things to consider:

- What is the villain's ultimate goal?
- What must they do to achieve that goal?
- Who or what is standing in their way?
- How will they eliminate that obstacle?
- Where do they live now?
- What defenses do they have?
- Who serves them?

And so on.

Answer questions like that, and you'll soon have a campaign laid out, a stronghold constructed, and crafty challenges designed.

**Starting with the villain will help the players, too.** That's because they need someone--a personality--to fight against.

Psychologically speaking, we human beings gravitate toward stories with characters we can understand, identify with. It doesn't matter if the characters themselves are human or not. (How many Disney movies have you seen with non-human heroes and foes?) It doesn't even matter whether we *like* those characters or not. **The stronger the feelings those characters evoke—both good feelings and bad—the more profoundly we're engaged in the story.**

In *The Hobbit*, for example, the first part of the novel is largely concerned with the evil dragon Smaug, a well-drawn, fascinating character. We don't like him, *per se*, but we understand him, his vanity, his intelligence. Later, our attention shifts to Thorin Oakenshield—someone we like in the first half of the book but come to revile in the second. And throughout it all, we're rooting for Bilbo to overcome every challenge.

Like all good storytellers, Tolkien knew that to keep readers turning the page, he needed his characters--both villains and heroes--to leap off the page. They had to be relatable (which isn't the same thing as likable). Readers needed to understand them. If you'd replaced Smaug with, say, a brick wall, the story wouldn't have been nearly as good, because how can you love or hate a brick wall? How could you feel anything for it? And how could you root for Bilbo to succeed against it?

It's the same in D&D. The villain is your centerpiece, it holds the story together. It may not be human, and in fact, it may not be entirely evil (the best villains are a mix of good and bad), but it's got to have personality. Create that, and you'll lay the foundation for a truly epic adventure.



# WHEN IT'S TIME TO ROLL THE DICE

*Remember: everyone's there to have fun, including you.*

## #5. Always say "yes"

Most gaming groups have at least one player who likes to push the boundaries. You know the person I'm talking about: the one who decides that he wants to steal a horse from a stable in broad daylight. The one who chooses to attack a merchant--or even another character in the group--because she didn't like his tone of voice.

Dealing with these folks can be frustrating. You've spent a lot of time creating a campaign from scratch or familiarizing yourself with one you've bought or borrowed. There's so much cool stuff that your players can do, so much for them to explore and discover! Why would this yutz screw up an amazing story for himself and his fellow players?

I don't have an answer for that question. All I know is that **when the game threatens to spiral out of control, you have two options: you can resist, or you can go with it.**

(Fun fact: you have the same choices when your car hits an icy patch and goes into a tailspin. Equally fun fact: experts recommend the same reaction for both DMs and drivers.)

Resisting is the wrong response, and I'll give you three reasons why.

For starters, players aren't stupid. They can read your tone of voice and your actions. They can tell when you're frustrated. When you throw up your hands and roll your eyes, they see animosity. That creates a divide between you and them--a divide that interferes with collaborative storytelling, which is your shared responsibility. You and the players are in this together, and if you try to hit the brakes while they're moving forward...well, it's not likely to improve the story, that's for sure.

Second, if you're resisting, you may become a little vindictive. "Okay," you say, an evil glint in your eye, "as you pull out your sword to attack the shopkeep, she presses a small button, and a trapdoor in the floor gives way, plunging you into a deep, spiked pit. You take 15 points of bludgeoning damage, 10 points of piercing damage, and I need you to roll a Constitution saving throw to see if the poison on the spikes affects you." Though it might feel good at the time,



that kind of response makes you seem petty, and if not managed properly, it can escalate into a direct confrontation between you and the players.

Finally, when you resist, you're telling the players, "Stay on the path I've created for you." That may sound like a reasonable request, but **D&D should never, ever have a set path**. Playing D&D is acting out an alternate life in an alternate universe. There as here, players can choose to go in any direction they like. Good players will see the outlines of the path you've forged, and they'll stick to it, more or less. But no one likes to feel as if they're running through a hamster maze--even when they're in a dungeon labyrinth that feels like a literal hamster maze.

So, when players go in unexpected and/or unwise directions, follow them. Lean into it. **Always say "yes"**. "All right, you want to rob the priest who just cured your lycanthropy? Tell me how you want to do that." And let the story go its merry way.

Even if the game veers in odd directions, your path is still there. All you have to do is guide the players back to it. They attack a merchant and get sent to jail? Maybe a fellow inmate helps them escape through a secret tunnel that leads directly into the underground lair they've spent the past three sessions searching for. Maybe they can bribe a guard--or, since they're so inclined to roughhouse, knock out a guard, take his uniform, steal some keys, release all of the prisoners in the place, and escape in the ensuing chaos.

Bottom line: if you're clever, you can find a way to lead players back to the main narrative without having to drive them there with a whip.

## #6. Let dice drive the story

I don't usually like metaphors, but this one's pretty apt: a good game of D&D is like a summer road trip. The DM has built the car, paved the roads, planted flowers on the median, and constructed towns along the route, but the players sit in the driver's seat. They tell the DM what their characters do and where they go, and the DM describes what they see from the car window.



But sometimes, players want to get off the highway, take a winding, bumpy backroad. They choose to do stupid things--things that can seem doomed to fail. A rogue wants to visit the local general store and shop for climbing gear? Sure thing, no problem. A fighter wants to pickpocket the powerful mayor of a large town and steal a magic crystal that she carries for protection? That's a dicey proposition--literally.

In these sorts of situations, **rely on ability and skill checks to tell the story**. Does a character recall where the local Thieves' Guild is located? Have her make an Intelligence check to see if she remembers--or, if she's from that town, maybe a History check would be more appropriate. In the example of the pickpocketing fighter above, I'd probably ask for a Sleight of Hand check--and if the mayor is heavily guarded, I'd insist that he make it with disadvantage.

If they player rolls well, it's a remarkable success, and the story moves forward. If the roll fails...well, things can get interesting.

In the case of the thieving fighter, if the roll were high but not high enough, maybe the guards would just shove him away. If the roll weren't so close, maybe they'd rough him up a bit and throw him out of town on his ear. And if the roll were especially bad--say, a natural one--maybe the fighter would get locked in prison...or worse.

In short, **relying on die rolls creates an element of randomness, and randomness keeps the game fun**. (Many casino gamblers will tell you the same thing.)

The dice also ensure an element of fairness. For example, if players have gone way off-course and you're starting to feel frustrated (as we discussed in section five above), allowing dice to determine the narrative ensures that you remain impartial. If the players try something extraordinary and succeed, it's a hugely memorable moment. If they fail, they know that it's because luck wasn't on their side and they performed poorly. Most importantly, in the latter case they'll know that it's not a matter of you being vindictive.

As with all of the players' rolls, make sure you can see the dice when they land. Don't single out anyone if you can help it--no one likes to be accused of cheating. I suggest setting a policy upfront that ensures die rolls can be seen by all players and the DM. (Using a simple, inexpensive tool like a dice tower can make the practice fun, too.) This keeps everyone on the up and up.

As for whether the players can see *your* die rolls, that's your call, but I think you should keep them secret. I'm not suggesting that you ignore your own rolls and always take the story where you like. Quite the opposite: the DM needs to experience randomness too, just to keep the game entertaining. But in some cases, die rolls can give away crucial information.

For example, if one of your players casts *Charm Person* or *Geas* on an NPC, maybe the charm works...or maybe the NPC simply wants to play along as if the charm has worked, until the NPC has an opportunity to attack. If the players can see your die rolls, you risk ruining the surprise.



## #7. Keep the stakes high

Most DMs want characters to succeed--to slay the slavers, to retrieve the ring of power, to liberate the lost prince. That's not just because we like stories with closure and happy endings; it's also because the players gathered around the table are our friends. Whether we're DMing or having them over for dinner, we want to entertain them, to show them a good time. It's hard to do that when players' characters are being slaughtered left and right.



**But it's a mistake to make D&D so easy that there are no consequences for the characters.** If you load up every treasure chest with healing potions and powerful scrolls, if your NPC cleric has a seemingly endless ability to cure wounds and remove curses, if you treat chaotic evil, tenth-level wizards like brainless worms, players are going to lose interest--or at the very least, they're going to start acting irresponsibly.

I'm not saying that every combat episode needs to be a three-session-long boss battle (though there's certainly a time and place for that). But take a good, long look at the stats for the monsters your players are fighting. Do they have a below-average Intelligence of 5, an average Intelligence of 10, or an extraordinary Intelligence of 19? Are they prepared for a fight, and if so, are they not on heightened alert for interlopers? If one of your player's characters were in a similar situation, how would he react? Would he surrender if all of his friends lay dead? Trigger a deadly trap? Deceive his attackers while attempting to make a break for it?

Simply put, some monsters are stupid, but not nearly all. Some are devastatingly clever. Play them as such. Play them as though you were on the other side of the DM's screen and they were your character.

This approach applies in non-combat situations, too. If you treat the party's foes realistically, you ought to do the same for the world at large. Actions have consequences. Consider the scenario we discussed in section six--the one with the pickpocketing fighter. If he fails his attempt, he might go to jail, he might be fined, he might be banished from the town forever. But he might also lose a hand, an eye, or an ear. He might be branded, scarred, or tattooed as a thief. He might experience a change in alignment or lose favor with his god.

And in some cases, he might die.

Thankfully, **death is one element of D&D that doesn't have to be as realistic as it is in our universe.** According to the current rules, a player needs to fail three death saving throws

before she dies for good. In the interim, another member of the party can feed her a healing potion, cast a healing spell, or attempt to stabilize her with a Medicine check. And even if a character *does* die, there are still ways to bring her back.

Say that the worst has happened and one of your character is killed in battle. Maybe he failed three death saving throws, was attacked multiple times while at zero hit points (which triggered automatic death saving throw failures), or suffered a massive amount of damage in a single attack. (The various ways characters can die are explained on page 197 of the *Player's Handbook*.)

That's a tragedy, and hopefully the other players will react as such, but before they start planning funeral rites, have your magic-users make Arcana and/or Religion checks. Chances are, one of them has heard of spells like *Raise Dead* and *Resurrection*. Bringing the character back to life can become a side-quest, with the other characters transporting their friend's body to a powerful cleric and asking her to restore him. (During these sessions, the "dead" player can either watch from the sidelines or play a new character, possibly one that's been an NPC.) Of course, the cleric performing the ritual may demand some form of payment, or the spell may not work as intended...but that's another story.

What I'm trying to say is this: **if you treat the world of D&D realistically, it will become more real for the players.** At the very least, that should nudge some of your wilder players to consider the effects of their actions. And in a best-case scenario, it'll encourage everyone to think through challenges more thoroughly, to become more creative in overcoming obstacles, and to play their characters as they're written--dumb or smart, good or evil, impulsive or cautious.

## #8. Force characters to make hard choices

Because anything is possible in D&D, players have the opportunity to make plenty of choices. Some of those choices won't be difficult. Kill the orcs who've ambushed you in the woods? Of course! Loot the body of the warlock you've just defeated? Duh, obviously.

But part of the fun--and part of what makes a campaign memorable for players--is **putting characters in complicated moral or strategic situations.** Should they take the gold or save a child? Use the party's last



healing potion on their best fighter or on the NPC who knows his way through the dungeon? Trust the hobgoblin who's gone AWOL from her unit or slit her throat as she begs for mercy?

Those "Sophie's choice" moments are the things that players will recall for weeks, months, maybe even years. They may also be the kind of moments that spark fierce debate in the group, as chaotic personalities vehemently disagree with lawful ones. As long those arguments take place in character, they'll enrich the story--which is, of course, your number-one goal.

## #9. Let players do the talking

As a DM, part of your job is to keep a record of what the players have done on their adventure. Every DM has a different method for doing this. I tend to jot down short notes during gaming sessions; then when I get home, I translate those notes into full sentences before I forget what they mean. (Otherwise, I find myself running through my scribbles an hour before a meetup thinking "Bought items"? For what? From whom? Who the hell bought them?")



I think it's a good idea to have players take notes too, or at least have them appoint someone as the party's scribe. That way, they'll have a written account of the story--one that'll probably include details that you've left out of your own notes.

Before the game begins, I usually provide a quick recap of recent events, setting the stage for the current session. Every so often, though, I'll **ask one of the players to bring us up to speed instead**. It helps firm up the story in their minds--far more than if I'm just reading something to them. It gives them a sense of where they are in this long, drawn-out miniseries we call a campaign. And as an added bonus, the details they include will give me some insight into the elements of the adventure they've found most memorable.

I do this during gameplay too. When the players encounter someone in their travels, I make sure that the NPC asks them who they are and what they're doing. This allows the players to share their version of the campaign, and it also allows them to tell their own characters' stories. That not only clarifies the narrative, the story arc of the adventure, it also gives the players' a stronger sense of their own characters. Like actors who've become intimately familiar with the roles they're performing, this deepens player's understanding of the world they're exploring *and* their characters' place within it. To me, that's a win-win.



## #10. Change the scenery

Every player tackles challenges in D&D in her own way. Some charge into dungeons with a war cry, waving their swords wildly overhead. Some are more cautious and curious, thinking their way through obstacles. Others love chatting up locals, laying out battle strategies, exploring new terrain, and so on.

As a DM, you have to **provide the right mix of social interaction, exploration, and combat to keep every player engaged.**



When the game is moving along precisely as you'd planned, you might not notice that you've gotten the balance right. But it's *very* easy to tell when the balance is wrong: players get bored, they start checking their cell phones, they begin acting carelessly, like they just want to get to the "fun stuff". Pay attention, and it'll be apparent when their attention shifts away from the game.

**The best adventures I've DMed have been about 50% exploration, 30% combat, and 20% social.** To me, that makes sense: a big part of what draws us to D&D is the allure of exploring a strange, new world. (When I play video games like *Skyrim*, I can spend hours just roaming around, taking in the sights, before I even bother with quests.) Social interactions, though? We experience those every day, so we probably don't want as many of them at the gaming table.

Keep in mind that you need to provide this mix of environments no matter whether you're running a campaign that you've created yourself or one that someone else has written. Yes, **even in a prefab adventure, there are opportunities to drop in something new.** For example, if your players are in an urban setting and grow tired of chit-chatting with NPCs, toss in a menacing group of thugs to provide a little combat--or let them discover a half-hidden ladder so they can explore the town from the rooftops.

On the other hand, if they've just finished a long dungeon slog, slaying wave after wave of orcs, hobgoblins, and whatever else you've hurled at them, let characters interact with a new NPC. Maybe it's a fellow adventurer who's the only surviving member of his party. Or perhaps it's a bandit who's reconsidered her life of crime and has deserted from a larger group.

Maintaining an appropriate level of tension between exploration, combat, and social scenarios takes practice, but in time, practice makes...well, not perfect, but you get better at it.

## #11. Keep it moving

At some point in every campaign, things slow to a crawl. Maybe the party is doing some last-minute shopping in preparation for a massive dungeon delve. Maybe they're on a week-long journey through the desert, with nothing but random encounters between them and the next oasis. Or maybe they're sitting at a tavern, drinking and debating their next move.



Whatever the case, gameplay in these situations can become disorganized and, let's face it, dull. DMing a shopping excursion and rolling up random encounters can be tedious, and players' short attention spans will be on full display. **Your job is to keep things moving along as quickly as possible.**

Are the characters travelling for an extended period of time? If you don't have any encounters planned, maybe create one random run-in--ideally one that helps move the story along--but no more than that. Are they looking for a particular kind of shop? Why look, there's one on the next corner. There's no need to make them ask every street urchin in town just to find a smith, leatherworker, or temple. Are they haggling with merchants? Simply ask the players what they'd like to purchase and be done with it.

I take this same speedy approach to some of the more realistic elements of storytelling--food, for example. Unless scarcity of food and water is an element in the story, I almost never ask players about when or what they eat. I don't make them keep track of rations. I know it's a part of the game, but as a DM, I have the option to overlook certain rules and guidelines, and that's one that doesn't matter to me. Like the players themselves, I want to get to the good stuff.

## #12. Don't take anything too seriously (except this tip)

D&D is a game. A few lucky folks make a living from it, but the majority of us play D&D for fun. The camaraderie, the storytelling, the triumphs, the tragedies, the potato chip crumbs stuck in every crevice of your *Monster Manual*--**it's all meant to be enjoyable, so enjoy it.** Surely the rest of your life is stressful enough without treating your hobbies like life-or-death crises.



Sadly, I know some DMs who haven't yet learned this lesson. I've seen them threaten players with bodily harm for cracking jokes at the gaming table. I've seen them fume at people who've given their characters ridiculous names like "Bob II: This Time It's Personal". And you know what? I've never once thought, "Yeah, that player should straighten up." In every case, I've said to myself, "Man, that DM's a jerk. Who'd wanna play under him?"

So what if a player wants to give her character a dumb name? As long as she's not distracting from the game, roll with it. (If you really, truly hate the name, find a way to give her a title, or perhaps a pseudonym that her character must use to remain disguised.) So what if a player wants to flirt with NPC priests or attack city guards? Let him. In a game like D&D, it's natural for folks to push boundaries. Once they realize that yes, anything's possible--and once they see how the less-rambunctious players behave--they'll likely settle down.

And if they don't, take them aside and have a chat about their behavior. Or simply don't invite them back. **The one thing you shouldn't do is rant and rave at the gaming table.** That just puts everyone on edge and makes a fun pastime into an awkward obligation.

It should go without saying that **as a DM, you're allowed to have fun, too.** Give NPCs funny names, use funny accents, have them tell bawdy jokes. You want an egomaniacal mercenary to speak in an Arnold Schwarzenegger-y voice? Go for it. It'll make that character exponentially more memorable. You want to put a mysterious, extradimensional blue box in the middle of an abandoned castle? Great. Some of the players may realize it's a TARDIS, but will they know how to operate it? Where will it take them? Is there a man with a fez wandering about the ruins somewhere?

(At the suggestion of someone on Reddit, I once placed a Mr. Meeseeks box from *Rick and Morty* in a treasure chest. The players thought it was funny, and they used the Mr. Meeseeks to great effect--until of course many of the little blue guys went crazy and undid all characters' carefully laid plans.)

I'm not saying that every gaming session should be like a comedy festival. In fact, if you follow some of the tips I've outlined above, you'll often have challenging, poignant, and sad moments during your campaigns. But to me, what makes a great game is balancing those heavier, emotional moments with lighthearted play. Leaning too far in one direction or the other can be monotonous, so do yourself and your players a favor by throwing in a few gags to counter the gore.

## THAT'S ALL FOLKS

If you've been DMing for a while, chance are good that you've got your own list of rules for running great, engaging adventures. If that system is working for you and your players, by all means, keep using it. I mean, if it ain't broke....

On the other hand, if you feel like something's been missing from your campaigns, perhaps some of the suggestions I've offered here will improve things just a bit. At the very least, I hope they provide some food for thought.

If you have additional questions or comments, feel free to email me at [sturtle@gmail.com](mailto:sturtle@gmail.com). You can find my personal blog at [sturtle.com](http://sturtle.com), and some of my other published works are available at [DMsGuild.com](http://DMsGuild.com) and [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).





For nearly half a century, Dungeons & Dragons has enthralled fantasy fans around the globe. It continues to attract new players even in this era of high-tech pastimes, despite the fact that D&D relies on nothing more than a couple of rule books and some funny-looking dice.

What makes D&D and other tabletop role-playing games so special, so alluring, is the fact that anyone can enjoy them. You don't need any particular skills; you only need to bring your imagination. And because of that, each time you sit down at the gaming table--whether that table is in a bar, a basement, or a hotel ballroom--the experience is a little different.

There's only one real constant in D&D: the fun is in the playing, not the winning. In fact, unlike most board games, card games, and video games, no one ever "wins" D&D. You simply live to fight another day.

Richard Read has spent more than three decades playing D&D, and much of that time has been spent behind the dungeon master's screen. In this short book, he shares some of the lessons he's learned overseeing campaigns large and small. If you're a longtime dungeon master, many of his observations will probably ring true. And if you're new to DMing, some of his advice may help turn your next adventure into one that players remember for years to come.

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*Richard Read has written about games, cars, travel, theatre, and pop culture for Gawker, Fodors, High Gear Media, and many points in-between. He's penned several D&D adventures; edits Gaywheels.com, a website devoted to LGBT car fans; and co-authored The French Quarter Drinking Companion, a field guide to some of New Orleans' best watering holes. He lives in New Orleans with his partners, numerous hounds, and a moderately well-stocked bar.*