Start A Campaign... Now!

By Dungeon Mastering

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Foreword

There are years of Dming experience in this document. I started writing about the art of game mastering without knowing I would keep it up for 1 year! These are some of the first articles I wrote – they give a good overview of how I approach planning and running games.

I hope "Start A Campaign... Now!" can help you do just that.

Have fun gaming!

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The first game

One of my favorite aspects of D&D is world and campaign creation. The possibilities are endless. The players are excited about the upcoming first game. The inspiration flows.

However, I usually quickly find myself confronted by the implications of my visions of *grandeur*. Who has the time to really create a world, plan a campaign perfectly and logically? It's almost impossible. But it is possible to create and plan enough for you and your players to have fun.

What does *doing just enough* mean?

Here's my failsafe approach to a first game:

1. Let the players know the first game will be almost exclusively character creation.
2. Tell the players they are responsible for determining how their characters know, or met each other, and why they will stick together.
3. Make sure the characters all have *hero potential*.
4. Invent 3 unique, odd, fascinating facts about their world, environment or situation.
5. Get them into a fight as soon as everyone is done with their characters!

The first game is all about the characters

My players' characters will be the center of attention for dozens of games and years to come. They need to be fun to play and fun to watch. That's why I will allow the players to play any character concept they can think of. I'll even give them extra skill points to make the concept work. The only limit to what their characters can be is how they all fit together, as a group. The classes don't matter at all, but the social interactions, the reason

why they are - or will be - an adventuring group is crucial to the survival of the campaign. That's why they have to create their characters together and decide how they know each other together.

I like to supervise the character creation process for each player. I spend 30 minutes to an hour with each player, filling the character sheet. Usually, I end up allowing and suggesting much more than I restrict what the character can be. I like to do that to know the characters better and to reinforce the idea that the character can and will be exceptional.

The characters will become heroes

To become a fully qualified hero, a character needs at least one strength and one flaw. Big ones. It makes the game much more fun. The concept of the hero with one major weakness has been used for decades and it works. I feel this is very important in a game.

Limited world creation

Since this D&D stuff is all about the players, you will design a campaign - and possibly a whole world - that allows them to use their skills and achieve greatness. If you design too much too early you might find that it clashes with an interesting character or group concept. I like to come up with 2 or 3 random facts about the world they'll be adventuring in. I will mention these facts during the opening scene to grab the players attention, give them something to look forward to. But ultimately, the first game is all about...

The first fight

Hey, encounters are a big part of Dungeons & Dragons. Everyone enjoys them. And the players are eager to test their characters abilities.

It's that easy

There you go. A successful, 3 or 4 hours long first game. If the game is not long enough, get the characters into another fight or try to make the fight longer. Don't make a habit of it, but it's acceptable in a first game.

Before the second game

The characters are born. The players are pumped. I usually am under intense pressure to schedule the second game quickly. However, this is when the biggest chunk of my work usually occurs. Once again, I try to prioritize. I want to plan a great game #2. I want to do it quickly. And I don't want to spend all my free time doing it.

Here's what I try to do:
1. Identify 1 skill or ability on each character sheet. I'll plan scenes that give each player an opportunity to use that skill.
2. Plan events that will ensure the characters have will want to pursue the main goal of the campaign, while allowing them to go after their own goals too.
3. Outline the main events or crucial moments of the campaign.
4. Generate 3 dungeon maps and 1 town from [Jarvis Buck's dungeon generator](#).
5. Plan the details of the events that are the most likely to include the players.

Players love to use their characters' special abilities

It sounds obvious, but a lot of the dungeon masters I've known spend more energy to show off the non-player characters abilities than to make sure the PCs use theirs. There's nothing more frustating than facing an NPC when the DM just wants to show off its powers. Deep down, the players know the dungeon master won't let them outmuscle or outwit the villain.

Planning the first act

Most stories, novels, movies follow the three act structure – beginning, middle, and end. Act 1 ends when the protagonist(s) – in this case, the PCs - are committed to a goal and can't back down. I won't get into the details of the three act structure right now, but trust me, it works. As a DM, one of your main goals is to make sure that all the characters are

sucked into the maelstrom of fascinating events that your campaign will be. The key here is that the PCs must be forced into an adventure, forced to commit. They probably have adventuring dispositions, but something they value must be lost or at risk. Something must happen that the characters just cannot ignore.

Campaign draft

I try to outline the whole campaign right from the start. I try to state the key moments in the campaign, however vaguely. For example, if the campaign is about finding a lost friend, here is what my campaign outline will look like:

- Introduce NPC that will become a friend.
- Establish trust with friend
- Establish unconditional friendship, or even love with friend.
- Friend disappear, PCs find clues.
- PCs find out that a captain in the king's army has kidnapped friend.
- Social and bureaucratic conflicts arise because of position of kidnapper
- PCs find and provide clues that captain is guilty, but still haven't found friend
- Before being arrested, captain flees and hides. Life of friend is now in danger
- PCs track down the captain.
- The captain is found and slain / arrested
- The friend is saved.

The great thing about an outline like that is that it is easy to follow, very open. The first act ends when the friend disappears, but the entire act can be a mini-adventure in itself. The circumstances don't matter at all as long as friendship is established.

The dungeon generator

This online application has become an essential tool for me. I use it as a backup. If the players don't act the way I thought they would and decide to explore an avenue I haven't

planned for, I use the random dungeon or town as a backup plan. It makes improvisation more efficient and the players feel that the dungeon master is in controlled, well prepared.

Plan for the most likely events.

That's it. I have my master plan, my backup plan, my player

The second game

During the second game of a new campaign, I try to focus on two things:

- Taking notes
- Enforcing the game rules that are really important to me (usually one or two)

Improvisation and note taking

I like to keep my players guessing and feeling that they can do whatever they want and go wherever they want. I have my game all planned out. I have a few backup plans. But I'll still be making up a considerable amount of information as the game goes along.

I keep a list of random names of people and places (the dungeon generator is great for that). By looking up names in my notes instead of just thinking them up, the players feel like I'm prepared for anything. Over the years, my players have learned to know my DM tricks but they still pay attention and try to remember some seemingly insignificant non-player characters because I write down who they met and I bring them back in the story a few games later.

To be able to bring them back, I need to take notes. I take a lot of notes during the game, mostly when players are discussing in-character. I also like to take a break midway through a game and write down what has happened so far. I do the same at the end of the game. My players usually leave their character sheets with me, so I also have their notes.

Enforcing rules

I don't care much about rules, as long as everyone is having fun. But I sometimes decide to change some rule or add one. My favorite addition to the rulebook is that the players are not allowed to just declare their attack action during a round of combat. They have to

describe it. It makes encounter much more interesting. It can take a while before everyone gets used to it though. I usually also implement a co-rule that states that no negative attack or damage roll modifier will be applied as a result of going for fancier or riskier action instead of the usual "I attack". I've been witness to many great fights since the inception of that rule.

The second game is the perfect time to start enforcing a rule that players aren't used to.

How to prepare a game in 30 minutes or less

I remember when I had a social life.

I was following up on some horror campaign discussions this morning and someone linked to a helpful article on the d20 SRD. I read the whole thing and it was very interesting but very long. Then I thougt *screw this*. I just want to have fun with this D&D stuff. I don't want to spend my week-end preparing a 4-hour game.

I believe it is possible to prepare a 4 hours game in thirty minutes or less. Don't get me wrong - to run a extraordinary game like a horror campaign or single-game stand-alone campaign you'll need to invest a lot more than 30 minutes. But for most weekly games, it would be great to spend less time preparing.

How to prepare a game in 30 minutes or less.

- Generate or use a pre-made map. Gryphon from community3e.com suggested an old Ravenloft map or real castle maps in this article on DM tools. (5 minutes)
- Don't bother with planning the descriptions too much but focus on one element to set a mood. Constant rain. Darkness. A smell. Anything that you usually don't do. Stick with it and your players will feel the tension from the outside element that's gnawing at them. (2 minutes)
- Generic monsters. No time to mess with the latest weirdo from *Monster Manual 7: Underwater invertebrate beasts*. Go for a goblin, a giant, a wild animal. Just bookmark a book or scribble the stats down. (3 minutes per encounter)
- Spice up each encounter with something special. Make it very obvious that there is something different about an encounter. For example, the characters meet a lone gnoll with a shiny silver 2-handed sword. That's unusual. It will keep them on their toes and it's not much work to think of a single weird fact about each encounter. (2 minutes per encounter)

- Add a situation that involves a riddle to the game. Just *google* riddles. There are hundreds of websites on riddles - all ugly as hell apparently, so I don't want to link to them. (5 minutes)
- Reuse old material. I always prepare scenes that I end up not using because my PCs have a knack for the unpredictable. I also reuse maps of places they have already been to and they never notice. (5 minutes to dig up the old stuff)
- Bring back an old problem or villain. You can worry about explaining the return to life of a fallen enemy later. Just bring back the villain (3 minutes)
- Polish the most lacking aspect of the game you just planned. (5 minutes)

What to do in-game to make sure you don't run out of material

- Let the players role-play.
- Encourage role-play by being lively when impersonating NPCs.
- Fudge the monsters' HP if a fight isn't long enough or hard enough. *N.B.: If you are a player, know that your DM will never do that. That was a joke.*
- Give the PCs a mysterious magic item. It is mysterious because even the DM has no clue what it does. The players coud spend hours toying with it trying to figure it out. Eventually they'll come up with a guess about what the item is for and you can just go with the flow and confirm the players' guess.
- Award enough XPs for the characters to level up. That'll eat up 30 minutes or an hour.