

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

There's a common joke I've heard since the publication of this book's predecessor, *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* and it goes something like this:

"I'm too lazy to read your book on lazy game mastering."

Fear not, lazy GM! This book is built for you! This book can be absorbed in several lazy ways. Here's how to get the most out of this book:

- Read this introduction so you know what you can get out of this book.
- Read chapter \$, Top Tips for Game Masters, for the best tips I can offer for GMs new and old.
- Read chapter \$, The Eight Steps of Lazy Game Prep, to review the eight steps of game prep the rest of this book is built around.
- Scan through the book's table of contents to see what topics this book covers – stop and flip to a chapter if it grabs you.
- Scan through the headers of each chapter to get the main points the chapter covers.
- Read the chapter summaries at the end of the chapter's your interested in. Dig in more on any given subject when you want more detail.
- Jump to the Lazy GM's Toolbox in chapter \$. It's a huge chapter of small tools and tips to run RPGs. Scan through the list of tips and jump to the ones that interest you.
- Read the sections that interest you further.
- Maybe grab your favorite beverage and read the whole book.

FOR NEW AND EXPERIENCED GMS ALIKE

This book walks TTRPG game masters, new and old, through the process of lazy game mastering to help you more easily prepare and run awesome roleplaying games. It's built on over 15 years of experience interviewing, surveying, and studying game masters and their processes for preparing and running games. Whether you've been playing RPGs for 50 years or five weeks, this book can help you more easily run great flexible games for your friends. If you're brand new to roleplaying games, read chapter \$, Getting Started Running RPGs. It'll lead you in the right direction.

What Does "Lazy" Mean?

In the context of this book, a "lazy" game master is one who seeks focuses on the most impactful prep and techniques for play that offer the greatest value for the fun of the game. "Lazy" here is about efficiency – focusing on what matters for the game and omitting what does not. Lazy GMs prepare to improvise – gathering the material they need to let the game unfold at the table. For decades, GMs lament about the vast amount of prep they do only to have players veer off from the path GMs lay out. Experienced GMs often come to the following realization: the less prep they do, the more fun the game. This doesn't mean no prep – as you'll see from this book – but focusing our prep on the stuff that leads to fun stories even we can't predict. Prep what you need to run a great game.

WHAT'S NEW?

This book goes hand-in-hand with the concepts in the book *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* published in 2018. Nothing in this book overwrites material in *Return* and you do not need *Return* to get value from this book. Both books offer valuable insights to help you run great games.

Where *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* focused on preparing your game, running your game, and thinking about your game – this book dives into the weeds helping you prepare and run sessions of your favorite tabletop RPG with a focus on expanding our use of the eight steps, understanding how they can be used in different types of common adventures, and giving you a huge toolkit of tips and tricks for running great games. This book builds off of seven years of experience since the publication of *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* – expanding the concepts of the eight steps based on the experiences of thousands of game masters.

THE EIGHT STEPS HAVEN'T CHANGED

If you're familiar with the eight steps for lazy GM prep (see chapter \$ for a summary), the eight steps haven't changed. This book expands the utility of each step and how they relate to different game systems, different GMs, different groups, and different adventure types. We've learned a lot about how those eight steps work and share those experiences here.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is for new or experienced tabletop roleplaying game masters preparing to run or who currently run tabletop roleplaying games. The advice in this book covers a wide range of tabletop RPGs with a focus on fantasy RPGs that include a single game master and several players.

If you're a long-term GM looking to expand to other systems than Dungeons & Dragons or a new GM eager to just get *started* with D&D, this book can help you learn how to stay flexible, keep your prep under control, and run an awesome evolving game with your friends.

FOR NEW GMS

Before you dig into this book you'll want to read and understand the basic rules of the system you choose to run. This book doesn't cover the basics of running roleplaying games. This book gives you a practical framework for building your sessions, adventures, and campaigns. It offers tested tips and tricks for helping you avoid common mistakes that can take other GMs years to figure out on their own. See chapter \$ for more advice for new GMs.

FOR EXPERIENCED GMS

Maybe you're familiar with the eight steps or maybe you have your own style for prepping your games. This book, hopefully, helps you think deeper about your game prep. Maybe you get some good ideas here you can integrate into your own process or the ideas here can inspire you to try out something new and find an approach you like.

Maybe the material here helps you review and refine the system you have – filling in gaps, cutting things you realize you don't need, and polishing up your prep so you feel great doing it and equally great when it's time to run a game. Maybe you find one key tip you love and want to bring into your own game. Maybe you re-evaluate your entire system. However long we've been running games, we can always find something new to try.

WHAT RPG SYSTEMS DOES THIS BOOK COVER?

This book is system agnostic – with a focus mostly on fantasy RPGs that have one game master and one or more players.

Throughout writing this book, we kept several RPGs in mind including Dungeons & Dragons (2014 and 2024), Tales of the Valiant, Level Up Advanced 5e, Shadowdark, Daggerheart, Numenera / Cypher system, Old School Essentials, 13th Age, Shadow of the Weird Wizard, and others. You'll notice the wide range of styles between these games from high fantasy character-focused games to dark and gritty dungeon delving games. The steps and processes in this book not only support this wide range of RPG systems but many of the features of those systems inspired ideas found in this book. The heavy use of random tables for old-school games can shake up our ideas for high-fantasy character-driven games just as well.

INSPIRATION

This book is inspired by the best advice I could find for game masters from several systems. Here's an non-exhaustive list:

- 13th Age
- Apocalypse World
- Blades in the Dark
- Daggerheart
- Dungeon World
- Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition
- FATE Core
- Ironsworn
- Level Up Advanced 5e
- Numenera
- Old School Essentials
- Shadow of the Demon Lord
- Shadow of the Weird Wizard
- Tales of the Valiant

Appendix \$ at the end of this book includes several other books that influenced the ideas in this one.

NEXT STEPS

- Read the next chapter on Top Tips for Game Masters – it's short and it offers the top tips for

running roleplaying games that I've managed to put together.

- Read the chapter summarizing the eight steps if you're not familiar with them.
- Scan the table of contents. Dig into chapters that grab your attention. Read their summaries and dig into the chapter text for more details.
- If you're new to RPGs or want a refresher, read "Getting Started Running RPGs".
- Take a look at the toolkit in chapter 5. See the tools you have available there.
- Look at the random tables and maps in appendix A and B.
- Find a nice comfy chair and read the rest of the book.

TOP TIPS FOR GAME MASTERS

This chapter includes the best tips I have for running great tabletop roleplaying games for GMs new or old. These tips came from hundreds of GMs, dozens of books and thousands of discussions and surveys.

Many GMs learn these tips the hard way after running games for weeks, months, or years in frustration only to come around to these maxims in the end. Yet, these tips aren't universal truths – every one of them likely has a contrary experience – but I think they lead to the most fun games at the table for both GMs and players.

LET THE STORY UNFOLD AT THE TABLE

You don't define the story of an RPG adventure during prep. The story occurs during the game itself. The more you expect things to go a certain way – or *plan* for things to go a certain way, the more disappointed you'll be and the more unbalanced you'll feel when things go in a surprising direction.

Instead of pre-planning or expecting a particular story, let the story unfold at the table. Focus your prep on the components you need to help the story take shape as you describe the world and situation for your players and your players choose the actions of their characters.

BUILD SITUATIONS AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS

One of the greatest joys of a game master is to be surprised by the events of the game itself. Instead of building pre-defined scenes with expected directions and outcomes, set up situations and let the characters interact with them. Get comfortable improvising the reactions of the world as the characters act. In each scene you consider, ensure you include several meaningful choices for the characters and opportunities for the characters to get involved.

FOCUS ON THE CHARACTERS

The characters are the heroes of your story. Be on their side. Keep them foremost in your mind when thinking about the game. What matters to them? What do they want? What choices can they make? What situations make them look cool?

Be the characters' biggest fan. Embrace their successes, lament their failures. Do not be their

antagonist. You are not the enemy or the opposing side. You are the antenna, drawing this world of fantasy to the table. You are a facilitator, helping stories unfold during the game and those stories focus on the characters.

PREPARE TO IMPROVISE

Focus your preparation on the tools and materials that help you put the game together at the table when running it. Avoid fragile adventure scenarios that require the characters to go only one way or the whole adventure falls apart. Prepare for your game, run your game, and look back at what material helped you and what can be omitted. Split your prep into pieces you can put together in different ways depending on how things go in the game. What tools help you improvise during your game? Take note of them and keep them handy.

PAY ATTENTION TO PACING

Good pacing keeps our games exciting – with players on the edges of their seats waiting to find out what happens next. Bad pacing can make everyone feel miserable or like they want to go to sleep. Pacing is more than just keeping the action fast-paced, though. It's about the oscillation between upward and downward beats (see Upward and Downward beats in chapter \$). Good pacing is about knowing how to move things forward when they slow down, knowing when it's time to give the characters a break, or knowing when it's time fan the flames. Watch the clock, watch the body language of your players, and focus on the tools that help you change the pacing of the game to make it as fun as possible.

FOCUS ON YOUR NEXT GAME

Only one game matters – the next one you run. Our creative minds can run wild with ideas for big four-year campaign arcs. Sometimes this helps give us a direction for a campaign (see chapter \$ on lazy campaign building) but things change depending on the situation in the game (and out of it). Focus your attention on the specific things you need for the next session you're going to run. Worry about the session after that when you're done with this one. Focus on what you need to feel comfortable sitting at the table (virtual or physical) surrounded by your friends and running a fun game.

REINFORCED THROUGH PREP

You'll find through-lines throughout the rest of this book connected to these maxims. How we prepare our game and how we run our game often ties back to these mantras. These concepts can stand firmly in our mind but how we use them is what really matters.

Onward.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Consider these top tips from many different GMs with centuries of combined experiences running tabletop roleplaying games.
- Let the story unfold at the table.
- Build situations and see what happens.
- Focus on the characters.
- Prepare to improvise.
- Pay attention to pacing.
- Focus on your next game.

GETTING STARTED RUNNING RPGs

This chapter is for brand-new game masters or for experienced game masters who want to offer practical advice to new GMs they might know.

This book won't teach you how to run roleplaying games, but I can give you a path to help you get started. This chapter gives you a roadmap to help you pick up the skills, experience, and tools you need to run your first game. If you're already experienced, this chapter might fill in some gaps in your own path or give you advice you can pass off to new GMs.

CHOOSE AN RPG SYSTEM

Before you run a game, you need to choose a system. Many choose the latest version of Dungeons & Dragons – currently the 2024 / 2025 5th edition *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual*. You might choose another system depending on what you and your friends choose to play.

When considering a system to run, it's worth knowing what you and your players seek in an RPG. Here are some categories and definitions to help you select an RPG system and describe it to your group:

Genre. In what sort of world and overarching narrative does your RPG take place? Common genres can include high fantasy, dark fantasy, apocalyptic fantasy, science fantasy, and others. Outside of fantasy you have science fiction, horror, urban, and so on. Some RPGs are directly based on common fictional worlds like Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, and others. Different genres can include different themes as well – dark fantasy, pulp fantasy, or light-hearted silly antics all play differently. Discuss these genres and themes with your players or bring one to them that you're interested in trying out.

Game System. What system does a given RPG use? Examples include 5e (the core rules for D&D 2014 and 2024 and other 5e-based systems), d20 (a larger pool of games that typically use a 20-sided die for their core resolution mechanic), Powered by the Apocalypse (the story-based system popularized by Apocalypse World), and many others. You may already know what system you want to run or you may want to investigate several RPGs to see what systems they offer.

Kitbashing Your Own System

You may find that you have a preferred system you like to run and begin the long-practiced art of house ruling your own system. I encourage you to do so! You can learn more about house ruling under “House Rules” in chapter 5 (the toolkit). Find components you like from your systems of choice and bring them to your own game. You can bring many small rules and sub-systems into your game completely on the GM side, using them again if they work and throwing them aside if they don't. House rules on the players' side can be trickier. Changes you make can be permanent and require getting buy-in from your players. Find components of various systems you like and bring them into your game when they suit the game you want to run. See the Lazy GM's Toolkit in chapter 5 for a huge list of small tools, tips, and tricks you can bring into any system you run.

Rules Complexity. Is your ideal system lightweight where characters are fast to generate and the game focuses on only a few core mechanics? In these lightweight games, most of the game comes from the back-and-forth conversations between the player and the GM. Or is your ideal game mechanics heavy or crunchy where characters and their interactions with the world have a lot of mechanics and much of the game involves rolling dice and making checks to see if you succeed or fail? Lightweight games often work well for newer players and shorter-run campaigns while more complex games often work well for advanced players and longer campaigns.

Character Role. What role does the character fill in the world? Examples include folk-heroic (the character is like other people in the world – they're just the one to have picked up a sword and headed into a cave), high-heroic (the characters are heroes in the world, even early on in the game), and super-heroic (the characters are unique in the world and powerful at all points in the game). The character's place in the world also tends to describe how dangerous the world is. Folk-heroic games tend to be more dangerous. High-heroic and super-heroic games typically have longer character arcs and thus greater character resiliency. While character deaths happen in high-heroic games, it's generally expected that the characters live throughout the campaign. Folk-heroic games also tend to spend more time on inventory, encumbrance, lighting considerations, and rations than high-heroic

games which hand-wave many elements of basic survival for the larger heroic story going on.

Gameplay. How are actions and decisions resolved? Is your ideal game more player testing where the GM describes the situation and, based on how the player describes their character's actions, determines results? Or does your game lean more towards character-based skills – focusing on the character's mechanical capabilities, abilities, attributes, and skills? Games with robust skill lists lead to more rolling to determine outcomes where lightweight games with only a few attributes tend to focus more on the players' descriptions of their characters' actions.

Combat Style. Do you prefer games with more tactical combat where characters and monsters are represented with miniatures or tokens on a gridded combat battle map or do you prefer more narrative or theater of the mind gameplay in which distances and measurements are abstracted?

Answering some or all of the questions above can help you select the ideal RPG for you and your group.

Try Other Systems

You need not choose only one system. Instead, try out a few systems and see what you and your group like. You might think you or your group won't dig one particular style of game and then find out you really like it when you run it. The same goes the other way – a system you might think you and your group will love might turn out not to resonate the way you thought. You can often convince your group to try out different systems by suggesting you all try a new system out for two or three sessions – enough for you all to get a feel for it without abandoning whatever system you typically run. Running other systems has the added benefit of expanding your GM knowledge and gives you ideas you can bring to other games you run.

CONSIDER STARTER SETS

Many RPGs have starter sets intended to get you up and running quickly with the system you choose. These starter sets or starter adventures help you understand how roleplaying games play out and the mechanics of the specific roleplaying game you choose. Even if you *have* experience with roleplaying games, starter sets and starter adventures are just as fun as more “advanced” adventures and campaigns.

Some starter sets cost money but many RPGs have *free* starter sets. RPG companies know there's a lot of competition and many of them offer free adventures and limited sets of the rules to get you started. Starter sets are fantastic ways to dive into the hobby.

READ THE RULES

Once you've selected a system, read enough of the rules to get an understanding of how it plays. You don't need to memorize the whole rulebook but you want to know enough to get you and your players started. You can also ask your players to help you adjudicate the rules as you all figure it out.

Counting On Your Players for Rules Help

If you're trying a lot of different systems or you and your players are new to the system you're playing, ask your players to help you understand the rules. Let your players know that you're all responsible for understanding the rules of the game. If you have one or more players in particular that have a knack for understanding rules, ask them in particular to help you adjudicate the rules of the game. Otherwise, ask all of your players to help you find and understand the rules of the game you're playing. This trick not only helps you offload the understanding of the rules but also shows your players that you're all playing together – it isn't you versus them.

FIND PLAYERS

Finding players and maintaining a regular RPG group is the hardest obstacle in this wonderful hobby. Chapter 5 includes tips for building and maintaining a solid RPG group that hopefully plays regularly for years to come. Give yourself the time and allocate the energy required to bring players together to enjoy these fantastic games.

WATCH HOW IT'S DONE

Since roughly 2015, liveplay games have grown exponentially in popularity. These games used to be a handful of friends recording their game in their basement to now selling out massive venues in major cities so tens of thousands of people can watch a group play an RPG.

The growth of liveplay games also marked the first time people learned about RPGs by watching other people play online instead of learning about

it from their family and friends, leading to huge growth in the hobby. Many players learned what RPGs look like from these videos – and so can you.

Depending on the system you choose, you can almost certainly find videos of people playing and talking about that system. Watch these videos to get a handle on how these games work and what they feel like outside of just the rulebooks.

Once you have your hands around what games look and feel like and a general understanding of the rules of your chosen system, you're ready for the next step.

READ OTHER PEOPLES' EXPERIENCES

The rise of online communities in the 90s also greatly expanded the experiences GMs can share about the games they play and the tips they have. Like streaming games, these shared communities exploded in popularity. Reading the experiences of other game masters also new to the game you plan to run helps you leverage the vast wealth of experiences of others. You'll learn where the tough parts are and you'll get ideas about how to approach your own game.

KEEP THINGS SIMPLE

One of the most common problems I see with new GMs is the immediate desire to go big and change how things work without yet understanding how these games play at all. Before you run off with your massive homebrew world that fundamentally changes the nature of RPGs, start with the basics. Start with the starter set. Don't try to change anything yet. Look for pre-generated characters your players can use. Stick to introductory characters. Basic adventure premises are just fine and lots of fun. Facing goblins in a cave has been a fantasy trope that worked well for fifty years and it's still a lot of fun. Your players, through their characters, make your game unique – not your zany big ideas about the world.

Seek to understand how RPGs run before you start to change things.

GATHER YOUR TOOLS

Your chosen RPG likely has particular tools you need to run: dice, pencils, character sheets and so on. You can find example GM toolkits in chapter \$ (the Lazy GM's Toolbox).

If you're playing online seek out the tools you need to run your game online: voice and video communication, a text chat, a way to share images if needed, and maybe a virtual tabletop if you're using maps and tokens. You can find more about running games online in chapter \$.

LEARN TOGETHER AS YOU PLAY

Another common misconception about playing RPGs is that GMs should teach the game before you play the game. Often GMs spend far too long explaining everything on a character sheet and every rule of the game before actually playing. Instead, teach as little as you need to get started and then leap into the game. Teach the rules of the game as they come up during play instead of trying to teach everything beforehand.

You can also ask your players to help you with the rules. If they have the rulebooks handy, ask them to help you look up rules as you need them. Just because your role has the word "master" in the title (an unfortunate word in several ways), you are not the total authority on the game. Asking your players to help you find and adjudicate rules puts you on the same ground as them – a group of friends playing a game together.

Try Short Campaigns

We often hear about GMs running long multi-year campaigns but if you're just getting started, consider running short focused campaigns to get a feeling for your system of choice, the story you choose, and to help your players get a feel for their characters and the game with little commitment. If you decide to turn a short campaign into a longer campaign, you can certainly do that, but don't worry about aiming for a short campaign of four to twelve sessions instead of a big multi-year commitment. Many groups, unfortunately, never complete a long campaign and a shorter campaign with a solid ending is often better than a long campaign that sputters out before it ends. See chapter \$ (Run Lazy Campaign Adventures) for more on running short or long campaigns.

GET STARTED

The best way to learn an RPG is to run it. Just do it. It'll get messy. You'll make mistakes. You might have to figure things out as you go. That's ok. Millions of players over the past 50 years have been in your shoes learning for the first time. You

can share in the experiences of thousands of other GMs but nothing beats your own experience actually running a game, and then the next one, and then the next.

Go forth. There are other worlds than these.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Get started with RPGs by choosing a system, finding that system's starter set, and reading the rules.
- Find one or more players to play with (see chapter 5).
- Watch videos of people playing your chosen game.
- Read and share the experiences of other GMs playing your system of choice.
- Keep things simple. Don't immediately leap to building your own vast world and changing all the rules – focus on a simple starting adventure and let your creativity and that of your players shine at the table.
- Gather the tools you need to run your game.
- Learn together with your players as you play.
- Get started. Don't wait for a perfect understanding of the game. Gather some friends and start playing.

MAXIMS OF THE LAZY GAME MASTER

\$ Is this chapter necessary? I think we can cut it given the top tips we have in chapter 2.

It helps to have a core understanding of the philosophies you bring to your game. Below are several philosophies I think are particularly useful – and not always obvious – to keep in mind when preparing and running your game.

These philosophies come from several fantastic RPGs and other books of RPG advice – particularly from games like *Apocalypse World* and *Dungeon World*. Others are shared from the experiences of hundreds of game masters.

Be the Characters' Biggest Fan. It's easy to fall into the trap that the GM is the enemy of the characters. Countless tropes reinforce this destructive idea. Instead, be fans of the characters first. You want to watch them do cool stuff just as much as they want to do cool stuff. Put the characters first in your mind – it's their story we're enjoying.

Leave Blanks. You don't need to fill everything out to run a game. In fact, it's beneficial to leave yourself, and your players, room to let the details flow in as the story progresses. Some of the best elements of fiction are those hidden in the shadows – the stuff we can't see or hear but know is out there. We all remember stories we've read or watched where our own minds filled in the blanks only to be disappointed when the creator filled them in a different way. Leave blanks in your world, campaigns, and adventures.

Address the Characters. It's easy to slip out of the fiction of the game and talk to your players instead of their characters. Stay in the fiction by talking to the characters. What would they do? We have other tricks we'll cover to help you and your players stay in the world but this is a good one up front.

Describe, Don't Define. A hulking scarred menace with a rough tattoo of a demon prince etched into half of his body wielding a rusted cleaver the size of a picnic table is a lot scarier than "ogre 2". Use descriptions instead of definitions to keep your players' imaginations always working.

Think Through the Eyes of Your Villains. What are they thinking about? What are they doing right now? What plans do they have? What quests are they working on? How do they react to the latest actions of the characters? Let the game flow

from the movements of the villains (more on this in chapter 5). Resilient campaigns flow from the actions of the characters and the reactions of the villains. Instead of plotting out a story, think through the eyes of your villains.

Sandwich Mechanics with Narrative. "Your hammer cracks into the shoulder of the skeletal tomb guardian, shattering bone into splinters. Your blow inflicts 14 bludgeoning damage. The tomb guardian roars with ethereal rage." Stay in the fiction of the world by describing what happens in the world, then the result of any game mechanics, and then back to the world again.

Offer Three Viable Options. Give the characters meaningful options – three is a good number -- for quests they might go on, directions as they travel, paths to infiltrate the ruined keep, villains to face. Make every option viable and don't presuppose one choice over the other. Offering three paths gives players meaningful options and forces you to focus on the larger situation instead of a pre-planned set of scenes.

Focus On Your Next Session. It's easy to let your campaign ideas get away with you and start writing a two-year outline for the campaign you want to run. Instead, focus on the one game you know is going to happen – your next one. Follow the eight steps to build the components you need for that game. Use extra energy to think about how the world reacts to their previous actions.

Build From the Characters Outward. The characters are the focal point of the story, the campaign, the world, and the universe. Start where they are and spiral outward. You don't need a 100,000 year history. You don't need a pantheon of 36 gods. You don't need to fill out the details of seven continents. Instead, start where they are – the town they're in, and the infested cellars under the old decrepit windmill on the hill. Fill out the gods the characters might worship or might oppose. Build the town based on the locations they might want to visit. Start from the characters and build two horizons out. What can they see and what will they see when they get there.

You need not embrace every philosophy as a core to your GM being, but it helps to understand your own maxims as you approach your game. Like every piece of advice in this book, take what works for you and build your own approach to prep and run RPGs.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Internalize these lazy GM maxims.
- Be the characters' biggest fan
- Leave blanks
- Address the characters
- Describe, don't define
- Think through the eyes of your villains
- Sandwich mechanics with narrative
- Offer three viable options
- Focus on your next session
- Build from the characters outward

THE EIGHT STEPS OF LAZY GAME PREP

The following chapter summarizes the eight steps of lazy GM prep – a framework to help you prepare for the next session of your roleplaying game and the backbone of the advice in this book. The chapters following this one dive into the details of each step to show you their breadth and depth. Later in the book, you'll find chapters describing how to customize the eight steps depending on the type of adventure you're running.

Use this chapter as your summary and review for the eight steps of lazy GM prep.

Why the Eight Steps Work

The framework of the eight steps of lazy GM prep works well for two reasons. The first is that the framework gives you a clear outline of steps to take to help you prep your games. Most RPGs offer little specific guidance for game prep – they don't want to lock themselves into any one given style. Roleplaying games give us a limitless sea of creativity for the games we run but such wide open waters can paralyze us when it comes to knowing what we should prep and how. The eight steps offer a life preserver in these wide open waters of RPG prep – they give you concrete things you can do to prep for the next session you're going to run. The eight steps also work well for a wide range of RPGs because they focus on the specific elements of the fiction of the game – characters, the session start, scenes, secrets, locations, NPCs, monsters, and rewards. Most RPGs contain these things and; regardless of the mechanics, focus, theme, and flow of the RPG; these eight elements are almost always there. Finally, these eight steps work well because they're flexible. You can tailor each step for the kind of game you're going to run and you can add or eliminate steps depending on what you need to run your game. Much of this book shows you how to customize and tailor the eight steps to fit your style and your game.

WHAT'S CHANGED?

If you're familiar with the eight steps from *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master*, you'll note that the eight steps have not changed. Some have been tweaked, like "select rewards" instead of "select magic items". For others, the differences are in

the details. For example, the scenes step carries several different potential elements of prep and the details of the fantastic locations step expands and contracting to support the type of game you're running. These changes are covered in the chapters for each of the eight steps.

The eight steps have held up since 2018 but what we prep *within* each step can change depending on the RPG we're playing, how long we've been playing it, where our session fits within a campaign, and many other variables. If you're an experienced lazy GM, much will seem familiar but take note of where we've expanded the steps to suit a wider range of games, styles, and situations.

Now let's look at the eight steps.

REVIEW THE CHARACTERS

The characters are the heroes of your game. They're the focus of the lens of the game. They're the actors in our evolving story that truly matter. Thus, we put the characters first in our minds as we prep for our next session. During this step we might review several elements of the characters – their names, backgrounds, classes, stories and character arcs, equipment, mechanical capabilities, dreams and wishes, and anything else we think might plant them in the next session we run. We do this first to guide the rest of our prep in the remaining steps. Guide your prep by asking "who are the characters and how do they connect with the world in the next session?"

CREATE A STRONG START

We have little control over the direction of our games once they're underway but we can decide how the game starts. The start of our session is the one scene where we *know* the setup. This is also our chance to draw the players into the world and get things started with a bang. A strong start is a catalyzing event – something action-focused. The driving phrase for this step is "something happens". Guide your prep by asking yourself "what happens at the beginning of our next session to draw the characters into the adventure?"

What's New?

Each of the following eight chapters outlining the eight steps for lazy GM prep includes a breakout box like this one describing what has been added to

the step since the publication of *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master*. If you haven't read *Return*, you need not worry about these sections. If you're familiar with *Return*, these boxes can point you to new considerations for each step.

OUTLINE POTENTIAL SCENES

RPG sessions are a collection of scenes. Sometimes we have a good idea what scenes occur. Sometimes not. The "scenes" step lets us capture things that *will* happen, things that *might* happen, options we might put in front of the characters, hooks that might draw the characters into the game, and more. The "scenes" step is a great junk drawer to help us capture things we need to string together the events in our upcoming game and lay out the seeds for the game after that. This step can change significantly depending on what sort of session you're running. Guide your prep by asking yourself "what scenes might occur in our next session?"

DEFINE SECRETS AND CLUES

Secrets and clues are, perhaps, the most powerful idea you'll find in this book. Secrets and clues are short pieces of information – usually a sentence or two – that the characters can learn in the next game. Secrets and clues might be bits of history, information about events taking place, details of lost gods, clues about lost treasure, information about notable NPCs – any information the characters (and the players) might find valuable. A key design element for secrets and clues is that **we do not define where the characters learn them**. We improvise their discovery during the game. Characters might learn secrets by studying ancient mosaics on the walls, learning them from NPCs, discovering them in a dream, reading them on dusty parchments, and in many other potential ways. Guide your prep by asking yourself "what ten secrets might the characters learn in the next session?"

DEVELOP FANTASTIC LOCATIONS

Events in our session happen *somewhere*. Every scene takes place in a location. The location might be a room in a sprawling dungeon or at a table in an old inn. We note these locations and what makes them interesting in this step. The amount of detail we include and the resolution or depth we use to denote locations changes depending on

our needs. Sometimes all we need is the evocative name of a dungeon. Other times we want to note several fantastic features the characters can use in a detailed battle arena. Sometimes it's a bunch of one-world or two-word descriptions for potential chambers in a larger dungeon. Like secrets, we abstract locations from its inhabitants (captured in the NPCs and Monsters steps) so we can decide during the game who might inhabit a location based on the evolving story and the pacing of the game. Guide your prep by asking "what fantastic locations might the characters visit in the next session?"

OUTLINE IMPORTANT NPCs

The characters interact with other sentient beings – called non-playing characters or NPCs. In this step, we outline notable NPCs, capturing their names and any details we might need to run them at the table. This might be a few words on their history, appearance, background, or motivations. Sometimes a name is all we need. Guide your prep by asking "what NPCs might the characters meet in the next session?"

CHOOSE RELEVANT MONSTERS

Monsters might be any antagonists in our game but sometimes they're just monsters. Here we list any monsters the characters might run into in the next session. Sometimes this might be a short random list of potential assailants. Sometimes it's the description of the inhabitants of an occupied force. We can include page numbers referencing the stat blocks of our monsters next to the monster's name so we can easily reference them during play. Like the other eight steps, we can improvise encounters by determining which monsters show up in which scenes at which location depending on the circumstances in the world, the pacing of the game, or even a random roll of a die. Guide your prep by asking "what monsters might the characters face in the next session?"

SELECT REWARDS

Characters often get some sort of reward for their efforts. It might be renown. It might be a magic item. It might be big piles of gold. In this step we outline the rewards the characters might acquire. Treasure often matters a lot to players and its worth our time to prepare what treasure they

might acquire. Sometimes we do so randomly. Sometimes we pick it depending on the situation. Sometimes we ask the players for wish-lists of what they might want to acquire. Like the other steps, we can decide when and where to include these rewards depending on what happens in the game. Guide your prep by asking “what rewards might the characters receive in the next session?”

Where to Write Your Notes

One of the major advantages of the eight steps framework is that it’s completely tool agnostic. Whether you use online software, a word processor, a notes app on your phone, or a physical notebook – prepping with the eight steps supports whatever tools you prefer to use. Consider using tools that fit the simplicity and speed the eight steps offer. The more complicated your tools, the harder it is to prep. I find that a simple digital notes application I can share on my laptop and phone works fine for me and I still print my notes on a single sheet of paper for every session I run. In times past, I wrote my notes in a small pocket notebook I took everywhere and I could still do so easily today. The main message of the eight steps – preparing what you need to stay flexible and improvise during your game – equally fits when choosing the tools we use to write them down. Keep things simple and focus on your game.

- Review the characters
- Create a strong start
- Outline potential scenes
- Define secrets and clues
- Develop fantastic locations
- Outline important NPCs
- Choose relevant monsters
- Select rewards

A FOCUSED, FLEXIBLE, AND CUSTOMIZABLE FRAMEWORK

The true value of the eight steps for lazy GM prep is to have a handle on what you need to do to prepare your game. You need not follow these steps rigidly. Hold on with a loose grip. Use the steps that help you prepare your game. Ignore steps that don’t help you. Change the steps and what you include in them to support the next session you’re going to run.

The eight steps are intended to help you get a handle on your prep. They’re a solid flexible checklist to focus the limitless possibilities of our RPGs into manageable preparation for the next game you’re going to run. These steps serve you, not the other way around. You owe them nothing. They exist only to help you run your game.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The following outlines the eight steps for lazy GM prep.

REVIEW THE CHARACTERS

Who are the characters in your game and what connects them to the events of the next session?

The player's characters (often referred to as just "characters" or "PCs") are the most important characters in the universes we create. Step one of our eight steps focuses our attention on these characters. Who are they? What do they want? What do their *players* want? What draws them into the game, the world, and the adventure you're going to run? What secrets might they know or learn?

We can focus on lots of things when considering the characters. Above all, we focus first on the characters to draw them into our minds for the rest of our prep. As we prepare the other eight steps, we can think about how the characters relate to the material we prepare in those steps. What might matter to them?

What's New?

(\$ we got feedback that we might not need these breakout boxes. Do we?)

This step now includes several other considerations when reviewing the characters such as character-focused secrets, motivations, reward wish lists, mechanical considerations, campfire tales, and more.

Here are several things we can consider when reviewing the characters:

THEIR NAME

One game I like to play is just trying to remember the names of the characters in my game off the top of my head. If you're really focused on your game, this probably isn't hard. If you're running a lot of games, though, it can be tricky. Being able to remember the names of the characters is a great test to measure how well you're keeping them in mind when prepping your game.

A name also tends to remind you of other things. When you remember their name, you remember some of their background, some of their motivations, some of their drives and ambitions. A character's name is a doorway to the rest of their existence.

If you're starting a new game or have trouble remembering who is playing who, you might want to put the player's name next to each character's name in your notes.

CHARACTER TRAITS

What race, species, or ancestry is the character? What's their class? What's their defined background? We can spend time thinking about the crunchy makeup of a character just to get all of that into our heads as well.

What Should You Write Down?

What character information should you write down and where do you keep it? How you record character info can vary depending on your preference. You might keep a specific character page or file that you update with things like new character abilities acquired while leveling up, acquired magic items, responses to campfire tales, stars and wishes, and other info. You don't need to add things to character file every session but it's worth reviewing regularly. Each session it's worth listing each of the characters in your session notes and jotting down any character-based secrets and clues or other character-focused material you want to keep in mind for the upcoming session. I like to have a single file with headings for each of the characters' names and bullet points of character info I collect from session to session. I check it every few sessions when I need inspiration.

CHARACTER BACKGROUNDS

When thinking about the characters, it helps to think about their role in the world. Where did they come from? What role do they fulfill in the world. Understanding the characters' backgrounds helps steer the hooks and drivers for the game to come. The longer your campaign goes, the less you need to remember these backgrounds. Instead, you can use them to fuel character-focused secrets – because of X, they know Y. See chapters \$ and \$ for guidance on working with your characters to build their backgrounds and motivations during character creation when running your session zero.

CHARACTER MOTIVATIONS

When we're already in a campaign, it's often easy to know what motivates the characters. But early on it can help us to think about what sort of hooks motivate the character. We can start with three big and easy character motivations:

- Greed
- Discovery

- **Altruism**

Do the characters want to find treasure and complete quests? Do they love the thrill of discovering things no one else has ever seen? Do the characters want to save the world, or at least the parts of it they can save? These three motivations hold a lot of weight to get the characters interested in doing things. You can reinforce these motivations during your session zero (see chapter \$).

Here's a longer list of potential character motivations if you need more inspiration on how to motivate characters to follow through with their adventures.

1. Revenge
2. Personal discovery
3. Fulfilling a family obligation
4. Seeking an heirloom
5. Burying a secret
6. Running from something
7. Hunting someone
8. Fulfilling a vow or prophecy
9. Building an organization
10. Dethroning tyranny
11. Revealing a secret
12. Curing a curse
13. Saving someone
14. Building a reputation
15. Protecting fellow adventurers
16. Ending a threat
17. Acquiring a trophy
18. Proving one's self
19. Escaping from somewhere
20. Enacting justice

CHARACTER SECRETS AND CLUES

One useful question to ask when reviewing characters is "what secret or clue might tie this character into the next session?".

Unlike larger secrets covered in step 4 (see chapter \$), you know this secret ties directly to the character and draws them into the world. This secret may come up organically when running the game or it might just help you connect the character to the situation in the world.

Here are some example character secrets and clues:

- **Andrew Armageddon** – The lich Velenda Thrayde gave the death knight Karavon the key to the Temple of Astaria.
- **Kendal Olamaer** – You get to face your nemesis, Karavon, once again, like you did a thousand years ago.
- **Chris Catastrophe** – Not all of the Mages of Kartan left the service of the Nameless King.
- **Lana** – Death permeates the Dread Necropolis. There are fungi here from many worlds.
- **Ozara** – The arch of Astaria is a holy relic in an unholy place.
- **Lloris** – Death follows the Dread Necropolis from world to world like a plague.

How these secrets come up depends on how the game goes. You might reveal these as the characters explore the world. You might reveal them as a second-person narrative ("Chris, because you are a former mage of Kartan, you know that not all mages of Kartan left the service of the Nameless King"). You might call for a knowledge check if it makes sense that the character might struggle to remember this bit of information (and it's not vital that they succeed).

Secrets are my Current Default

Of all the things I can review when I review the characters, tying the characters to the session through secrets is my default. Depending on the type of session I'm running, I might review other things like current magic items or what types of monsters each character excels at facing, but I default to character-focused secrets most of the time when I prep my games. This might change, of course, as my own style changes, but it's what I've been doing for a few years now.

CHARACTER MECHANICS

What does the player like seeing their character do in the game? What cool game mechanics does the character have? Do they love fireballing big hoards of monsters? Do they love standing toe-to-toe with great big brutes? Are they fantastic at stressful negotiations or picking locks? Take note of the elements of gameplay and mechanics players love to see in action and think about how you can showcase these mechanics and traits in the game. If you don't know what they are, ask your players what they enjoy doing the most and write it down in your larger character file. We want the characters to look awesome, so let's

keep their best traits in mind while the rest of the game's world begins to take shape. See "Lightning Rods" in chapter \$ for more details on choosing monster types the characters love to battle.

STARS AND WISHES

Every few sessions we can ask our players what they're enjoying in our current game and what they want to see more of. This concept, called "Stars and Wishes" by Lu Quade, is a positive way to get feedback about the game and gain insight into how the players think about it. When we ask this question, write down the results in our character notes so we can review them before future games and update them as our campaigns move on.

CAMPFIRE TALES

An in-world version of Stars and Wishes is an idea we call "campfire tales". During a scene of rest in your game, ask each player to describe what their character is thinking about – where they've come from, what they've done, and what they're thinking about the future. These in-world narrative scenes are a great way for the players to define their characters, learn about the *other* characters in the group, and give you information to help you steer the adventure. Read more about campfire tales in chapter \$ (exploration) and in the Lazy GM's Toolkit in chapter \$.

Several Benefits from a Single Tool

Campfire tales are a great example of a powerful concept for great Lazy GM tools – single tools that provide multiple benefits. Great Lazy GM tools serve several purposes at once. Campfire tales, for example, helps players define their characters, connects characters to one another, helps players better understand the other characters in the game, and gives you information to help you build your campaign. When building out your Lazy GM toolkit, take special note of the tools that provide several benefits in a single package. Chapter \$ includes tons of GM tools many of which include these multiple benefits.

POSSESSIONS AND WISHLISTS

What items does the character possess? What magic items do they wield? What items are they looking forward to?

Magic items in our typical fantasy d20 games offer huge direct benefits to the characters and yet are almost completely in the hands of the game master to distribute. During our character reviews, we might think about what items they have, what items they want, and what items might be cool for them to pick up. We'll talk more about this in "Selecting Rewards" in chapter \$.

NOT EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE

You don't need to go through all of these elements every time you go through step 1 of the eight steps. Instead, ask yourself what you should review for your characters for the next session you're going to run. Sometimes your character review might just be writing their names down. Sometimes it might be considering what secrets connect the characters to the session. Sometimes you'll want to audit their current possessions and think about what they might want next. Every step of the eight steps includes a lot of flexibility to focus on the things you need to run your next game – reviewing the characters is no exception.

Put the characters in your mind and build a session to draw them into tales of high adventure.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Begin your prep by writing down the names of the characters. Test yourself by seeing if you remember all the character names by heart.
- Keep note of the character's species, class, background, motivations, and other notable mechanics.
- Each session ask yourself what secrets might tie the character to the session you're going to run.
- Consider the mechanical features of each character. How might these mechanical features manifest in your next session? How can you show them off?
- Use "stars and wishes" and "campfire tales" to better understand what the players are thinking about and what their characters are thinking about. Write the results down.
- Think about your players, what drives them and how you can ensure each of them has a good time at your game.
- Keep track of possessions and wishlists.

- You don't need to track all these elements every session. Focus on those that help you prepare your next game.

CREATE A STRONG START

What strong start will draw the characters and your players into your next session?

GMs have little control over the direction of the game except in one place – where the game begins. We decide what opens the game, what draws players into the world we share, and what propels things forward.

Whether running a single-session game or beginning in the middle of an ongoing adventure, a strong start moves things forward.

What's New?

This chapter expands on the Strong Start with additional discussion and examples of adventure hooks and more examples for strong starts.

We can define our strong start with a simple question:

“What happens?”

What happens at the beginning of the session to pull the characters into the story and our players into the session? The more action-focused this strong start is, the more momentum it has.

Strong starts differ from the beginnings of some typical adventures where a stranger comes up to the characters at a tavern and starts in with a monologue about the strange things going on at the old ruined watchtower out of town. Such introductions are common but not exactly action focused.

Instead, a beaten young man stumbles into the tavern shouting about the dead coming back to life just as a recently deceased hunter stumbles in after him, clawed hands outstretched and ragged teeth hoping to sink into the young man's throat. Now we have some action!

TWENTY STRONG STARTS

Here are twenty example strong starts you can use as a model or as inspiration when thinking about how to start your session.

1. A wounded NPC comes to the characters with harrowing news.
2. Someone is being chased.
3. Something horrible bursts from the ground.
4. A grim omen appears in the sky.
5. The weather takes a dark turn.
6. A booming voice addresses the characters.
7. Something explodes.
8. A mutated creature appears.
9. The characters fall into a sinkhole.
10. An airship crashes.
11. A sinister ruin bursts from the earth.
12. A villain shows up for coffee and a chat.
13. Visions overtake a religious character.
14. A grim statue animates.
15. Assassins attack.
16. Bandits ride into town.
17. A wizard rides into town demanding fealty.
18. An NPC animates into a werewolf and attacks an old friend.
19. The sun eclipses.
20. Swarms of rats burst from the cellar.

Adding Strong Starts to Scenes

In the next step of the eight steps, we outline potential scenes. Obviously, the strong start is one of those scenes. If all we need is a single line to define our strong start, we can put that line in the “scenes” step, helping us consolidate and simplify our notes. The first scene is our strong start.

SINKING IN THE HOOK

Adventures have hooks – a reason for the characters to follow the path of the adventure. Maybe it's gold, maybe it's a drive to help those who cannot help themselves, maybe it's the thrill of discovery of the unknown.

The strong start is the place to plant in that hook if one does not already exist and it does so through direct action. Undead crawl out of the ground seeking to devour humanoid flesh and it all started when that strange glow emanated from the ruined watchtower out of town. If only a band of heroes would travel to the tower and end the threat – they'd be heroes of the town, discover more of the land's strange history, and receive a nice reward for their efforts.

Hooks require motivations (we might say “bait” if we're going to stick to the fishing metaphor) – a reason for the characters to follow the path laid out in front of them. It helps when we establish these motivations in the characters before our game even begins. In chapter \$ we talk about building a campaign one-pager for a campaign – even a small campaign – in which we establish

character motivations clearly before the players begin *building* their characters. This might seem heavy handed but it helps ensure the group all has a reason to stay together and go on adventures. This built-in group motivation helps us easily define hooks.

When writing our Strong Start, we might add a line called “Hook” just to reinforce the hook we want to place in front of the characters during this start.

TWENTY HOOKS

Here’s a list of twenty adventure hooks to draw characters into the game. Use them as models or inspiration for your own hooks:

1. Someone’s missing and needs to be recovered.
2. A holy artifact needs to be recovered.
3. An unholy artifact needs to be destroyed.
4. Evil needs to be cleansed.
5. Great treasure needs to be recovered.
6. A dangerous creature needs to be destroyed.
7. An villain needs to be eliminated.
8. A location needs to be cleared out.
9. A mysterious prophecy needs to be uncovered.
10. A murderer must be found.
11. Undead must be laid to rest.
12. A weapon must be forged.
13. A powerful force of magic must end.
14. A planar gate must be closed.
15. An outerplanar creature must be contacted.
16. A monument must be cleansed or destroyed.
17. A key must be found.
18. Battle plans must be stolen.
19. A plot must be uncovered.
20. A village must be protected.

STARTING WITH A FIGHT

The easiest strong start is a combat encounter. Sometimes, you might be able to end a session in a continuing campaign *before* a major battle. This builds in an easy strong start. You know where your next session is going to begin and you know it’s going to be action packed.

Starting with a fight has a few potential issues worth noting. First, if you end your game on a cliffhanger, you risk that the same players won’t be able to enjoy that battle in the following week. If your players have a tendency to be in and out of one game or the next, you might run a more episodic style of game where every session has a beginning, middle, and end – sort of like a TV serial. Personally, even with a rotating group of players, my players recognize that sometimes we end before a big battle they might have to miss.

Battles take time, however. If you start with a big battle, you eat up a fair bit of the time for your session. Smaller battles take less time but any battle is usually longer than a scene without combat. Take note of the the time a combat encounter takes when thinking about your game and considering a strong start with a fight.

Most of the example strong starts listed earlier in this chapter give examples of non-combat strong starts.

IN MEDIA RES

Latin for “in the middle of things”, filmmakers often use this concept to start movies off with a bang. We can take this concept into our adventures as well. In the classic D&D adventure *Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan*, the adventure begins with the characters already in the deep unexplored woods before the ground opens up beneath them, dropping them into the depths of the ruins. There’s no tired conversation with an old sage at the village inn – you’re already there and now you have to find your way out.

We can start our own adventures in a similar way, skipping the origin story and jumping straight into the action, letting the players know ahead what drew them to this moment and what motivates them to follow the rest of the adventure. If you’re running a single-session adventure and time is tight, starting as close to the heart of the adventure as possible gives you and your players more time for adventuring and less time spent getting to the good parts.

Think about how you can cut your session closer to the adventure’s heart and away from the boring introduction.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Outline a strong start to get the characters and players into the story.

- Include a hook to pull characters into the rest of the adventure.
- When in doubt, start with a quick fight.
- Begin as close to the action as you can.

OUTLINE POTENTIAL SCENES

What scenes might happen in the next session?

This question leads you to jot down a handful of potential “scenes” the characters might engage in during the next session you run. We can hold a lot of different things in this step and it can change significantly based on the kind of session we’re going to run.

What’s New?

Since *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master*, I’ve expanded this step into what I call the “junk drawer” for the eight steps. We can pack a *lot* of different things into the “scenes” step. This chapter shows the versatility of “scenes” and how we can include adventure hooks or other elements of the other steps into the “scenes” step.

A LIST OF FIVE POTENTIAL SCENES

One easy model for this step is to list out five scenes that might occur in your next game. You can include the “strong start” from the previous step as one of these scenes. If we presume a typical scene lasts 45 minutes on average, that covers just about four hours of game time. How many players you have in your game, the RPG you’re running, and the type of scenes you’re including may change that time but a 45 minute loose benchmark is a pretty solid bet for most groups, games, and situations.

Don’t go overboard with your descriptions in this step. A sentence or two should be about it. Remember that you’ll list most of the details in the other steps of your prep.

THE IMPORTANCE OF “POTENTIAL”

I’ve used the words “potential” and “might” a lot in the past few paragraphs and I want to underline them for a moment. We really have no idea what’s going to happen in our game much of the time and that’s the beauty of tabletop RPGs. We’re playing to see what happens – just like the players are. The rest of the eight steps, and many of the other topics in this book, are intended to give you tools to help you improvise as the game takes different directions. This “scenes” step is no different.

Things change in our games. This outline of “scenes” isn’t a map. These scenes won’t always take place like we think. Your list of scenes gives you loose ideas to help you get your hands

around the game and feel comfortable running it. Be ready to change scenes, toss out scenes, and add new ones as the game evolves at the table.

LINEAR VERSUS PARALLEL SCENES

Sometimes we might have a list of five scenes with an expectation that one takes place after the previous. Other times we list out potential options knowing the characters will pick one of several options. We probably don’t want to build out a large decision tree of stacking options. We’re only able to run so many scenes in a game session anyway. Recognizing our game can take a lot of turns, a detailed network of potential scenes likely shatters the minute it hits reality.

Keep your list of scenes relatively simple with a focus on helping you get a handle on what might happen in a session.

INCLUDING OTHER STEPS IN SCENES

Sometimes, when it makes sense, we can include components of the other eight steps in scenes. Scenes might involve NPCs, locations, or monsters. If we highlight, underline, or bold these elements in our notes, they can serve us just as well in this step as they can in their own dedicated lists. Maybe you break out the “strong start” into its own section or maybe you just list it among your other scenes. You don’t need to replicate information in your notes if it doesn’t help you and keeping your notes brief makes them easier to reference during the game. On the other hand, sometimes listing components separately makes it easier for you to reference during the game. Choose the approach that works best for you.

ADVENTURE HOOKS & NEXT STEPS

In the same way a strong start might contain a clear adventure hook, such an adventure hook might make more sense in our “scenes” list. Writing “Hook: Save Kalaslurr” in our scenes can help us reinforce what draws the characters into the adventure.

We can also keep a list of “next steps” in our scenes. Where might the characters go next when they’re done with this current adventure? What options or quests lay ahead? Listing out three “next steps” or “quests” in your scenes helps you get a handle on where the characters might go next. Putting these options in front of the player

before the end of your next session lets you know where you can focus your prep time for the session after that.

Adventures versus Sessions (\$Note, this can go in lots of chapters)

This book uses the phrase “adventures” and “sessions” in different contexts and that’s worth clarifying. “Adventures” are self-contained stories in which the characters often focus on quests, explore locations, and accomplish goals. Adventures often take more than one session to complete. Campaigns are collections of adventures surrounding an overarching campaign goal (discussed more in chapter \$). Sessions are the specific allotments of time you spend with your players at your next game. The eight steps of the lazy game master focus on sessions, recognizing that some of the material you prepare may bleed into your next session, or help you prepare your next session, as the characters navigate an adventure.

Blockquote Break

Moving Session Prep Notes from One Session to the Next (\$Note, this can go in lots of chapters)

As you prepare your notes for your next session, you may find material from your previous notes still applies. Sometimes you only reveal five of your ten secrets and clues. Other times you filled out a whole adventure location that takes three sessions to fully explore. It’s fine (and encouraged) to move material from previous session notes to your new notes to save you some time. It’s also worth preparing new session notes for each session even if you feel like lots of parts of your last session notes still apply. Writing a fresh set of notes ensures you have what you need for the session to come and helps you reinforce it in your mind.

A FLEXIBLE WORKSPACE

Think of the “scenes” step in your eight steps as a flexible bin where you can put just about anything you need to help you keep your game on track. The “scenes” step is intended to help you get your hands around the session you’re about to run. Most often this includes a list of the scenes you plan to run but you can include anything here that helps you get your hands around your game.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Write down the five potential scenes that might take place in your next session.
- Scenes may or may not occur. Don’t hang on too tightly to the scenes you outline – they’re likely to change during the game.
- Scenes may be linear or might involve multiple parallel paths. Don’t try to map out a huge network of decisions. Focus on the scenes you need in your next game.
- Don’t go overboard with scenes. Keep them to a sentence and don’t write down too many.
- The “scenes” step is a flexible place to keep track of adventure hooks or next steps for future sessions.
- If desired, you can include information from other steps in your scene listings like the strong start, NPCs, monsters, and locations.
- Use scenes as a flexible step to help you keep your hands around the session and make you feel comfortable running it.

DEFINE SECRETS AND CLUES

What ten things might the characters discover in your next session?

Secrets and clues are likely the most unique and powerful tool in the eight steps of lazy game mastering. The question above helps you focus on specific information you can write down in your prep notes to help draw the characters and players into the game.

Here are some important criteria for secrets and clues:

- They're short – often just one sentence long.
- They're relevant to the characters in the next session.
- They're abstract from their method of discovery.

Short, relevant, abstract.

What's New?

This chapter expands the topic of secrets and clues adding types of secrets, methods of discovery, and how characters uncover secrets and clues.

TEN EXAMPLE SECRETS AND CLUES

Below are ten example secrets and clues taken from my actual session notes:

- The Nameless King used the Dread Necropolis to destroy worlds – Arkus being his first – a land dominated with temples in his honor.
- Abandoned ziggurats to Father Grimskull lay on the dead desert sands where the Dread Necropolis originally resided. The Dread Necropolis wants to return to its dead home world.
- The Nameless King was often worshipped as a god. The NK's desire to reach godhood is what brought the god Io to deploy his celestial children and form the Army of the Blue Star.
- The Death Knight Karavon summoned Skrathe, the Lord Below. He sent Skrathe and his assassins to kill Astaria and break the curse of the Nameless King. They've already gone through the arch.
- Astaria's monastery contains some of the most powerful celestial weapons ever used in war across the multiverse.

- The Nameless King forged four powerful swords for his servants. Karavon wields the sword Nightbringer. Skrathe wields Sunburner. Zillian has the sword Bloodletter that once belonged to the Erinyes Kryvus Redvein. The Blackfire Blade was once known as Duskfire, and once wielded by the balor Ulventa.
- Several mages of Kartan began secretly waiting for and aiding in the Nameless King's return. One of these is the archmage **Velenda Thyrade**.
- **Thrade** killed **Gyles Freerunner** but he was resurrected at great expense because the city knows how beloved he is to the characters.
- Doom comes to the lands surrounding the City of Arches. It is as though the lands known the inevitable is coming.
- **Nomios Longthumb** was the archmage who built the Arch of Astaria. He got his plans from Velinda Thrade.

They're not perfect, of course, but they give you an idea what secrets can look like.

Ten Imperfect Answers Instead of One Perfect Answer

Coming up with ten secrets and clues can sometimes feel a lot. Don't let perfect be the enemy of good as Voltaire once supposedly said. One way to come up with a good idea is to try to come up with ten ok ideas and pick from your list. Often you'll find your mind stretching into areas you don't typically think about. Some of the best secrets show up in the final three. When you're having trouble coming up with an idea, come up with ten. You can also fall back to random tables which you'll find throughout this book and especially in appendix \$. Roll on the tables to break your brain out of the mundane.

REPLACING PAGES OF LORE

Secrets and clues help you avoid writing or delivering a manuscript of lore for your world, whether it comes from a published setting or one you made yourself. Instead of losing yourself and your players in deep histories, nested factions, massive pantheons, and the rest of things that define your world – secrets and clues help you focus on specific elements that matter to the

characters in the next session of your game. Instead of writing paragraphs of text, focus on the one sentence of information a character might discover in the next game.

Think of secrets and clues as treasure the characters acquire during their adventures – often more valuable than money.

TYPES OF SECRETS AND CLUES

Though simple in construction, secrets and clues can cover a wide range of information. The only core criteria for a secret is that they're short, they're relevant to the characters in the next session, and the characters can discover them in multiple ways.

Here's a list of twenty types of secrets and clues:

1. Recent events.
2. Information about a notable NPC.
3. Villainous plans.
4. Ancient or recent history.
5. Location of a valuable magic item.
6. Recent movement of a faction.
7. Information about a god.
8. Secret plots against local leaders.
9. Lore or attributes of a monster.
10. Information on a relic held by the characters.
11. Conflicts between warring nations.
12. Dark portents.
13. Uncovered conspiracies.
14. Historical information about locations or people.
15. Previously unknown information about a character.
16. Locations of secret entrances.
17. Information about particular traps.
18. Information on different paths while traveling or exploring.
19. Information about differing dungeon passages.
20. Different potential approaches to a troublesome NPC.

METHODS OF DISCOVERY

We keep secrets abstract from their method of discovery so we can include them wherever they make sense when running our game. This makes

secrets and clues especially valuable as a way to **prepare to improvise**. It doesn't matter what path the characters take, we can always drop in useful secrets when it makes sense in the fiction of the game. How characters discover secrets is a common question. Here are twenty ways characters might discover secrets:

1. From an NPC.
2. From a character's memory.
3. From a piece of old parchment.
4. From a fresco on a wall.
5. From a dream or portent.
6. From the details on a weapon or piece of armor.
7. From a tabard or banner.
8. From ancient crumbling statues.
9. From an old dusty tome.
10. From a slain villain's journal.
11. From a ghost or spirit.
12. From the study of rocks or plants.
13. From the study of physical construction.
14. From a previously studied religious text.
15. From the aggregation of multiple clues.
16. From local folklore sung in song.
17. From old coins or currency.
18. From the behavior of villains or monsters.
19. From a newspaper, one-sheet, or town crier.
20. Gossip overheard at a local tavern.

DO YOU ROLL OR JUST GIVE OUT SECRETS?

Another common question is whether a GM gives out secrets freely or requires that the characters work to discover it. The answer is, of course, it depends. It depends on whether the information is something the character could figure out without much effort or whether it would require some extra work. Depending on your system's handling of ability or skill checks, you might call for a check and, based on the results, give out no information, partial information, or all the information.

Don't lock vital information behind a single check, lest the group lose the whole game on a bad roll of the dice. Instead, shift how they can discover vital information by moving it to a different location or giving them enough to keep moving forward without revealing everything.

RUNNING MYSTERIES WITH ABSTRACT CLUES

Mysteries can be a troublesome adventure model – something we cover more in chapter 5 on adventure types and chapter 6 on troublesome adventure models.

Secrets and clues, however, give us a different way to run mysteries. In a typical mystery adventure, the characters must find out certain information at a certain time in a certain place. This makes mysteries brittle. What happens if the characters don't follow the adventure in that way?

Abstract secrets and clues can help. We can put vital information or chains of clues, in our notes as secrets and clues and drop in the right clues in the right situation during the game. This way lets us react to the path the characters take while investigating the situation. We can drop in the clues that make sense given the context of the situation instead of hoping the players figure out the right info at the right place and right time to discover the clues they need. Dropping abstract clues in during the game turns a brittle adventure into a flexible and resilient one that gives players many ways to uncover the mystery.

REFRESH SECRETS AND CLUES EVERY SESSION

Refresh your list of secrets every session. Don't overwhelm yourself by building a database of previously unused secrets. If a particular secret was really important, it'll come back. On average, you might find that you only reveal about half of the secrets you prepare but that's fine. You always want to have more secrets than you might need so you can be sure you won't run out of interesting lore for the characters to discover in the session.

When you prep, it's fine to go back, look at previous secrets, and move them into your current notes if they're still relevant. Some older secrets may no longer be relevant based on what happened in the game. Rewrite them or throw them out for new secrets. Other secrets from your previous notes might still be useful if discovered. You can move those useful secrets forward into your next session's notes. Moving secrets forward is a fantastic lazy trick to making your prep easier.

SECRETS SERVE YOU

Since writing about secrets and clues in *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master*, I've continually gotten questions about whether GMs are using secrets "right". The answer is always "it's right if it helps you." Secrets serve you. All of the concepts in this book serve you. You do not owe secrets, the eight steps, this book, or your own prep notes anything. They all serve you and the game you run for your friends. Refine how you prep your game based on what helps you run a great game.

Some secrets are huge in scope. Some are tiny. Some are found in vast dreamscape universes. Others are found on little slips of paper under the table in a bar. Hopefully the guidance in this chapter gives you an idea how secrets can serve well as a lightweight bit of prep to aid to improvisation but you always get to decide what's working well for you.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Write down ten secrets and clues based on what the characters might learn in the next session you run.
- Secrets should be relevant to the characters, short, and abstract from their method of discovery.
- Secrets help you deliver the lore of your game and setting in an easy-to-prepare way you can deliver to your players during your next session.
- Sometimes characters discover secrets naturally, sometimes they must make a check. Don't lock vital secrets behind checks that could fail.
- Use secrets to give clues to a mystery however the characters decide to investigate it.
- Refresh secrets every session, throwing irrelevant ones out and moving relevant ones forward.
- Secrets serve you. You owe them nothing. Use secrets and clues to help you prep and run great evolving RPG sessions.

DEVELOP FANTASTIC LOCATIONS

What fantastic locations might the characters witness or explore in your next session?

Every scene in our game happens *somewhere*. Like the other eight steps, we separate locations from monsters, NPCs, scenes, and the rest so we can build scenes as they come up when running our games.

Also, like the other steps, what we prepare for “fantastic locations” depends on what we need, the type of session we’re going to run, and where we’re at in our campaign (or if we’re running a campaign at all).

Locations can be lots of things. For this discussion, we’re going to break fantastic locations down into two types: big locations and small locations.

Big locations represent the backdrops of significant scenes. These locations often include notable features like an ancient monolith discovered in a clearing while traveling through the woods or the spired throne in the sanctum of your adventure’s main villain. Often we only need a handful of these larger locations for a single session of our game.

Small locations might be each room in a larger dungeon. We don’t need deep evocative descriptions for every chamber in a 30 chamber dungeon. Instead, we might need descriptions of a handful of major chambers and the rest we can fill out with shorter one- or two-word descriptions (assuming we need descriptions for all of them to begin with).

We’ll cover both of these types of these locations as we continue.

What’s New?

This section discusses the different types of locations – some being small rooms in a larger complex while others are large set-pieces. It also includes example locations, monuments, descriptions, and origins to help inspire ideas for your own fantastic locations.

CHOOSE A MAP

If you have the opportunity, showing your players maps of their locations draws them further into the world. Maps can fall into several categories:

- Overland maps

- Towns, cities, and villages
- Floor maps for known locations like inns, taverns, or manors
- Dungeon maps
- Combat encounter maps

Showing maps to your players is easy when playing online. For in-person games you either have to show them pre-printed maps, print maps yourself, or show them digital maps as well.

Some players have difficulty visualizing locations without a map – a condition known as aphantasia. Even a quickly drawn map on a wet or dry-erase blank poster map (see *Lazy GM Tools* in chapter \$) helps all players better understand the layout they’re in. You can also draw abstract or zone-based maps (see “Zone-based Combat in Chapter \$) for visualizing locations without concern for fixed distances. Basic hand-drawn dot and line maps can show locations and the routes between them, helping players remember where they’ve been, what choices they made, and where they’re going.

You can find maps in lots of places including:

- Published adventures or campaign settings
- Map creators who share their maps online
- Programs that can generate maps
- Subscription services that offer maps as rewards

Use Existing Maps

Many game master guides include instructions or sets of random tables for building your own dungeons and many GMs love drawing out their own dungeons. For us lazy game masters, I recommend using and re-using existing maps as often as possible. Start with a theme for your location. Before you fill in the details, look for a map that fits the theme. Then build around that map. You can find sites with hundreds of maps at the link for online resources on the copyright page of this book. Look for maps that include an engaging design described earlier.

WRITE DOWN AN EVOCATIVE LABEL

In your prep notes, instead of writing lengthy descriptions or using terms that are too generic, use an evocative label to define a location – big or small. It’s not just a “pantry”, it’s a “rotted pantry” or “infested pantry” or “magical pantry”. By adding a little flavor to our locations, we define them better in our minds without having to write

huge descriptions. Simple labels save time but still offer more than a single word.

These short evocative labels work for locations big and small. When we want to fill in a larger location – we can add more details.

Fantastic, Functional, and Familiar

Dungeons & Dragons 4th edition and 5th edition designer, Rodney Thompson, once described a model for describing locations with “three Fs”: fantastic, familiar, and functional. What features of this location evokes the fantasy of this world we’re creating? What makes the location familiar to us and our players? What makes it functional so characters can actually do things here? Keep the three Fs in mind when defining locations.

SCENE-BASED LOCATIONS

When our locations form the backdrop of a major scene, we likely want details beyond just the evocative name. In addition to the evocative name, we can include three notable features. These three features helps make the location unique and includes details the characters might use in the scene.

This larger location description serves well for locations you *know* the characters are going to visit like a waypoint along an overland or underground journey (see chapter \$), a notable location in a city the characters are going to visit, a boss’s chamber near the end of a dungeon, or any other major location likely to act as the centerpiece for a scene you’re going to run. Think of them like the backdrops to a scene in a play. What’s behind the actors?

Here are five examples of scene-based locations:

The Burning Monolith. Pool of molten rock, charred corpse-strewn trees, thick choking smoke.

The Shattered Tower. Lighting bolts, floating stones, titan’s iron maul.

The Secluded Pool. Dancing faeries, giant flowers, strange starscape.

The Dragon’s Claw. Massive bones, shrine to Mother Avanta, shattered weapons.

The Burial Barge. Jotun skeleton on throne, deep saltwater pool, ghost-touched urns of the dead.

Each of the three features listed in these example scenes adds to the fantastic, familiar, and functional aspects of the location – giving you and your players interesting features to build off

of as the scene expands during the game.

Characters can try to climb or teleport up on the floating stones. They can work to avoid the lightning bolts. The party’s barbarian can try to pull up the titanic maul and hammer their foe.

Mixed with NPCs, monsters, and interesting situations; these large scene-based locations act as an evocative backdrop for the scenes we run in our games.

MONUMENTS

For larger scene-based locations, we can use a monument as a focal point for the location – the one big feature of the location in which our scene takes place. Monuments work well for overland exploration, chambers found while delving in the caverns beneath the ground, or the focus of a large chamber in a dungeon. Monuments also work well as the set piece for random encounters. *Where* an encounter takes place is often as interesting as the encounter itself.

Here are twenty monuments to inspire your own ideas.

1. Sarcophagus
2. Obelisk
3. Orb
4. Bone pile
5. Skull
6. Megalith
7. Pillars
8. Throne
9. Statues
10. Well
11. Orrery
12. Effigy
13. Arcane circle
14. Spire
15. Altar
16. Pit
17. Fountain
18. Archway
19. Cage
20. Brazier

WHO MADE IT?

We can further define locations and monuments by tying them to particular creatures. Here’s a list of twenty fantasy-based species and origins to inspire your ideas on who built a monument or

location. You can tailor this list to focus on the species of your system of choice.

1. Human
2. Elven
3. Dwarven
4. Halfling
5. Gnomish
6. Tiefling
7. Dragonborn
8. Orc
9. Goblinoid
10. Undead
11. Celestial
12. Fey
13. Elemental
14. Giant
15. Fiendish
16. Unseelie fey
17. Aberrant
18. Shadow
19. Ethereal
20. Abyssal

These species-based locations might inspire us to add secrets and clues to these monuments – something the characters can learn by interacting with the monument.

MAKE YOUR OWN FACTION LIST

(\$ This might be repeated elsewhere and I don't know if this is a good place to put it – Some recommend moving it to NPCs)

Build your own custom list of factions to flavor locations, items, monuments, quests, NPCs and other aspects of your game whether you're running in a published campaign setting or your own homebrewed setting.

Here's an example faction list for the *City of Arches*, a high-fantasy city sourcebook I wrote in 2024.

1. Prince Arazuun – Slain demon prince.
2. The Black Hand – Criminal network and god of assassins.
3. Elvenya – Forgotten god of the starlit elves.
4. God-Queen Sett – Queen consort of the Nameless King.
5. The Hunger of the Void – Alien-touched kraken of the black waters.

6. Ibraxus of Choul – Demon prince of corruption.
7. Karigulon – Demon prince of cannibals and lycanthropes.
8. Lady Straythe – Vampire queen of Castle Nightfall.
9. The Lower Twelve – Forgotten fell gods.
10. Mother Avanta – Red dragon protector of kobolds.
11. The Nameless King – Former tyrant of the City of Arches.
12. Ourboran – Moon of oblivion.
13. Predalion – God of travel and trade.
14. Sulin – God of light.
15. The Three Sisters – Goddesses of knowledge, life, and death.
16. Vithra – The serpent king.
17. Vrys – Fallen celestial.
18. The World's End – World-destroying tarrasque.
19. Xereth – Dragon lich of the Nameless King.
20. Xrake – Fallen fiendish blue dragon.

You might make separate lists for current factions, historical factions, or gods to better fit the sorts of locations and monuments you intend to flavor.

These custom faction lists make your adventures and campaigns unique – tying locations and events to the lore of your world with little work required.

Vehicles of Secrets and Clues

Locations, large and small, are fantastic vehicles to reveal secrets and clues. Your faction list and origins can help narrow down what types of secrets a location might reveal, but you don't need a reason to decide that a given location might expose a secret or clue if it makes sense during the flow of the game. Locations can have layers of history – from recent events to ancient history. Characters who explore these locations can reveal these secrets – letting the whole world come alive as they explore it. This is why improvising the method of discovery for a secret and clue is so powerful – as the characters explore, they learn more of the world around them even if you had no idea what part of the world they would decide to explore.

EFFECTS

When we're filling out bigger locations, the features of these locations might have an effect on those in the area. Here's a list of twenty effects you can apply to a location – big or small:

1. Smoky
2. Acidic
3. Bloodied
4. Burning
5. Frozen
6. Poisonous
7. Necrotic
8. Thunderous
9. Ringing
10. Lightning
11. Radiant
12. Shadowed
13. Oozing
14. Ethereal
15. Whispering
16. Windswept
17. Drenched
18. Diseased
19. Crystalline
20. Silvered

Location Features and “Moves”

In games using the “Powered by the Apocalypse” game engine, world features have “moves” – things they can do as the characters navigate the world. When we're thinking of the features of a location – big or small – we can think about them from the perspective of what they do. Lighting arcs down, bloody steps fill those nearby with a blood rage, ooze-covered locations burn those who try to touch or cross them. When adding features, think about what those features can do.

TYING MECHANICS TO LOCATION FEATURES

When you're building out locations with notable features, you want to have some mechanics on hand from your chosen RPG system to help those features *do* something. These mechanics can include:

- Ability or skill checks to manipulate them.
- Damage they might inflict to characters or adversaries.

- Damage types based on the flavor of the elements.
- Effects and conditions.

Find cheat sheets of these sorts of mechanics so you can improvise the mechanics of a location when the characters visit it. If you know the characters are going to a location, it may be worth your time to prepare the mechanics for the features at a given location. How much damage does that spinning blade pillar do? How hard is it to channel the holy energy out of the shattered saintly statue? How do the characters avoid the poisonous stench emanating throughout the room?

ROOMS IN DUNGEONS

Unlike larger encounter locations that build the backdrop of big meaty scenes, sometimes the characters travel through larger areas with a larger number of smaller rooms. We often call these “dungeons” even if they aren't built to imprison folk. Here are twenty examples of larger areas often found in fantasy adventures:

1. Academy
2. Beast's Den
3. Castle
4. Caverns
5. Derelict Ship
6. Dragon's Lair
7. Forgotten Vaults
8. Grove
9. Manor
10. Mines
11. Necropolis
12. Prison
13. Sewers
14. Sunken Grotto
15. Theater
16. Thieves' Den
17. Tower
18. Unholy Temple
19. Village
20. Wizard's Lair

Each of these larger areas contain several smaller rooms and chambers we want to define. We don't need to fill out every individual chamber with the same level of detail we use in our major scene-based locations. We might

develop scene-based locations main chambers and boss rooms, but for the rest of an adventure location, we can just use evocative names – often just two words.

Engaging Dungeon Map Design

When selecting or drawing your own maps for your games (see “Use Existing Maps” below), ensure you build or choose maps with a design that engages players. Most commonly attributed to the late dungeon designer, Jennell Jaquays and popularized by Justin Alexandar, engaging maps often include several of the following features: - Multiple entrances – two or three ways to get in. - Changing elevation – the location isn’t a single flat plane. - Multiple loops – traveling through the location doesn’t follow a single linear path. - Secret passages – the characters can find fun ways to “hack” the location. - Secret rooms – the location includes secret areas the characters might use to rest or find treasure. - Multiple level changes – locations with multiple levels have several different ways to traverse levels including wells, deep cracks, sinkholes, or stairwells.

As an example, here’s a list of twenty chambers we might find in an unholy temple:

1. Bloody vesting rooms
2. Ghost-filled audience chamber
3. Feasting hall
4. Priest dormitory
5. Morbid gallery
6. Grim fountain
7. Profane shrine
8. Preparation room
9. Artifact museum
10. Blessed armory
11. Torture chamber
12. Summoning circle
13. Sacrificial well
14. Dungeon cells
15. Hidden treasury
16. Isolation chamber
17. Sacrilegious library
18. Private altar
19. Unholy ossuary
20. Reliquary chamber

Because we don’t know where the characters might go, keeping these descriptions short fills in the location and lets us improvise as needed

without a lot of work. If you’re using a map (likely for such a larger area), write down these labels right on the map. Otherwise, jot them down in your notes.

You can find twenty example room descriptions for each of the twenty adventure locations listed above in appendix \$.

THEMES

Sometimes you don’t have time to fill out every chamber for an entire location even of those descriptions are only one or two words. Instead, you can write down a quick list of themes – abstract concepts or chamber descriptions not associated to specific locations in the map. Use these themes help you improvise chambers and corridors when running your game.

Here’s an example set of themes for an unholy temple:

Unholy Temple Themes: Sacrifice, blood, macabre art, claw marks, bloody drains, demonic depictions, rusted weapons, unholy scriptures, grim poems, black fountains.

During play, as the characters explore a location, consider these themes and improvise the purpose of a chamber as they enter it. Use the chamber descriptions found in appendix \$ for further inspiration.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Fantastic locations can be big or small – large set-piece locations or individual rooms in a larger adventure location.
- Use evocative names to draw your imagination into the world and make the location unique.
- For larger scene-based locations, write down the evocative name and three notable and useful features.
- Include monuments in larger locations. Flavor monuments with origins, factions, and effects. Monuments make fantastic vehicles for secrets and clues.
- When it makes sense, apply mechanical effects to locations or monuments. Find the tools to improvise these effects in your RPG of choice.
- For larger locations with lots of smaller rooms – write down an evocative name for each room and save the extra features for large rooms you know the characters will visit.

- Even easier, write down themes for a larger location and use those themes to improvise specific chambers as the characters visit them.

OUTLINE IMPORTANT NPCs

What NPCs might the characters meet in the next game?

A good chunk of the RPGs we play involve the characters interacting with NPCs – friendly or otherwise. In this step we outline what we need to run these non-playing characters in the next session we’re going to run. We split out NPCs in our prep so we can drop them into our session wherever they make sense even though NPCs might be tied to specific scenes in specific locations. NPCs also make fantastic sources for secrets and clues.

Even in the darkest dungeons, ancient spirits might rise from the bones of the dead to impart useful clues to adventurers in need. In just about every session its worth having one or more NPCs the characters can talk to so they’re not just fighting monsters from beginning to end.

Whats’ New?

This chapter goes into greater depth into the potential traits you might note for NPCs.

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

Different GMs need different things when prepping and running NPCs. Some GMs get away with just the NPC’s name and improvise the rest. Other GMs seek details on physical appearances, mannerisms, backgrounds, goals, and more. These differences in preferred prep for NPCs bring us to a very important point:

You only need to write down the things you can’t remember or improvise during the game.

If it helps you to note the NPC’s appearance, mannerisms, and goals; by all means, write it down. But sometimes a name is enough.

Speaking of names...

NAMES

Names are hard. It’s hard to remember them. It’s hard to come up with them in the first place. One of the most valuable aids a GM can keep on hand during the game is a **good list of names**. You can find a big pile of random names here in this book in appendix \$.

If you don’t have a list of names handy, you can instead make one up on the fly. One way to do this is to take a common name that jumps into your head and change a letter or two. Robert

becomes Vobert. Jonathan becomes Ronavan. Michael becomes Richael. It takes a little bit of bring processing power to build a name like this but if you get used to it, you don’t have to rely on your list of names as much as you might otherwise.

Sound a name out before you throw it out in front of your players. Speak it aloud. Aeineaivael seems like a great elven name until you try to say it out loud.

Another trick is to avoid NPCs that start with the same letter. You and your players can stumble easily when Nirove and Navan and Netel are the three main NPCs in your campaign. Change up first letters of the NPC names you’re choosing.

CHARACTER TRAITS

There are several traits you might consider to fill out an NPC. These include:

- Species
- Job, class, or role
- Alliances
- Appearance
- Dress
- Notable characteristics
- Background
- Goal
- Quirks
- Social approach

You don’t need all of these traits for any NPC. Consider which traits help you run that NPC at the table. I often stick to a name, who they are, and what they want. I can usually improvise the rest.

Many GM guides include tables for generating NPCs from species, traits, appearances, and the like. You can find a set of tables for generating or inspiring your own NPCs in appendix \$. Use these lists during prep or play to bring your NPCs to life.

Consolidating NPCs In Your Prep Notes

When writing out your prep notes, you might cover NPCs in the other steps of your notes. If you already wrote the names of NPCs in your strong start, scenes, or secrets and clues; you may not need to write out a separate NPC section. Bold their names or underline them so you can quickly reference NPC names when running your game. You can decide if its more valuable to list NPCs in their own section or include them in your notes for the other steps.

CHOOSE CHARACTERS FROM FICTION

A quick way to build a rich NPC is by picking one out from your favorite fiction. Choose a character from a movie, TV show, book, or video game you like. Think about their appearance, goals, and mannerisms. Shake them up by switching their gender. It's a quick lazy trick to surf off the effort other creators spent building out fantastic characters.

Doing Voices

How to best speak in the voice of an NPC is largely a topic outside the scope of this book but I'll offer a suggestion. I find listening to audiobooks helps me hear how a single narrator can play multiple characters with multiple voices, including those beyond the gender of the narrator. If you're in a car listening along, you can practice the same technique.

THINK THROUGH THE EYES OF NPCs

Think through the eyes of your NPCs to make them come alive at the table. Who are they? What do they want? Put yourself in their shoes. Act as they would act. Even if you're not comfortable jumping into an NPC's voice, you can still think as they think and react as they would react to the characters. Sometimes you don't know what direction the characters are going to take and no decision tree or flow chart matches what happens at the table. If you get into the mind of the NPC, you can react just as they would react in the world you're creating. Thinking through the eyes of your NPCs gives you great flexibility to go where the story goes and is a solid part of **preparing to improvise**.

Use NPC Portraits

Whether playing online or in person, it can really help to show pictures of NPCs along with their names. Keep these handy from session to session, keeping players connected to NPCs through the visual representation of that NPC. Share pictures in your online tool or print NPC portraits when playing together physically.

PLAYER-DRIVEN NPCs

Let your players decide which NPCs are important and which can fall away. About half of the NPCs you drop into your campaign might be improvised and some of those improvised NPCs

might end up being your players' favorite ones. Embrace them. Let NPCs fall away when the players lose interest in them and reintroduce those the players remember and seem to resonate with.

NPCs and Factions

In chapter 5 (Fill Out Your Lazy Campaign) we look at building factions to flesh out the world – good, bad, and shady. When outlining important NPCs, consider whether any of your notable NPCs are tied to any given faction and whether they connect to the motivations or quests of that faction.

WHEN TO ACT AND WHEN TO ROLL

A common question among GMs, new and old, is when to go with the flow of the dialog between characters and NPCs and when to roll checks to see if an NPC is swayed by the characters. The answer is, it depends. If you feel like a roll can lead to an interesting outcome no matter the result, it might be worth rolling to see how a conversation turns. Another answer is to roll when chance plays a part in the in-world conversation.

You can also ask players to roll if their approach wasn't as good as you think their character would do. Not every player is comfortable playing a charismatic character and they shouldn't be punished for it – using the mechanics of their character can help.

Don't create a two-way gate where players must both succeed on a check *and* perform well in roleplaying. Let it be one or the other. Use a roll to sway how a conversation might be going or build up a character's in-world performance even if the player isn't a fantastic roleplayer. If a player roleplays well on their own, don't also require a check to succeed.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Write down what you need to run NPCs in your next session. Sometimes this might just be a name.
- Keep a good list of names handy during the game for improvised NPCs. Find tricks for coming up with names quickly during play like choosing a common name and changing a letter or two.
- Consider what traits you need to prepare to fill out an NPC for play. Don't go overboard.

- Choose characters from fiction to quickly fill out appearances, mannerisms, goals, motivations, and approaches.
- Think through the eyes of your NPCs. Who are they? What do they want? How would they react to the characters? Get into their minds and act as they would act.
- Use rolls to build upon a player's roleplaying. Don't gate success behind both a good roll *and* great roleplaying.

CHOOSE RELEVANT MONSTERS

What monsters might the characters face in the next session?

Characters often face and fight monsters in fantasy roleplaying games. In typical fantasy RPG prep, GMs often prepare scenes which include monsters already picked out in both number, composition, and position. Too much preparation can lead to your game feeling static – just a series of pre-determined scenes the characters walk through from one to the next. Instead, in this step of the eight steps for lazy game mastering, we list potential monsters the characters might face so we can improvise encounters based on the situation in the world and the current pacing of the game.

What's New?

This chapter includes descriptions of the use and value of random rolling to help you improvise encounters during the game.

CHOOSING RELEVANT MONSTERS

Depending on the session you're running, you'll want to make a list of potential monsters the characters might face. Most monster books give some indication of the ecology of various monsters. This ecology can help you determine which monsters make sense given the location the characters explore. Monster books might also give you ideas for what monsters tend to lair with other monsters.

The key question to ask is "what monsters make sense for this location and situation". If you have a good answer for that, you're good to go. If you need more, going through your favorite monster book and picking out monsters that fit the situation can help – as can random encounter tables or monster lists by region.

Think about the reality of the locations you're using in your next session. If it's an ancient unsealed tomb, you're not likely to find living monsters who eat and drink. If it's a well-maintained citadel, you're not likely to have strange beasts wandering around.

Your list of monsters doesn't have to be very long. Six to ten different monsters is probably enough. When you've selected your monsters, write down their page numbers in your chosen monster book in your notes or add hyperlinks if you're using digital notes. Give your

future self a break by making it easy to look up monsters during the game.

Save Time. Use the Book

Some GMs painstakingly copy over stat blocks for monsters into their prep notes. Instead, note the page number of a monster's stat block in your notes and use the physical or digital monster book to look up that stat block when you need it. Doing so cuts down your prep time and breaks you away from gravitating towards only those monsters you've bothered to write down ahead of time. Use your physical books. That's what they're there for.

UNDERSTAND MONSTER BALANCE

Different RPGs have different systems for balancing the difficulty of monsters to the characters. Sometimes these systems are simple – match the number of characters at a given level with a number of monsters at a given challenge rating and you have a hard encounter. Other times they can be complex, with experience point budgets determined by character levels used to "buy" monsters of various experience point values.

Other systems eschew any sort of balance between characters and monsters – focusing encounters strictly on what number and type of monsters make sense for the given situation or based on random rolling.

Whatever system you run, spend time understanding the relationship between character power and monster difficulty, assuming your chosen system has one.

Typically, you'll want to build encounters with monsters based on the fiction – including both easy and challenging encounters as they make sense – and fall back to your understanding of the relationship between monster difficulty and character power to ensure you're not inadvertently running a deadly encounter.

THE LAZY ENCOUNTER BENCHMARK FOR 5E

\$ We may cut this for space and reference it instead.

Here's an example monster difficulty benchmark for 5e-based games including D&D 2014, D&D 2024, Tales of the Valiant, Level Up Advanced 5e, and other 5e-based games and monster books.

This Lazy Encounter Benchmark matches character levels against monster challenge ratings to determine a threshold where an encounter might be deadly. Here's how it works:

An encounter may be deadly if the sum total of monster challenge ratings is greater than one quarter of the total of character levels – or one half of character levels if they're 5th level or above.

A single monster might be deadly if its challenge rating is greater than the average level of the characters, or 1.5 x the average of character levels if the characters are 5th level or above.

This is a loose benchmark and many variables can sway it one way or another such as the synergy of the characters, the experience of the players, the magic items the characters wield, the specific circumstances of the encounter, how well rested the characters are, and so on.

But this benchmark helps us have a loose gauge of potential encounter power. When I run 5e games, I write this benchmark result down in my "monsters" section so I can keep it in mind when I'm building or running encounters.

Different systems have different benchmarks similar to this one while others have no benchmark at all. If your system has one, spend time understanding the relationship.

MONSTERS, SITUATIONS, AND PACING

Two variables help you determine which monsters to include in your game and how many – the situation in the world and the pacing of your game. You often can't know these two criteria before you run your game – both evolve as the game plays out at your table.

Situations describe what's happening in the world and in the location. Guards move around. Monsters wander about. Creatures hear things going on and go to investigate. The world changes as the characters explore it. We don't have to arrange all of the monsters in all of the chambers ahead of time. We can improvise where monsters might be given what's going on.

The pacing of our game also changes as we run it too. If the characters are having a hard time facing a series of difficult challenges, throwing another hard battle at them can feel punitive and frustrating. If they're having too easy time, the game can get boring. Thus, we can shift the pacing of the game to ensure players don't feel either frustrated or bored by changing the type or number of monsters they face next.

For example, if the characters just got beaten up by black puddings in the sewers beneath the hobgoblin fortress, they might find themselves entering a room with two sleepy hobgoblins playing cards. If they had an easy time navigating the chambers below, they might run into a squad of hobgoblins practicing their phalanx maneuvers.

You don't need to have your hands on this dial all the time, but changing the number or type of monsters to fit the pacing of the game can make the game more fun for everyone.

World First, Pacing Second

These two dials – what makes sense in the world and what the current pacing of the game feels like – are powerful tools but they're sequential. Start first by asking what makes sense in the world given the current situation and then decide if you need to tune the results to fit the pacing of the game. The game feels more real if fiction dictates what happens next before you change that fiction to fit the fun of the game.

LETTING THE DICE SHAPE THE SITUATION

Some RPGs often fall back to dice rolls to determine the situation. GMs often roll to see which monsters and how many monsters might appear in a scene or situation. You might also roll dice to determine distance, attitude, and behaviors as well. You can use a table-less oracle die to determine things like distance, attitude, and behavior instead of needing to reference a table – the higher the roll, the more extreme the situation is (or far away if measuring distance). To do so, roll a six-sided die. The lower the result, the less "extreme" the result.

For example, let's say you roll a 6 sided die to determine attitude. A 2 might be monsters who are relatively friendly or curious. A 5 means monsters that are pretty suspicious and hostile.

Rolling for behavior, a 1 might indicate sleeping monsters while a 6 might be monsters conducting a horrid sacrificial ceremony. You can use the quest lists in chapter \$ for a wider range of potential activities – other creatures go on quests too!

Distance is easy. Roll a 1 and the monsters are close to the characters. Roll a 6 and they're far away.

If you're not sure what the situation is and can't decide based on events going on in the world, throw the dice and see what they give you.

You can also turn your list of monsters in your prep notes into a random list, letting the dice decide which monsters show up or using the roll to inspire your own ideas. Don't let such lists get too large complicated. A list of six, eight, or ten monsters serves just fine for a medium-sized location.

See chapter \$ for more tips on getting the most from random monster tables.

SOME BATTLES DESERVE MORE PREP

Sometimes you know a big combat encounter is going to happen and its worth taking extra time to prep it. Boss fights are one such situation. Boss fights can be notoriously difficult to run in many systems. It's a fine line between a battle that's a total pushover, one that provides an excellent climactic challenge, and one that ends up being a boring slog. Take a look at the "Dials of Monster Difficulty" in the Lazy GM's Toolkit in chapter \$ for ideas on how to tune battles before and during play and learn more about building larger combat encounters in chapter \$ where we cover the combat adventure type.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- List monsters the characters might face in your next session.
- Write down page numbers or use hyperlinks in your digital notes to make looking up monsters easy.
- Understand the relationship between monster power and character power for the RPG you're running. Use it as a loose benchmark when building encounters.
- Like other steps, keep monsters abstract from locations. Drop them in when the situation and pacing are right.
- Improvise the number of monsters and the situation in which they might appear while running your game.
- If desired, use your list of monsters as a random encounter list. You can also roll for attitude, distance, or behavior to help you set the stage.
- Spend extra time on big boss battles or complicated combat encounters you know are going to occur.

SELECT REWARDS

What treasure, magic items, or other rewards might the characters receive?

Treasure, magic items, and other character-altering rewards matter a lot to players but the distribution often falls to the GM. Thus, it behooves us to pay attention to the rewards we deliver in the games we run.

What's New?

This chapter expands on potential rewards including single-use magic items, intelligent magic items, and overpowered magic items you might want to watch out for. It also describes intangible rewards some games offer instead of physical loot.

Different systems offer different types of rewards but most fantasy RPGs primarily offer treasure and magic item rewards.

There are several ways to award such items but, as lazy GMs, we'll focus on the easiest ways that offer the biggest impact: randomly generated treasure and wishlist items.

RANDOM TREASURE

Since the earliest days of *Dungeons & Dragons*, dungeon masters and game masters distributed treasure by rolling on random tables. The practice continues to this day.

Rolling random loot makes a lazy GM's life easy. Find the best random loot generator for your chosen system, roll a parcel that fits for one session of play, and write it down in your notes. During the game, distribute that parcel where it makes sense in the situation. You can put the parcel in one area or split it up to put it into multiple places. If you roll your parcel and aren't excited by the results, roll again. You can find some treasure generators for various systems at the resource link for this book on the copyright page.

Digital tools for rolling loot work particularly well because they can roll a huge variety of loot all at once instead of requiring that you roll across several tables several times with physical dice and a book. But certainly the treasure tables in most common game master guides work well too.

It helps to find treasure tables that reward treasure for a single session of play. You might have to figure out how to break down a game's treasure system to fit in a single session. This way your treasure lists are "stateless". You don't have

to worry about what you awarded before or what you might award next week. You can just plop down a new set of treasure and reward it as it makes sense in the game.

WISHLIST TREASURE

You can also ask your players for a wishlist of magic items they want to receive. Instead of asking for specific pieces of gear, ask them for the *general* type of reward they want to receive. You're looking for a loose gauge, not specific items. It might be wands or magic armor or greatswords – once you have an idea what types of items the characters want, you can tailor items that fit their characters and tie them deeper into the world.

It's up to you how often you reward such powerful items. Different game systems have different expectations on magic item rewards. Some have a set expectation of magic item rewards to ensure characters remain powerful as they level up. Other games expect only random loot and don't account for these items in the balance between characters and the world. For 5e games, one such item every five levels or so is about right.

Even if you're not awarding these wishlist items in your next session, you can capture the rewards mentioned by your players in your character notes so you can review them when going through step 1 (review the characters) of the eight steps in the future.

Be careful rewarding items that imbalance the game so much that it becomes less fun to play. Some players desperately seek items to increase their defensive or offensive capabilities only to get bored when they've trivialized all of the encounters they face. Find and reward magic items that give characters more options without focusing on a single narrow combat capability like offensive power or defensive power.

What About Levels?

For games that include character levels, deciding when to level up can be even more important than the rewards you offer. Some games have specific moments of level progression built in and thus leave it out of the GM's hands. Other systems have expectations for experience points gained or leveling at certain times during the game. For us lazy GMs, milestone leveling is the easiest. When the characters accomplish certain goals in the game, they level up. You can state these important

goals ahead of time so characters know what to do when they level up. You can also change which accomplishments lead to a level as the story evolves. Don't map out each level against some large campaign outline. Focus instead on the next big goal and let the players know what they'll receive when they accomplish it.

SINGLE-USE MAGIC ITEMS

The excellent roleplaying game by Monte Cook Games, *Numenera*, powered by the Cypher System has a particular type of reward called a "cypher". These are single-use magic items or character-based abilities gained during a campaign with powerful effects. In *Numenera* and the Cypher system, there are often physical cards describing these cyphers but it's easy to generate single-use magic items like this in most fantasy RPGs – items with a single use of a powerful spell. I call these items "relics".

Relics are items often with a powerful spell attached to them that any character can activate. Once used, the relic loses the ability to cast the spell again. Thus, it's a single-use magic item.

Because they can only be used once, it's great fun to give lower level characters access to a powerful spell far above their capability to cast. Sure, it might break the game, or an encounter, or the world; but they can only once!

Here's a list of items that might work well as a catalyst for a relic:

1. Coin
2. Figurine
3. Orb
4. Amulet
5. Earring
6. Bell
7. Bone
8. Bowl
9. Candle
10. Ring
11. Circlet
12. Bracelet
13. Knife
14. Goblet
15. Key
16. Lamp
17. Brooch
18. Skull
19. Mask

20. Wand

And here's a list of potential spells you might put on these items. Though this list comes from 5e sources, they likely match up with other fantasy RPGs. You can expand this list significantly depending on the system you're running and the spells you have available.

- (1-2) Light
- (3-4) Bane
- (5-6) Bless
- (7-8) Cure wounds
- (9-10) Detect evil and good
- (11-12) Detect magic
- (13-14) Guiding bolt
- (15-16) Inflict wounds
- (17-18) Shield of faith
- (19-20) Blindness/deafness
- (21-22) Silence
- (23-24) Bestow curse
- (25-26) Dispel magic
- (27-28) Flame strike
- (29-30) Insect plague
- (31-32) Acid splash
- (33-34) Shocking grasp
- (35-36) True strike
- (37-38) Burning hands
- (39-40) Charm person
- (41-42) Color spray
- (43-44) Comprehend languages
- (45-46) Detect magic
- (47-48) Fog cloud
- (49-50) Jump
- (51-52) Sleep
- (53-54) Thunderwave
- (55-56) Acid arrow
- (57-58) Invisibility
- (59-60) Misty step
- (61-62) Ray of enfeeblement
- (63-64) Scorching ray
- (65-66) Shatter
- (67-68) Web
- (69-70) Fear
- (71-72) Fly
- (73-74) Gaseous form
- (75-76) Haste
- (77-78) Lightning bolt
- (79-80) Slow

- (81-82) Stinking cloud
- (83-84) Banishment
- (85-86) Black tentacles
- (87-88) Blight
- (89-90) Fire shield
- (91-92) Ice storm
- (93-94) Stoneskin
- (95-96) Cloudkill
- (97-98) Cone of cold
- (99-100) Disintegrate

INTELLIGENT MAGIC ITEMS

Intelligent magic items are a fantastic way to include tag-along NPCs in your campaigns that don't get in the way. Sinister intelligent items work better than "cursed" items. These sinister items continually giving the characters information but at a cost or from an unreliable narrator. Such magic items might upgrade every few levels depending on the quests the characters perform or at various other milestones – gaining offensive or defensive bonuses, once-per-day spell-like abilities, and other features that grow as the characters grow and as they complete major milestones in the story.

AWARDS OTHER THAN TREASURE AND MAGIC ITEMS

Some games don't focus on the characters acquiring physical rewards. Instead, the characters gain new features for their character, new information to lead them to new branches in the story, or gain other less tangible rewards. Examples of awards include:

- Story-based character boons
- Gaining spell-like abilities
- Dwellings and upgrades
- Faction reputation improvements
- Titles of nobility or honor
- Story-based level increases

You can still include such rewards in your prep notes under this section. Even if they're not physical items, character rewards matter a lot to the players and thus its worth preparing what we can reward in the next session we're going to run.

WATCH OUT FOR BROKEN ITEMS

Sometimes systems include items that can make your life harder as a GM. It can also be hard to identify these items until its too late. Seeking discussions of such items on the internet can help – look for information your system of choice and see if you can find other GMs talking about troublesome magic items in forums dedicated to the system you play. If you can't find a list – ask. Ask if there are any troublesome magic items in the system you're running and see what you hear.

Typically, these overpowered magic items give capabilities to characters well outside of their normal abilities. They can sometimes remove all challenge from threats and make it much harder for you to prep an interesting game.

Sometimes such powerful magic items can be reigned in by limiting its use in some other way – perhaps only usable once a day or only a limited number of times before it expires completely.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Rewards matter to the players but are under almost complete control of the GM.
- Use random tables to generate per-session treasure parcels.
- Award these parcels where they make sense as you run your next session.
- Ask players for their wish-list of items for their characters. Record it in your character notes and review wish lists during step 1 (review the characters).
- Award single-use magic items to give lower-level characters powerful spells they can only use once.
- Consider including intelligent magic items that act as tag-along NPCs but without the extra burden of another character to track.
- Include non-physical rewards in this step for games that include them.
- Watch out for magic items that can make the game harder to run.

CHOOSE YOUR STEPS

The previous chapters outlined the eight steps of the lazy GM. Each step includes a lot of flexibility to suit your style, the style of the system you choose, and the type of session you're actually going to run.

But even the steps *themselves* can change depending on you, your system, and the situation of the session you're going to run. You'll use different steps in different ways if you're running a single-session game of Daggerheart than if you're running a session in the middle of a longer Shadowdark campaign.

This chapter helps you decide which steps you might want and how you might use them depending on the type of session you're going to run.

CHOOSE THE STEPS YOU NEED

Above all, choose the steps that help you prepare for the game you're going to run. Don't spend a lot of time trying to figure out what to do with a step if you don't need it. Running with seven, five, or even three steps if you feel like those three steps have what you need works just fine. The eight steps exist to serve you.

FOUR COMMON SITUATIONS

Chapters \$ through \$ talk about how to use the eight steps for eight different adventure types. This chapter offers examples for changing the eight steps depending on two factors and four possible situations:

- Single-session games with a published adventure.
- Sessions for ongoing campaigns with a published adventure or campaign.
- Single-session with a homebrewed adventure.
- Sessions for ongoing campaigns with a homebrewed adventure.

SINGLE-SESSION GAMES WITH PUBLISHED ADVENTURES

When running a single session game, like a four-hour game at a convention or a one-shot game for your friends at home, you're not starting in the middle of a larger story. You also know nothing about the characters (most likely). Because you

have a published adventure, you don't have to spend as much time outlining locations, monsters, NPCs and treasure.

You will, of course, want to read the adventure before you run it but much of what you might need to prep is already in the published adventure. You can likely skip reviewing the characters, developing fantastic locations, choosing relevant monsters, and selecting rewards. You may still want to prepare the following steps if they're not covered in the published adventure:

Strong Start. Where will your session start? Sometimes this is clear in a published adventure but sometimes you need to refine it and outline it for yourself so it's clear to you.

Outlining Scenes. You may want your own rough outline the scenes taking place in your single session published adventure. If time is a constraint, use this list to help you identify optional scenes you can cut as time gets tight. Don't kill the awesome conclusion. Cut from the boring middle.

Define Secrets and Clues. Break down the lore of the adventure into bite-sized nuggets you can reference and reveal in your game. Most adventures don't outline secrets this way but it's handy to drop in lore as you go.

Outline Important NPCs. Some adventures break out NPCs so you know who's important and worth taking note of but sometimes not. You may want to jot down your own list of important NPCs so you have them on hand.

SESSIONS IN ONGOING CAMPAIGNS WITH PUBLISHED ADVENTURES

Many times you're running sessions as part of a longer ongoing campaign. When running a longer campaign, you now have characters to consider for the first step of the eight steps – reviewing the characters. You'll still want your strong start, scenes, secrets and clues and maybe other steps depending on how far your game strays from the published adventure as your campaign grows (most games do!).

Review the Characters. Reviewing the characters ensures you have your specific characters in mind and can think of ways to tie them to elements of the published adventure. It's worth doing every session.

Strong Start. What brings the characters and the players into the game with a bang? Published adventures in ongoing campaigns don't

necessarily have strong starts built in so you'll want to identify your own.

Outlining Scenes. Like a single-session game, it still helps you to get your hands around what might happen in the next session you're going to run even if running from a published adventure.

Secrets and Clues. Secrets are still worth outlining session by session in an ongoing campaign using a published adventure. Secrets can evolve session by session – some come from the adventure itself and some come from the evolution of your campaign away from the printed material.

NPCs, Locations, Monsters, Treasure. You may prep these steps or omit them based on what you're using from the published adventure and what you're customizing yourself.

SINGLE-SESSION HOMEBREWED ADVENTURES

Like your single-session games using published adventures, you aren't likely to know much about the characters or their interaction unless you wire it in yourself before the game begins and hand out pre-generated characters. Since the rest of your adventure is homebrewed, you're likely to want to use the rest of the eight steps.

Strong Start. Get your characters into the adventure quickly.

Outline Potential Scenes. Have an idea what can happen in the session you're going to run. Like running a single-session published adventure, be ready to cut scenes for time if time is tight.

Locations. Be ready with a map if you're doing some sort of exploration adventure. Don't make it too big for a single session game. Three to five big rooms is likely enough.

Secrets, NPCs, Monsters, Treasure. You're likely to want to fill these steps out the same way you would for other adventures.

SESSIONS IN ONGOING CAMPAIGNS WITH HOMEBREWED ADVENTURES

This is the typical use-case for the eight steps. You're running your own adventure, or a heavily modified published adventure, and you're in the middle of a longer campaign. Time isn't as tight in each session. You know your characters. Each session includes new material built off the previous. In this case you're likely to want to walk

through the eight steps to see what you need depending on the sort of game you're running.

Mashing Up the Eight Steps \$ Is this repeated elsewhere?

In previous chapters we talked about consolidating steps in your notes. Your strong start can be the first scene listed in your "scenes" step. You might describe locations, NPCs, and monsters in your scenes if they're clearly tied together. NPCs might be described in secrets and clues. It may serve you to have a shorter set of notes with particular steps mashed up into other steps. It also might serve you to have NPCs, monsters, and locations listed separately to make your notes easier to reference and so you can grab from each list as you need during your game.

USE THE STEPS YOU NEED

These four cases are common but far from the only situations in which you run your games. The type of game system you're playing, the type of adventure you're running, and your own personal needs and desires play a big part in which steps serve you. Some GMs are comfortable with fewer than the eight steps. Others need more to feel comfortable.

Each session you prep isn't just a chance for you to walk through and fill out the eight steps but a chance to decide which steps you need at all. Each step is designed to be modular enough to fit what you need of it and the whole process is flexible enough to cut the steps that don't help you prep.

You can evaluate your prep each session to see what steps you need and what material best serves you. Ask yourself the following questions to tune your prep:

- What material did I use from my prep notes?
- What material did I not use? Do I still need to prep it?
- What material do I *wish* I had but *didn't*? Should I prep that next time?

It's also worth learning from others what value they get from their prep. Try things out. Experiment. Test your prep.

Choose the right steps to support the game you're going to run.

The Most Important Steps

I often get asked which steps are most important. If I only had three steps, which three would they be?

This chapter shows that it's largely dependent on the type of game you're running, but, for me, I find the following three steps hold a lot of weight in my prep notes: - Strong Start - Scenes - Secrets and Clues If I have those three steps, I often feel like I have enough to run a game. I might sneak locations, monsters, and NPCs into those steps, of course, but those steps do a lot of the work I need to feel good about my game.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Choose the steps that help you prep your game.
- Different systems, types of sessions, and your own personal style can change which steps you'll want to use for the next session you're going to run.
- For single-session games using published adventures focus on the strong start, scenes, secrets and clues, and NPCs. Be ready to cut from the middle for time
- For sessions in larger campaigns using published adventures, focus on the characters, the strong start, secrets and clues, and any other steps that fill out the material you already have in your published adventure.
- For single-session games with your own homebrewed adventure, you can't know who the characters are but otherwise you might use the rest of the eight steps to fill out your custom adventure.
- Sessions in larger campaigns with homebrewed adventures are the common use case for the eight steps. You'll likely want to review all eight steps.
- Feel free to change the steps you're using for the next session you're going to run. Each step serves to help you get your hands around the next game you're going to run. Use what helps and omit what doesn't.

RANDOM LISTS

The following appendix contains many random lists you can use to flesh out your adventures and campaigns during both prep and play.

Consider mixing rolls together, rolling multiple times on a single table, or joining the results of several tables together to build unique results that fuel your imagination.

Add a custom faction list (see chapter 5) to further flavor the results of these tables with details from your own campaign.

Augment these tables with random tables tailored for your own chosen system.

NPCs AND PATRONS

NPCs bring our game worlds to life. Use the lists in this section to generate NPCs and their characteristics.

NAMES

Mix and match elements of the names below to come up with something unique. Switch out the first letter of a name from the ones below or common names around you for a quick new name.

COMMON NAMES

Abigail, Addison, Adelaide, Aeditha, Aeris, Aiden, Aigyptos, Alainne, Albert, Aldous, Alesta, Alexandra, Alianore, Allison, Amabel, Amias, Amice, Anaxibia, Ancelot, Annabel, Arianna, Arthur, Askalabos, Atys, Audrye, Augustine, Avra, Ayleth, Bacchus, Bakis, Barnabas, Bathsua, Beatrix, Belath, Belos, Berekyntia, Bernaith, Bernard, Birch, Borse, Bouchard, Bran, Breccan, Brien, Brigone, Brody, Brom, Brunhild, Bryguz, Bukolos, Caden, Callie, Camden, Camers, Carmen, Carna, Caspar, Chartain, Christian, Claire, Clemence, Clifton, Crestian, Cunovin, Damia, Danyell, Deianeira, Deimachos, Deitrich, Derwin, Dimi, Dodona, Dominy, Donner, Dorcas, Dorothe, Drake, Drew, Dyana, Dylan, Eccles, Echo, Edelinne, Edwyn, Eilonwy, Elaisse, Electra, Eliana, Ellerete, Elpida, Elsebee, Elyn, Emanuel, Emblyn, Emeria, Emery, Emilie, Emma, Epigonoi, Epione, Eremoz, Eschina, Esdeline, Esmenet, Esmour, Ethan, Ethelia, Eupalamos, Fauna, Feleta, Fotiyinos, Frideswide, Galain, Galfrid, Genneth, Geoffrey, Ghalantzo, Gianna, Godebert, Godfrey, Gregory, Griffith, Gryffen, Gyles, Hailey, Halstein, Hannah, Hart, Hebir, Heinlein, Helena, Helenor,

Helias, Helios, Helvynya, Henrietta, Henry, Hilda, Honora, Hopladamos, Hudson, Humphrey, Hunter, Imedia, Inferi, Ione, Irae, Isabella, Ischys, Isemeine, Ismay, Ismenia, Isyrion, Jasmine, Jayce, Jeanne, Jillian, Joleicia, Jonathas, Jordyn, Josian, Joyce, Justitia, Kain, Katherine, Kaunos, Kayla, Keira, Kermit, Kiernan, Kilix, Kimball, Kinborow, Kinnison, Kyzikos, Lanathos, Landon, Latisha, Lauren, Leah, Leipephile, Leofwen, Letita, Leukippe, Levi, Liliana, Lily, Linette, Linos, Lowell, Luphea, Machaon, Maddeline, Madelyn, Maisenta, Malin, Mansel, Margarete, Margeria, Mars, Martine, Mason, Mathild, Melampus, Menestheus, Meredith, Meryell, Miles, Millicent, Minos, Mirabelle, Mnestra, Morys, Muriel, Mykenai, Neilos, Neofytos, Nicholina, Nicolaa, Niki, Nireus, Nora, Nyklos, Odexes, Oiax, Oibalos, Oleia, Oliver, Olyver, Orthaia, Orvist, Osborne, Palamon, Parnella, Pelinne, Percival, Phanes, Philippe, Phrasios, Phrogas, Pippa, Pittheus, Polyxene, Pontreus, Portheus, Potitii, Powle, Prescott, Prudence, Pyxathor, Radolf, Raffe, Rauffe, Reagan, Reinholdt, Remnus, Reona, Reynard, Reynfred, Rickeman, Rolfe, Ronald, Rosalind, Rose, Rufus, Ryan, Rychyld, Salios, Sandre, Serge, Sibyl, Sighard, Simond, Skyler, Snow, Solyeuse, Spyro, Sybell, Sysley, Tamsin, Tasia, Tavromiki, Tavrostenes, Teoz, Theophane, Thomasyn, Toril, Tyler, Vaughan, Vesta, Victor, Vivian, Warin, Werner, William, Wolfstan, Yanna, Ysmeina, Zacheus, Zoe

SURNAMES

Graveldust, Ghoulsbane, Bullhorn, Doomcaller, Crowfinger, Darkboot, Beastrend, Freespur, Quickhound, Eagleclaw, Wyrmsoul, Tigerclaw, Gemteeth, Mudstomp, Drakestalker, Brightsmile, Lioncloak, Goosebeak, Trailwalker, Bluewind, Faerieharp, Felstorm, Silvercry, Longtrail, Anvilheart, Swiftbeard, Hawkborn, Drumheart, Harpstone, Oaklover, Wolfbelly, Bronzetongue, Ebonhammer, Nightblood, Stormfang, Moonbound, Foxhand, Stonebuckle, Ghostdancer, Goldmaker, Spirithelm, Redhood, Willowsong, Greengaze, Goblinseeker, Ironson, Wormwillow, Cloudvalley, Angelclaw, Shadowchaser, Dragonrock, Dogtooth, Glassborn, Spiderwind, Darksinger, Mountainbottom, Angelharp, Redslicer, Coppertoof, Gloomfang, Kingchaser, Icerock, Ratcutter, Shieldbrood, Ebonstone, Dawnsoul, Faeriedance, Northmaul, Ghostblade, Lionbelly, Wisdom, Smileheart, Thornbond, Shadowforger, Whitetongue, Nighthide,

Earthwillow, Frostbane, Flamehelm,
 Willowblood, Glassboot, Hillbrow, Hollychest,
 Doghoof, Doomcowl, Riddlesong, Grayclaw,
 Tallvalley, Ironstalker, Knifestorm, Spellbright,
 Bluespear, Songbound, Ironborn, Dirtfinger,
 Freeclaw, Drakesoul, Whitehand, Oakstorm,
 Faerieheart, Lioncloud, Titanhelm, Dawnrazor,
 Lawblade, Maceheart, Northhand, Stormclaw,
 Wormwatcher, Shadowstalker, Spirithouse,
 Catwalker, Ratchaser, Goldbeard, Stoneblood,
 Darkteeth, Silversmile, Mountainmaul,
 Icewhisker, Oakson, Duskheart, Millcloak,
 Fireboard, Nightbane, Greenfang, Freewind,
 Tallhelm, Ironbrood, Gemsong, Flamekin,
 Crowstorm, Broadbrow, Gloomcloud, Treeboot,
 Faeriecaller, Angeltraveler, Dragongaze,
 Emeraldthumb, Wyrmhelm, Herosteel, Giantclaw,
 Doomcleaver, Darkbelly, Shadowspear,
 Willowgaze, Ghostrazor, Spellstorm,
 Duskwhisker, Beastcowl, Halfbane, Longcloak,
 Foeheart, Tallstone, Starsmasher, Dragonriver,
 Hollycloud, Broadwind, Tigerblade, Quickmaul,
 Glorywhisper, Drakeforger, Northhide, Felbeard,
 Riddlebound, Arrowbond, Doghand, Lionteeth,
 Hillseeker, Icetooth, Spiritglove, Wormbuckle,
 Stonemaster, Freesoul, Knifefang, Shieldheart,
 Lightstorm, Dawnspur, Nightboot, Moontrail,
 Gloomwind, Thornbuckle, Angelcloak, Freerain,
 Shadowmaker, Lionwhisper, Willowwatcher,
 Ratrazor, Icestar, Spellfang, Stormcaller,
 Doghelm, Drakemaster, Mountainhood,
 Irontouch, Coppergaze, Macekin, Greenlaugher,
 Longheart, Ebontooth, Gravechewer,
 Gentlewhisker

BEHAVIOR

1. Enthusiastic
2. Flighty
3. Shifty
4. Optimistic
5. Paranoid
6. Well spoken
7. Superior
8. Haughty
9. Pessimistic
10. Suspicious
11. Worried
12. Greedy
13. Brave
14. Stern
15. Sly

16. Wise
17. Reserved
18. Cheery
19. Opportunistic
20. Soft spoken

SPECIES & ANCESTRY

Roll 1d10 for more common fantasy species and ancestry or 1d20 for less common species.

1. Human
2. Elf
3. Dwarf
4. Halfling
5. Orc
6. Drow
7. Tiefling
8. Dragonborn
9. Fey
10. Goblin
11. Construct
12. Celestial
13. Ghost
14. Wizard's familiar
15. Talking animal
16. Avian
17. Lizardfolk
18. Catfolk
19. Lycanthrope
20. Artifact

APPEARANCE AND MANNERISMS

1. Wild hair
2. Scarred cheek
3. Body tattoos
4. Smokes a pipe
5. Gold teeth
6. Walks with a limp
7. Dashing clothes
8. Picks teeth
9. Missing eye
10. Multicolored eyes
11. Feathered earring
12. Missing hand
13. Spits a lot
14. Shifty eyes
15. Intense stare
16. Snorts often

17. Facial tattoos
18. Heavy beard
19. Missing fingers
20. Half-shaved head

PROFESSION

1. Farmer
2. Blacksmith
3. Clerk
4. Merchant
5. Apothecary
6. Thief
7. Guide
8. Entertainer
9. Guard
10. Soldier
11. Acolyte
12. Sailor
13. Mercenary
14. Sage
15. Noble
16. Artisan
17. Priest
18. Veteran
19. Knight
20. Mage

QUESTS

NPC quest-givers often seek characters to accomplish something somewhere. Use this table to determine what they seek. Mix this with items and locations in later tables to fill out quests. You can also use this table to add motivations for NPCs, intelligent monsters, villains, and factions. You can also use it for short-term motivations for intelligent creatures in encounters along a journey.

1. Find an item
2. Kill a villain
3. Rescue an NPC
4. Uncover a secret
5. Clear out monsters
6. Protect a monument
7. Protect an NPC
8. Steal an item
9. Return an item
10. Close a gate
11. Open a gate

12. Activate a monument
13. Disable an artifact
14. Recover an item
15. Convince an NPC
16. Awaken a monster
17. Put a monster to sleep
18. Bury a secret
19. Discover a monument
20. Dig up an artifact

TOWNS AND VILLAGES

Use the following lists to flesh out towns, villages and settlements the characters visit. For town locations, see the village list in the larger list of locations.

TOWN SENTIMENTS

How do the townsfolk feel?

1. Happy
2. Elated
3. Uncaring
4. Joyful
5. Optimistic
6. Pessimistic
7. Downtrodden
8. Frightened
9. Horrified
10. Concerned
11. Unconcerned
12. Harried
13. Sleep-deprived
14. Dazed
15. Hyperactive
16. Purposeful
17. Lazy
18. Melancholy
19. Busy
20. Suspicious

TOWN EVENTS

What sort of every-day event occurs in the town? Use this list to give the town a sense of life. These town events often work well as strong starts.

1. Wedding
2. Funeral
3. Preparing for war
4. Seasonal celebration

5. Burning of an effigy
6. Death of a noble lord
7. Day of drunkenness
8. Celebration of lovers
9. Great feast
10. Execution
11. Market day
12. Parade of vanquished foes
13. Celebration of the dead
14. Religious holiday
15. Wild boar hat festival
16. Robbery
17. Brawl
18. Visit by the circus
19. Wrangling of rampaging beasts
20. Festival of kites

NOTABLE WEATHER CONDITIONS

What is the weather like? You can use this table to flavor weather during overland exploration adventures as well.

1. Clear
2. Cloudy
3. Windy
4. Foggy
5. Thick mist
6. Light precipitation
7. Medium precipitation
8. Heavy precipitation
9. Torrential precipitation
10. Fantastic event

FANTASTIC EVENTS

Sometimes something fantastic happens in towns or during overland travel.

1. The stars disappeared from the sky
2. An unexpected solar eclipse
3. The blood moon rises
4. Swarms of stinging insects descend
5. Acidic fog rolls in
6. A second sun appears in the sky
7. A storm of arcane energy
8. The arrival of a servant of a god
9. Meteor shower
10. A cyclopean behemoth rises
11. Swarms of mischievous devils
12. Tentacles appear in the sky

13. The dancing dead come to life
14. Volcanic eruption
15. Collapsing sinkhole reveals ancient ruins below
16. The sun does not rise
17. A great floating tower appears
18. The lord’s castle disappears
19. The border to the fey realm grows thin
20. The world of shadow bleeds over into the material realm

LOCATIONS, MONUMENTS, AND ITEMS

The following tables outline locations, monuments, and items to fill out quests and adventures. Flavor them with conditions, descriptions, origins, and elements of your own custom faction lists.

d20	Location	Monument	Item
1	Tower	Sarcophagus	Coin
2	Crypts	Obelisk	Figurine
3	Keep	Orb	Gemstone
4	Cairn	Bone pile	Amulet
5	Giant statue	Skull	Earring
6	Caves	Megalith	Bell
7	Sewers	Pillars	Bone
8	Temple	Throne	Bowl
9	Mines	Statues	Candle
10	Mansion	Well	Ring
11	Academy	Orrery	Circlet
12	Dungeon	Effigy	Bracelet
13	Barrow	Arcane circle	Dagger
14	Vault	Spire	Goblet
15	Tomb	Altar	Key
16	Warren	Pit	Lamp
17	Ship	Fountain	Brooch
18	Sanctum	Archway	Skull
19	Cove	Cage	Mask
20	Castle	Brazier	Necklace

CONDITION, DESCRIPTION, AND ORIGIN

Locations, monuments, or items can be flavored by determining their condition, description, and origin.

d20	Condition	Description	Origin
1	Smoky	Ruined	Human
2	Acidic	Decrepit	Elven
3	Bloodied	Obsidian	Dwarven
4	Burning	Haunted	Halfling
5	Frozen	Unholy	Gnomish
6	Poisonous	Sunken	Tiefling
7	Necrotic	Forgotten	Dragonborn
8	Thunderous	Macabre	Orc
9	Ringing	Ancient	Goblinoid
10	Lightning	Festering	Undead
11	Radiant	Monstrous	Celestial
12	Shadowed	Golden	Fey
13	Oozing	Spired	Elemental
14	Ethereal	Towering	Giant

d20	Condition	Description	Origin
15	Whispering	Forsaken	Fiendish
16	Windswept	Gloomy	Unseelie
17	Drenched	Horrific	Aberrant
18	Diseased	Colossal	Shadow
19	Forceful	Overgrown	Ethereal
20	Cursed	Shattered	Abyssal

100 MONUMENT STRUCTURES

The following is an extended list of monuments the characters might discover in their journeys.

1. Aerie
2. Altar
3. Aqueduct
4. Arcane circle
5. Archway
6. Aviary
7. Barrow
8. Battlefield
9. Bell
10. Bone pile
11. Boneyard
12. Bonfire
13. Brazier
14. Bridge
15. Cage
16. Cairn
17. Campsite
18. Canal
19. Carcass
20. Carriage
21. Cauldron
22. Cave
23. Cenotaph
24. Cesspit
25. Charnel pit
26. Columns
27. Crater
28. Crossroads
29. Crystal
30. Dome
31. Doorway
32. Earthmote
33. Effigy
34. Fighting pit
35. Firepit
36. Fossil
37. Fountain
38. Gallows

39. Gateway
40. Geode
41. Geyser
42. Graveyard
43. Gravestone
44. Grotto
45. Grove
46. Hollow
47. Huge skull
48. Idol
49. Illusion
50. Keep
51. Lantern
52. Machine
53. Mausoleum
54. Megalith
55. Meteorite
56. Midden
57. Mill
58. Mine
59. Mirror
60. Monolith
61. Monument
62. Mosaic
63. Nest
64. Obelisk
65. Orb
66. Orrery
67. Oubliette
68. Petrified creature
69. Pillar
70. Pit
71. Planar rift
72. Platform
73. Podium
74. Pool
75. Rock
76. Ruin
77. Sacred circle
78. Sarcophagus
79. Shipwreck
80. Shrine
81. Sigil
82. Sinkhole
83. Slab
84. Spell effect
85. Sphere

86. Spire
87. Statue
88. Stone circle
89. Stone tablets
90. Sundial
91. Throne
92. Tomb
93. Totem
94. Tower
95. Trash heap
96. Tree
97. Wall
98. Waymarker
99. Well
100. Windmill

50 MUNDANE ITEMS

The following is an extended list of random items.

1. Amulet
2. Arrowhead
3. Bell
4. Bird skull
5. Bone
6. Bowl
7. Box
8. Bracelet
9. Brooch
10. Buckle
11. Candle
12. Coin
13. Crown
14. Cup
15. Dagger
16. Disc
17. Earring
18. Figurine
19. Finger bone
20. Flute
21. Forked rod
22. Gemstone
23. Glove
24. Goblet
25. Hammer
26. Idol
27. Jewelry box
28. Key
29. Lamp

30. Mask
31. Medallion
32. Mirror
33. Necklace
34. Opal
35. Orb
36. Pipe
37. Quill
38. Ring
39. Rod
40. Skull
41. Sphere
42. Spike
43. Statue
44. Stone
45. String of beads
46. Symbol
47. Tiara
48. Tooth
49. Vial
50. Wand

STONEMASONRY DECORATIONS

The following outlines stonemasonry decorations and descriptions for flavoring stone walls in adventure locations.

1. **Relief.** The projection of an image in which the stonemasonry around the image is carved back, leaving the image protruding forward. Includes low (bas), high, and sunken. Such reliefs might reveal lost histories or forgotten knowledge.
2. **Frieze.** A long horizontal stretch of painted or sculpted decoration at the upper edge of a wall, room, or object like a sarcophagus. These decorations might not be noticed at first glance but a perceptive character might pick up interesting clues with their keen eye.
3. **Mural.** A piece of graphic artwork painted directly on a wall or ceiling. Murals can depict great wars, images of gods, or rulers of old. Murals might peel away revealing layers of such works.
4. **Fresco.** A vivid painting applied directly to freshly laid plaster. The plaster might

break away showing carvings on the wall underneath.

5. **Mosaic.** A pattern or image created from inlaying small pieces of stone, glass, or ceramic. Such pieces of glass might contain magical lights or other embedded spells.
6. **Runic carvings.** Writing of language or ideographs carved into rock slabs or tombstones. A knowledge of history might uncover their meaning.
7. **Encaustic painting.** Using heated wax to apply pigments to a surface, often wood or canvas. The wax might be melted away to reveal something underneath.
8. **Gilded Engravings.** Applying a thin coating of gold over another surface, sometimes inlaid within a carving. Such engravings might conduct electricity or activate a trap when pulled away.
9. **Marouflage.** Applying a painted canvas to a wall with an adhesive such as plaster or cement. Such decorations might hide a secret door behind the canvas.
10. **Sgraffito.** Scratching through the surface of one pigment to reveal the pigment underneath. Scratching away further might reveal a mural painted underneath – like a giant scratch-off ticket.

ENCOUNTERS

Use these tables to help you improvise encounters. Give encounters a backdrop by rolling on the “monuments” table and flavoring both the monument (and potentially the creatures) with other rolls on tables such as origin, condition, description, and your custom faction table (see chapter \$).

Encounters may not always have the characters meeting the creatures directly. Sometimes the characters come to a location after the creatures already left or the characters come to a location and realize creatures are on the way.

ENCOUNTER CREATURE

1. NPC
2. Natural Beast
3. Unnatural Monster

4. Fey
5. Undead
6. Otherworldly

DISTANCE

How close is the encounter when the characters discover it?

1. Close
2. Close
3. Medium
4. Medium
5. Far
6. Far

ATTITUDE

What is the attitude of the creatures towards the characters?

1. Friendly
2. Cautious
3. Indifferent
4. Suspicious
5. Hostile
6. Violent

BEHAVIORS

What are the behaviors of the creatures? What are they doing?

1. Sleeping
2. Resting
3. Eating
4. Engaged in a ritual
5. Hunting
6. Ready for battle

EXTENDED BEHAVIORS

This list extends potential behaviors for creatures encountered but focuses more on the activities of sentient creatures. Extend this list with NPC quest goals in the previous NPC lists.

1. Searching for treasure
2. Building something
3. Engaging in a ritual
4. Arguing
5. Taking prisoners
6. Researching the area
7. Hunting for something

8. Protecting someone or something
9. Preparing for war
10. Preparing to spring a trap
11. Decorating
12. Recovering after a battle
13. Trying to escape
14. Seeking revenge
15. Hunting something or someone
16. Magically drawn to the area
17. Gambling or engaged in sport
18. Preparing to rob passers by
19. Looking to buy or sell
20. Scouting for a larger group

HAZARDS

Encounters may include hazards, either alongside or instead of the creatures encountered. You can include more detailed traps using the traps tables below.

1. Pit
2. Poisonous pool
3. Tumbling trees or rocks
4. Lightning
5. Fire
6. Thorny foliage
7. Boot-sucking mud
8. Slippery terrain
9. Sharp rocks
10. Crumbling statues
11. Acidic slime
12. Darkness
13. Molten rock
14. Poisonous plants
15. Webs
16. Mold spores
17. Thick smoke or fog
18. Volatile crystals
19. Stinging insects
20. Collapsing walls

TRAPS

Use these lists to generate simple or complex traps, incorporating multiple features, plus energy damage or conditions.

To generate a simple trap, roll on the Types and Triggers lists. For more dangerous traps, add an effect from the Flavors list to put a unique twist

on the damage or impose a debilitating condition. For really devious traps, roll on the Flavors and Types lists twice, combining features into deadly combinations such as 'sleep-inducing bolos and thunderous crushing pillars, triggered by an onyx demon's skull.'

FLAVORS

1. Fiery
2. Freezing
3. Necrotic
4. Poisonous
5. Acidic
6. Thunderous
7. Lightning
8. Forceful
9. Diseased
10. Stunning
11. Blinding
12. Deafening
13. Weakening
14. Draining
15. Sleep-inducing
16. Binding
17. Dominating
18. Psychic
19. Mind-altering
20. Confusing

TYPES

1. Bolts
2. Spears
3. Scythes
4. Bolos
5. Spiked chains
6. Pit
7. Rolling ball
8. Crushing pillars
9. Darts
10. Glyphs
11. Swords
12. Axes
13. Tendrils
14. Whips
15. Nets
16. Bear traps
17. Cages
18. Beams

19. Hammers
20. Bladed disks

TRIGGERS

1. Door
2. Floor plate
3. Tripwire
4. Throne
5. Corpse
6. Chest
7. Old book
8. Child's toy
9. Jeweled skull
10. Beams of light
11. Golden angelic statue
12. Crystal goblet on pedestal
13. Onyx demonic skull
14. Jeweled pillar
15. Steep stair
16. Jeweled crown
17. Gilded sarcophagus
18. Bound prisoner
19. Weapon on an altar
20. Idol on pedestal

DUNGEON DISCOVERIES

Add useful discoveries to dangerous locations to create upward beats in the characters' story.

1. Helpful NPC
2. Holy fountain
3. Inspiring statue
4. Revealing mosaic
5. Radiant shrine
6. Friendly spirit
7. Hidden campsite
8. Edible mushrooms
9. Explorer's pack
10. Spy hole
11. Adventurer's journal
12. Escape tunnel
13. Useful teleporter
14. Enlightening mural
15. Healing spring
16. Wounded enemy
17. Well-stocked armory
18. Friendly creature

19. Useful machinery
20. Historical library

TREASURE

This list lets you add treasure to the adventure as appropriate. Roll a d10 to determine monetary treasure, or a d20 for monetary and magical treasure.

1. Coins
2. Bag of gemstones
3. Platinum jewelry
4. Rune-scribed gem
5. Golden goblet
6. Ancient tome
7. Treasure map
8. Ancient relic
9. Fantastic art
10. Jeweled idol
11. Potion of healing
12. Other potion
13. Scroll or spell scroll
14. Bag of holding
15. Wondrous item
16. Wand or rod
17. Magic light weapon
18. Magic heavy weapon
19. Magic ranged weapon
20. Magic armor

ADVENTURE LOCATIONS AND AREAS

These pages contain lists of specific rooms or chambers in twenty common adventure locations. Use these descriptions to fill out rooms or chambers in larger adventure sites or to inspire your own ideas. Flavor chambers with further details as needed from other random tables.

LOCATIONS

This list outlines the major adventure locations broken down in the twenty lists that follow.

1. Academy
2. Beast's Den
3. Castle
4. Caverns
5. Derelict Ship
6. Dragon's Lair

7. Forgotten Vaults
8. Grove
9. Manor
10. Mines
11. Necropolis
12. Prison
13. Sewers
14. Sunken Grotto
15. Theater
16. Thieves' Den
17. Tower
18. Unholy Temple
19. Village
20. Wizard's Lair

ACADEMY

Includes abandoned or populated schools, universities, or laboratories – either mundane or magical.

1. Classroom
2. Public library
3. Private library
4. Dining hall
5. Kitchen
6. Laboratory
7. Component closet
8. Lecture theater
9. Gymnasium
10. Private study
11. Forbidden library
12. Audience hall
13. Staged theater
14. Scriptorium
15. Lounge
16. Art gallery
17. Dormitory
18. Gardens
19. Observatory
20. Equipment storage

BEASTS' DEN

Caves or dens for non-intelligent beasts or monsters.

1. Sleeping den
2. Drinking pool
3. Dining chamber
4. Bone pit

5. Nursery
6. Vermin nest
7. Rain tunnels
8. Deep rift
9. Cleaning chamber
10. Treasure heap
11. Secret exit
12. Mudslide
13. Livestock prison
14. Squirring midden
15. Maze for prey
16. Secret tunnels
17. Primeval shrine
18. Trophy chamber
19. Hunter's perch
20. Ancestral tomb

CASTLE

Suitable chambers for castles, keeps, and other defensive fortifications.

1. Dining hall
2. Throne room
3. Kitchens
4. Armory
5. Royal bedrooms
6. Guard barracks
7. Knight barracks
8. Treasury
9. Smithy
10. Training yard
11. Strategy hall
12. Trophy room
13. Religious shrine
14. Prison cells
15. Hall of tapestries
16. Artifact gallery
17. Menagerie
18. Apothecary chamber
19. Torture chamber
20. Oubliette

CAVERNS

Locations found in natural caves and caverns.

1. Waterfall
2. Large pool
3. Natural columns

4. Beast's den
5. Deep shaft
6. Underground rift
7. Bridged chasm
8. Crystal chamber
9. Spiraling steps
10. Mushroom grove
11. Forgotten statue
12. Lava pools
13. Insect nests
14. Stone rings
15. Crumbling sinkhole
16. Abandoned village
17. Acidic stalactites
18. Petrified victims
19. Hall of bones
20. Primeval shrine

DERELICT SHIP

Suitable for sea, air, or spacefaring ships.

1. Crew quarters
2. Captain quarters
3. Officer quarters
4. Helm
5. Storage hold
6. Officer mess
7. Crew mess
8. Armory
9. Pantry
10. Guest quarters
11. Navigator's room
12. Galley
13. Shrine
14. Medical bay
15. Cellblock
16. Observation room
17. Bilge
18. Head
19. Captain's hold
20. Treasure hold

DRAGON'S LAIR

Suitable for a large bestial, intelligent, or draconic horror.

1. Sleeping chamber
2. Treasure vault

3. Waterfall
4. Audience hall
5. Egg hatchery
6. Elemental pool
7. Private entrance
8. Livestock pen
9. Observation roost
10. Bathing pool
11. Scrying chamber
12. Secret vault
13. Private library
14. Artifact museum
15. Servant quarters
16. Dungeon cells
17. Trapped maze
18. Draconic altar
19. Guardian chamber
20. Trophy hall

FORGOTTEN VAULTS

Secret protected chambers and galleries.

1. False treasury
2. True treasury
3. Living pillars
4. Dead god's shrine
5. Primordial seal
6. Summoning circle
7. Planar fissure
8. Living artifact
9. Demon's prison
10. Draconic skeleton
11. Guardian chamber
12. Vampire sarcophagus
13. Antediluvian obelisk
14. Soul vessel vault
15. Artifact vault
16. Annihilation Sphere
17. Lich's throne
18. Godling cylinder
19. Titan's cell
20. Angelic armory

GROVE

A site where nature has taken over either above or under ground. Can be used as a lair for natural creatures, witches, and other beings who dwell in such places.

1. Mushroom forest
2. Scintillating pool
3. Thorny vines
4. Pit of dead beasts
5. Large flowers
6. Hedge maze
7. Hollow tree
8. Thatched hut
9. Fire pit
10. Trapped clearing
11. Bestial effigy
12. Mud pit
13. Sinkhole
14. Gazebo
15. Forgotten statue
16. Hanging carcasses
17. Feeding ground
18. Fallen trees
19. Rocky cave
20. Winding ravine

MANOR

Suitable for mansions and other dwellings of rich folk.

1. Main foyer
2. Master bedroom
3. Guest bedrooms
4. Kitchen
5. Dining hall
6. Study
7. Library
8. Servant quarters
9. Treasury
10. Pantry
11. Bathing room
12. Guard quarters
13. Servant's dining room
14. Greenhouse
15. Master closet
16. Art gallery
17. Menagerie
18. Hidden library
19. Family altar
20. Hidden Saferoom

MINES

Natural caves transformed for the extraction of metals and gemstones.

1. Deep shafts
2. Heavy equipment
3. Narrow tunnels
4. Dining hall
5. Runoff drain
6. Miners' barracks
7. Foreman quarters
8. Spiral dig
9. Gemstone treasury
10. Collapsed tunnels
11. Cart depot
12. Yawning sinkhole
13. Drilling chamber
14. Lava chamber
15. Buried shrine
16. Mushroom farm
17. Beast warrens
18. Refuse pit
19. Forgotten vault
20. Bestial bloodbath

NECROPOLIS

Suitable for catacombs, cairns, tombs, or other place for the burial and internment of the dead.

1. Fetid pool
2. Imperial crypt
3. Charnel pit
4. Embalming room
5. Chamber of urns
6. Gilded burial hall
7. Candlelit shrine
8. Throne of bones
9. Historian's tomb
10. Everburning firepit
11. Guardian chamber
12. Huge sarcophagus
13. Dragon crypt
14. Tower of sepulchers
15. Flesh laboratory
16. Titan's grave
17. Entombed ship
18. Oracular sphere
19. Ghostly gateway

20. Cold-iron prison

PRISON

Dungeons and cells for those expelled from society.

1. Low-security cells
2. High-security cells
3. Sewage drains
4. Kitchens
5. Dining hall
6. Warden's office
7. Chapel
8. Armory
9. Hospital
10. Storage vault
11. Guard post
12. Guard barracks
13. Isolation cells
14. Torture chamber
15. Sunken cells
16. Beast pens
17. Burial pit
18. Laboratory
19. Cesspit
20. Oubliette

SEWERS

Constructed passageways for the entry of clean water and the removal of waste.

1. Slimy sluice
2. Swirling detritus
3. Deep drain
4. Roaring drain
5. Echoing cistern
6. Maintenance vault
7. Abandoned hovel
8. Broken machines
9. Pipe network
10. Bone pit
11. Hidden stash
12. Discarded statues
13. Thieves' den
14. Mushroom grove
15. Corpse pool
16. Beast's lair
17. Secret shrine
18. Mummified beast

19. Shattered portal

20. Hag's lair

SUNKEN GROTTO

Submerged chambers below ground.

1. Glowing pool
2. Coral pillars
3. Crystal cave
4. Deep fissure
5. Blackwater pool
6. Seaweed grove
7. Driftwood wreck
8. Shark den
9. Frozen statues
10. Lost treasury
11. Watery archway
12. Ziggurat altar
13. Coral graveyard
14. Hag's effigy
15. Hydra's den
16. Egg hatchery
17. Lava tubes
18. Sacrificial ledge
19. Ruined temple
20. Sunken throne

THEATER

For performance to entertain the masses.

1. Main theater
2. Proscenium arch
3. Orchestra pit
4. Back stage
5. Front stage
6. Trap rooms
7. Dressing rooms
8. Rehearsal room
9. Prop room
10. Wardrobe
11. Projection room
12. Balcony
13. Lobby
14. Gallery
15. Catwalks
16. Box office
17. Upper boxes
18. Stage wings

19. Arena stage
20. Lounge

THIEVES' DEN

Where unscrupulous brigands lair.

1. Throne room
2. Thieves' quarters
3. Master's quarters
4. Fighting pit
5. Meeting room
6. Mess hall
7. Armory
8. Guildmaster's office
9. Practice room
10. Sewer entrance
11. Main treasury
12. Gambling den
13. Seedy tavern
14. Secret treasury
15. Sunken cells
16. Murder hallway
17. Shrine of blood
18. Secret den
19. Piranha pool
20. Underworld pit

TOWER

Tall defensive structures intended to observe the surrounding area.

1. Guard quarters
2. Light armory
3. Heavy armory
4. Cellars
5. Secret entrance
6. Garderobe
7. Observation level
8. Meeting hall
9. Shrine
10. Lounge
11. Dining hall
12. Dungeon
13. Trapped entry hall
14. Guardroom
15. Vestibule
16. Gallery
17. Stables

18. Smithy
19. Sewers
20. Office

TEMPLE

Locations of worship for both holy and unholy faiths.

1. Vesting rooms
2. Audience chamber
3. Feasting hall
4. Priest dormitory
5. Art gallery
6. Fountain
7. Shrine
8. Preparation room
9. Artifact museum
10. Blessed armory
11. Torture chamber
12. Summoning circle
13. Sacrificial well
14. Dungeon cells
15. Hidden treasury
16. Isolation chamber
17. Sacrilegious library
18. Private altar
19. Ossuary
20. Reliquary chamber

VILLAGE

A populated or unpopulated town – filled with bustling merchants or the ravenous undead.

1. Inn
2. Tavern
3. Livery
4. Blacksmith
5. General Store
6. Temple
7. Town Hall
8. Theater
9. Arena
10. Provisioner
11. Apothecary
12. Keep
13. Tailor
14. Training ground
15. Adventurer's hall
16. Library

17. Butcher's shop
18. Bakery
19. Prison
20. Warehouse

WIZARD'S LAIR

Where those who practice the ways of the arcane sequester themselves.

1. Audience hall
2. Main library
3. Secret library
4. Wizard's bedroom
5. Scrying chamber
6. Guardians' hall
7. Meditation chamber
8. Treasure vault
9. Artifact museum
10. Summoning chamber
11. Mirror prison
12. Planar portal
13. Crystal vault
14. Advisor's cell
15. Alchemical lab
16. Multiverse orrery
17. Menagerie
18. Flesh laboratory
19. Ooze vaults
20. Lightning chamber

LOCATION CONNECTORS

When running overland or underground exploration adventures, you may want to describe what those paths are like. The following lists include connectors for various types of journeys between locations

OVERLAND CONNECTORS

The following paths are more common during overland travel.

1. Ancient roadway
2. Cracked plains
3. Dry riverbed
4. Subterranean trek
5. Old aqueduct
6. Precarious switchback
7. Well-traveled road
8. Narrow gap

9. Peaceful seacoast
10. Grim tunnels
11. Hidden stair
12. Lost mines
13. Shadowy path
14. Bestial path
15. Stag's trail
16. Abandoned road
17. Overgrown vale
18. Roaring rapids
19. Forest path
20. Path of bones

WILDERNESS CONNECTORS

These paths include more faerie-folk and fantastic paths the characters might follow through the wilds.

21. Dancing faeries
22. Pointing skeletons
23. Arcane ley line
24. Obsidian markers
25. Bloody game trail
26. Strange smells
27. Glyphed trees
28. Tree carvings
29. Mushroom path
30. Ghostly wolf
31. Running hares
32. Laughing nymphs
33. Lines in the stars
34. Alluring songs
35. Ancient ravine
36. An old string
37. Roaring river
38. Unique plants
39. Friendly critters
40. Ivy-covered statues

UNDERGROUND CONNECTORS

The following paths connect locations in the depths below ground. Roll twice or add in condition, origin, or effect rolls for further flavor.

1. Narrow path along a crevice
2. Natural caves
3. Underground river
4. Steam vents
5. Lava flow

6. Failing fey gate
7. Worm tunnel
8. Giant staircase
9. Rotten roots
10. Narrow bridge over gorge
11. Sunless lake
12. Arcane arches
13. Ancient hallway
14. Dimensional rift
15. Infested warren
16. Forgotten sewers
17. Dwarven roadway
18. Earthquake fissure
19. Mining tunnels
20. Cavern of fossils

DUNGEON MONSTERS

The following tables let you randomly select monsters based on “dungeon level.” Although these charts are built for old-school dungeon delving, you can use them to generate randomly encountered monsters in just about any fantasy setting - a ruin, an old church, caves, catacombs, an old wizard’s tower, or some other forgotten lair.

Though built on lists of monsters from Dungeons & Dragons, you can use these tables to inspire your selection of monsters from other systems as well.

To use these tables, first decide what dungeon level the characters are on. This might correspond to the level of the characters (assuming characters of 1st to 20th level) but it doesn’t have to. If 2nd-level characters decide to descend to dungeon level 5, so be it.

Once you have a dungeon level selected, roll a d20 and look across to see which monster table you should use. For example, if the characters are on dungeon level 4 and you roll a 12, you’ll use monster table 3. Then go to the indicated monster table and roll a d20 again, to determine which monster might show up. Using the above example, consulting monster table 3 and rolling a 3 gives a result of ‘Ghoul.’ Instead of using dungeon levels, you can just jump to whichever monster table feels right for the circumstances. If you know you’re looking for a monster with a challenge rating of 4 or 5, just roll on Monster Table 6. You can also use these tables to quickly look up monsters at particular challenge ratings. Even if you absolutely hate random encounters,

you can use the tables to generate encounter ideas you might never think of otherwise.

There are a few ways to choose the number of monsters in an encounter. First, think about what makes sense. Ghouls travel in packs, but a rug of smothering is probably found alone. You might roll dice to determine the number of monsters- for example, 3d6 ghouls. You might also choose to have one monster leading others-a pack of ghouls led by a ghast, for example.

MONSTER LIST 1

1. Bandit
2. Cultist
3. Flying snake
4. Giant crab
5. Giant rat
6. Kobold
7. Poisonous snake
8. Stirge
9. Tribal warrior
10. Axe beak
11. Blink dog
12. Dretch
13. Drow
14. Giant bat
15. Giant frog
16. Giant wolf spider
17. Goblin
18. Skeleton
19. Swarm of bats
20. Swarm of rats

MONSTER LIST 2

1. Wolf
2. Zombie
3. Cockatrice
4. Darkmantle
5. Gnoll
6. Gray ooze
7. Hobgoblin
8. Lizardfolk
9. Magmin
10. Orc
11. Rust monster
12. Sahuagin
13. Scout
14. Shadow

15. Swarm of insects
16. Thug
17. Worg
18. Animated armor
19. Bugbear
20. Death dog

MONSTER LIST 3

1. Dire wolf
2. Duergar
3. Ghoul
4. Giant spider
5. Giant toad
6. Harpy
7. Imp
8. Specter
9. Spy
10. Ankheg
11. Bandit captain
12. Berserker
13. Black dragon wyrmling
14. Cult fanatic
15. Ettercap
16. Gargoyle
17. Gelatinous cube
18. Ghast
19. Giant constrictor snake
20. Gibbering moulder

MONSTER LIST 4

1. Azer
2. Green dragon wyrmling
3. Grick
4. Griffon
5. Merrow
6. Mimic
7. Minotaur skeleton
8. Ochre jelly
9. Ogre
10. Ogre zombie
11. Priest
12. Rug of smothering
13. Sea hag
14. Swarm of poisonous snakes
15. Wererat
16. White dragon wyrmling
17. Will-o'-wisp

18. Basilisk
19. Bearded devil
20. Blue dragon wyrmling

MONSTER LIST 5

1. Doppelganger
2. Giant scorpion
3. Green hag
4. Hell hound
5. Knight
6. Manticore
7. Minotaur
8. Mummy
9. Nightmare
10. Owlbear
11. Phase spider
12. Veteran
13. Werewolf
14. Wight
15. Winter wolf
16. Black pudding
17. Chuul
18. Couatl
19. Ettin
20. Ghost

MONSTER LIST 6

1. Lamia
2. Red dragon wyrmling
3. Succubus/incubus
4. Wereboar
5. Air elemental
6. Barbed devil
7. Bulette
8. Earth elemental
9. Fire elemental
10. Flesh golem
11. Giant crocodile
12. Gladiator
13. Gorgon
14. Half-red dragon veteran
15. Hill giant
16. Night hag
17. Otyugh
18. Roper
19. Shambling mound
20. Troll

MONSTER LIST 7

1. Salamander
2. Vampire spawn
3. Water elemental
4. Wraith
5. Xorn
6. Chimera
7. Drider
8. Invisible stalker
9. Mage
10. Medusa
11. Vrock
12. Wyvern
13. Young white dragon
14. Oni
15. Shield guardian
16. Stone giant
17. Young black dragon
18. Assassin
19. Chain devil
20. Cloaker

MONSTER LIST 8

1. Frost giant
2. Hezrou
3. Hydra
4. Spirit naga
5. Young green dragon
6. Bone devil
7. Clay golem
8. Cloud giant
9. Fire giant
10. Glabrezu
11. Young blue dragon
12. Aboleth
13. Guardian naga
14. Stone golem
15. Young red dragon
16. Behir
17. Ereeti
18. Horned devil
19. Remorhaz
20. Archmage

MONSTER LIST 9

1. Erinyes
2. Adult white dragon

3. Nalfeshnee
4. Rakshasa
5. Storm giant
6. Vampire
7. Adult black dragon
8. Ice devil
9. Adult green dragon
10. Mummy lord
11. Purple worm
12. Adult blue dragon

MONSTER LIST 10

1. Iron golem
2. Marilith
3. Adult red dragon
4. Balor
5. Ancient white dragon
6. Pit fiend
7. Ancient black dragon
8. Lich
9. Ancient blue dragon
10. Ancient red dragon