

FIND AND MAINTAIN A GREAT GROUP

Finding a great group who can regularly and reliably carve out the time to play a roleplaying game is notoriously the hardest part of the RPG hobby. Throughout the history of the game, this problem persists. Even with the explosion of online play and digital tools, finding and maintaining a great RPG group remains challenging. This chapter offers tips and tools to help you build an awesome group who can hopefully enjoy playing games together for years and decades to come.

WHERE TO FIND PLAYERS

For fifty years GMs shared the best places to find players for their games. Here's a list of common groups GMs have found players:

- Family members
- Friends
- Friends-of-friends
- Coworkers
- Fellow students at schools and universities
- Fellow players met at local game shops
- Fellow players met at local community centers, libraries, and local online forums
- Fellow players met on online forums and message boards for your chosen system

MAKE YOUR DESIRE KNOWN

One of the best ways to find players is to simply let folks know about your interest in the hobby. Talk about it. Mention it in passing conversations at work or school. Don't be embarrassed by your love of the hobby and don't be shy. Nerd stuff is cool these days and roleplaying games have never been more popular. Sometimes you'll run into people who know nothing about RPGs but often you'll run into people who at least heard of Dungeons & Dragons and, a few times, you'll find people who love to play and *want* to play.

FINDING THE RIGHT PLAYERS FOR YOUR TABLE

Finding players is already hard but finding the *right* players can be even harder. Different players and different GMs have different desires

for the games they play. Some want brutal survival-based games while others want games of high fantasy and deep character-driven stories. Some want heavy story-focused games while others want deep tactical combat simulators. It can take time to figure out which system and style you prefer – recognizing that some systems support *many* styles. Once you know, you'll want to make sure the players you're considering want that style as well.

The easiest way to gauge a player's desires is to ask them. Write a list of questions to gauge a player's interest. You can find example questions below. The key to these questions is that there's no right or wrong answer. You're trying to figure out each other's style before you commit to a game, not trying to catch potential players with "gotcha" questions.

There's one important thing to remember about inviting players to your games – **it is much harder to remove a player who isn't working out than it is to stop them from joining in the first place.** Rejecting people from any group is extremely painful for everyone involved. Instead, try to identify that a player isn't a good fit for your game before you've both committed to a long-term seat at the table.

For many, it's also important to keep personal safety in mind. Consider meeting and playing in public places and joining a group with a friend.

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR NEW PLAYERS

Below is a list of example questions you might ask players to determine their drives and interests. You can discuss these questions with potential players in person or, if you're running online games, in an email or other electronic format.

- Are you able to play regularly (at the time you plan to run games)?
- What systems do you enjoy? What systems do you not enjoy?
- How would you rank the following aspects of RPGs from the most to the least enjoyed?
- Roleplaying
- Exploration
- Narrative ("Theater of the Mind") combat
- Tactical combat
- Character Backstory
- Campaign Storylines
- Getting together with friends

- Mechanical character options
- What do you enjoy most when playing RPGs?
- What do you enjoy the least?
- What do you look for in a good GM?
- What are examples of bad games you've played in? What went wrong?
- What's one of your favorite memories from a previous game?
- What's something in a previous game that didn't work out?

These questions aren't perfect for every player or every group. Customize your own set of questions to support the style of game you're running. In some cases, the system you're running can filter out players who aren't interested in that system so be sure to mention that. If you have particular styles of play you know you want to use, ask if they're willing to play with that. For me, for example, I ensure that players are ok running at least some battles in the "theater of the mind". I have less interest in deep tactical combat and this question often gets players to self-select out of my groups with no harm done.

RUN SINGLE-SESSION OR SHORT-RUN GAMES

A great way to see if a player is a good fit for a group is to actually play with them. Single session games have a low commitment and still give you a feel for how a player plays at the table. Sometimes one session isn't enough to get a full picture. Perhaps run a short-run campaign of two to four sessions. That should be enough to see if a player is a good fit.

Run these games outside of your regular scheduled longterm campaign if you have one. If you can, include players from your regular group and get their feelings for your new potential player as well. Again, it's much less disruptive to not invite a player to your regular group than kick them out later.

FIND AND FILTER PLAYERS ONLINE

Finding players for online games can be a bigger challenge than inviting players to an in-person game. You have a much wider potential net for players which is great – since geography is much less of a problem. But because of general internet anonymity and a lower level of commitment, the

behavior of some online players can be...challenging.

Because of these potential behavior issues reason, you'll want to focus even more on initial interviews, questions about their goals and desires for their games, and trying out single-session or short-run games before you invite someone to a regular campaign.

Managing People Isn't Fair, But It is Necessary

Unfortunately, fair or not, the GM often finds themselves in the position of managing the people at the table. This means handling personal conflicts, ensuring one or more players don't dominate the spotlight, making sure everyone's comfortable with the material in the story, and so on. You can delegate some duties to other players – like scheduling – but other parts you're just going to have to manage. When you are handling personal conflicts, some of the best advice is to focus on the problem – not the person, de-escalate as much as possible, and talk to people one-on-one instead of in a group so they don't feel ganged up on. Sometimes, however, you might find yourself in the position of handling harassment or other unacceptable behavior. Manage those situations swiftly and protect those who need protecting.

MAINTAIN A REGULAR SCHEDULE

The challenge of maintaining a regular RPG group is exasperated if you don't have a regular time scheduled to play. It often works best to select a specific time of day and day of the week for a regular game and then play with whoever can make it. The more you reinforce a regular time, the easier it is for players to block that time in their schedule and commit to a regular game.

Consider running shorter games that don't require as much of a commitment. Two hour games or three hour games might be easier to fit into a week than a four-hour game.

Aim to schedule your games at a regular day and time to help maintain a consistent schedule.

RUN WITH MISSING PLAYERS

If you always require every player to be at every game, you might cancel more games than you run. Instead, run as long as you have enough players to play. Ensure all of your players recognize and agree that the game rolls on during

your session zero (see Running a Session Zero in chapter \$).

Games often thrive with somewhere between four and six players. You can get away with fewer players (even as few as one!) but most groups work best with four players. More than six players and the game becomes much harder to run with less time focused on each player around the table.

Running even if one or two players can't make it means you'll run more games. Missing players can catch up with the game when they return and their characters can fade into the background when their player isn't there. Try not to tie the story of your game so tightly to a single character that a missing player throws the whole adventure off. This isn't always possible but do your best and your game will work out better for it.

RECRUIT ON-CALL PLAYERS

Another trick for a more flexible and consistent group is to have "on call" players. These players can't commit to a regular seat at the table but still want to play from time to time. When one of your regular players can't make it, you can call one of your on-call players to step in. One or two such "on-call" players works well.

If you have a consistent group already but someone else approaches you with interest in the game, explain to them the concept of being an on-call player. In my experience, potential on-call players understand how it works and aren't bitter for the role.

If one of your regular players begins regularly missing a game, have a conversation with them about becoming an on-call player instead. Explain that moving them to be an on-call player isn't a matter of behavior or any other aspect of the game, it's simply a matter of giving the regular seat to someone who can be there more regularly. It's a sensitive conversation to have but doing so helps you build a fantastic, reliable, and flexible group.

The concept of an "on-call" player may seem strange. Explain the situation to your group and any potential on-call player and hopefully they'll understand why you can't just swamp the table with seven or eight regular players. Most people recognize that too many players makes the game worse for everyone.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Finding and maintaining a great group is one of the hardest parts of the RPG hobby.
- Find players among family members, friends, friends of friends, co-workers, at hobby stores, community centers, schools, universities, libraries, and on local and online forums.
- Let people around you know of your passion for RPGs. People may come to you looking to join a game.
- When considering a new player, ask questions to gauge what type of game they may want to play. Pay special attention for online players who have more anonymity and less initial commitment. Build a list of questions to gauge players' styles and desires.
- Run single-session or short-run campaigns with new players to feel them out before inviting them to a long-term campaign or ongoing group.
- Maintain a regular weekly schedule when possible. Aim for three or four-hour games.
- Aim for six regular full-time players for most games. Play even if you only have three or four. Let missing characters fade into the background.
- Recruit one or two "on-call" players who can fill in when you have a seat free.

RUN SINGLE-SESSION GAMES

Whether you're running your first game ever or your ten-thousandth, we often find ourselves running RPGs in which our entire story fills just a single session of play. You might be running single-session games at a convention, at your local game shop, for some friends or co-workers, or to feel out potential players for a larger campaign (see chapter \$). Maybe single-session games are all you can fit into your life right now.

This chapter offers advice for running single-session games or short-run campaigns of up to about four sessions. Chapter \$ covers how to build, prepare, and run longer-term campaigns.

PREPARING A SINGLE-SESSION GAME

How we prepare for a single-session game differs from how we'd prepare a session in an ongoing campaign. For single-session games, we're unlikely to know much about the characters and we don't need hooks for longer adventure threads. We can still use many of the eight steps, either when preparing a pre-published adventure or a homebrew adventure. See chapter \$, "Choose Your Steps", to consider which steps you want to focus on for a single-session game.

If it's your first game ever, you'll almost certainly want to run a published adventure – ideally one written as the starting adventure for the system you intend to play. Nearly all RPGs offer starter adventures. They're specifically designed to help new game masters understand how to run a game, show you what differentiates their system from others, and gives you something fun for your group.

If you have experience running games, you likely already know if you want to run a published adventure or prep your own homebrew adventure. One long-held and surprising observation stands out, though.

Published adventures aren't typically easier to run than homebrew adventures. Both published and homebrew adventures take time to prepare. Published adventures require that you read them, understand them, and make them their own. Homebrew adventures require that you prepare all the material you need to run the adventure with the advantage that you know every part of the adventure you're going to run.

Otherwise, preparing for a single-session game follows much of the same process as any game

and can benefit from following the eight steps of lazy GM prep outlined earlier in this book.

USE PRE-GENERATED CHARACTERS

When running single-session adventures you almost always want to offer pre-generated characters for your system of choice. Low-level pregens get your players into the game quickly and help new players better understand the underlying system.

RUN A MINIATURE SESSION ZERO

When you sit down to run your single-session game, consider running a miniature session zero. We cover session zeros more fully in chapter \$, mostly focused on longer-term campaigns but it can help you to go through that chapter even if running a single session game.

Our miniature session zero follows an abbreviated checklist. You can find more details on these components in chapter \$.

- Discuss how long the session is going to take and when you'll take a break (ideally once every 90 minutes).
- Cover what topics or content is allowed or not allowed in the game.
- Cover use of safety tools such as lines and veils and "pause for a minute".
- Clarify the characters' goal and bond to the adventure. What are they supposed to accomplish?
- Cover any other specific rules for this particular session players need to know up front.

Ideally you can cover this in just a couple of minutes. Don't spend too much time talking about the adventure without getting into it. Fire off that strong start!

KEEP TRACK OF TIME

If you have a deadline for the duration for your game, keeping the entire session within the allotted time is always a challenge. No matter how well you think your adventure fits within the time you have, it almost always takes longer than you think.

Even published adventures *designed* to fit in a certain timespan often fail to do so. Be ready to

cut material from published adventures as you run them to fit into the time you have.

Here are some tips to help keep your single-session adventure on time:

- Run with four or fewer players.
- Use low-level characters with fewer mechanics.
- Keep an eye on the clock throughout the session.
- Expect scenes to take 45 minutes each and plan appropriately.
- Keep at least 45 minutes for the final scene in your game – particularly if it's a big boss fight which might even need significantly more time.
- Plan ahead to cut scenes out of the middle of the adventure. Don't run the boring middle only to cut off the climactic ending.

RUN TIMED ADVENTURES

One trick to keep adventures running on time is to run adventures where time is part of the adventure itself.

I run a yearly Ravenloft game every Halloween in which the characters must explore the vampire Strahd's massive castle seeking three items of power before the vampire shows up to destroy them. No matter where the characters go or what they do – Strahd shows up 45 minutes before the end of the session. The time constraints of the session are built into the adventure.

Here are several potential adventure hooks for running timed adventures:

- The characters must collect three artifacts before a villain shows up.
- The characters must find as many artifacts as they can in an old crypt before the mountain surrounding the crypt collapses.
- The characters must find as many pieces of intelligence in the hobgoblin fortress before the hobgoblin's dragon ruler returns.
- The characters must find as many parts of the staff of power as they can to use it to defeat the soon-to-arrive undead mage.
- The characters must rescue as many lost souls as they can before the portal to hell cuts them off from their home world.

One key to these timed adventures is that they're not "all or nothing" quests. The more goals you accomplish, the better off you are, but you don't "fail" if you miss some of them. See chapter 5 for more discussion of the brittle nature of all-or-nothing collection quests.

EXPANDING TO MULTI-SESSION GAMES

Sometimes single-session games expand out into short-run campaigns. Other times, we plan to run an adventure over several sessions in a short campaign. Short campaigns are a fantastic way to try out a new system, feel out new players or a new group, or take a break from longer campaigns. Much like single-session games, we can jump right into it instead of spending a lot of time on campaign prep and world building. The general arc of our short campaign might be more substantial than a single-session game but not by a lot. Sometimes published adventures designed to fit into a single session instead take two or three – particularly if you expand them out.

And sometimes, our short-run campaigns grow into longer campaigns. That's fine too.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- We might run single-session games for many reasons: to try out new players, to try out new systems, to run at conventions or local game shops, or because it's all we can fit into our schedule.
- Preparing single-session games is different than longer campaigns – focus on prepping what you need to run the adventure in the time you have.
- If you're new to GMing, use the introductory adventure for the RPG you intend to run.
- Use pre-generated characters for single-session games.
- Run an abbreviated session zero to get your players on the same page.
- Keep track of time. Be ready to cut from the middle to get to the adventure's conclusion.
- Try running adventures where the story is specifically timed to run within a session.
- Sometimes single-session games expand out into short campaigns or even longer ones.

BUILD AND RUN A LAZY CAMPAIGN

Single session games can be a great way to enjoy roleplaying games without a big commitment but long-term campaigns can build stories that last a lifetime. Long-term campaigns can last for as few as four or five sessions or go on for years – even decades. These campaigns often include large evolving storylines, high stakes, and deep character growth for you and your players to experience throughout your campaign.

There are several types of RPG campaigns. Some prefer open-ended player-directed campaigns where characters seek their own goals and the GM builds the path in front of them as they go. Sometimes referred to as “west marches” style games – the players drive the direction of the game and the game master builds the world out from the directions the players choose. There’s more to west marches style games, such as player-driven scheduling, shifting groups, and sometimes shared worlds but the larger topic of west-marches-style games goes beyond the scope of this book.

Some RPG campaigns follow an overarching story with clear beats the characters are intended to follow – one to the next. Big published campaign adventures often include these big-beat storylines as chapters in a larger campaign book. The characters are intended to navigate through the storyline from chapter 1 to chapter 8 as the story moves forward.

Other campaigns offer a mix of styles – with a clear larger goal for the campaign the characters seek but many different ways to get there. These campaigns have a specific focus but don’t map out *how* they reach that goal. The direction of the campaign evolves based on the characters’ decisions. This campaign model fits well with our lazy GM style and it’s the one we’re going to focus on here but many of the ideas ahead work well for many different campaign styles.

The campaign model of a specific goal with several possible paths works well with homebrewed campaigns set in published campaign settings but can still work when running published adventures or running homebrewed adventures in a homebrewed setting (see chapter \$ for lazy tips to build your own world).

There are many ways to prepare your campaign but here I offer a five step process

intended to fit the ethos of the lazy game master by preparing only what you need to run your campaign and focus on building a story that evolve the more you play. The major steps of this process include:

- Building a campaign seed (this chapter)
- Writing a campaign handout for your players (chapter \$)
- Running a session zero (chapter \$)
- Filling out your lazy campaign (chapter \$)
- Optionally, building out more of your world (chapter \$)

With a nod to Carl Sagan, in order to build your campaign, you must first invent the universe.

Consider Shorter Campaigns

Many times when we think about long-term campaigns, we imagine campaigns that go on for years. Don’t discount the value of shorter campaigns, though – those that last between maybe five and twenty sessions. Such campaigns have several advantages: - They let you run a more focused story. - They give you the opportunity to try out character options or optional rules you might not want to work with for two whole years. - They offer an easier path and commitment for trying out a different RPG system. - They let you fit more stories into your life. There’s a great joy that comes from running long campaigns, but there’s also a lot to be had running shorter campaigns too. Consider both options when choosing what type of campaign to run.

CHOOSE YOUR WORLD

Where does the campaign take place? What world is it in? Some RPGs have their own built-in world while others expect you to either create your own or use a published world. Campaign worlds usually include things like

- notable locations
- geography
- history
- politics
- factions (political, religious, villainous)
- pantheons and theology

and often other stuff. We don’t need all of these things to get our campaign started but it’s worth selecting worlds and sourcebooks that have what we need.

Consider Homebrewed Adventures in a Published World

The laziest way to fill out a world is to build off of one that already exists. There are hundreds of published RPG fantasy worlds from which you can choose to host your campaign. These highly polished products offer way more than you can develop on your own for your own custom world. Published campaign settings have fantastic art, widespread geography, deep pantheons and histories, and much more. You often get a tremendous amount of value for the money.

DEFINE THE CAMPAIGN'S HOOK

With a world selected, it's time for a campaign hook. The whole rest of the campaign surrounds and focuses on this hook. The hook is what the campaign is about. It's a north star – a way for you and your players to know the goal and direction things are headed.

Here are ten example campaign hooks.

- Destroy the vampire Strahd.
- Destabilize the tyrannical Dragon Empire of Midgard.
- Stop the rise of the Queen of Dragons.
- Save the world from the world-destroying magic of the Second Mourning.
- Save the forest region of the Gloaming from the ooze god Mugdulblub.
- Close the doors of the demon-summoning Black Cathedral.
- Stop the rise of the galaxy-ending entity known as the Fourth Emperor.
- Prevent the expansion of the Ghoul Imperium into Midgard.
- Recover the Key of Worlds before the cult of Ibraxus.
- Prevent the return of the Nameless King.

Come up with a campaign hook you can drop in front of the players and the characters at the beginning of your campaign so they know where things are headed. Avoid being too vague in an attempt not to spoil the surprise. Let players know what they're getting into. It's possible, of course, for a campaign's goal to shift as the campaign rolls on, but, ideally, you can put enough of a campaign hook in front of the players so they know what their characters face.

A Less Defined Campaign

This style of having a clear campaign hook may not work for you or work for every campaign you want to run. Some campaigns focus on the characters simply exploring the world and getting involved in the adventures right in front of them. You might also have an initial campaign hook that either evolves or gets completed, leading to a new campaign hook. You still want to be clear with your players what this campaign is about and a risk of running a campaign without a clear hook is that players have their characters wander about without much idea what they should be doing. Thus, the strong campaign hook is our default recommendation.

DETAIL THE CAMPAIGN'S TRUTHS

What are the "truths" of your campaign and world that the players should know before they start thinking about building their characters? What are the important elements of history, politics, environment, and the current situation that matter to them right now and into the future. How do the world and characters connect to the campaign's hook?

Somewhere between **three and six truths** can define what makes this campaign different from others. These truths can offer hooks to the players to help them build their characters. They help define this particular story in this particular world. These truths should also help *sell* this campaign to your players. What makes it exciting? Why would *you* want to play a game there?

Be wary of having too many truths or making them too long and complex. Too many and they start to lose their impact and meaning. Players start to tune out. You want enough truths to define your setting but not so many that players start to forget them. You always have time to reveal more secrets in the sessions ahead. Likewise, you don't want *vague* truths. These truths should be specific enough to clarify what sets this campaign apart from others.

Here are six truths for a *City of Arches* campaign:

- A thousand years ago, a tyrannical ruler was banished and cursed so all memories and visages of him was wiped from the annals of history – he is now only known as the Nameless King.

- As capital to the once mighty empire, the City of Arches contains dozens of archways that once connected one world to another. Now the archways are largely dormant – though some flair to life on occasion. Others are rumored activate when in proximity of an arch key.
- Sometimes arches flair to life and beings step through into the world with no memory of who they are or where they came from. A band of sages known as the Archkeepers greet such arrivals with warmth, safety, and a basket of fine gifts.
- Though none know the name of the Nameless King, a cult known as the Knights of the Nameless King believes it's imperative that the King be found and returned to his throne. They operate in ancient ruins, deadly alleyways, and in the parlors of corrupt nobles.
- Though the city above is quite safe, the shady undercity known as the Lower Reaches is ruled over by loose bands of criminals. Deeper still is the deadly and chaotic ruined city of Sunken Revvia.
- Rumors speak of a single key, called the Key of Worlds, able to open any archway to any world. A cult known as the Children of Ibraxus seeks this key to bring their beloved demon prince into the world.

Like the campaign's main hook, these truths should be player facing. They help your players understand the scope and scale of the game. They know what's going on enough to tie their characters to in-game events, histories, or situations. Did your character come through one of the arches or have you always lived in the city? What drives you to thwart the Knights of the Nameless King or the cult of Ibraxus?

OPTIONALLY DEVELOP PATRONS OR FACTIONS

If you plan on having your group choose a patron or faction during your session zero (see chapter \$), you can start thinking about these patrons or factions during your initial campaign prep. Patrons might represent particular alignments or goals within the campaign's world and framework. When the characters choose a patron

during your session zero, they're selecting the general approach of the campaign.

Here are some example patrons:

- **Roselyn Zeshe:** Spymaster of the queen (neutral).
- **Garland Willowmane:** Archkeeper of the City of Arches (neutral good).
- **Joselyn Halfcloak:** Lieutenant commander of the Golden Knights (lawful good).
- **Adel Rosethorn:** Fence in the Lower Reaches for the Black Hand (chaotic neutral).

Choosing a patron doesn't lock the characters exclusively onto one path, but it gives the characters an initial connection from which to get started.

You can, instead, skip the selection of a patron or faction and let the characters decide who to align with after they've already played in the campaign a while.

CONSIDER QUESTIONS FOR PLAYER-DRIVEN WORLD BUILDING

Some game systems encourage player-driven world building – handing the creation of some of the aspects of the larger world to the players. This gives players more direct involvement in the world in which their characters travel and can lead to some exciting elements of the world you may never have come up with on your own.

Instead of leaving such world building open-ended, consider preparing some questions to guide players in their creation. Here are some examples:

- Tell us about the thieves' guild your character once belonged to.
- What are some unique features of the inn and tavern of the town?
- What are three interesting nearby adventure locations your character always wanted to explore?
- What nightmares do you imagine beneath the city streets?
- What force fights against the kingdom of this region?
- Tell us about the god of light and the god of darkness.
- What location does your character go to to escape from the bustle of the town?

- Who runs the local blacksmith and what relation do you have?
- What business have your characters worked for before?
- What cafe do your characters visit each morning?
- What fantastic feature is notable about this town?

Names are Hard

Asking players to name things doesn't always work out well. Coming up with good names is hard – for both GMs and players. If you find yourself needing to define things in your world with lots of proper names, find good name generators or good lists of random names and give those to your players ahead of time so, when you're asking players to define things in your world, they have a source of good names they can use.

Focused questions help players come up with interesting aspects of the world without coloring too far outside the lines of the campaign you're putting together. Ask questions that steer their creativity into areas that support, rather than oppose, the theme of the campaign.

PREPARE A STARTING ADVENTURE

Now we're ready for our first adventure. Our first adventure should be short and focused, getting us and our players familiar with the world, the game system (if its not one we're familiar with already), the campaign, our characters, and each other. Keep your starting adventure simple. An NPC gives a quest to the characters to go somewhere and do something. Appendix \$ includes several quest seeds to choose from – easily modified to fit your world, setting, and system. You can even skip the quest-giving part and jump right into the adventure, explaining that the characters *already* received the quest.

We won't be able to fill out all eight steps for this first adventure, since we don't know who the characters are yet, but we can prepare enough to run a short one- or two-hour adventure at the end of our session zero.

Here are ten possible intro scenarios to get your campaign started:

- The characters fall down a sinkhole full of skeletons.
- The characters witness a robbery by a bunch of bandits.
- The characters are attacked by brigands on their way back to the starting location.
- The characters begin half-way through an old ruin attempting to disrupt an evil ritual.
- The characters begin in an arena fighting for their lives.
- The characters wake up in a cell after having been captured.
- The characters find their home town under attack.
- The characters see travelers being attacked by monsters.
- The characters hear someone pleading from down in the sewers.
- The characters defend innocents from a summoned foe.

As the game evolves, we'll switch to a more open quest model (see quest models in chapter \$) but, to keep things simple for us up front, focus on a single quest and single adventure to get things started.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Building a lazy campaign involves several steps: developing an initial campaign seed, writing a campaign guide for your players, running a session zero, and then filling out what you need to run adventures in your campaign setting.
- Choose a campaign world – published campaign worlds offer a great deal of material you can use or reskin.
- Define your campaign's hook – write down the single north star you and your players can focus on for your campaign.
- Write down three to six "truths" for your campaign that define it and clarify how it differs from all others.
- Optionally, prepare a handful of patrons or factions the characters might align themselves with.
- Optionally, consider and prepare questions so players can build out parts of the world.
- Prepare a short one- to two-hour adventure to get your campaign started during your session zero.

WRITE A SHORT CAMPAIGN GUIDE

So you're planning to run a longer RPG campaign. You've got your world selected, your campaign hook, your campaign's truths, and other material discussed in chapter \$. Now it's time to bring your campaign to your players.

We do so by putting together a short handout for our players (ideally a single page) so they can get an idea of what this campaign is about, how their characters fit into it, and what house rules you're bringing to the table.

This campaign guide doesn't *have* to fit on one page but every line beyond a page is a line your players are less likely to read. Players are busy and have a lot of demand for their attention. The shorter your guide, the more impact it has and the easier it'll be to get your players on board.

Let's look at what we might put on that page.

THE CAMPAIGN HOOK

Remember that hook you wrote in chapter \$? Include this hook in your campaign guide. Tell players in a sentence or two what this campaign is about. Get players on board by recognizing what they'll be doing when they play this game.

THE TRUTHS

Include your campaign's "truths" so your players know what separates this campaign from all the rest. Make them specific and evocative. Sell your players on this campaign – why do they want to play it?

THE CHARACTER'S ROLE AND GROUP BOND

What types of characters make sense for this campaign? What role will they fill? Be specific. This role and bond help players recognize which types of characters work well in this campaign and which won't. It avoids the common problem of having characters with misaligned motivations from the drive of the campaign. No more "my character doesn't really like going on adventures and prefers staying home reading a book".

Though some groups have players build characters independently, this book recommends and expects that you and your players build characters together during your session zero

(chapter \$). Thus, declare specifically in your campaign guide – before the players have created their characters – what sorts of characters work well together to accomplish the goal of the campaign.

The format for this sort of role and bond is simple:

You and your fellow heroes work together to accomplish something.

This format typically works well for heroic-focused games, where the characters seek to help the weak fight the strong.

Most of all, a group bond ties characters together with a common cause. This bond prevents any initial friction in which the characters don't trust one another, don't yet plan to work with one another, or don't care about the campaign's goal – they care about the goal because that's the focus on the campaign.

Here are some example roles and bonds:

- You and your fellow adventurers seek to protect the City of Arches from the remnants of the Nameless King.
- You and your fellow heroes seek to destabilize the Dragon Empire.
- You and your fellow adventurers seek to protect the people of Barovia from the devil Strahd.
- You and your fellow heroes seek to prevent the rise of the dragon queen.
- You and your fellow heroes seek to prevent the Second Mourning.
- You and your fellow adventurers seek to recover the lost items of the Faerie Queen before the destruction of the Gloaming.
- You and your fellow heroes seek to protect the people of Whitesparrow from the threats lurking outside the town.

Too Heavy Handed?

Some GMs think this approach is too heavy handed – too much of a railroad. If you have approaches you prefer, you certainly don't have to build such a strict bond before character creation. But, like many parts of lazy GMing, sometimes it's just easier to define the campaign's goal, bind it to the characters, and bind them together to skip all of the fumbling around when we all know where the game should be heading.

ON MOTIVATIONS

When thinking about this character role and group bond, think about what motivates the characters to go on adventures. In chapter \$, when considering the characters, we included a list of typical motivations like altruism (making the world a better place), greed (finding loot), and discovery (learning what secrets the world has to offer). Consider implanting one or more of these motivations in your campaign guide as part of this group bond. Ensure that the bond is strong enough to continue the campaign as well. You don't want the characters quitting their job of adventuring after they earn 200 GP in the first dungeon. What motivates them to keep adventuring?

PATRONS OR FACTIONS

If you chose to have the characters select a patron or faction to align with, list them in your campaign guide so players can read about them. Then, during your session zero, players have the information they need to choose the faction they're interested in.

RULES AND HOUSE RULES

If you have any special instructions for the rules you plan to run with, describe them in your campaign guide. Perhaps your campaign only uses certain character options or certain sourcebooks of material. Perhaps you have some house rules specific for this campaign. Perhaps you have particular options for character creation you want to clarify. This is the place to put it.

Limit Source Material

For large RPGs, you might be inclined to let players select from any character options they can find. Instead, focus your campaign to a specific set of character options that fit the theme and world of your campaign. This limitation actually helps players be more creative by choosing character options they might not otherwise choose. Limiting and focusing sources builds a specific flavor for the campaign you're running. As a start, consider allowing options from the core rulebook plus one additional sourcebook focused on the themes of your campaign.

SAFETY TOOLS

Safety tools help ensure players are all on the same page when it comes to the content presented in the game. You can find several resources for excellent safety tools on the reference page linked on the copyright page of this book but we'll look at two specific safety tools you can outline in your campaign guide:

- Lines and Veils
- "Pause for a Minute"

LINES AND VEILS

Lines and veils help you and your players describe specific types of content you don't want in your game at all ("lines") and content that's ok but better handled off-screen ("veils").

Example lines might include:

- No in-world or out-of-world racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia.
- No inter-party violence, theft, or betrayal without the consent of both players beforehand.
- No violence towards children or domestic animals.
- No non-consensual sexual contact or harassment of any sort.
- No character-driven slavery or torture.

Example veils might include:

- Consensual sexual contact.
- Villainous use of slavery or torture.

You can include your own lines and veils in your campaign guide and then open the conversation up for players to add their own lines and veils, privately or as part of the group, to ensure the game is focused on a good time for everyone.

"PAUSE FOR A MINUTE"

"Pause for a minute" is a verbal version of the X-card by John Stavropoulos and Script Change by Beau J agr Sheldon. Here's how it works and how you can describe it to your players both verbally and in your campaign guide:

Any time during the game, anyone, including the GM, can say "pause for a minute". This ends current conversations. Players and the GM drop out of character to talk about a given situation.

Use this to ask to move past an uncomfortable scene, ensure agreement among players about a course of action, or to get back on track about what's going on. Use "pause for a minute" often to help ensure everyone's heading in the right direction and having fun with the game.

You can include this description in your campaign guide and discuss it during your session zero.

\$ Note, we can move this to the appendix if that works better.

EXAMPLE CAMPAIGN GUIDE – THE CITY OF ARCHES

Here's an example campaign guide for the City of Arches tailored for a particular campaign.

CAMPAIGN THEME

Defend the City of Arches from the rise and return of the Nameless King.

Among the towering gateways looming over the City of Arches, sunlight shines on the golden armor of the city's protectors as its citizens go about their day. Yet in the forgotten chambers below the city lies a forgotten threat that may shake the city to its knees. This shadowy threat has no name – simply called the Nameless King – and yet the threat of its return grows every day.

SIX TRUTHS OF THE CITY OF ARCHES

- The City of Arches is ruled over by the Golden Order including Queen Karsara Aventus IV, the city's Golden Knights, and the elected the Golden Council.
- Mysterious archways give the city its name, each once a planar portal, now mostly dormant. Travelers from other lands or worlds sometimes step out from one of these archways and into the city. They come with little memory of their past and have no way to return. Some seek keys to open stable gateways within these archways.
- The Archkeepers greet new arrivals through the archways warmly, giving them baskets of food, artisanal cheeses, and scented soaps and suggest a calming bath in the public baths beneath the Falls of the Three Gods.
- The catacombs of the Cliffs of the Dead along the northern mountains above the city have

housed the city's dead for centuries. Some crypts lay forgotten, and others were sealed off centuries ago. The mountain itself seems to draw old crypts deeper inward.

- Layers of ruins lie below the City of Arches. The Lower Reaches, ruled over by the criminal organization known as the Black Hand, houses many of the city's seedier establishments and clientele. The Lost Cisterns lead even further into unknown tunnels, chambers, and caves filled with dangers and wonders alike. Deep below lies the horror-filled ruined city of Sunken Revvia.
- North of the city reside the fisherfolk and submerged ruins of the Revlend Marches. South reside the farmers, villages, and ancient forests of the Doorish Hills. West seethe the wracked desert and tomb-filled Western Deadlands. The city includes several patrons and factions to drive character's adventures. You and your companions may serve one or more of these patrons.

PATRONS OF THE CITY OF ARCHES

During our session zero you'll choose from one of the following main patrons:

Garland Willowmane – High Archkeeper. Garland, a middle-aged human priest, and her Archkeepers greet new arrivals to the City of Arches as pleasantly as possible. The Archkeepers found over the years, that a being of the most fiendish origin may become one of the greatest of the city's citizens. Yet not always do new arrivals come peacefully.

Roselyn Zeshe – The Queen's Spymaster. Roselyn, a portly middle-aged elf, serves the queen and seeks her continued reign over the city. Roselyn seeks those able to root out plots against the queen and hidden dangers threatening the safety of the city.

Joslyn Halfcloak – Second of the Golden Knights. Second in command of the Golden Knights, Joslyn, a dwarf veteran, often hires local adventurers to augment the Golden Knights, serving to protect the city of threats without, within, and below.

Adel Rosethorn – Lower Reach Fence. Adel, a smiling halfling merchant, runs a shop of relics and curios in the city's Lower Reaches. She hires adventurers to recover mysterious artifacts of

previous ages buried in the city's vast and hidden chambers. Ru

YOUR CHARACTER IN THE CITY OF ARCHES

Characters of any race, species, or ancestry fit well into the City of Arches. You may be a new arrival, with only hazy memories from where you came, or you may have grown up in or around the city. The City of Arches is a city of adventure, with intrigue among the city's factions and mysteries hidden below, beyond, above, and outside. There are many with whom to speak, many mysteries to uncover, and many horrors with which to cross blades.

Above all, your character seeks to work together with your companions to protect the city and seek adventure within its depths.

CHARACTER CREATION

For this campaign we'll be using the D&D 2014 rules from the * D&D Player's Handbook, Xanathar's Guide to Everything, *and* Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* except for the Peace and Twilight cleric subclasses.

We'll build characters together during our session zero. Characters begin at 1st level. Calculate attribute scores using either the standard array or point buy systems. You can, instead, choose one of the two following standard arrays.

16 (+3), 14 (+2), 14 (+2), 12 (+1), 12 (+1), 8 (-1)

16 (+3), 14 (+2), 14 (+2), 12 (+1), 10 (+0), 10 (+0)

These arrays already include the bonuses you'd receive by choosing a background. Don't add those bonuses on top of the arrays above.

"PAUSE FOR A MINUTE"

During this campaign, at any time, a player or the DM can say "pause for a minute" to stop the current conversation, break character, and address the situation. This can be used for anything from "I really don't like this subject in the game" to "I don't understand why we're in this dungeon". Use it freely to clarify the direction of the game and address any concerns.

CONTENT, LINES, AND VEILS

This campaign contains the following subject matter: cults, insects, humanoid sacrifices,

eldritch horror, caves and other tight spaces, underground cities, blood and gore.

This campaign contains the following material veiled off screen and only conducted by villains: torture and slavery.

This campaign will not have any of the following: non-consensual sexual contact or harassment among any characters or NPCs, player-initiated torture, player-initiated racism, violence towards animals, violence towards children, misogyny, transphobia, or homophobia.

DELIVER YOUR CAMPAIGN GUIDE

Deliver your campaign guide to your players before you sit down for your session zero (see chapter \$) – but not *too* early. If you give it to them too early, players will likely start building a character in their minds (if not on paper) before they've had a chance to sit down with the rest of the group to build characters together. Deliver the one-pager a day or two before the session zero so players have enough time to digest it but not enough time for them to flesh out a full character ready to go.

If you're worried players will *still* build their characters early, instruct them to build *two* characters and not fall in love with either of them. That way, when you all sit down at the table during your session zero, they have a couple of options for characters that might fit with the rest of the group.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Write a short campaign guide you can give to your players ahead of your session zero.
- Keep your guide short – ideally one to two pages. Players won't have the time to read much more than that.
- Include the campaign's hook so they know what the campaign is about.
- Include the "truths" that define the campaign so they know what sets this campaign apart from all the others.
- Define the group's overarching goal and bond to help players build characters focused on the theme of the campaign.
- Include any selection of group patrons of desired.
- Include any rules guidance and house rules.

- Describe safety tools such as lines, veils, and “pause for a minute”.
- Deliver your campaign guide a couple of days before your session zero.

RUN A SESSION ZERO

You've got your campaign planned out. You have your short campaign guide and sent it out to your players. It's time for your session zero!

A session zero is the first session of a longer campaign in which you and your players talk about the campaign to come. You discuss the theme of the campaign, go over your campaign summary, build characters together, and then, if you have time, run a short adventure.

REVIEW THE CAMPAIGN GUIDE

Maybe your players read over the campaign guide you wrote in chapter \$ and sent out to them before your session. Maybe they didn't. Sit down and go over it. Talk about the theme of the campaign. Go over the six truths. Answer questions. Talk about what sorts of characters work best for the campaign. Talk about factions and the initial direction they might want to take with the campaign.

This is the time to have an open discussion about the campaign to come. Hopefully they've had hints about the campaign you wanted to run beforehand and are already on board.

You can go beyond the campaign guide now that you have your players in front of you. Talk more about the world and their place in it. Go deeper into the six truths. Talk about the gods of your campaign, the geography, the history, and anything else you think they'll digest to help them build their characters. Give them the information they need to build characters designed to get the most fun out of the campaign.

GO OVER SAFETY TOOLS

Even though they're written down in your campaign guide, spend time going over safety tools. You already outlined your own lines and veils but your players may have them as well. They can discuss them right there but tell them they can also come to you outside the game one-on-one to add anything that might be missing. If you play with a regular group, keep their previous lines and veils in mind and add them to your list beforehand.

Talk about "pause for a minute" so they understand how it works. Clarify that they can use this both for uncomfortable content but also just to help them get on track with other player

decisions or to help clarify what the goal of the game is at that moment.

BUILD CHARACTERS TOGETHER

After having reviewed the campaign guide and talked about the game in general, it's time for the players to build their characters. Ask players what they're thinking about as they build them out. Encourage them to talk to one another about potential classes, backgrounds, and character hooks. Have them coordinate which characters best fill which roles and which characters have which skills trained, when applicable, so they're not duplicating the same things.

If you want, you can offer potential bonds between characters – relationships the characters already have with one another that help them bind together in a group. Here's a list of potential character bonds you might share:

1. Adopted siblings
2. Mentor and student
3. Friendly rivals
4. Sage and scribe
5. Priest and acolyte
6. Fellow veterans
7. Ward and guardian
8. Longtime traveling companions
9. Buddy cops
10. Childhood friends
11. Noble and bodyguard
12. Soulbound mortals
13. Former prisoners
14. Former criminals
15. Hunted quarry
16. Pact bound
17. Apocalypse survivors
18. Savior and saved
19. Business partners
20. Employer and servant

How Much Background Do You Need?

You and your players should discuss how much background material they need for their characters. Some groups prefer more emergent backgrounds that fill out during gameplay (a method I prefer) while others like to have more extensive background prepared by their players. If you choose the latter, ask players to do so after your session zero so they have an idea about the other characters and the general theme of the campaign.

Campfire tales during your game (see “Campfire Tales” in chapter \$) are a great time for players to fill out more of the background of their characters as the campaign grows. Review the backgrounds of the characters during step 1 of your eight steps (see chapter \$).

CHOOSE A PATRON OR FACTION

If you decided to offer a patron from a list, now is the time to discuss these options with your players. Depending on how the patrons align with the world, this choice can change the theme of the rest of the campaign.

You can skip this step – letting players choose a patron or faction to align with once they’ve actually gotten into the game and know what’s going on. Your players also aren’t locked into their faction forever. They can decide to shift allegiance depending on how things go in the campaign.

ASK WORLD-BUILDING QUESTIONS

In chapter \$ we considered outlining questions to help players build out portions of the world. Now is the time to bring those questions to the table and see what they come up with. You may tailor your questions, omit some, or come up with new ones based on what you’ve heard about the characters already during character creation. Write down the results and use them when you build out your larger world in chapters \$ and \$.

RUN AN ADVENTURE

If you have the time during your session zero, run the short introductory adventure you prepared during your initial campaign prep. You won’t have a lot of time so a strong start and another scene or two are probably all you need. Use the NPCs, quests, locations, and other generators in appendix \$ to help you build this short adventure if desired.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Go over safety tools, taking input for any additions.
 - Build characters together – facilitate communication between players as they build their characters.
 - Have the players choose a patron or faction should you desire.
 - Write down the results when asking players to build out parts of the world. Use them in your larger campaign prep.
 - Run a short adventure to get the campaign started.
- During your session zero, review your campaign guide.
 - Clarify the goal of the campaign, the six truths, the character’s bond to the campaign, and other rules and house rules.

FILL OUT YOUR LAZY CAMPAIGN

At this point you've started your campaign planning with the hook, truths, and potential patrons or factions. You've run your session zero and a small adventure to get the campaign started. You've gathered information on the characters and gotten more input from your players. Now you can fill out more details of your campaign to fuel your future adventures.

The areas of your campaign you might further fill out include:

- A starting location with a fantastic feature
- Some adventure locations and initial quests
- Three villains, their goals, and their quests
- Some factions the characters can get involved with
- A faction list to help flavor the elements of your world

But first, let's talk about "spiral campaign development".

SPIRAL CAMPAIGN DEVELOPMENT

Different GMs handle campaign and world building in different ways, but we're going to focus on one way here – spiral campaign development.

In spiral campaign development, we focus on the characters, where they are right now, and what's going on around them. We don't care much about the larger world outside of the view of the characters or their influence. We care about what's right in front of them. As our campaign progresses, we spiral outward as the characters move further out and learn more about the world around them.

We expose much of the lore of the campaign through secrets and clues (see chapter 5). Asking ourselves "what might the characters learn in the next session" is a way for us to stay focused on what's in front of the characters. We need only look one horizon out, and maybe one horizon out from there, to help us determine what comes *next* once the characters dealt with whatever they're dealing with now.

And it starts at a starting location.

A STARTING LOCATION

Your world may be vast, but your characters have to start somewhere. Towns often work best as a starting location – just big enough to have the things adventurers need and not so big that they overwhelm you or your players with too many places to remember.

This starting location is the center of our spiral campaign development. We build this settlement and start spiraling outward. Consider what features and locations this starting location has that support the characters, the theme of your campaign, and your future adventures.

Here's an example list of twelve common locations often found in an adventuring town:

1. Inn
2. Tavern
3. Livery
4. Blacksmith
5. General Store
6. Temple
7. Town Hall
8. Theater
9. Gambling parlor
10. Provisioner
11. Apothecary
12. Keep

You can add to or modify this list, filling in details to make your own starting town unique for your campaign. You also can add other locations that fit the classes and backgrounds of the characters. These might include:

1. A thieves den for rogues
2. An adventuring company headquarters for fighters and barbarians
3. A fighting pit for fighters and barbarians
4. A theater or music hall for bards
5. An arcane tower or apothecary for sorcerers, warlocks, and wizards
6. A secluded grove for druids, barbarians, or rangers
7. A temple or shrine for paladins, clerics, and monks
8. A soldier's training ground for fighters, paladins, and barbarians

Put your characters foremost in your mind. Think about what locations connect the

characters to the town and propel them into adventure.

ADD A FANTASTIC FEATURE

Make your town unique by adding a fantastic feature – something that sets this town apart from every other. Here's a list of twenty possible fantastic features one might find in a town.

1. A petrified giant knight kneeling in the center of the town.
2. A giant floating alien rock.
3. A shaft delving deep into the earth.
4. A fallen skyship from another world.
5. A huge hand piercing out of the ground.
6. A castle or tower with no door.
7. A huge sword thrust into the ground.
8. A rift lined with subterranean ruins and a red glow down deep.
9. A massive everburning brazier.
10. Four huge armored statues guarding the town at four different compass points.
11. A spot where the sun appears fully eclipsed.
12. A huge archway said to once open to another world.
13. The half-buried skull of an ancient dragon.
14. A nearby bottomless lake from which strange creatures rise.
15. A huge temple to a long-forgotten god.
16. A vast tree which shades the whole town.
17. A large glowing orb floating above.
18. A long-abandoned dungeon on a nearby mountainside.
19. A nearby pool of healing waters.
20. Friendly ghosts who walk the streets at night.

A town with a fantastic features grabs your players' attention and differentiates the town from every other one they've seen.

ADD ADVENTURE LOCATIONS AND QUESTS

Now we're into the meat of what we need our world for – locations for adventure! What are three notable and interesting adventure locations around your starting town? Take a look at the list

of adventure locations in chapter \$ which discusses fantastic locations. Write down three locations and associated quests to begin with. Flavor locations with the gods, histories, and factions. Add a quest for each location (see the list of quests in Run Lazy Campaign Adventures in chapter \$) and you're ready for adventure!

OUTLINE THREE VILLAINS, THEIR GOALS, AND THEIR QUESTS

At this point we might spiral out further to build some greater context into our campaign. Instead of focusing on big-world ideas, we spiral out in our campaign and choose three villains. Who are the three villains in your campaign? What do they want? What quests are they going on to get there? Villains are the big players in your campaign – they're the big forces moving things forward if the characters weren't there to thwart them. Often one of these villains may be tied to our campaign hook described in chapter \$. It's also possible the other two villains are subordinates to the main villain.

Villains don't always have to be conscious entities. We can stretch the definition of "villain" into things like ecological or planetary disasters as well. Most often, however, villains are sentient entities doing bad things.

Each villain has something they're trying to accomplish. This motivation is usually a long-term goal, not something they'll get done soon. The villains also have quests they or their minions follow to accomplish these goals. These quests are often sequential but not always. Villains, their goals, and their quests drive the story forward and give the characters something to crash into to get the story started. They aren't static figures – they're changing the world around the characters. You can use the quest motivation list in appendix \$ to fuel ideas for villainous quests.

Villains can operate at different levels or scales within your campaign. Some might be lesser-powered near-term villains – those the characters might face early on in their adventures. Others might be mid-tier villains – powerful but not godly. And some might be world-threatening over-arching villains the characters hear about early but face late in the campaign – maybe as the campaign's final boss. Sometimes lower villains work for boss villains while other times they operate independently.

Here are three example villains, goals, and quests – all of these tend to be mid-tier bosses tied to the City of Arches:

- **Villain:** Skrathe – Lord of Below
- **Goal:** Return the Nameless King to his throne.
- **Quest 1:** Send his herald, Gyles Freerunner, into the high society of the City to find out who is loyal and who is not.
- **Quest 2:** Recover his sword, Sunburner, from his tomb in Sunken Revvia.
- **Quest 3:** Find the location of the Monastery of Astaria where the celestial knight hides the cure to the curse of the Nameless King.
- **Villain:** Elvenia Summervine – Daughter of Ibraxus
- **Goal:** Bring the demon prince Ibraxus into the world.
- **Quest 1:** Assassinate the meddlesome Archkeeper Garland Willowmane.
- **Quest 2:** Recruit followers of Ibraxus through a series of parties at her posh manor.
- **Quest 3:** Bring a herald of Ibraxus into the world.
- **Villain:** Star – Assassin of the Red Rose
- **Goal:** Take over as the criminal mastermind of the Lower Reaches.
- **Quest 1:** Take over several independent criminal gangs of the Lower Reaches.
- **Quest 2:** Assassinate the leaders of the Black Hand – the current criminal organization.
- **Quest 3:** Kill the queen and put her sister on the throne as Star's puppet.

With three villains, their goals, and the quests they undertake, we can start to see how these quests start to collide with the characters. Perhaps the characters witness the attempted assassination of Garland Willowmane. Perhaps Roselyn Zeshe, spymaster of the queen, recruits the characters to attend one of Elvenia's balls only to witness Elvenia's meeting with Skrathe. These villainous quests aren't *character* quests, but those attempting to solve these villainous quests clash with the characters as they explore the world.

Alternative to a Plot-Driven Campaign (I think I repeated this somewhere)

The concepts described in this chapter, and other chapters on campaign building are intended to help

you build open free-flowing campaign settings where the actions and decisions of the character drive the direction of the campaign. These are an alternative to larger story-based campaigns where you have specific expectations for the major beats of the campaign. Many published campaign adventures have rigid plot-driven structures where chapter 1 leads to chapter 2, chapter 2 to 3, and so on. When developing your own campaign setting, you can have a loose outline of where things might go but only to give you what you need to focus on the adventures, quests, and sessions directly ahead of you. Leave room for the campaign to take interesting twists and turns as the characters interact with the world and its actors and as that world reacts to their actions. Focus on prepping material that aids in that flexibility and doesn't lock you in to just one plotline.

DEVELOP FACTIONS

What organizations operate in your world? You don't need a lot – maybe three to six factions with some “good guy” factions, some “bad guy” factions, and maybe one or two “shady” factions. You might use the traditional Dungeons & Dragons alignment chart to inspire your factions, skipping some neutral factions:

- Who's the lawful good faction?
- Who's the chaotic good faction?
- Who's the lawful neutral faction?
- Who's the chaotic neutral faction?
- Who's the lawful evil faction?
- Who's the chaotic evil faction?

Factions built around alignments give the characters someone to talk to, someone to get quests from, someone to worry about, and someone to fight. Bad guy factions might be directly connected to your villains.

Factions make the world a living place even outside of the presence and actions of the characters. You might add a notable NPC or two for each faction – one who leads the faction and one who might act as the point of contact between the faction and the characters. You can also give factions goals and quests the same way you might for your villains. Don't get carried away plotting out the motivations and quests of all of your factions though – more than three ongoing villains or factions and you and your players simply can't keep track of them all.

Three to six factions is a good place to start.

A FACTION LIST

Now that you have villains and factions you can start to write down a numbered list of villains and factions to flavor monuments, items, NPCs, monsters, quests, and locations. If you have them already, you can add gods and historical figures to this list as well. If not, you may want to develop a small pantheon or history as part of your larger world building (see chapter \$).

Write one big numbered list or several smaller numbered lists so you can roll on this list during prep or during the game to wrap objects in your game with the context of your campaign.

Unlike most of the random lists you find in this book, you'll want to make your *own* faction list to define your own campaign. No one can do it for you.

FOCUS ON YOUR NEXT SESSION

Now that you've filled out some details of your campaign, you're ready to focus on your next session using the eight steps of lazy GM prep. In the next chapter we'll talk about running adventures in context of your longer-form campaign.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- With your initial campaign details in hand and new details from running your session zero, you're ready to fill in more details of your campaign's world.
- Build your campaign from the characters outwards. Start with where they are now and what's around them and spiral out.
- Outline a starting location with details useful to your characters and players.
- Add a fantastic feature to your starting location to make it unique.
- Add three interesting adventure locations including quest hooks to get your campaign started.
- Focus on three villains in your campaign. Outline their goals and the three quests they're undertaking to accomplish these goals.
- Build a faction list of villains, gods, factions, and historical figures. Roll on this list to flavor items, monuments, NPCs, monsters, and locations.

- Focus on the next session you're going to run.

RUN LAZY CAMPAIGN ADVENTURES

You designed your initial campaign seed (see chapter \$), wrote your campaign summary (see chapter \$), ran your session zero (see chapter \$), and filled in more details of your campaign (chapter \$). Now you're ready to run adventures in your campaign!

What does your prep look like for each session of your game from here on out?

Much like the eight steps from chapters \$ through \$. The ongoing homebrew adventure is the default style of adventure around which the eight steps of lazy GM prep were built.

Focus down on what you need for the next session. Where did the session end previously? What choices did the characters make? How does the world react? What comes next?

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

Presuming you've had your first adventure to start off your campaign, the next session you prep answers the question "what's next?" and "where do you go from here?". Sometimes the answer is obvious. If they're in the middle of a dungeon, you keep going with the dungeon. If they've ended the first adventure, it's time to come up with more.

A FOCUS ON QUESTS

The RPG *Shadow of the Weird Wizard* has a focus on "quests" instead of "adventures". This idea keeps us focused on not just the adventure ahead but the motivation to complete it. Quests tie adventures and locations to the motivations and goals of the characters. Here are twenty example quests the characters might get involved in:

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

Quests take place at locations. You can find a list of locations in chapter \$ and in appendix \$ when you need some motivation. Quests also often come from NPCs – covered in chapter \$ with NPC generation lists in appendix \$.

Quests can follow a simple model:

An NPC asks the characters to accomplish a goal at a location.

Quests don't *always* follow this model, of course, but it's not a bad way to start if you're scrambling for ideas. You can find several quest models in chapters \$ through \$ and some common quest models that don't always work well in chapter \$.

Since we're running adventures tied to a campaign, the *motivation* for those quests ties back to the central motivation of the campaign. Why would the characters go on this quest? How does it help them achieve their longer-term goal? Why do they care? That's worth considering in as well and baking into your prep.

OFFER THREE QUESTS

To give the players some agency over the game, offer three quests to the characters and let them pick one. Keep the remaining two on hand so they can pick from one of those the next time they select a quest. Then remove the third and come up with three new quests after that. This is called the "3-2-1 Quest Model" described in detail in chapter \$.

OFFER QUESTS NEAR THE END OF A SESSION

When the characters close in on the end of their current quest, put the next set of quest options in front of your players and have them choose one *before* the end of your current session. This way you know what direction they're going to take and can focus your prep on that one direction.

Even if you're still in the middle of one adventure but you think it might be completed in

the next session, put the your next set of quest options in front of your players and have them choose so you know what's coming next. It's fine to break character and ask "after you guys complete this adventure, which of these three quests do you think you'll go for next?".

Otherwise you could find yourself having to prep multiple quests, locations, inhabitants, and so-on and waste material should they choose to skip whatever you prepped.

THINK TWO HORIZONS OUT

Though we focus heavily on the material we need for the next session we're going to run, we also want to have a loose gauge on the session after that. That's why it's a good idea to think about what future quests might drop in front of the characters when they near the end of this one. During your prep you can write down a list of potential quests, not bothering to fill in the details until your players selected it. A sentence usually does the trick – just enough to tell players what the quest is about so they can decide if it's something they want to do or not.

CHARACTERS ACT, THE WORLD REACTS

As the characters go on quests, meet NPCs, kill villains, and go on other adventures, the world changes around them. Villains become aware of their actions. The villains' own quests get thwarted by the characters' actions. The characters change the world and the world responds.

If you have three villains doing things, like we outlined in chapter \$, you can see the complexity of events taking place.

Think of this like a pool table full of balls. The characters are the cue ball. NPCs and villains are the other balls. Players hit the cue ball and it collides with the other balls on the table which collide further into other balls. Some go into pockets. Some bounce around. No one knows what the table will look like. The same is true for our games. The characters act, the world reacts. Things change.

THINK THROUGH THE EYES OF THE VILLAINS

Instead of thinking about our game as a story, and committing the cardinal sin of plotting that story out before the players have had a chance to get

involved, focus on those balls bouncing around the pool table. The easiest ones to follow are the bigger villains in a campaign. What are they up to right now? What are they doing? Have they sent minions to the same dungeon the characters are headed to in order to acquire the same magical artifact? Have they already *been* there or are they going to show up as the characters leave?

"What are the villains doing right now" is a fantastic question to ask yourself when thinking about your larger campaign. The world moves and often moves through the actions of the antagonists.

KEEP YOUR HANDS ON THE PACING DIALS

The world can move fast or slow depending on the story and the pacing of the game. When offering several choices to the players – several villains to thwart as an example – don't set up situations where it always feels like the characters are behind.

If you have three villains accomplishing their quests and goals quickly, it can feel like the players are one step forward and two steps back all the time. This can frustrate players, making them feel like, no matter what they do, they can't make real progress.

Hold back on rapidly changing the pace of the world around the characters. Villains make mistakes, and things take time. The world is complicated and those complications slow things down for everyone – villains and heroes alike. This gives the characters a chance to get ahead even when several villains move forward with their dastardly plans.

FOCUS ON THE NEXT SESSION

As the characters accomplish quests, the world moves on. New quests manifest in front of the characters through the NPCs they talk to, the locations they visit, and the secrets they learn. We take the changing world and focus it down to the material we need for our next session. The big movement around our worldly pool table focuses down into the material we need to run our next session – changes to the characters themselves, the strong start, the scenes we might run, the secrets and clues the characters might discover, the locations they visit, the NPCs they meet, the monsters they fight, and the rewards they acquire.

Think about the evolving world and focus it down to the eight steps of prep you need to run your next session.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- After your session zero and a short introductory adventure, prep following sessions using the eight lazy GM steps covered earlier in this book.
- Focus on quests the characters can undertake. A common model is “an NPC asks the characters to accomplish a goal at a location”. Reference a list of quest prompts for ideas as needed.
- Offer three quests to give players agency over the direction they take. Use the 3-2-1 quest model to cycle through quests (see chapter \$).
- Put future quest options in front of your players near the end of a session so you can focus your prep on the choice they make. You can even ask for such options in the middle of a current quest if you think it’s going to end in the middle of your next session.
- Think two horizons out during your prep. What quests might you place in front of the characters so they can choose their next path?
- Base quests and the general drive of your campaign based on the world’s reactions to the actions of the characters as they head towards the primary driver of the campaign.
- Think through the eyes of your villains. What are they doing? How do they react to the actions of the characters?
- Don’t move the villains’ quests too quickly or your players will feel like they’re going two steps back for every step forward. Keep your hand on the dial of the pacing of your campaign.
- Refine your campaign planning down to the material you need to prep for your next session. Focus on the next session you’re going to run.

LAZY WORLD BUILDING

You may have enough at this point to jump into prepping and running specific adventures in your campaign without needing to worry about much else, but some GMs like to fill in further details of their campaign – creating a rich world their players can understand. This chapter talks about some of the common areas of a campaign setting we might fill out and still maintain our lazy GM ethos.

But first, a word of warning...

YOUR PLAYERS MAY NOT CARE

GMs often build their own campaign worlds to fuel the fantastic feeling of creative freedom and drive. We GMs *love* building things, writing about things, and exploring worlds that never existed until we thought them up. Building vast worlds is a great way to enjoy our own creative freedom – and to do so in a way that we can use and explore in front of our friends is a big benefit. Rarely do we have such opportunities for boundless creativity in our lives and, once we get started, it feels really great to fuel that creativity and channel it into a world we can bring to our players.

But here's a hard truth – players may not care about your world. Players often focus their attention on their own characters, their own backgrounds, and their own impact *in* that world. You're not going to draw your players into your fifty-thousand-year history all at once. Players aren't going to care about the war of the pantheon that took place in the days before the planets formed. They care about how much a healing potion costs or whether the cellars beneath the inn are filled with giant rats or skeletons.

It's wonderful to use your creative drive to build out fantastic worlds. Don't do so expecting your players to love it as much as you do. Players don't owe your effort their love. You chose to build what you built.

That's why we focus on spiral campaign development, described in chapter 5. Focus on the characters and build outwards. It's also why we consider *buying* a published campaign setting instead of building our own. We get the leverage of tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars and thousands of hours of effort building worlds in word and art for the cost of a sourcebook.

If you *are* drawn to building your own world, keep spiral campaign development in mind, but there are other areas of your world you may want to fill out.

Even if you're running a published setting, you may want to fill in details like these. Keep these details in a campaign notebook or digital text file. I like to keep mine in a series of text files in a "campaign support" folder alongside the rest of my prep material.

Now let's look at some of the systems and considerations you might have when filling out your world. These include:

- A practical history
- A practical pantheon
- Character-focused factions
- A magic system
- A useful economy

A PRACTICAL HISTORY

You don't need to fill out thousands of years of history, but a world's history helps separate your campaign setting from other fantasy worlds. Instead of a long timeline of events, think about a handful of big events that shaped the world. Reveal these historical elements to your players through secrets and clues uncovered as the characters explore the world during your adventures. If a world's history isn't interesting or relevant enough to reveal as a secret and clue – you probably don't need to worry about it.

What About a Calendar

I don't have useful advice to offer regarding in-world calendars. Stick to twelve months, four weeks, and seven days to make your life easy. Rename them if you want but keep the first letter to match our own days and months so it's easy to convert it. The same with seasons – unless your world is particularly fantastic, you can mirror the seasons of our world. Calendars and seasons are a great example of the sort of material you can get from a published campaign world instead of having to make it up yourself. Unlike some, I don't believe careful tracking of a calendar is required to enjoy a fine RPG campaign.

Fallen kingdoms, organizations, and societies are a great way to fill out a history. Here are several examples for fallen societies you can use as templates for the details of your campaign world:

1. A magocracy
2. An totalitarian dictatorship
3. A corrupt kingdom
4. A fey court
5. A theocracy
6. A democracy ruled by a council, parliament, or senate
7. A kingdom of necromancers and their undead thralls
8. An age of wondrous machines and automatons
9. A society ruled over by an otherworldly entity
10. An age of tribalism, warlords, and bloodshed
11. A time where immortals and primordials ruled the world
12. A time where magic permeated all things – a life force of its own
13. An age where gods walked among mortals
14. An age where mindless monsters ruled over everything
15. A time when dragons ruled over the land
16. A time when the heavens, the hells, the abyss, and the world had no boundaries
17. A time where undead took over the world
18. A literal dark age where the sun disappeared and the planet was covered in black ice
19. An age of immortal tyrants
20. An age where travelers from other worlds ruled the planet

A PRACTICAL PANTHEON

Most fantasy RPGs need some sort of pantheon. Like our starting town, we can focus the pantheon around the characters. You don't need a dozen potential gods of light – you only need the one god the cleric or paladin worships.

You might choose a handful of “good” gods and “bad” gods to fill out the history of your campaign setting and flavor some of the locations, monuments, people, and items the characters interact with. You can build your gods around a handful of themes or domains.

Here's a list of possible good-aligned domains:

1. Life

2. Light
3. Knowledge
4. Death
5. Nature
6. Protection
7. Harvest
8. Trickery
9. Magic
10. Revelry

Some pantheons for more evil-aligned deities might include

1. Chaos
2. Hell
3. The Abyss
4. The Outside
5. Plague
6. War
7. Blood
8. Forbidden Knowledge
9. Murder
10. Undeath

A god tied to each of the domains above fills out a good-sized pantheon without being too overbearing. For each god, note their name, alternate names, and symbols or iconography the characters might discover that represent this god.

If you're having trouble thinking up a pantheon, choose a pantheon from real life such as Greek, Egyptian, or Norse pantheons and change their names and features to suit your own world. And, of course, you can steal gods from other published campaign settings – changing them as you see fit.

You can find an example pantheon in Appendix \$.

GEOGRAPHY AND REGIONAL MAPS

Your campaigns take place *somewhere*, and having some idea what the region looks like helps make it real for you and your players. The laziest trick is to use an existing geography from a published campaign setting. See “Homebrew Adventures in Published Settings” in chapter \$.

Even if you choose to customize much of your geography for your own campaign, you can take an existing map and modify it to suit your needs. Professional cartographers and map-makers also often post hand-made geographical maps without descriptions you can reskin to suit your own

campaign. You can find cartographers listed on the resources page linked on the copyright page of this book.

If you feel the burning desire to draw your own geographical map, I'm not standing in your way, but I wouldn't call it a lazy approach. Ask yourself if it's worth the time and effort (recognizing it may be great fun for you). You may really enjoy it but you cannot expect your players care as much as you do.

A MAGIC SYSTEM

The easiest way to include a magic system in your campaign setting is to use whatever the default is for the system you choose. Assuming your chosen game system includes magic and describes how it works – that's good enough. If you want more, you can think about how magic works in the world. Is it rare? Is it common? What is its source? How does it affect nations, politics, armies, and governance. You can fall down the rabbit hole quickly on this topic so be careful – you really don't need to worry about it much.

It's worth keeping in mind that magic isn't often so rare that no one expects it. Fortifications in magical worlds likely have to deal with flying enemies and are prepared to do so. The same might be true for things like scrying and teleportation magic. Most well-fortified locations and organizations are aware of such magic and have ways to defend against it.

Avoid Changing the Game's Rules

A common mistake newer GMs make is to use their world to radically change the rules of the game system you choose. In my experience, and the experience of other players and GMs I've talked to, players really don't like to see the rules changed just to fit a system. It's all too common to see a world where "clerics don't exist" or "magic is extremely rare" and thus break core concepts of how a game is going to work. Maybe for some systems it can work out (FATE can let you do anything) but generally, stick to having the world form around your chosen system instead of changing your chosen system to fit your world idea.

A USEFUL ECONOMY

Like magic, you can fall deep into the well of your world's economy but generally your game system of choice has one built in, so use that one. You might have special economic angles you want to

include based on your system's default economics.

Sometimes you can have fun with it by including the economy of actual adventuring – villages taking out options on the treasure held by an ancient red dragon for example or vast dragon empires where dragons own every coin in the region whether it's in the pocket of a merchant or buried deep under ancient sands.

Most of the time it's easiest to just stick to what your game rules state.

One useful metric to measure the economy of your game's world is how much a skilled laborer makes in a day. This daily income of a skilled laborer gives you a good benchmark to decide how valuable things actually are in the world.

BUILD THE WORLD YOU NEED

When building a world for your campaign and adventures, prepare what you need to run your games. A rich history, interesting factions, and flavorful gods are the decorations that make your world unique among the thousands of fantasy worlds your players are familiar with but don't fall too deep in the well of building components that never hit the table or actually end up getting in the way.

Build the world you need to run your game.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Consider using a published campaign world instead of building your own from scratch.
- If you do decide to build your own, focus on the things you need to run your sessions.
- Remember that your players care more about their characters than the depth of the world you create.
- Fill out three villains for your campaign. Give each of them a goal and three quests they're undertaking to fulfill their goals.
- Outline a practical history you can reveal to the characters one secret at a time.
- Fill out a pantheon to flavor your world focused on gods the characters worship or battle against.
- Create three to six factions – those the characters work with, are concerned with, or actively battle against.
- Develop a numbered faction list of the villains, gods, historical figures, and factions in your

game. Roll on this list to flavor monuments, locations, items, NPCs, quests or other elements of your game.

- Use the magic and economy system of the game system you choose. Avoid customizing things too far away from the intention of the system.

RUNNING GAMES ONLINE

In recent years, and with a large surge during the COVID-19 pandemic, many RPG groups moved some or all of their games online. Being able to run games online brings players together from all over the world in a way that in-person games can't. Running games online also has unique approaches and challenges worth focusing on. This chapter offers some thoughts and tips for making the most for running games online.

A DIFFERENT VIABLE WAY TO PLAY

If you're used to playing games in person, running games online can seem like an inferior way to play but it's not. It's just different. The advantages of playing games online include:

- No issues with distance, traffic, or travel time.
- Easier access to and lower costs for maps and tokens.
- More robust virtual tabletops automate the math for complex dice operations.
- Running online provides a safe environment for those not comfortable meeting strangers face to face.

Of course, playing in person has advantages too:

- A closer connection to the people we play with.
- It's harder to get distracted when you're playing next to your friends.
- No voice lag and fewer issues with cross-talk.

Like many of the tips, tricks, and tools in this book, think of online play as another set of tools for your GMing toolbox. You don't have to move all of your games online. Nor must you ignore online gaming completely. Instead, run games online when it better fits your life and the lives of your players.

Playing Online During Covid

When the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic hit, many people were isolated in their homes. I had two regular in-person games at that point and a third game that got together maybe once a month or so. When the pandemic hit, all my games moved online. For me, it wasn't a choice. I either played online or I didn't play and the latter wasn't an option. At the time, my experience running games

online was extremely limited so I used this situation as an opportunity to learn how to play online and share what I learned. The games I ran made the pandemic bearable for me and my players. I had many friends in these groups talk about how much they looked forward to each game and how important these games were to them. We maintained and reinforced strong friendships through our online games. Years later, two of my three games moved back to in-person but we still regularly go online if enough people can't make it in person. My irregular monthly game turned into a regular twice-monthly game because it's become much easier to play online than drive around to peoples' houses. Being able to play games online brought us closer together than before.

YOUR ONLINE TOOLBOX

The tools and applications you use to run online games can vary widely. You might only need a voice channel in an online chat or collaboration tool. You might just use a group phone call for voice.

Having some way to share visuals helps too. A text chat that allows you to upload images can cover this, or you might use some sort of shared whiteboard. Many chat applications also let you share your screen, which lets you share all sorts of visuals including battle maps, sketches, handouts, and anything else.

A whole industry of virtual tabletops (VTTs) grew over the years such as Roll20, Fantasy Grounds, Foundry, Owlbear Rodeo, and others. Each has advantages and disadvantages which go beyond the scope of this book. Such tools change frequently so you'll want to research which ones work best for you at the moment.

Virtual tabletops often bring a level of complexity you and your players must navigate to use them in play. Some are easier to use than others and some have much wider sets of features than others.

Another risk with online virtual tabletops is lock-in. The more you use a single tool and buy RPG systems, campaigns, adventures and other supplements within that tool, the more locked into that tool you are. Should the owners of those tools take a different direction than you want with their future development, you may lose your investment of time, energy, experience, and money. Consider these costs and risks when choosing and using virtual tabletops.

BUILD A RESILIENT SOFTWARE STACK

Instead of focusing on a single virtual tool, consider using several tools, each focused on the one thing it does better than others. Such a stack might include:

- A digital notebook or notepad
- Voice or video software
- A virtual tabletop for maps
- Online or physical rules references and a way to share them
- Music software
- A shared dice roller (or even using physical dice at the table)

If you keep the components of your digital software stack separate, you're less locked into a single platform. Instead, you can pull out and slot in a new component to replace any component that no longer serves to help you run your game.

USE PHYSICAL BOOKS AND DICE WHEN PLAYING ONLINE

It's common and tempting to ignore physical books and dice when playing online but there's no reason you *can't* use physical books and dice on your table or desk when running games online. Several VTTs offer full rules integration but often at a cost of money, complexity, and flexibility. Instead, focusing on using VTTs for maps and tokens while continuing to use your physical books for rules, monster stat blocks, and other elements you need during your game ensures you're not bound by the limitations of the VTT you're working with.

It can be fun to use a shared dice roller with your online players but sometimes these digital dice rollers are *slower* than using physical dice. Allow players to choose whether they want to use an online dice roller or roll physical dice (or perhaps encourage it) and feel free to roll dice on your side as well.

WATCH WHERE YOU SPEND YOUR TIME

When prepping and running games online, it's easy to get buried in the incredible flexibility and details of the software we use. It's tempting to integrate every rule of the game, every monster, every map, every token, and every source of lighting into one big setup but doing so takes a *lot* of time. Instead, embrace simplicity and focus

your time on the aspects of your game that bring the most fun for you and your group. Are you better off spending hours setting up dynamic lighting on your detailed map or better off spending time considering the characters and what might excite your players in the next session you're going to run?

Don't get buried in the minutia of your favorite virtual tabletop at the expense of prepping what matters most for your game.

BE READY FOR TECH SUPPORT

Getting a whole online RPG system set up between several players and the GM adds complications. Lots of things can go wrong. Be ready to manage the the technical support required to get everyone up and running with two-way communication, no noise feedback, and any other technical hurdles that come your way. Ask your more tech-savvy players can help those who are not. Spend time *before* your game connecting up with your players to get their tools all set up so you're ready to go when it's time to play. Discuss the technology stack you'll be using for your game and ensure your players can get set up for it during your session zero (or even earlier).

FINDING PLAYERS FOR ONLINE GAMES

Things often go smoothly if you're running online games for people you've met in person, but playing with players online that you've never met in person can be a different experience. Players meeting online have less invested in the game and in their relationship with you which can lead to poor behavior, disruptive behavior, or game abandonment.

Chapter 5 ("Finding and Maintain a Great Group") offers tips for finding players who work well with the group and game you want to run. Be ready to vet players more stringently for online games and be ready to replace players who don't fit well into your group and game. Depending on what system you're intending to play and where you go to find players, you may want a more rigid funnel for finding the right players for your game – including a detailed questionnaire to gauge their interests in the game you want to run and online discussions ahead of the game to get used to their style before you try to run a game with them.

Running games online also provides a fantastic way to meet new people around the hobby we love in a safer environment than physical games might. Not everyone is comfortable meeting new players face-to-face. Setting up and playing games online provides can provide a more comfortable experience.

CALL ON INDIVIDUAL PLAYERS

How we talk and respond during online games is different than talking and responding in person. When playing online we often miss body language even if we're using video during our online games. Voice lag can also an issue. These issues can lead to a couple of problems:

- Players unaware of the lag talk over one another.
- Players who *recognize* the lag stay silent.

Call on specific players by name when looking for a response. Focus first on those you haven't heard from to ensure everyone's getting their time in the spotlight. If someone else jumps in, interrupt them and tell them you'll get back to them. Build a vocal order for the conversation to avoid players talking over one another or being left silent while everyone else engages.

There's no reason you need to take on the burden of moderation alone. Explain the issue of cross-talk to your players and ask their help in ensuring everyone gets their chance to speak. Ask them to call on other players for a response as well like you do with "Elective Action Order" initiative (see "Initiative Options" in chapter \$).

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Running games online offers a flexible way to play with players all over the world. It's just as viable a way to play as in-person.
- Running games online has advantages and challenges compared to in-person play.
- Set up a flexible stack of software and tools to help you run games online.
- Be ready to replace parts of your software stack that chance or no longer serve you.
- Feel free to use physical books and dice even with online play. You don't need to use every feature of a rich virtual tabletop.
- Be careful not to get sucked in to the technology – spending time futzing with

minutia at the expense of the important parts of your game.

- Be ready to manage technical support with your players to get everyone online and playing.
- Be more stringent when finding players for online games.
- Call on individual players to avoid issues with lag and cross-talk.

ENDING CAMPAIGNS

Unfortunately, many groups never actually reach the in-world story-driven ending of an RPG campaign. Instead, real-world circumstances lead to the campaign's ending. Players can't make the time, group participation dwindles, GMs burn out, players move away – lots of things can lead to the end of a campaign besides its meaningful conclusion. Chapter \$ offers our best tips for building and maintaining a great group to help counter some of these issues.

Sometimes we're lucky enough to reach a campaign's natural ending within the story and, when we do, it's a beautiful thing.

This chapter contains advice for making the most of your campaign's big conclusion, and some issues to be wary of as well.

RUN A JUICY FINAL BOSS BATTLE

For many fantasy RPGs, a campaign's ending focuses around a big hairy boss battle. Often the characters and a main antagonist have been hounding one another for months or years and it's time to go toe to toe. Some final confrontations might throw the characters against a boss who poses an insignificant threat, pitting the characters against his more powerful subordinates instead. But, most of the time, players expect a big fight against a big boss.

The combat adventure model described in chapter \$ includes tips for running big meaty boss battles including running waves of combatants before the characters face the big boss. This multi-wave encounter pushes characters to the limit but gives you the ability to increase or decrease the threat depending on how things are going by increasing or decreasing how fast the next wave enters the battle. Good waves of combatants can include:

- A bunch of "normal" monsters, roughly the same number and power of the characters.
- A big pile of "minions" – significantly weaker than the characters but dangerous, or at least annoying, in large numbers. Players love mowing down lots of minions.
- Big "elites" of roughly one for every two characters in number and power. These offer good monsters for players to "control" with spells or abilities like *banish*, *charm*, *stun*, or other debilitating effects.

- The big final boss. A "solo" style monster intended to threaten all the characters by itself. Because players *hate* this guy, they're going to focus everything they have on the boss. The boss is going to need a lot of defensive power and likely ways to break out of debilitating effects. See "Dreadful Blessings" in chapter \$ (the toolbox).

You may want to add some fun environmental effects that can thwart the characters with the opportunity for the characters to turn them around on their adversaries under the right circumstances. The combat adventure type in chapter \$ has lists of environmental objects you can use to inspire your ideas.

When running a boss fight like this, keep your hands on the dials of monster difficulty (see dials of monster difficulty in chapter \$) for more details. These dials typically include:

- How many hit points the monsters have
- How many times the monster attacks in a turn
- How much damage the monster inflicts
- How many monsters are in the battle
- How fast the next wave of opponents comes out in a multi-wave battle

You can use some tricks to modify these dials as needed such as:

- When the boss or sub-boss is defeated, so are all of its minions.
- The boss can absorb hit points from their minions.
- An environmental effect like an unholy altar gives certain monsters bonuses to attack but if it's turned, causes them to lose those advantages, take on disadvantages, or just die.
- Certain objects in the arena give bosses extra abilities. Destroy the objects and they lose those abilities (higher armor class, more damage, ways to mitigate effects, and so on).

You can even improvise these effects depending on how the battle goes.

Above all, prepare a nice fun boss fight that lets the players show off their characters abilities, makes them feel like they faced a significant threat, and draws a fun climax to an ongoing campaign.

Not all RPG systems benefit from these high-crunch combat boss fights. Sometimes a boss is

just like other monsters and that's how they operate in the RPG. Hopefully, by the time you're ready to run a final conclusion to your campaign, you have an idea how boss fights work in the system you're running. Adjust this guidance to fit the system you're running and your experiences with it.

GIVE PLAYERS WHAT THEY WANT

It's tempting to include some big shift in the story near the end of the story – some big final surprise. Avoid that temptation.

Instead, sessions before you're coming to the conclusion of your campaign, ask players what they're looking forward to. What are the loose ends they want to tie up? What's their hope?

Give them that.

It can be fun to watch the story take interesting twists and turns as the campaign rolls on but when you're coming to the end, be very careful shaking up expectations and ruining the player's hope for the end of the campaign they wanted. Any change you make to the story, ask if this is negating any of the choices the characters made earlier. Don't make your players feel like chumps for following a quest NPC who turns out to be a bad guy all along. Avoid last-minute betrayals. Any shift in the story should *make sense* given what's been happening in the story.

You don't need to make the most unique ending in the world of fantasy fiction here. Give players what they want. Give them the conclusion they've been hoping for and deserve.

ONE YEAR LATER

The easiest way to ensure players enjoy the final arc in the story of their character is to *let them do it*. One of my favorite tricks I've used over the years is the "one year later" montage.

Here's how it works.

At the end of your campaign, when the boss is defeated and the parades are over, ask your players to describe where their characters are one year after the end of the campaign.

Their stories will surprise and delight you and your other players.

Since your campaign is over, there's no worry that the ending they choose somehow ruins the story of the campaign. You're done! They're done! Let them take the story from that point onward. It's almost no work for you as the GM and also

ensures players get the ending they want for their characters.

If you know you're getting close to the end of the campaign, warn players to be ready for their "one year later" montage so you're not surprising them with it in the final session. Let them spend the time to think through where they see their characters in a year.

Then sit back and enjoy the result.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Few campaigns get the benefit of a nice clean in-world ending. Give such campaign endings the attention they deserve.
- Run a fun boss fight with multiple waves of combatants intended to show off the characters cool capabilities.
- Keep your hands on the dials so you can increase or decrease the threat as needed.
- Give players what they want in the campaign's conclusions. Avoid last-minute story shifts and NPC betrayals.
- Ask players to describe where their character is one year later, after the events of the campaign's end. Enjoy the stories they have to tell.