

# Chapter 1

## The Role of the Dungeon Master

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Discovering the role of the Dungeon Master
  - ▶ Finding what you need to play D&D
  - ▶ Exploring the many expressions of Dungeon Mastering
  - ▶ Understanding the goals of Dungeon Mastering
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**Y**ou know what DUNGEONS & DRAGONS is. It's the original roleplaying game, the game that inspired not only a host of other roleplaying games, but most computer roleplaying games as well. A *roleplaying game* allows players to take on the roles of characters in a story of their own creation. Part improvisation, part wargame, the D&D game provides a wholly unique and unequalled experience. For a game such as D&D to work, one of the players in a group must take on a fun, exciting, creative, and extremely rewarding role — the role of Dungeon Master.

Thanks to the presence of a Dungeon Master (DM), a D&D game can be more interactive than any computer game, more open-ended than any novel or movie. Using a fantastic world of medieval technology, magic, and monsters as a backdrop, the DM has the power of the game mechanics and the imagination of all the players to work with. Whatever anyone can imagine can come to life in the game, thanks to the robust set of rules that are the heart of the D&D game. The rules and imagination can take your game only so far, however. The heights your game can reach and the fun you can have with it depend on the creativity and involvement of the Dungeon Master.

Do you have a burning desire to create adventures or even entire D&D worlds? Do you enjoy being at the center of the action, helping your friends have a rollicking good time? Then maybe the role of Dungeon Master is right for you.

In this chapter, we look at the role of the Dungeon Master and see how a good DM makes for a good game of D&D.

## *What Is a DM?*

A Dungeon Master is one of the players in a DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game group. The other players each create a single character and use that character to interact with the imaginary world depicted in the game, but the DM plays a pivotal role that goes beyond that of the other players. In short, the Dungeon Master runs the game. You can get along without a fighter or a rogue or a cleric character, at least for a game session or two, but you can't play a game of D&D without a DM.

Because the D&D game is as wide open as the imaginations of the players, the presence of a DM to act as a moderator, story designer, and narrator is essential. The players interact with each other and the imaginary environment through the actions of their characters, and the DM describes each scene, directs the action, and plays the roles of the monsters, villains, and all the other people (the butcher, the baker, and the innkeeper, for example) that the characters meet on every adventure.

As the DM, you aren't competing against the players. You set up interesting, exciting, even challenging situations, and then use the game rules to fairly and impartially allow events to play out. You don't know how things are going to turn out, and neither do the players. That's one of the elements that makes the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game so much fun. When you and the players get together to play out a compelling group story, everybody wins!

## *So You Want to Be the Dungeon Master?*

The Dungeon Master (or DM) plays a special role in the D&D game. The DM controls the pace of the story and referees the action as it unfolds. The power of creating worlds and controlling dragons resides in the hands of the DM. As DM, you are the master of the game. The rules, the setting, the action, and ultimately the fun all radiate from you. Sounds like something you just have to do? Well, being the DM involves having a great deal of power. We show you how to use that power wisely and with great responsibility so that you and the other players have a fun experience.

We also show you that the role of DM doesn't have to mean a lot of work and hardship. The fun, excitement, creativity, and decision making of running a game session are in your hands. We provide plenty of tips and shortcuts to help you along the way. Although Dungeon Mastering can sometimes be as easy as showing up to the game (just like the other players), more often than not the DM has to do a little bit of upfront preparation so that the game session unfolds smoothly. With our hints and techniques, it can look as though you spent hours working on your adventure. Granted, some DMs *do* spend hours on their craft, creating the adventure before the game session, and that's a big part of the fun for them. But for those of you like us, who don't

have a lot of free time to devote to our roles as DMs, we think you'll appreciate the time-saving suggestions we provide in this book.

So you want to be the Dungeon Master? From the moment we saw the original *Dungeon Master's Guide* to those many years ago, so did we. So come along. You're in good company!

## What Do You Need for Playing?

The DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game has few requirements but lots of options. In addition to players, a Dungeon Master, and an adventure, you need (to a greater or lesser extent) the following items to play the game:

- ✓ **The game itself:** D&D is a unique type of game, a roleplaying game, that's presented in three core books — *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual*. There's also a *Basic Game* that comes in a box for people new to the hobby.
- ✓ **Dice:** The D&D game uses a unique collection of dice, each with a different number of sides. Dice add a random element to the game, and in fact, turn D&D into a *game* (as opposed to merely an improvisational activity). A set of D&D dice includes the following:

<i>Number of Dice</i>	<i>Type of Dice</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
1	Four-sided dice	d4
4	Six-sided dice	d6
1	Eight-sided dice	d8
2	Ten-sided dice	d10
1	Twelve-sided dice	d12
1	Twenty-sided dice	d20

In addition to the basic set of dice, it pays to have extras of certain types of dice. For example, you might find it handy to have several extra d4s or d8s when rolling damage for spells such as *magic missile* or *searing light*. The players ought to have several sets of dice (one set per player is best), so that they don't have to waste time collecting the dice they need from all over the table.

- ✓ **Character sheets:** Every player needs a character sheet that details the character he or she is playing. You can photocopy a character sheet out of the *Player's Handbook* or purchase a pack of deluxe character sheets. Players should use a pencil to fill out their character sheets because the game stats change as the character gains experience and picks up loot. Some Web sites also provide PDF versions of the character sheet that you can download and print for personal use.

- ✓ **DM screen:** As DM, you need a DM screen. It provides useful charts and tables you need in the game and helps you hide your maps and notes and other accouterments so that the players can't peek at what's to come.
- ✓ **Miniatures and a battle grid:** The *Dungeon Master's Guide* provides a ready-to-use battle grid, a play surface where your miniatures can represent tactical situations (such as combat encounters). Other play surfaces are available wherever fine hobby games are sold. DUNGEONS & DRAGONS *Miniatures* booster packs contain a variety of cool monsters and hero figures that you can use to represent characters in tactical situations. Although miniatures and a battle grid aren't technically necessary, they do speed up play and help players better visualize the fantastic situations you put their characters in. (They're also pretty cool and fun to collect, and you can play a more competitive version of the game with them, if you're into that.)
- ✓ **Pencils and paper:** D&D players need a way to keep notes, track their progress through a dungeon, write down what kind of treasure they find, and otherwise record important game information. For this reason, it pays to have a lot of pencils (with good erasers), paper, and graph paper handy during a game session.

## *The Expressions of Dungeon Mastering*

In many ways, the Dungeon Master is the focus of a D&D game. When you decide to become a DM, you decide to take on a special role that sets you apart from casual and dedicated players alike. You moderate the game rules. You set the pace of the story and action. You determine the challenges that the player characters must face, and you give depth and reality to the game world you create.

It boils down to this fact: The Dungeon Master takes on a lot of functions in the game. To help you better understand this fact, we've divided the role into its many expressions. This division is kind of artificial, set up so we can discuss the role of the DM in a logical and clear manner. In reality, many of these expressions blend into each other or might not even come into play in a typical game session. Still, exploring the role of DM is easier when you look at it in this fashion. We discuss each of these expressions of DMing in the sections that follow, and we delve deeper into each expression in later chapters.

### *DM as rules moderator*

When the players gather around the table for a game of D&D, as the DM, you're in charge. This means that you make the call when the game rules aren't crystal clear or when the written rules can be interpreted in different ways. Like an umpire at a baseball game or a referee moderating a basketball

game, you have to use the rules as you understand them and apply them to the situations that present themselves.

The DM also makes the call when players attempt to do something that isn't exactly covered by the rules. Sure, the rules clearly spell out how to make attacks, cast spells, and use physical skills such as Climb or Jump. The fun of a roleplaying game such as D&D, however, is that players can — and often do — try to have their characters accomplish amazing things that sometimes go beyond the limits of the rules.

Just remember to be fair and consistent. If you treat every player in the same way and follow the logic of your past rulings, everything should work out fine. If you come up with a way to handle a specific type of action, apply that same ruling the next time that action or something similar occurs.



The best moderator DM has a solid understanding of the rules of the game. You can't interpret the rules if you don't know them. Make sure that the players know about any changes (or *house rules*) you're incorporating into the game. When a situation comes up that isn't covered by the rules, make a decision. Don't be afraid to ask the players for suggestions, but remember that your decision is final. The adventure must go on, so decide on a ruling and get back to the action of play as quickly as possible.

The DM has the ultimate authority over the game, even over something that is clearly covered in a rulebook. Use this power wisely. If you decide to overturn a rule for the game, clearly explain to the players why you are doing it and then make a note of the change so that you can fairly and consistently apply the rule change in the future. The same goes for house rules and new rules you create to cover situations unique to your campaign. The players must trust you in this role, or the game will come crashing down around you. Nothing earns that trust better than when you make fair and consistent rulings on a regular basis.

So, the best moderator DM is fair and consistent and has a solid grasp on the rules.

## *DM as narrator*

Your campaign exists in your imagination and the imaginations of the players. For everyone to get the most out of the game, it falls to the DM to serve as a narrator for the action.



This doesn't mean that you tell the players what their characters do. The decisions regarding player character actions should always rest in the hands of the players. Instead, you should serve as the portal into the imaginary world, the eyes and ears (and other senses) of the characters. If you do this well, the game really comes alive.

As the narrator, you describe what happens as the player characters interact with the world. You tell them what they see, what they hear, what they smell. (But never what they do!) In a roleplaying game, the action scrolls across the imagination of the players, and anything you can do to paint a vivid and accurate picture of the scene makes the action more immediate and immersive.

You describe the monster that just leaped out of the clinging shadows. You describe the stench of evil that wafts out of the dark, gaping chasm. Don't just give the players the facts. Make sure to tell them what their characters see, hear, smell, and even what they feel and taste when appropriate. Make sure to describe everything from the player characters' point of view. Don't reveal anything they shouldn't have immediate access to, such as what's beyond the closed door or what's inside the locked chest. Be descriptive, using words that show the players what's around their characters — what they can see and otherwise sense about the immediate environment.



Don't give everything away in your description of a scene, though. Provide enough information to give the players a sense of where their characters are and what they can gather with a brief examination of the area. Hold back enough information to make the players curious and get them thinking about questions they should ask. You can even decide to leave some clues for the game to handle, for when the player characters make Spot, Listen, or Search checks in the area. By only describing the most obvious details, you get the players to draw their own conclusions and decide on their next course of action.

As narrator, you also get to be the special effects technician for the movie that plays out in the imaginations of the players. When it comes time to describe fantastic environments and otherworldly vistas, you get to create whatever special effects you can imagine and describe. When the action really takes off, you get to determine how the magic spell the wizard casts appears, how hot the fire playing along the edge of the fighter's flaming sword feels, and how terrible the monster charging toward the player characters looks and sounds.

A good narrator DM shows players the results of their characters' actions by using evocative, exciting, and vibrant words and descriptions.

## *DM as a cast of thousands*

Each player controls one character in the game. You, as the DM, control the entire supporting cast, called *nonplayer characters* (NPCs). Everyone from the bit characters to the prominent allies and adversaries that inhabit your campaign are yours to use as you see fit. These are the people (and creatures) that the player characters interact with, and they're all yours to breathe life into. Most of your NPC cast of thousands will require only a key descriptor or a single detail that helps you play a role, as well as a single skill or other key statistic that might come into play. Some NPCs can even be improvised on

the spot as the need arises. You need to create full-on game statistics for an NPC only if that character is an opponent or a major ally. Otherwise, just like in the movies, you need to put together only as much as you think you're going to use in the game.



Whether an NPC serves as a walk-on or has a minor or major role in the story, play each one as an individual. Roleplay! Nothing makes an NPC come alive like roleplaying a key feature to give him or her personality and pizzazz. For major NPCs, such as the dastardly villain or the regal king who hires the adventurers, roleplay to the hilt. Ham it up, act it out, and make each character memorable in the scene.

As a cast of thousands, a good DM needs to separate his or her role as DM from his or her role as the controller of the supporting characters. Your NPCs shouldn't know everything that you know about the story and the previous actions of the player characters. Also, your NPCs shouldn't become the heroes of the story, outshining the player characters and stealing the spotlight from them. Be fair (there's that phrase again) and play each NPC within the confines of the specific role you imagined for him or her. Sure, you want to sometimes get the drop on the player characters, but most of the time, if the players make smart choices or the dice fall in their favor, don't use your power to get the upper hand. If the player characters have set a perfect ambush for your goblin raiders, let the goblin raiders stumble into it.

Remember to apply the same standards you use as game moderator to your nonplayer characters as well as to the player characters. Provide good challenges so that a good story can develop, but don't view yourself as the players' opponent. And don't alter the rules to make your supporting NPCs more powerful or important. Let that develop naturally or leave it alone and keep the action moving.

The best DM as a cast of thousands uses a variety of voices, mannerisms, attitudes, and accents to make each NPC interesting and unique.

## Relax and have fun!

D&D is a game. We aren't going to come to your house and give you a test on all this stuff, and we certainly won't hold it against you if you make a mistake or two along the way. Learn the rules in stages, adding elements as you and the other players need them. For example, if you're starting a 1st-level adventure, don't worry about trying to learn all the ins and outs of higher-level spells that won't come into play.

Be entertaining and allow the players to entertain you. Ham it up, play it straight, go for the dramatic, or do whatever is appropriate for the scene and the adventure you've set up.

You and your fellow players are playing a game. Use the rules as you see fit, be fair and consistent, and have fun. That's the key to a good D&D experience.



## *DM as player*

The DM as player covers some of the same ground as the DM as a cast of thousands. However, whereas the DM as a cast of thousands really speaks to the roleplaying aspects of D&D, the DM as player speaks to the parts of D&D that are all game. The DM gets to play too, and much of a DM's enjoyment comes from rolling dice and seeing what happens — just like any of the other players.

So, when the monster needs to decide what to do during an encounter, or when the villainous lich lord ponders which of its many necromantic powers



to use, or when the hired scout weighs her options when deciding whether to help the adventurers or flee to a safer place, that's when the DM gets into character, decides on a course of action, and rolls some dice.



The DM must keep a solid separation between his or her functions as a player and the near-omniscient abilities he or she possesses as moderator, narrator, and creator. In most cases, the DM should try to have a preset plan for how monsters and other nonplayer characters will behave. This plan doesn't need to be elaborate; it just needs to provide a guideline or two on how to run the character or monster in an encounter. If you use a published adventure, those cues are built into the text. If you make up your own adventure, you need to set the cues.

Cues should be simple and straightforward. Monsters usually fight to the death, though some might attempt to flee or surrender when reduced to half or one-quarter hit points. Some monster cues might include tactics such as "attack the strongest fighter first" or "pile on the spellcasters as soon as you see them." Other cues might provide guidelines on how and when to use the monster's special abilities. Just jot down enough information so that you have an idea about how you want the encounter to play out. You can always make changes on the fly, in the heat of the battle. But always stay fair to the role of the monster, its purpose in the adventure, and what it should reasonably be able to figure out from its own perspective (not the near-omniscient perspective you have as DM).

When it comes to rolling dice, it pays to decide on the conventions you want to use when you put on your metaphorical DM's hat. Here are your options:

- ✔ **Make all rolls secretly:** Some DMs make all their rolls behind the DM screen. This gives them the option to change the results on occasion to make for a better game. (We call this *DM fiat* or *DM cheating*, and you should use it only sparingly. We discuss this important DM tool in more detail in Chapter 10.)
- ✔ **Make all rolls openly:** Some DMs make all their rolls in the open, allowing the dice to fall as they will, regardless of the circumstances. This can make for an exciting and sometimes deadly game session where PCs and NPCs alike are left to the whims of fate.
- ✔ **Make some rolls secretly, some openly:** Some DMs might roll openly or behind the screen, depending on who they're rolling for and what's currently going on (minor encounters rolled in the open, major encounters rolled in secret, or vice versa). For example, rolls whose results the characters can't observe, such as a villain's Spot or Sense Motive check, are best done secretly, behind your DM screen, to keep the players in suspense. Rolls with clear and immediate results in the game world, such as a monster's attack rolls, are best done openly, so the players can see the results of the rolls and can't contest when the dice don't fall in their favor.

The same mantra for all good DMing applies to being a good player DM. Be fair and be consistent. Don't favor your nonplayer characters over the player characters. Don't try to force the story in any particular direction. Set up the situations, play your NPCs and monsters, and let the adventure develop as it will. After all, surprises and unexpected results make for memorable and fun D&D moments.

## *DM as social director*

We've said it before, and we'll say it again. D&D is a social experience. As such, the role of social director more often than not falls to the Dungeon Master. The DM usually hosts the game group, invites the players, sets the schedule, and provides a portion of the entertainment by running the game. Now, all these functions can be spread out among the gaming group, but we discuss the role of social director as an expression of the DM for purposes of explanation.

First, you must form your gaming group. This can happen naturally among friends with a common interest, or you can go out and actively recruit players from a gaming club, in a gaming store, at school, or at work. Because you can't play D&D without a DM, it is the DM who usually goes about forming the gaming group.

Then, you have to set up the particulars of when and where your gaming group will meet. This isn't all that dissimilar to planning a party or other social get-together. You need a *when* that works for the majority of the group, a regular time when the group will get together for the express purpose of playing D&D. This could be every week (for example, every Thursday evening from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.); or every other week (the second and fourth Sunday of every month, from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m.); or once a month (the first Saturday of every month, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.); or whatever other consistent schedule works for you and the group. The *where* can be the DM's house, or you can rotate playing locations among the group, or you can meet in a conference room at work or school, or wherever everyone can get to and be comfortable while playing the game.

It isn't the DM's responsibility to provide a place to play the game, but many DMs do. If you can't provide a place to play, work it out with the rest of the group. Chances are good that someone in the group can accommodate the game and the schedule that everyone agrees to. You just need a place where the group can gather, spread out the books, character sheets, and battle grid (if you use one), and roll dice. It should be a comfortable location because a game session might last for four hours or more, depending on the needs and desires of the group. As a social experience, the group should work out how snacks and drinks will be provided. Will everyone bring their own? Will everyone bring something to share? Will one member be charged with catering

the event while everyone else chips in? Anything can work, and it usually falls to the DM to get the group talking and making plans in advance of game day.

As a social experience, it falls to the DM as social director to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to have a fun experience. That means allowing time at the beginning and end of the game session for general conversation. Don't rush to start the game. Let everyone catch up and ease into the mood at their own paces. When a suitable amount of time has passed, announce that the game is going to start and request that non-game-related conversations come to an end. But don't be an ogre about this. Someone will inevitably break character or make a pop culture reference sometime during the game, and that's okay.

Sometimes the good social director DM must also play mediator when the players themselves have a disagreement. Disagreements are inevitable. Just strive to keep everyone civil and respectful of each other, and do your best to help them reach an equitable solution. Sometimes this can be as simple as having them roll dice if the disagreement involves dispute over an in-game item, such as a piece of treasure or a newly discovered magic item. Sometimes more work needs to be done, and it's okay for you to ask them to table the argument for now and get back to it after the game session ends so that the rest of the group can get back to the game. (We discuss this and other potential game group problems in Chapter 9.)

A good way to keep in contact and make sure everyone knows when and where the next game session will be held is e-mail. Sending out reminders is a great way for the DM to stay on top of the social director role. And if you handle the e-mails with a little bit of flair and creativity, you can even treat them as an extension of your game world. Perhaps the reminder for the next game session is sent out by the villain the group has been tracking for the last couple of sessions, degrading them (in the villain's voice, of course) for being unable to catch him. That should get everyone to the gaming table on time!

The best DM as social directors makes sure that every player gets his or her time in the spotlight during the game.

## *DM as creator*

You might be the type of Dungeon Master who only uses published adventures and campaign setting books. Or you might be the type of DM who looks to such purchased items for inspiration but tends to create adventures from scratch. Either way, you have a role as a creator when you're the DM.

Every decision, every rules call, every utterance by a monster or a villain, every descriptive flair you add to your narration of a scene — all of these

things and more reveal the creator inside you. The DM creates whole worlds one encounter at a time. That's a big part of the fun of being the DM: You get to lay the foundation for the story, the adventure, and the world that will unfold with every game session you play. Sure, the players add to the story and the world through the actions of their characters, but it all begins with the DM.

Even if you decide to use published adventures, you still get to express your creativity by making subtle changes to better fit what has happened earlier in your campaign or to react to something unexpected that the player characters do. We dive into this expression of Dungeon Mastering in more detail later in the book, especially in Parts III and IV.

The best DM as creator rewards the players who make the effort to immerse themselves in the game world by providing an experience that's every bit as engaging as a well-written book or great movie.

## *The Goal of Dungeon Mastering*

The earlier sections in this chapter cover, in broad strokes, the many hats worn by the Dungeon Master. But what's the goal of being the DM? Why do you do it? A number of goals exist, but it boils down to this: to have fun. The DM gets to have fun by running the game, crafting the adventures, and narrating the story of the player characters. When the DM and the players both have a fun and satisfying experience, the game of D&D really shines as a social experience.

Whether you like moderating the rules, narrating the story, or creating the adventure — or taking on any of the other expressions of DMing we discuss in this chapter — the reason to be the DM, the only reason, is because you enjoy it. When you have fun, the whole group has fun, and that's what games such as D&D are all about.