

Sly Flourish's

Running Epic Tier D&D Games

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How to Use This Book

This book is written for Dungeon Masters (DMs) planning to run epic tier Dungeons and Dragons 4th Edition games. It assumes you've run a bunch of D&D 4th edition games at this point and have a firm understanding of the basics. You've prepped adventures, you've developed and ran a lot of encounters, you know the ins and outs of 4th Edition but ahead lurks the dark waters of the epic tier.

Maybe your campaign has finally reached past level 20 and you're about to dive into the stories where the player characters (PCs) have power beyond that of mere mortals. Maybe you've always wanted to run some epic-level battles against the most dangerous opponents in the multi-verse. Maybe you want to run a couple of one-shots against the oldest dragons to fly the skies. If any of these situations are true, this book is for you.

Running epic tier D&D 4th edition games is very different from running games at the heroic or paragon tier. With the vast number of feats, powers, and items available by any single PC, some devastating combinations of powers will no doubt show up at your table. PCs can recover hit points without using healing surges. They can kill minions with no actions spent. They can paralyze and quickly slay just about any single monster, solo or not. Dealing with all of this while you run a great game is challenging and this book was written to help.

This short book is designed to help you run fun, challenging, and fantastic epic tier D&D games. We'll talk about building awesome stories worthy of epic PCs. You'll learn tricks to deal with the increase in PCs power above level 20. You'll learn how to keep combat challenging without increasing the time it takes to run it.

This is not a book for beginners. If you're looking for tips to help you build great D&D games at all tiers, take a look at [Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips](#) along with the [Dungeon Master's Guide](#), the [Dungeon Master's Guide 2](#), or the [Dungeon Master's Kit](#). If you have a handle on all of that, however, and are ready to take your PCs all the way to the top, look no further.

If you're looking for a summary to quickly improve your epic tier adventures, jump to the last chapter in this book where we summarize the best six tips for improving your epic campaign.

Otherwise, let's begin by building stories worthy of your epic tier PCs.

Know Epic PC Roles

In order to apply the right challenge to your group for a particular encounter, you need to understand the capabilities of each of your PCs. Your goal isn't to directly counteract these capabilities, but to build an encounter that will let the PCs use their vast capabilities and still face a suitable challenge.

Nuking strikers

Powerful strikers with the right combination of items, feats, and powers can inflict up to 300 points of damage in a single round. They often have lots of escapes from attacks, are able to avoid terrain elements and visual obscurity, and pour out damage continually throughout a fight.

Adding brutes is an easy way to increase the amount of total hit points in an encounter. You have to be careful, though. Too many hit points and the battle will grind to a halt. Ensure a large battle has some form of success criteria rather than simply killing every monster.

Example: The black dragon's bodyguards You want to run a high-level solo black dragon but you know that the strikers in your party will quickly cut him down. Add in four or five Yuan-ti brutes as worshippers of the dragon who can also bring a threat to the party. Give these brutes the ability to take damage instead of the dragon as an interrupt so that massive

damage doesn't hit the dragon directly every time. When the dragon dies, however, so do the brutes whose life forces were tied directly to it. This way you have a way to remove some massive damage from the dragon but the battle won't turn into a slog-fest when the dragon dies.

Ranged strikers in particular are notorious for their ability to avoid nearly all threats. Counteract this with some artillery of your own, map-wide environmental effects, and creatures with reach.

Example: The donut aura One way to keep the threat high on your ranged attackers is with a tool called the donut aura. This aura only affects squares outside of a certain range from your central boss monster. For example. A level 25 lich causes a field of natural disruption that affects all squares outside of five squares from the lich. Anyone that begins or enters squares greater than five from the lich takes 25 points of necrotic damage and receives no benefits from heals. Now you have a constant way to keep ranged attackers on their toes and moving around the battlefield throughout the battle. Mix this with a traditional aura and you give PCs a choice, although neither of them are very good, which brings its own sort of fun.

Super-sticky defenders

Good epic tier defenders are like flypaper for monsters. They draw monsters in and mark them with marks so powerful that it would be idiotic to attack anyone else. Automatic damage, -3 to defenses, and applied status effects as free actions aren't uncommon from an epic tier defender. Incredibly high defenses, oceans of temporary hit points, and a dozen ways to heal prepare the defender to take these hits.

Challenge a party that has a powerful defender by ensuring no single creature acts as the primary damage dealer. Even in battles against powerful solos, environmental effects, auras, and extra creatures often will be the only threat to non-defenders in a group.

Multiple simultaneous bosses, expansive battlefields, hard-to-reach artillery, lots of brutes, movement-hindering terrain, creatures and environments that daze; all of these are good ways to deal with strong defenders without preventing the defender from performing his or her job.

Example: Replacing solos with elites Instead of running a battle with a single powerful solo monster, consider replacing that solo monster with three elite monsters instead. Say you were planning an encounter against a massive epic-level Elder Purple Worm. Instead, replace that purple worm with three ancient abyssal worms (level 30 elites from [Demonomicon](#)). Three elites are a lot harder for a defender to lock down than a single solo worm. Want to be really mean? Give them both.

Incapacitating controllers

Strong controllers create powerful zones that inhibit or damage creatures within it. They create apparitions that pin creatures down and inflict continuing damage. They kill minions with hardly a thought and paralyze single creatures with a rainbow of various status effects.

Like the super-sticky defender, you'll want an expansive battlefield for your controllers. As many of the controller's zones require minor actions to sustain, a carefully placed stun or daze can often eliminate them. Don't do it too soon or too often. The player shouldn't feel like he or she got screwed

out of a daily. But if that zone seems to be completely removing the challenge of a battle, you might want a way around it.

Catastrophic area attackers

Strikers, leaders, and controllers all often wield very powerful area attacks. Though most dangerous to minions, these area attacks can also dish out a lot of damage or control a big section of a battlefield.

Again, large battlefields, a good number of obstructions, or a network of hallways can help you keep your monsters apart from one another so they aren't all hit by the area attack. Adding a few more hit points to your monsters, adding a few monsters, or upgrading your monsters to brutes can also ensure they aren't wiped out in these area attacks.

Example: The minion generator Big area attacks eat minions faster than a lawn mower. A minion generator helps solve this problem. Say your wizard boss has four portals in his throne room. Every round, at the end of his turn, have the wizard summon four devil minions from these portals who act immediately after the wizard. This way they get at least one round before getting killed and keep coming every round. With three minor-action skill check successes, the PCs can disable these portals to prevent the summoning of the devils. This setup gives minions a fighting chance at being something other than battlefield decoration against heavy area attackers.

Super boosting leaders

Leaders that boost a group's defenses, attacks, and damage can turn the threat of a battle very quickly. With a powerful Warlord, for example, the

bonuses they give to the party essentially guarantee hits. Rather than fight this, simply accept that PCs will almost always hit and learn to deal with the damage and status effects rather than worry about defenses.

Strong leaders might toss around lots of temporary hit points. Large areas of ongoing damage whittle down those temporary hit points and give PCs an added threat to worry about.

Forcing the separation of a party can also reduce the effectiveness of a boosting leader. Roper-like forced movement, complex hallways, creatures that kidnap and teleport PCs, these are all tricky ways to split up a party. Use this with care, however.

Example: The fire shield Late in epic tier games, warlords in particular can give out an amazing amount of free-action attacks. Give your boss a fire shield of sorts to deal with all of these free attacks. Any time your boss takes damage, it inflicts 30 fire damage on the attacker with no action required. Because this can be particularly nasty, limit the duration by letting PCs disable this fire shield with three minor-action skill check successes, one per round. You can also see an example of this type of power with the Adult Black Dragon in the [Monster Vault](#).

Challenging but not contradicting

When designing encounters for such high-level PCs, you need to keep a careful balance to ensure you don't simply counteract your PC's advantages but still provide a challenge to them. Your players worked hard to get these powers, after all, and they want a chance to use them. Sometimes dominating a powerful battle is the fun your PCs seek. There is always a

careful balance between challenge and fun. Keep this balance in mind as you prepare your encounters for these superhuman PCs.

With a firm understanding of your player characters and their role, you're now ready to design the framework for your epic tier encounters.