

# THE LAZY DM

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First printing November 2012

*“I don’t have to do much prep at all, I just kind of wing it.  
But they think I spend hours and hours and hours actually  
planning all this shit out.”*

—Chris Perkins,  
Senior Producer of Dungeons and Dragons  
and Dungeon Master for Acquisitions Incorporated

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# I. ABOUT THIS BOOK

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This book builds upon two ideas. First, many dungeon masters spend a great deal of time planning and preparing their Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) games without necessarily bringing more enjoyment to their players or themselves. Second, and potentially more profound, less preparation may result in a more enjoyable D&D game. With these ideas in mind, this book aims to:

**Save you time preparing for your D&D game**

**Help you focus on the elements of your game that bring the most enjoyment to you and your group**

**Show you how preparing less results in a more dynamic and exciting game**

You probably love preparing your D&D game and these ideas come as a bit of a shock. We all love building great D&D games, that's why we're running them instead of just playing in them. You don't have to lose the joy of preparing your game. Instead, you'll see what and how to prepare so that you can focus on the things that bring the greatest joy to you and your group.

## Who is this book for?

This book is intended for experienced dungeon masters who have run dozens, if not hundreds, of Dungeons and Dragons games. This is not a book for a novice. Books such as the various Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Master's Guides and my own *Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips* are aimed at newer dungeon masters who need to get a better handle on the basics. Although this book doesn't require true expertise in dungeon mastering, it assumes that you know the basics and have significant experience running games at the table. The more games you have under your belt, the more useful the contents of this book will be.

Like *Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips* and *Running Epic Tier D&D Games*, this short book focuses on tips, tricks, discussions, and resources to help you spend less time building a better D&D game. Like the very goal it undertakes, reading this book will take little of your time and offer you practical solutions to build open and exciting D&D games. Every idea in this book may not resonate with you or your preparation style. There is no one true way to prepare a great D&D game for every group. This book should, however, give you something to consider as you prepare for your games. Use what works for you. Discard the rest.

Now let's make our games great.

## IV. THE DANGERS OF OVER-PREPARATION

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*“No plan survives contact with the players”*

—Davena Oaks, *The She DM*

Being a lazy dungeon master isn't just about saving time. It's about spending time where it has the most impact on the enjoyment of you and your group. There are other more dangerous things than simply wasting time. Let's explore some of the potential dangers of over-preparation.

### **You spend your time in areas that matter little to the game**

Of 470 surveyed dungeon masters who run weekly D&D games, 38% spend 30 minutes or more designing monsters (read about the DM survey in **Appendix B**). The most popular versions of Dungeons and Dragons (we'll stick to Pathfinder, D&D 3.5, and D&D 4th Edition for this discussion) contain hundreds to thousands of monsters across all levels. There's little need to build one more, regardless of your desire to do so. This all makes logical sense until you feel that drive to custom-build a new villain. It might take you fifteen minutes or an hour to build a monster depending on the edition, and that monster might get killed in only a couple of rounds of play. You might never get to show off the true capabilities of these monsters.

### **You build up too much stake in your material**

The more time you spend preparing for your game, the more you want your players to experience what you prepared. If you spend three hours setting up a beautiful three-dimensional encounter area, how likely are you to let the players find a creative way to skip it? How pissed off will you be when a pain-in-the-ass wizard casts “fly” and everyone soars over it like a flock of seagulls (including the hair)?

Every bit of time you spend preparing for your game emotionally commits you to use those results. You want your players to see the stuff you make. Therefore, the more stuff you make, the less likely you are to let your players deviate from that course.

It comes down to the feeling of control. What frightens dungeon masters the most is the feeling that our game will suck because we didn't bother to prepare. The more control we apply to the game ahead of time, the better we feel.

But your game isn't about controlling the story; it's about letting the story run free. Think back over the games in your life, to the most memorable moments of those games. How many of those moments were pre-scripted by the DM and how many of them were memorable simply because no one at the table had any idea what was about to happen? This doesn't mean your planned ideas are useless, but they might serve better as ideas to tap later than as a fully-filled out story.

### **You build a story before it should be built**

DMs might often think the stories happen when they type out their adventure notes or build a map, but the true story is told while the game runs at the table. How much should we write ahead of time for a story that is supposed to happen during our game? How do you prepare for a spontaneous story to erupt? You certainly don't do so by writing up six pages of prose you expect everyone to follow.

The story of our games occurs at the table, not beforehand. The more you try to fill out the story ahead of time, the more likely you'll fall into a scripted, rehearsed, and potentially boring plot.

There are ways to avoid all of these and still have fun preparing for your game. It isn't about building stories, though – it's about building the stage, weaving in the backgrounds and desires of the PCs, wiring in personalities of the NPCs, and building the world in which the whole group tells their story at the table, not on your computer a week earlier.

## XXI. IMPROVING IMPROVISATION

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More than anything else, proper improvisation tools and techniques help a lazy dungeon master run a great game. The better you can improvise, the less you need to prepare. It takes a lot of practice and a lot of guts to get better at improvising, but the end result saves you time and makes your game more exciting. Improvisation is the key trait that helps you build a game that lives and breathes instead of one painted by numbers.

### Enjoyment at the table: A lower bar than you think

In his article [A Lesson in Mediocrity](#), Chris Perkins describes how a game he thought went terribly turned out not to be too bad for the rest of the group:

*“Despite my less than stellar performance, the players had a great time. When the session ended, my players thanked me for the terrific game, to which I responded with silent surprise.”*

Most of the time, our group doesn't have high demands. They want to get together, have a few laughs, eat some junk food, and escape the real world for a few hours. They don't demand the depth of a Stanley Kubrick movie with the choreographed action of Robert Rodriguez. They just want to relax for a bit.

### You need to relax a bit, too.

If you paid for this book, you likely hold yourself to a high standard as a dungeon master. You likely hold yourself to a standard higher than your players expect. There's nothing wrong with demanding more from your game, but don't let that get you down at the table. When it comes to your game, take it easy and let the game go where it will. Remember that, above your epic story and your well-tuned encounters, people just want to have fun. If that means throwing stuff away, throw it away. Unlike Chris Perkins, you don't have three thousand people watching you run a D&D game at PAX, so quit worrying.

### Preparing for improvisation

There's a careful balance between feeling prepared and feeling relaxed. The less you've prepared, the more nervous you might feel. Preparing for improvisation steers you the right way. Fill your toolkit with aids for improvisation

instead of tools that force your game down one particular track. You can find many of these tools in [Appendix A](#).

### Trust

Steve Townshend often discusses the importance of trust in our D&D groups. In a [podcast](#) and [follow-up article on improvisation](#), Townshend talks about the importance of looking at your players not as an audience, but as partners in the show. You have to trust them and build their trust in you. The more open you are to them, the more trust flows around the room, the more fun you will all have. The safer you will be to explore your cohabited imaginations.

### Act as if

You may never feel fully relaxed when you run your game. We put a lot of energy into these games and we want them to go well. Use the common trick of both great leaders and recovering alcoholics everywhere: act as if. The folks at your table look to you to lead them. You're not taking a hill in 'Nam, but they still look to you and your behavior to guide them. The more relaxed you are, the more relaxed they are. Don't apologize. Don't fret over small stuff. Go with the flow. Listen, laugh, and say yes.

### Yes, and ...

Good improvisors know when and how to interact with “yes, and...”. This is a powerful aid and the cornerstone of improvisation. Each person at the table has something to contribute, and has the ability to take the game in a certain direction. Your job is to include their ideas and build off of them, giving them something back in return. As your players bring up ideas, find ways to include these ideas into the story and build off of them, adding a component they might not have considered or a way to tie their idea back into the central theme of the story. Being inclusive is critical to group storytelling and breaks down the walls between DMs and players. Should a player use these ideas as opportunities to steer the game away from the collective enjoyment of the rest, find ways to steer them back again by building off of the idea.



## Putting yourself into your character

Another acting tip has you putting yourself in the mind of the character, in many cases, is an NPC or villain. What are they thinking? What are they doing? The more you see things from their point of view, the more you will easily react to the actions of the players as they interact with these NPCs. As you build these ideas, drop a few notes down on those NPC 3x5 cards you built for your game.

## Go with humor

We love our games, and sometimes we love our serious storylines. Players might use humor to break the serious tension of a game. Don't totally shut them down – build off of it. Let them have their moment of comedy. It doesn't mean your game can't be serious and that you can't return to moments of drama. Consider the mix of tension and humor in the game World of Warcraft. You have the tragedy of the Lich King and the threat of Deathwing on one side and the humor of the Harrison Jones quests on the other. Both comedy and drama can co-exist in your own game.

Humor can help you enjoy the wacky things that happen as you improvise. If you say something stupid, double-down and have fun with it. Use it to make fun of the NPCs and villains if they say something dumb.

In his article [Ham Acting Across the Table](#) Forgotten Realms creator Ed Greenwood describes the value of our wacky voices as the catalysts for the shared memories our games create. We all might make fun of the bad Monty Python quotes, but in the end, it's what makes a game unique and memorable for years to come. Humor is a powerful tool.

## Follow the masters

To see an expert dungeon master using all of these techniques, watch [Chris Perkins run D&D games for the Penny Arcade crew in the Acquisitions, Inc. games](#). Chris improvises many of the scenes and situations in these videos, changes voices often, and continually says “yes and…” to keep the stories evolving around the players.

## Practice

None of these techniques for improvisation come overnight. You'll have to work at them. The only way to get better is to actually improvise again and again. This means running games, lots of them, and paying attention to the moments when you can let things slip out of control and watch them blossom into something else. Put yourself in situations which require improvisation. Volunteer to run a game ten minutes before it's about to start. Continually refine your tools, adding those that help and removing those that don't. Focus on the tools that help you feel prepared without forcing your game down a single pre-determined direction.



# APPENDIX A: LAZY DUNGEON MASTER TOOLKIT

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Below you will find a series of lists to help you build your lazy D&D game. Use them either directly or as examples to build your own lists. Print them out and keep them tucked in your DM kit to help you improvise when the time is right. Add your own lists as you need.

## 20 Adventure Seeds

1. Dwarven explorers uncover a mad wizard's vault.
2. Undead attack an old monastery protecting an evil artifact.
3. An isolated village seeks heroes to defend it from monstrous attackers.
4. Hobgoblin slavers allied with a demon-blooded dragon terrorize local farmsteads.
5. A powerful noble family seeks vengeance for a slain criminal son.
6. Orc raiders enslaved dwarves to dig into an ancient dark elf ruin.
7. A fledgling apprentice releases a demon who begins building a fiendish army.
8. A corrupt warlord harries a poor village with a hired band of rogues.
9. A supernatural plague from a forgotten elven ruin turns local villagers into ghouls.
10. A floating keep from an alternate world crashes into a nearby wild forest.
11. A thieves guild threatens to release a hallucinogen into a city's water supply.
12. Forbidden knowledge revealed in an old book brings powerful justicars who plan to wipe out everyone in the town.
13. The corpse of an old god infested with devils appears embedded within a nearby mountain.
14. The death of a hill giant lord's son brings down the lord's goblinoid army onto a nearby walled city.
15. A king finds a hidden door within his keep that leads to a vast multi-leveled labyrinth.
16. A kobald witch-doctor discovers a powerful artifact that sways inhuman armies to his service.
17. A band of mercenaries starts a war between two feuding cities.
18. An evil priest becomes filled with terrible power and unleashes charismatic cultists across the land.
19. A fallen hero's father frames local adventurers, while allying with wilderness tribes to increase terror.
20. Recent foresting expansions upset a nearby swamp full of lizard-men and their black dragon god-king.

## 20 Movie-Inspired Quests

1. Hunt down a powerful beast never seen in this area before (*Jaws*)
2. Find an ancient buried artifact before an evil army does (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*)
3. Find a lost treasure to negotiate a hostage rescue (*Romancing the Stone*)
4. Hunt down constructs that believe they are human (*Blade Runner*)
5. Protect a young girl who holds the fate of a kingdom in her mind (*Firefly*)
6. Seek revenge upon the cult that wiped out a whole village (*Conan the Barbarian*)
7. Drop behind enemy lines to destroy a bridge (*Bridge over the River Kwai*)
8. Hunt down a rogue general now seen as a god by an army of goblinoids (*Apocalypse Now*)
9. Seek revenge on rogue bandits who accosted a bar wench (*Unforgiven*)
10. Find the last surviving brother of five in the middle of a war (*Saving Private Ryan*)
11. Take revenge on the orc tribe that murdered a young girl's father (*True Grit*)
12. Protect a village from a band of monstrous brigands (*Seven Samurai / Magnificent Seven*)
13. Save a village from two warring bandit tribes (*Yojimbo*)
14. Find a lost treasure before two other parties find it (*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*)
15. Imprison or slay a powerful demon trapped within a keep (*The Keep*)
16. Destroy an ancient artifact containing the soul of a demon prince (*The Prince of Darkness*)
17. Hunt down and destroy a shapeshifting monster released from an ancient buried vessel (*The Thing*)
18. Kill the gang of assassins who left you for dead (*Kill Bill*)
19. Kidnap or rescue an unborn heir (*The Way of the Gun*)
20. Steal an artifact from the most powerful bank in the city (*Heat*)



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Michael E. Shea is a writer, gamer, and technologist and creator of [Sly Flourish](#), a website dedicated to building the better Dungeons and Dragons dungeon master. Mike is the author of [Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips](#) and [Sly Flourish's Running Epic Tier D&D Games](#) and is a [freelance author for Wizards of the Coast](#). Mike has been playing Dungeons and Dragons since 1987.

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