

RUNE'S FULL-TIME DM, PART-TIME PREP GUIDE



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LESSON 1: BE ORGANIZED

There are a few lessons that I consider fundamental to this style of DM'ing; without them, you will find yourself doing preparation that does not need to be done, or even redoing preparation that you have already done. In order to cut your prep, you need to streamline as much of your process as possible and that starts with organization.

This may seem pretty obvious, but, if you intend to run a lengthy campaign, you should keep it all together, in one place. This is particularly important for the DM who has little prep-time, because such a DM is most likely to work on bits of the campaign in a piecemeal fashion, particularly if inspiration strikes unexpectedly. This is all well and good, but do yourself a huge favor and keep it all in one place! Commit to this before you even begin the campaign, and you will save yourself a lot of headache (and extra work) in the long run.

LESSON 2: KNOW THE RULES

Maybe your players all want to play a light-hearted game and specific knowledge of the intricacies of the rules-set is not that important, because it just won't come up. That's great. However, all it takes is one rules-savvy player and your lack of knowledge is exposed. Does it matter? That depends on the player. The player might act as a repository of said knowledge in the game; if this is so, take advantage of this resource!

If, on the other hand, the player is the type to look for any advantage he can get, your lack of knowledge has given him a pretty big one. In such a case, it is particularly important that you educate yourself.

But it's important anyway. Why? Because the better you understand the rules, the more consistent you will be as the game rolls along and, believe me, if you are trying to streamline, consistency is your friend.

If you don't like a rule, fine—don't use it. If you don't know every arcane minutia of the rules, that's okay, you can rule on the fly, and look something up later. But, the more solid your grasp on the basics (and the commonly used not-so-basics), the better equipped you will be to tinker with the rules, and to make consistent adjudications in play.

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LESSON 3: REDUCE THE BOOKKEEPING

The last lesson kind of leads into this one: take a look at the rules. There are probably several things that jump out as tedious and time-consuming. Can you ditch them? Do they need to be replaced with something? How can you reduce the bookkeeping load both for you and your players?

Right off the bat, I'm going to throw a proposal out here. Ditch the Experience Point system. It is cumbersome and, frankly, encourages a style of play (that is, combat-driven) that will make your life more difficult.

Some DMs simply advance PCs whenever it feels appropriate. If you would prefer a little more structure, however, I recommend advancing the PCs in level as they accomplish quests (say, 2 major quests, with 3 minor quests counting as a major). There is some degree of tweaking that you can do here, as well. For instance, if you want earlier levels to come quicker than later levels, you could add 1 major quest to the total needed every time a level is achieved.

With this simple substitution, we eliminate the need to figure out how much XP a party earns, how to divvy it up, how many combats you need to plan for so the party can level, and how to advance the PCs if they take an approach that isn't combat. These things may not seem significant, but they add up, and they eat away your prep—and playing—time.

LESSON 4: GET YOUR PLAYERS TO DO THE WORK

Now that you've got an idea what kind of mechanics you're going to support your campaign with, it is time to start in on the setting. And, you know what? Your players can—and should—help with that. What you need to do is provide incentive to do so.

This is how I do it: Whenever a player takes it upon himself to do something outside of the game that could potentially enrich the play experience (make a map, NPC, prop, or whatnot), I award a point that the player may use with any PC in any game I run to alter fate in some way—turn a hit into a miss or vice versa, turn a hit into a crit, throw in a plot-twist. This awards the players according to their initiative (as opposed to the PCs' initiative) and has the added bonus of helping the entire party be more survivable (which, in turn, makes my job easier—it's like rewarding myself for getting them to do prep for me!).

It comes down to this: The more minds that are excited about the campaign setting and actively work to embellish it, the richer it will be—and the less work you have to do to get it there, the better off you will be.

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LESSON 5: EVERY ELEMENT IS AN NPC

Everything – That abandoned village the PCs just came across? NPC. The pile of loot they've been after? NPC. That forest fire bearing down on them? NPC.

What does all of this mean? It means that a little personality will go a long way. The better your players remember things, the sparser your notes can be.

More importantly, if you are going to do as little preparation as possible, you will not have detailed notes on many of the elements in the game. Therefore, you need to make what notes you do have count. Think about these elements as characters and it will be much easier to bring them to life. As with any NPC, you should be thinking, “How will the PCs interaction with this character matter?” When you really get down to it, that's all that ever really matters in the game.

LESSON 6: DON'T PLOT. HOOK!

Seriously; the more detailed your plans, the more clever your schemes, the more dastardly your designs, the more time you have wasted! Your NPCs should most definitely have diverse motivations and (sometimes) complex objectives, but you, the DM, should not! The players will subvert, dash, and render obsolete any such attempts.

Instead, throw out lots and lots and lots of hooks. Write these hooks down (on separate index cards, for instance). Keep them all with your campaign stuff (a box is good). If the PCs don't bite on the hook, make a note on the card, stick it back in the box, and pull it out to complicate their lives later.

This is the core philosophy that drives this DM'ing style, so I will reiterate: Every hook that the PCs ignore is a potential complication down the road. Create plentiful hooks; they will not be wasted.

LESSON 7: NEVER STAT WHAT YOU DON'T NEED

But, how will you know what you need to stat? Chances are, you have a pretty good idea, already, but if you are in doubt, *you do not need to stat it!* Even when you do need to stat something, *you only need to stat what you need!* It sounds so intuitive, but, seriously, if you let yourself, you could easily sink more time into creating stat-blocks that will never get used than into any other aspect of campaign-prep.

But, what if you need combat stats for some NPC you didn't bother to stat out? Fake it. There are a few different ways to do this effectively. Two of them will be described in the next lesson, but there is one thing you can and should do before you ever begin playing.

Create or acquire some generic templates of creatures/NPCs that you can quickly adjust to fit your needs on the fly as the need arises in play. These should not be detailed; just enough to get by with.

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This is a minimal amount of prep that you should do before you start the campaign and again when the PCs level. The small amount of prep can—and will—save the day at some point.

With this as a fallback, you should have no reservations about giving as few things as few stats as possible.

LESSON 8: RE-FLUFF AND RECYCLE

Two other things you can do to help you put together an unexpected combat are also useful tools all-around, so they get their own lesson. Take a monster out of the monster manual. Great. Now you have stats, but how does it fit in? You could just drop it in, but if you use it a lot, things could get old. But, re-fluff that monster over and over again, maybe make a minor mechanical adjustment, and you've got a different experience, every time.

What about that NPC that you actually did have to stat out. Now that he's dead, you're done with it, right? Not so! Keep those stats handy; they, too, can be re-fluffed.

The more time you save with these creative adjustments, the less time you waste reinventing the wheel.

LESSON 9: KEEP NOTES DURING PLAY

This is going to seem obvious, but it is really important for a consistent, long-running campaign—especially one light on preparation. When you make up something (like an NPC's name) or something happened that you need to remember, write it down! Don't write down everything—just the important things. Make sure you keep these notes organized with the rest of your campaign after the game is over.

The time you save not having to remember things could astound you.

LESSON 10: DON'T USE WEIRD NAMES

That last lesson leads into this one. Don't use weird names. Just, don't. Seriously, how are you going to remember Xian'thrak'halitosis when you need to without looking it up? That's just wasted time. Bob's no good either, because it tends to break player immersion, but at least you can remember it.

Try simpler (even, occasionally, real) names and, especially, titles. Not lame titles, evocative ones. What's the difference? Well, that's just something you'll have to figure out for yourself.

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LESSON 11: MOST BATTLES SHOULD BE SKIRMISHES

If your players want to grind out combat after combat, you should seriously consider letting one of them DM, or pick up a published adventure, because combat prep requires time and lots of combat prep requires lots of time.

Therefore, battles should fall into two categories: minor and significant. Minor battles should never be long, overly complex, or unavoidable. Use weak enemies, sparse (but interesting) terrain features, and multiple ways to succeed or to bypass the conflict.

Significant battles, on the other hand, should be significant. Use difficult enemies, complex terrain features, and awesome imagery. Give these combats the love they deserve; they should be the focal point of the session, after all.

The minor skirmishes leading up to such a battle should be easily forgettable, but should serve an important function—they highlight just how epic the major battle is and help it be all the more memorable.

LESSON 12: LISTEN TO THE PLAYERS

I don't just mean listen when they're talking to you (although, obviously, you should). Listen when they're talking among themselves.

Listen to their conjecture. Incorporate it into the story (with some twists, of course). This will give the players a sense of satisfaction for being right, and gives you access to a valuable resource: other people's ideas.

Listen to their plans (when they discuss them openly). This will give you an idea what you need to prepare for in the near future. Don't use this information against them (much), or they'll just stop talking in front of you.

Listen to their conversations. This will give you a better understanding of what the PCs want out of the game, and what the players want. This, in turn, will help you focus on what preparation you ought to be doing and what isn't so important.

LESSON 13: IF THE QUESTION IS, "CAN I DO [SOMETHING THAT'S COOL]," THE ANSWER IS "YES!"

Simple, right? But it is *the* most important lesson. You've got enough work to do, let the players bring the Cool. They'll be energized and excited about the game, and all you have to do is let it happen.

If it's cool, find a way to let it happen.

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LESSON 14: LOOK EVERYWHERE FOR INSPIRATION

Whatever inspires you (gaming material, or not), incorporate it into your idea mill. Especially look for short adventures or adventure seeds that you can cannibalize.

There are many excellent sources for these (many on these very boards), but I'll point you to one collection I assembled (and rated) specifically for this purpose.

The Iron DM tournaments have, over the last decade, produced some *very* inspiring and creative pieces and tend to be rules-light or neutral (and, thus, easy to incorporate).

One of the best side-effects of the incredibly competitive and extremely tough challenge that is the IRON DM TOURNAMENT is that a plethora of extraordinarily creative and high-quality short adventures--or adventure seeds are produced.

Because of the format of the tournament, these are usually light on mechanics or system-neutral and are, consequently, usually pretty easy to port over to an ongoing campaign.

Are they all good? Of course not. But this is an anthology, not an archive. To that end, the following post(s) will contain links to some of the entries I consider to be the very best for purposes of actually running (as opposed to meeting the criteria of the tournaments).

Additionally, I will include a very brief description of each adventure and a very simple rating.

The rating system:

Ease of Use: This category is a loose estimation of how easy I think the adventure would be to actually run based on ease of formatting, information, hooks, linearity (or lack thereof), and the like. It is rated on a scale of 1-5, with one being "*practically unusable*" and five "*practically runs itself*."

Awesome: This category is a loose estimation of just how memorable the adventure is (in a good way) for the players and the DM/GM, based on creativity, amazing imagery, rat-bastardy, and the like. It is rated on a scale of 1-5, with one being "*either entirely forgettable, or memorable for all the wrong reasons*" and five being "*they'll be talking about this one years from now*."

Unfortunately, only the EN World Iron DM Tournaments appear to have survived the years and still be available on the internet. The tournaments held at Nutkinland and the Rat Bastard DM's Club boards have disappeared with those sites. Consequently, all of these examples are pulled from only from the tournaments held on this site (and, regrettably, not the original tournament, which was on a previous incarnation of EN World).

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As a final note, I encourage you all to post your favorites, as well. (And if anyone has archives of any of the lost tournaments, those would be cool, too!)

I have pulled these:

- **ajanders**

["Have a Heart, Please?"](#)

"A noble disappointed in love receives an invitation from a fae noble inviting him to purchase a clockwork heart, which is immune to the pangs of that emotion. The party discovers this clockwork heart contains an unpleasant surprise. The party must follow him through the strange environment of the Feywild, gathering advice and allies along the way, and convince him to give up his plan. The climax of the adventure includes a tense standoff with the fae noble and the provider of the heart, a devil with his own agenda."

Ease of Use: 4 (Solid structure with lots to do.)

Awesome: 5 (Like a fairy-tale gone wrong, and yet, so right!)

- **carpedavid**

["The Siege of Castle Yume"](#)

War between the Queen of Spiders and the Lord of the Dead has left the world without the dream tapestries needed for restful sleep. Can the matter be resolved before all mortals go insane?

Ease of Use: 4 (An implied cosmology may be too specific for some campaigns, but the ideas are so good, they ought to fit in somewhere!)

Awesome: 5 (Chocked full of awesome ideas!)

- **Enkhidu**

["City on the Edge"](#)

"The PCs will travel into unknown waters to the edge of the world, only to find that a terrible beast set to guard a gate between worlds is dying and they must install a new guardian."

Ease of Use: 4 (An evocative adventure that would be fun to run with just a few tweaks--even if your campaign world isn't flat.)

Awesome: 5 (An apocalypse at the edge of the world is kind of hard to forget. Epic.)

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- **Iron Sky**

[The Dreaming Lords"](#)

The PCs must travel from dream to dream in order to solve puzzle laid out in this adventure.

Ease of Use: 5 (The innovative structure of this adventure *begs* to be used.)

Awesome: 5 (Traipsing through dreams is always memorable. Even for those who can't remember their dreams.)

- **Iron Sky**

["The Far City"](#)

"The Far City is called by some the Last City, for it is said when one leaves all civilization and all that is known behind and travels to the end of one the worlds, there can be found the Far City, on the border between reality and chaos, astride the boundary with the Far Realm. It is ruled by the Cosa Nesunna, a race of aberrations that not only pull the strings from behind the scenes in the Far City, but have a massive network of "coscas" (families) that silently pull the strings behind the criminal organizations of all the Planes."

Ease of Use: 4 (As with many planar adventures, this one requires high-level characters, but there is much to discover once the PCs get there.)

Awesome: 5 (Far Realm hijinks. Tasty.)

- **Nemmerle (now El-remmen)**

["The King's Nightmares"](#)

Take a fantastic journey to a dream-scape on the dark side of the moon.

Ease of Use: 4 (Strong hooks and good details to hang intrigue upon.)

Awesome: 5 (Wow.)

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- **nonamazing**

["The Sound of Fear"](#)

A pyrohydra takes over the criminal underworld of a city--with each head running a different faction.

Ease of Use: 4 (Despite its length, this adventure is set up very interestingly, with the first half dedicated to laying out clues--through the agents of the pyrohydra's heads. The second half is a delve through the sewers to the monster, itself. It even includes a map of the sewers.)

Awesome: 5 (Intrigue and investigation abound. Also, who's going to forget a hydra who leads factions with conflicting agendas?)

- **Pour**

["Expiation"](#)

A PC has to go through Hell(s) before s/he gets to Heaven(s).

Ease of Use: 4 (This adventure would have to be planned from the beginning of a campaign to actually be run as written, but its fundamental ideas could be used in many.)

Awesome: 5 (Redemptive tales are good. Redemptive tales that a PC can participate in are amazing.)

- **Pro-Paladin**

["Good Clean Fun"](#)

"The PC is hired to work a late-night janitorial shift at a rendering plant. Here he or she uncovers murder, mad science, black magic and an ancient evil hoping to make a modern comeback."

Ease of Use: 4 (A modern adventure for a single PC seems pretty limited, but could be expanded for a party pretty easily. Either way, a solid adventure that will keep the player(s) invested. Could easily work with other systems, as well.)

Awesome: 5 (Creepy and macabre. This one would be hard to forget.)

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- **Rune**

[The Dying Flame"](#)

The PCs get caught in a web of political maneuvering and treachery as a ghost attempts to right a wrong that has doomed his city by sacrificing his own daughter.

Ease of Use: 5 (Once the PCs get to the city, they're pretty much *guaranteed* to get swept up in the adventure. Add to that the open-ended approach to resolution and you've got a tremendous little playground.)

Awesome: 5 (At once exotic and all too familiar, the set up is both rat-bastardly and engaging. No matter what the PCs choose to do, they'll have a lot to talk about.)

- **Rune**

["The Fishy God"](#)

The PCs are whisked away to a pocket dimension of the Far Realms to answer for crimes they may or may not have committed. (Un)fortunately for them, they are not really the ones on trial...

Ease of Use: 5 (Intrigue and curiosity combine to drive a tangled tale of alien deities--and an impostor--vying for dominance as the balance of power shifts. Naturally, the PCs are caught in middle.)

Awesome: 5 (The PCs are dropped in the middle of a rat-bastardly situation (so much the better if the PCs actually *are* guilty) that the players will never forget!)

- **seasoning**

["Backwater Tar Baby"](#)

The PCs chase a crazed animal out of a bag of tricks through the twisted pathways of a sphinx's city. Hijinks ensue.

Ease of Use: 4 (A paranoid city-maze that is compact and evocative. It can--and should--fit in any campaign.)

Awesome: 5 ("Remember that time we had to chase that ferret through the city-maze and then had to fight that harpy?" Totally, dude. Totally.)

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- **seasoning**

["St Margaret's Tear"](#)

This noir-style modern game features intrigue and a sentient (and malevolent, naturally) mind-flayer egg.

Ease of Use: 5 (Despite the modern setting, the fundamental structure of this adventure is so sound, it not only nearly runs itself, it could easily be the seed of a new campaign.)

Awesome: 5 (Creepy and atmospheric. The PCs *will not* forget the time one of them was almost turned into a mind-flayer.)

- **Sparky**

["Woes in Niadelaar"](#)

"People are falling ill in Niadelaar. That's nothing new, really. People have always fallen ill in Niadelaar -- it is a miserable, smelly, low-lying, backwater province with a history of trickery, deceit and betrayal that stretches back to the village's founding. A fine place for adventure and adventurers!"

Ease of Use: 5 (A tight adventure that is well laid-out.)

Awesome: 4 (feels like a dark fairy-tale.)

- **Thasmodius**

["Master of Puppets"](#)

An insidious blight plagues the city of Tir Tara--a city lost to the planes.

Ease of Use: 4 (A tight adventure with a lot going on.)

Awesome: 5 (Very creative and well, a lot going on!)

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- **Wik**

["Let us call thee devil..."](#)

The town of Yorik throws a party and the PCs are invited.

Ease of Use: 4 (Set up with no real plot, but, rather, a loose collection of linked encounters, this adventure is really a playground.)

Awesome: 5 (Part adventure, part (potential) drinking game, either way, it's a hell of a lot of fun.)

- **Wulf Ratbane**

["Bright Lights Cast the Darkest Shadows"](#)

Another noir adventure set in (almost) modern times, the PCs find themselves hunting what appears to be a vampire-starlet in 1920s Hollywood.

Ease of Use: 5 (The specific nature of the setting is far outweighed by the very solid structure of the adventure.)

Awesome: 5 (Vivid, haunting, and cinematic, this adventure plays out like a completely interactive movie.)

- **Wulf Ratbane**

[untitled *Memento* tribute](#)

If you've ever watched Memento and thought, "It would be great if someone wrote a D&D adventure like this," you're in luck. Someone did. This is probably the very best Iron DM entry. Ever.

Ease of Use: 5 (Good hooks and solid structure make it hard not to run.)

Awesome: 5 (Trust me. This adventure may feature amnesia, but they'll remember this one!)

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- **Wulf Ratbane**

[untitled white tower entry](#)

"The party discovers the eerie tower of the grand theurgist Morien, the so-called "living lich," and work to set things right before they, too, become victims of his life-draining machine"

Ease of Use: 5 (Tight and evocative.)

Awesome: 5 (Beautiful set-up and creepy-cool imagery will keep the players on the edges of their seats.)

- **Zappo**

["The Many Sings to Us"](#)

An alien hivemind is being spread through speech. Can the PCs find a solution, or will they be part of the problem?

Ease of Use: 5 (Solid and tight.)

Awesome: 5 (Excellent set-up, awesome adventure. Despite what I said about Wulf's *Memento* adventure, this might be the very best Iron DM entry. Ever.)

Even if you don't use one of these adventures wholesale, I'll bet you can take *something* from each and every one of them.

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LESSON 15: ENCOURAGE YOUR PLAYERS TO DEVELOP BACKGROUND AS YOU GO

Some players love to create elaborate backgrounds for their characters before the first session ever starts. These players are great, because they provide all kinds of hooks for you play off of right from the start--you should definitely take advantage of that (don't forget to write those hooks down and put them in the box!).

For some players, however, this type of "work" is like pulling teeth (and not in the fun way). That's okay. Some players like to get to know their characters as they play them, after all.

Now, there is an instinct, while DM'ing, to view the creation of serendipitous background information on the fly as an abuse of the game. Certainly, some players will try to abuse such a system. And yet...I recommend that you quell that instinct.

You shouldn't be trying to squash such creativity--you should encourage it.

First of all, there's no such thing as a serendipitous background. *Backgrounds exist to become relevant in a game.* Furthermore, every time a player introduces a new background element to your game, it is an *opportunity* for you to reintroduce it later (as, you know, a hook)!

Furthermore, it encourages your players to think about how their characters fit in your world *constantly*. That helps them invest in your setting, which is *crucial* when you aren't doing that much prep for it!

So what if the bit of background seems entirely out of character? Opportunity! Remember that people are complex and work with (and possibly also against) the player to determine how and why this apparent contradiction came about (not necessarily on the spot). And definitely make a note of it, so it can come back to haunt the character later.

So, now that we can see reasons for encouraging this type of thing, *how* do you encourage it? The method is up to you, but ought to be fairly minor (if you expect to see it happen frequently).

I would suggest granting a floating circumstantial bonus to a relevant check whenever the player applies a known background element or comes up with a *quick* description of how some previously unknown bit of background might affect the current situation. Then, of course, I would *immediately* write down that potential hook for future use.

By "floating," I mean unattached, but finite. Give the players a number of them for use in an adventure, session, adventuring day, encounter, or whatever other unit of time you think is appropriate and let their creativity determine when and how to assign them. Without the finite limit, you could find that the more creatively abusive players will not only effectively have a +whatever bonus to all checks, but also take up most of the session getting them!

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LESSON 16: ALWAYS BUILD TOWARD SOMETHING

I'm going to change focus now, just for a little bit, because so much of being able to run games with very little preparation is in the actual *running* of the games. The next few lessons will be aimed at getting your campaign to the point where it pretty much runs itself.

First of all, I will be assuming a desire to actually run a long-running campaign (and, for the DM who wishes to minimize prep, there is a solid reason for wanting to do so), but these lessons are applicable at any scale; they are just as appropriate for running a single session, as they are for running a campaign arc, an entire campaign, or even multiple linked campaigns!

Now, wait a minute! Did I just say a DM who wishes to minimize prep has good reason to aim for a long-running campaign?

Yes, I did. It may seem counter-intuitive, but prepping for a bunch of one-shots will result in *way* more time spent in preparation in the long run. You see, there is a certain point where the campaign progresses forward with its own momentum and with the decisions of the players. If you don't want to be doing a lot of extra work, you ought to be trying to get the game to that point as soon as possible.

Obviously, a big part of this is maintaining player interest. That's where this lesson comes in. Always build toward something.

There are lots of little ways to spark your players' interest and imagination. If you've had success with little tricks like cliff-hangers, or improvisational meta-games, or player input into the setting itself...good! Use that stuff.

But, fundamentally, D&D is a game about progressing from one state to another, about standing up against and overcoming challenges (or failing to do so in memorably spectacular fashion).

It's about taking individual PCs, NPCs, plot hooks, adventures, misadventures, player expectations, and DM expectations, and building a party, a setting, a plot, a story and a gaming group out of all of those little pieces. Always build toward something.

Great concept, but how is that in any way applicable?

That depends. In the beginning of a campaign, you'll probably be introducing the setting and the tone of the campaign and watching as the players struggle to find their party dynamic. You can use this time to introduce thematic foreshadowing and challenges to the party's cohesion. This is best handled subtly, of course.

The idea, though, is that you're working on building two things: a feel for what the campaign is going to be about and a feel for how the PCs are going to fit into it.

Later, when you have lots of plot hooks flourishing, and still more laying dormant, when the PCs' actions are starting to reveal consequences, and when the PCs have some goals in sight, you should be aiming to build a sense of progress for the players.

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Some of this is easy. As they pursue their goals, they will naturally feel a sense of progress, or ought to have a clear idea what immediate obstacles prevent that progress. But even down-time can be used constructively. Guide the players toward planning their successes during these moments with gentle (and, again, subtle) nudges. This is especially useful if they have become frustrated or lost.

Remind them that they still haven't discovered what that doppelganger was doing in the guise of the Cardinal. Point out that an all-out assault on the necromancer's forces is bound to fail, but they *do* know a crazy smite-happy Paladin of Legend, don't they?

Still later when they are finally hot on the heels of the villain who has evaded them for months (or years!) the game will have plenty of momentum going for it. At this point, you're trying to build a climax (as opposed to an anti-climax!). Throw in close calls, suspenseful situations, situations that require distasteful solutions. Build up the desire to *shut that villain down*. Then, when they're ready--when they can't suffer that villain to exist a moment longer, *that's* when you unleash all hell on them!

And, once it's all over, it's all over, right?

Nope! Wrap that story up, sure, but take some unresolved threads and build toward the next one. You don't have to play it (and, even if you do, it doesn't have to be with the same characters), but dangle it out there, anyway. You never know what'll come out of it somewhere down the line.

Always build toward something.

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LESSON 17: SET THE PACE

This next bit of advice is closely related to the last. In order to keep things running smoothly, and to keep player interest, you've got to set the pace!

Seems simple, right? And, really, it is. There's no need to be dictatorial about it, and, in fact, you'll be well served by merely offering a subtle nudge once in a while.

But what is the pace to set?

Generally, I view each session, adventure, or campaign in three vague stages--the early-game, mid-game, and end-game. Each of these stages represents a separate focus for the game and, consequently, each will want a different pace.

As mentioned in the last lesson, the beginning of a campaign is generally characterized by focusing on introducing the setting (and foreshadowing of themes that the campaign is likely to explore) and finding the party dynamic. Because this is so, much of the tension of the early-game will be come from the within the party itself, whether internal (as the party tries to learn each other), or external (as the party strives to make its mark in the world).

For this reason, I like to let the players generally set their own pace in the early-game, only nudge them forward when I feel that they've started to flounder. This does mean a large amount of off-topic chatter slows things down, but I'm okay with that.

I view it as an emulation of the down-time spent by the PCs in taverns or around the campfire that only occasionally gets played out. More importantly, it helps to encourage a bonding--particularly important, as I also spend the early-game presenting racial, religious, or cultural conflicts to the party (when they, inevitably, contain such diversity).

By the mid-game, though, the focus has shifted more toward accomplishing goals set by the party, so, while I still can usually get by with letting the players maintain their own momentum, I do occasionally have to remind the players what their goals are and what resources are at their disposal. I am far more likely to interrupt off-topic table-talk in this stage of the game.

By the end-game, it's an entirely different picture. At this point, I'm doing everything I can to tighten the tension and build toward that looming climax. When I remind the players of things at this point, it's usually about how dire their situation is, or how villainous that villain really is. Also, especially, I'll remind them of any missteps they've made in getting here, and how awful it is that they've come back to haunt them. This may *seem* like taunting, but that's okay, too, as it kind of give the villain a vicarious voice. Simply more grist for the motivational mill.

So, really, it's a simple matter. Start out loose and gradually tighten things up. You don't have to tell them when it's time to move on; all you have to do is focus their attention a little bit along the way.

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LESSON 18: EMBRACE THE SURREAL

I've talked a little bit about how consistency is a friend to the DM who has little time for prep. That may, at first, seem to be at odds with the suggestion I'm about to present, but hang in there, it'll all make sense.

Don't get hung up on the notion of "realism." It's a highly subjective concept, anyway. In this thing we call the "real world," we have our own networks of illusion. In a world with actual *magical* illusions...well, it's an over-rated concept, is all I'm saying'.

Now, that doesn't mean you should throw out *verisimilitude*. But, verisimilitude doesn't equate to "realism," anyway. What it *does* require is an internal consistency within the context of your setting--something you should be aiming for anyway, because it makes your job easier.

It is entirely possible to maintain an internal consistency while embracing surreal elements in your game, if these elements are an accepted part of whole. The benefits of doing so in a low-prep sandbox (a "streamlined sandbox") are profound, because trying to simulate "reality" is usually both a futile effort, and *lots* of work!

Don't get me wrong. Your rulings *should* be consistent and fair--that's the kind of consistency that helps your game run smoothly! *Reality*, though...just don't expect your players to see the same reality as you do!

Players have different viewpoints. If you can find a way to play with expectations, or play one set of perceptions against another, your game will be that much richer, and your players will probably be, at the very least, intrigued.

Players have faulty memories. Details shift over time, sometimes even the big ones. You *can* let this inevitability derail things, but consider incorporating these oddities into your game, instead.

I've run games set within dreams to great effect, but you don't have to go that far. It's a world of illusions. The players can never be *absolutely* sure what is "real" within the world and what is not.

Furthermore, your game is a story. You can evoke something of a folktale feel by presenting different versions of a story from time to time--or at least presenting the concept that different versions *exist*. The very *nature* of a folktale is that it has been passed along from one generation to the next *through many people*. Each telling necessarily has a different perspective. There is room in your game to do the same.

The important thing is that you don't have to do anything *specific* to make things feel surreal. But when something surreal presents itself, don't shut it down; work it into your game!

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LESSON 19: TRUST YOUR PLAYERS TO SOLVE THEIR OWN PROBLEMS

We've all heard the phrase, "railroading," and the general consensus is that it is a "bad thing." But why is that, and how does a DM who's short on prep-time avoid it?

I'm not going to comment on whether or not "railroading" in general is good or bad; instead, I'm going to point out a few ways that relying on the practice will make your life as a DM (particularly a low-prep DM) more difficult.

First, players tend to push back when they feel they have no meaningful options. This means that the DM must put more and more work into keeping players' interest and excitement levels high. It also means that the players are likely to rebel which, in turn, means that the DM will have to work that much harder to keep the game "on track." This is death spiral that ends in burnout.

Second, "railroading" is, at its core, micromanagement. What often begins with the fear that the DM won't be able to deal with whatever unexpected complications the players come up with leads to over-planning to prevent them. Fear of the unexpected is a legitimate concern, but I promise you, *your time could be better spent!*

So what do you do to prevent it? Well, if you've been following along, I've already suggested a few things: Don't plot. Hook! If you remember that the plot is something that the PCs make out of the setting you provide, you shouldn't have any fear that the PCs will derail it--they couldn't if they tried!

Remember to listen to the players. If you do this effectively, it will be difficult to be truly surprised by anything the PCs come up with.

Furthermore (and, in my opinion, more importantly), remember that if the question is, "Can I do [something that's cool]," the answer is "Yes!"

So, what else can you do? Incorporate the unexpected! When something *does* throw you for a loop, don't view it as an obstacle; view it as a challenge, perhaps, but certainly an opportunity! This gives you a chance to do something fantastic! Roll with it!

Finally, *have no fear!* I don't care how smart you are, you're players (collectively) are going to be able to come up with more (and, often, better) solutions to any given predicament than you are. You shouldn't waste your time coming up with a myriad of solutions for them, at all! At most, create one *very* general solution to use in case they get stuck. Above all, trust them to come up with their own *and when they do, don't shut them down!*

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LESSON 20: NAME THE PARTY

The last few lessons have provided some general suggestions to build player investment in your campaign. In this lesson, I'll suggest something very specific--and also very easy. In fact, it might be the single *simplest* bit of campaign prep you can do!

If your players haven't already come up with a name for their party, have the world come up with one (or more than one) for them!

This gives the world a means of viewing the party; a name implies a reputation (which need not even be accurate!). A reputation gives the world a hook for relating to the party and that gives the players a means of viewing their characters within the context of the world. And also, of course, provides motivations for changing the world, which of course, lead to hooks, which lead to adventures...

All of that from a simple name!

LESSON 21: BE MYSTERIOUS

Now, let's talk a little bit about narration. Assuming you are the DM, your voice is the voice of the setting. You set the atmosphere and the tone of the game. The way you choose to present that setting to the players will necessarily determine how the players perceive the world.

I recommend that you do your utmost to be mysterious. Why? For a couple of reasons, actually.

At its heart, D&D has, from the very earliest of days, been about the exploration of the unknown, whether that unknown has been the geography of the world itself, the intrigue of schemes and politicking, or the wonder of raw fantasy. Why is this so potent a motivator? *Curiosity, of course!* Presenting the world in a shroud of mystery will pique the player's curiosity.

Another potent reason to be mysterious is a little less obvious. Remember way back when I said you should be listening to your players to take cues on where to focus your prepping efforts? Introducing an element of mystery into your narration can help you do that.

You might have an idea what the answer to a question, or the solution to a problem might be, but you refrain from laying it all out in the open, you've given yourself an opportunity to let the players come up with their own conclusions--which gives you an opportunity to let them be (mostly) right about their speculations, while also throwing in an unforeseen twist.

So what does it take to be mysterious? If you aren't already practicing it, it might take a shift in philosophy--and a corresponding shift in habits. You'll have to pay attention to your diction and actively work toward being subtle.

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Practice describing not what is, but how the PCs perceive it. Practice answering questions evasively--a "He doesn't *seem* to be lying to you;" instead of "He's telling the truth." Practice, also, switching between mysterious and expository modes--hopefully subtly enough that the players don't notice the difference. And, of course, you most definitely should practice the well-timed "evil DM grin."

Before you know it, what might have seemed awkward at first will be second nature. Just...be mysterious.

LESSON 22: MAKE IT PERSONAL

If you want to run a game with little prep, you want your NPCs to be memorable. Not only are the players more likely to be engaged in a world with memorable NPCs, but you'll find that having forgettable NPCs means lots of wasted time rehashing details about NPCs in game. Ultimately, the players' tendency to forget the NPCs might make them harder for *you* to remember--which, of course, translates to more prep time when using them.

Of course, there are all kinds of tricks to giving your NPCs personality, but nothing will make them more memorable than pure emotion. For now, I want to talk about just two NPC types: villains and friends.

Villains are villainous. Of course, they do awful things to the NPCs in your world. But if you *really* want to make your villains memorable, make sure they do bad things *to the PCs*. It doesn't have to be anything major--at least, not at first--but it should be entirely malevolent, either entirely unprovoked, or disproportionately unwarranted. Get the PCs to *hate* your villains and they *will not forget them!*

Okay, so that's easy, but what about *friends*?

Well, that's easy, too. All kinds of allies might provide services or help the PCs in exchange for something, but consider having some NPCs do good things for the PCs with no strings attached. Your PCs will probably react to this in one of two ways: they'll either *like* the NPC, or they'll be suspicious of the NPC.

Either is good for the game, because, assuming the NPC continues to do good things for the party, either the fondness will grow, or the suspicion will. This leaves your options open for a betrayal down the road, or continued friendship, or even a sacrifice on behalf of the party (which could be very interesting if the party was suspicious of the NPC!).

No matter what, that NPC will be hard to forget.

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LESSON 23: CAMPAIGNS MEAN CHANGE

From the very beginning, I've written these lessons with the assumption that the goal is a long-running campaign. Why? One-shot games are plenty of fun, but they're more work in the long-run. Really. See, you have to recreate the context every-time you start up a new story and if you switch systems, your entire group will have to relearn or refresh your memories on a new set of rules. Every time.

On the other hand, a long-running game will keep the same rules throughout (usually!) and, just as importantly, provides its own context.

So, that means your goal is not to change things up, right?

No!

Running a campaign means *growing* characters, the adventuring party, the campaign setting, even the very gaming-group over an extended period of time. Where one-shots are isolated depictions of a game at specific points in time, a campaign provides the entire experience of growth from one point to another, and all of the points in between! A campaign isn't so much about *being* heroes, but, rather, *becoming* heroes.

But how do you apply this concept to running a game without prep?

Remember, you might provide the hooks, but the players provide the plot. This means that your players should be driving the narrative and that you will be playing a reactionary role. This, in turn, means lots of improvising on your part.

The following framework will help: Every scene that the PCs put themselves into, from the first introduction to the final denouement, like the story, itself, has a beginning, an end, and a period of transition in the middle.

You just need to figure out what they are, and, more importantly, how they flow from and lead to other such scenes.

Ask yourself, "What does this scenario begin in the context of the game?"

Is it the start of an adventure? The beginning of a rivalry? A friendship? A war? Whatever it is, if you've just created a hook, remember to write it down and save it for later!

Ask yourself, "How does this scenario change things?"

Does it throw a complication in the PCs' plans? Is it downtime used for training? Have past mistakes finally caught up with the PCs? Again, write any hooks down and file them away.

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Finally, ask yourself, "What does this scenario end?"

Is it simply the end of the PCs' non-adventuring careers? The end of a dynasty? The end of the universe?

Asking what begins or what changes in scenario has obvious implications for the development of the game. In contrast, asking what has come to an end[/i] may seem a little irrelevant, but it's actually very important. It provides you an opportunity to examine how different elements of the game are being resolved--and answering this question can help you provide a sense of accomplishment and evolution for the players, all with minimal effort on your part.

Keep those questions in mind and much of your improvisational work will already be done for you.

LESSON 24: MONSTERS MAY WANDER, BUT ENCOUNTERS AREN'T RANDOM

Building a world can be done in between sessions, but that's a lot more work than you need to put into it (though, if you *like* world-building and have the time, by all means, have at it!). It is entirely possible to create most of the world as you play.

Obviously, one way to do this is to use [random generators](#) to fill in the gaps as needed. You can also just make stuff up as you go along (and encourage your players to do so, as well).

The thing is, that kind of world-building can be very haphazard and lacking in depth. But it doesn't have to be. In the case of randomly generated results, some oddities could emerge. That's a good thing! If you take a moment to consider how an unusual result fits into the world, what was an unrealistic anomaly becomes an exception that establishes the norm. Everything has its place in the world, even if you just made it up on the fly. Finding that place adds a wealth of depth to the world you are building.

If you remember that everything is an NPC, consider that *all* NPCs have a purpose--a motive, or a reason for being. Every time you introduce something new to the campaign, think, *why is this what and how it is?*

Once you've got that, you just need to tie it all in. And you can do it in two ways that drive your game forward:

Everything has a hook attached. Figure out what it is, write it down, and put it in the box for further use! Not only will this potentially tie the newly created element to the campaign's future, it provides another course for the players to follow.

You can also tie your newly created element into the previously established campaign by pulling an old hook from the box and weaving the two together. This helps to reinforce the history of the campaign (as it directly relates to the characters) and, of course, also gives them an opportunity for action (or consequences for inaction).

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All of a sudden, that simple roll on a random chart or that off-the-cuff introduction of some minor detail has become a significant factor in the PCs' lives and that world you've been building a campaign around is just a little bit more layered and interesting.

LESSON 25: GET THE DICE TO DO THE WORK

Now, I don't mean by using randomized charts (although, you certainly can get good use out of them).

I'm talking about a philosophical shift that could completely change your entire game. The general idea that I'm going to present here is one that I feel is fairly innovative, but it is certainly not my own innovation. Rather, what I'm going to present here is but a generalized distillation of rules that have popped up (in one form or another) in various different role-playing games in recent years.

The basic idea is to use the dice (or whatever mechanic is used) not (only) to determine a binary success or failure of an action, but also to drive the game forward by giving the players something to work with when they don't succeed.

In games where this kind of thing isn't already baked in, all you have to change is the way you see (and describe) things. Instead of looking at that binary action mechanic as a success or failure generator, consider that the character is attempting to control a situation in some way and that a good roll probably means that the character demonstrates or maintains such control. A poor roll means that the character doesn't. Now that *could* mean outright failure, but it also might mean some unforeseen complication has arisen.

And with that simple shift in outlook, you've opened up a world of possibilities in play. For one thing, it will help to solve a problem that many groups have with attaching dice rolls to social or puzzle-solving situations--that is, the breaking of immersion that happens when the dice don't reflect what was actually said at the table--or are used in substitution.

When you've divorced the pass/fail mechanic from the die roll, you open up room for the players' details and descriptions of characters' actions (and no, this does not mean *acting*) to determine success or failure. The die, then, becomes a tool for adding depth and excitement to the campaign through complications.

This is all good for any style of game, but it is especially good for a prep-light game. Why? Because of all of the *opportunities* that it presents!

It presents you the opportunities to spring hooks on the players and to create them! In so doing, it offers the players the opportunities to create plot. By doing these things, you all are afforded the opportunities to build the setting, which presents the opportunity of building immersion, which, of course, can be utilized to build interest in the campaign.

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And all of this is being done *in play*, not in preparation! Just about the only thing you might want to prepare ahead of time would be a list of common complications you can draw inspiration from.

But, other than that, you're good if you just get those dice working for you.