1 Getting Started

old tight, everyone. I think they're coming through." Steel rasped on leather as the big sword came off Amiri's back.

"Maybe they'll be friends!" Lini offered cheerily. Beside her, the big cat growled deep in his throat.

"I don't think so, little one," Sajan said. Beyond the portal, glowing eyes were opening. Too many eyes.

"Oh. Okay then." The gnome drew a thumb across her sickle, blood beading on its edge. "The ground looks a little dry here anyway."

From the shadows of the doorway, a taloned arm stretched forth.

Duties of a GM

While everyone at the table plays the game, the Game Master creates the world, breathing life into it in front of a small audience enraptured by his story. The Game Master works the hardest of everyone, spending night upon night before each game session carefully weaving the strands of fate and plotting the course of the adventurers' lives, working in twists, building encounters and monsters, and pouring blood, sweat, and tears into his creation. To use a common analogy, roleplaying games are like movies where the actors get to improvise and alter the script as they go, working off prompts from the Game Master. Extending this comparison, if the players are the actors, then the Game Master is the director—and often the screenwriter, even when basing the story on a published adventure. While this is a generic comparison, it illustrates some of the multiple roles the Game Master fills. The position can also be broken down into a number of other duties and responsibilities as follows.

Storyteller: Weaving plots involving the player characters and any number of nonplayer characters, leading dialogue, and unfurling a vast tapestry of ideas, stories, and adventure, the Game Master is a storyteller first and foremost. While the game is a collaborative narrative told from all sides of the table, the Game Master paves and maintains the road along which the adventurers walk.

Entertainer: Despite the best-laid plans and most intricate plots, if the game isn't fun and engaging, it isn't worth the effort. It's the Game Master's job to do whatever's necessary to keep the players' energy and interest up, immersing the group in the story through the use of strange voices, animated gestures, and generally making a fool of himself in the most classic sense. In order to fulfill the role of every individual the player characters encounter, the Game Master needs to be impressionist, comedian, and thespian all in one. In the role of the entertainer, the Game Master is the steward of every player's experience, keeping everyone at the table involved and the story moving along at the proper pace.

Moderator: While important in any game, the role of moderator becomes even more important in games with new players unfamiliar with the rules, or situations where the Game Master might be running a game for strangers, such as "organized play" sessions at gaming stores and conventions. Many players enjoy the tactical aspects of the game and make the most of the rules in and outside of combat. The Game Master should know what each character is capable of, as well as the abilities of the nonplayer characters and monsters, and should be prepared to pass judgment on any contradictory or disputed interpretations of the rules. And while it's important for the Game Master to be fair and hear out players' opinions and arguments, a good Game Master has the confidence and resolve to hold firm once he's made a decision.

Creator: Not only does the Game Master bring stories to the table, but many times he is also the creator of entire worlds. More often than not, he spends more time preparing for the session than the session actually takes to play. When not using a published setting or adventure, the Game Master must take the time outside of the game to create the plot, build enemies, construct encounters, develop magic items and spells, design monsters, and flesh out the world of adventure the players will soon inhabit.

Instructor: Not everyone is going to show up to the table with an equal—or even sufficient—understanding of the rules. Some of these players will be young, the new generation of gamers eager to enter into the ranks, and others will be friends you've encouraged to learn the joys of roleplaying games; some may even be fresh recruits at conventions or game stores. Everyone has a different aptitude for the admittedly complex rules of roleplaying games, and many people are intimidated by them. Part of a Game Master's role is to guide players in learning the game—after all, the majority of Game Masters playing today learned from another Game Master who was patient with them.

Player: Despite a pervasive myth, roleplaying games are not about pitting the Game Master against the players. They are not competitions, and the Game Master does not lose when the players succeed—rather, if the players leave the table feeling tested but triumphant, then the Game Master has achieved the best possible result. Though one person guides the game, everyone is a player in some sense. Game Masters must be as convincing with the nonplayer characters they control as the players are with their own characters, if not more so.

In addition to these roles, the Game Master might also fill a handful of others. Many groups maintain a set of house rules for their games, and the Game Master has the final say on particular interpretations and arbitrations of rules (though everyone in the group should be aware of any house rules beforehand). The Game Master may also act as host for the game. At the least, the host provides an ample place to play. While some extraordinary Game Masters might provide all materials, including books, character sheets, pencils, dice, miniatures, and a battlemat, groups should decide upon those details themselves. As the host for a game, it is important to provide a surface large enough to play upon, a place for everyone to sit, reasonable facilities, and the desire to get a good game going. Whether played at a Victorian dining table lit with candelabras, on the floor of a spartan apartment, in the library during recess,

or in the back of a van on the way to a family camping trip, roleplaying games can be tailored to most any situation, as long as there's excitement and a desire to play.

A GAME MASTER'S GLOSSARY

Listed below are a few terms with which all new Game Masters should be familiar. These terms are mentioned throughout the *Pathfinder RPG Core Rulebook* and, beyond those presented in the Common Terms section (page 11 of the *Core Rulebook*), are among the most important in the Game Master's lexicon.

Adventure: An adventure is a self-contained storyline the PCs experience. An adventure is composed of a series of encounters furthering the storyline.

Campaign: A collection of stories weaving into an overreaching narrative. It may be a string of published adventures, a chain of homebrewed material, or an Adventure Path designed to be played as a series. A campaign may or may not have a definitive or predefined end point.

Campaign Arc: A sequence of adventures that mesh well with each other, usually part of a larger campaign. Game Masters often run these shorter arcs to create a story that's more concise than a full campaign but longer than a single adventure.

Encounter: An encounter is a short scene in which the PCs are actively doing something. Examples of encounters include a combat with a monster, a social interaction significant to the adventure's plot, an attempt to disarm a trap, or the discovery of a mystery or clue requiring further investigation.

Metagaming: This is when characters act on information that they don't have access to, but which their players know from the real world. Metagaming comes into play when players fail to maintain a divide between in-character knowledge and out-of-character knowledge. That could include anything from uncannily accurate in-character predictions from a player who's already read the adventure, players recognizing monsters when their characters wouldn't, low-Intelligence characters accessing well-educated players' knowledge and talents, etc.

Session: A session is a single bout of gaming. Not every session ties up an adventure; many adventures require multiple sessions to complete. The duration of sessions varies from group to group, from a few hours to a weekend.

TONE AND MATURITY

Players come to games to feel larger than life, and each brings a character that has aspirations, desires, abilities, and unique ways of looking at the world. The Game Master's job is to help guide the story and involve each character in a way that makes her actions feel meaningful. This means listening to the players while simultaneously keeping your own preferences in mind. No two gaming groups are the same, so groups that discuss their preferences for styles of play, tone, and group dynamics are more likely to enjoy long-running, trouble-free games.

STYLE OF PLAY

Finding the right fit with a group depends on a shared preference of styles of play and the willingness to compromise. Does your group prefer to focus more on combat or roleplaying? The former style moves quickly through the story and centers primarily on fun tactical situations. If it's the latter, games should highlight character development and storyline, and it wouldn't be unusual to have an entire session pass without combat. Most groups fit somewhere in the wide middle of this spectrum, but knowing what your players enjoy most is crucial to keeping everyone entertained.

TONE AND SETTING

Once your players decide what style of game they're looking for, it's time to consider tone and setting. A group that's more interested in lighthearted silliness will disappoint a Game Master wanting to run a creepy horror campaign. Setting and tone determine whether you're running a complex, gritty political game in which the PCs unravel conspiracies or a high-magic and high-action fantasy epic involving bizarre monsters and divine mandates. Setting encompasses the central themes and tropes of your world, and tone is the feel, whether that's gritty realism or fairy-tale derring-do. The desired magic level is also worth discussing early on, as some players like readily available magic, while others prefer it to be exclusive and rare, only finding a handful of magic items throughout their entire career. A short meeting before launching the campaign allows you to tailor the experience for your players, and most players appreciate the effort to satisfy everyone's tastes.

GROUP STYLES

In addition to focusing on the game-specific themes and styles, consider the group of players sitting around the table. Are they looking for a casual "beer and pretzels" game, or are they committed roleplayers looking for a deeply immersive campaign? Have you been playing with the same group for years? Is everyone at the table a complete stranger in a session you're running at a convention or a game store? Each of these different group styles requires a different performance from the Game Master. Casual groups require less focus and can often be more forgiving of mistakes, glossing over problematic situations in favor of hanging out and enjoying a shared hobby. Committed roleplayers can demand significantly more focus and attention, as each player brings a complex and interesting character in need of development within the game. Some Game Masters find convention play or hobby store play difficult because they lack a point of reference for the newly formed group. In these cases, a bit of small talk before the game begins often offers cues as to players' interests. Use time before play begins to ask a few focused questions about not only the players, but also their characters.

RETAINING INTEREST

Listening to your players is important not only when looking to start a new campaign but also during the course of the story. From your seat at the game table, you can tell who's engaged and who's not. The goal should always be to figure out what's going to grab the bored, distracted, or annoyed players and get them back in the game (without sacrificing the fun of the others, of course). If during the last game session a particular player seemed bored when it wasn't her turn at combat, make a point to chat with her about the reasons why. Maybe she doesn't feel like her character is performing well or getting enough of the spotlight outside of combat. It often only takes a slight tweak or a single encounter tailored to her skill set to make a disenfranchised player feel like a valuable part of the group.

Always be open to switching things up. Players inevitably throw wrenches into the Game Master's plans, despite how obvious a lead seems or how convincing a hook sounds. Don't be afraid to play off their creativity the same way they do with yours. If you have a plot the characters are trying to unravel, and the solutions they come up with make more sense than your prepared ones, try ignoring the original resolution from your notebook or a published adventure and turning the story in a new direction—the players never need know about the original version, and you can take full credit for their enjoyment. Similarly, if the players keep going off track and getting involved in events outside of your planned story, that might be a sign that your players are interested in a different sort of game than you originally crafted. And even if you have great empathy with your gaming group and give them everything they want, remember that tastes can change over time. Remember what your players enjoyed and try to perform in that way again, but

realize your players likely have varied palates and can enjoy a wide range of game types.

SENSITIVE TOPICS

Mature themes like cannibalism, drug use, gory violence, profanity, prostitution, and various forms of sexuality sometimes come up in the game, and not every group deals with them in the same way. Knowing the group of people you're playing with and accurately gauging their comfort zone is crucial to keeping a session enjoyable. If you anticipate anyone at your table being uncomfortable with certain mature themes, talk to your players beforehand. Determine their preferred treatment of the issues, and respect their preferences when deciding how heavily you want to play up those themes. If your group openly discusses sexuality, fondly recalls the gruesome scenes from a favorite horror film, or makes frequent off-color jokes, then it's probably fine including those themes in your campaign (though not necessarily—the player with the filthiest mouth or biggest slasher-movie collection might still be sensitive to certain issues). Instead of deciding everything ahead of time, you can also seed given elements into your adventure bit by bit to determine players' comfort level. For example, if you have a lecherous nonplayer character attempting to seduce a player character, drop a few hints, subtle at first, and see if the character takes the bait. Watching the player's reaction indicates their comfort level with the topic and lets you know how close to the boundary you can play. And of course, there's a difference between dropping hints and innuendos and graphically describing the dwarven lovers' sweaty embrace. A little mature content goes a long way.

Because combat is a core element of the game, violence happens. But just as children's TV shows can provide action without gore, so too is there a spectrum in roleplaying. Violence, or rather how graphically violence is portrayed, is one element in determining how appropriate movies and video games are for different ages and sensibilities, and a similar determination can be made for different styles of roleplaying. Depending on the context, you can

describe the same combat with a simple "you hit him with your sword," or create a more visceral description of the same action: "Your blade slashes across his stomach; his skin parts like thin lips and vomits his entrails onto the floor."

Adult themes can be an excellent way to get the characters to react to a villain or event. A foul villain who uses men and women as sexual playthings before strangling them in the carnal act can produce fear, anger, and a thirst for vengeance in even the most peaceful of characters. The level of comfort regarding violence can also change depending on the victim. While it may be perfectly acceptable for some groups to murder a bugbear villain, murdering a child—even for the greater good— is probably pushing the boundaries too far. In fact, involving children, animals, or other innocents at all can be a dangerous game—you might think that a villain who abuses animals is the ultimate example of depravity (and hence a great antagonist), but your players might not be prepared to talk about such things, even in the context of fighting against them. It's also important that, if you enjoy a game involving a lot of questionable morality and "lesser of two evils" plots, your party has similar inclinations. Allying with an obvious evil character in pursuit of mutual goals might feel like gritty realism to you, but others might see it as in poor taste, or completely against their characters' alignments. If you design an encounter that strains your paladin's commitment to his beliefs, make sure the player enjoys that sort of thing. In all situations, be mindful of the group's sensitivity and design your games accordingly.

If you feel certain styles or topics might turn off your players but still want to include them, consider testing the waters with your group by running that style of game as a one-shot and not something destructive to your regular campaign. When playing with strangers, young people, or with other potentially sensitive players, or when playing in a public place, it's best to keep any adult content out of your games. While society tolerates violence to some extent, other adult topics better suit more private, mature groups. Remember, some players might not want to see gritty real-world topics in their lighthearted weekly game. Above all, know your players—the better you know the preferences of the group you play with, the more enjoyable the game will be for everyone involved.
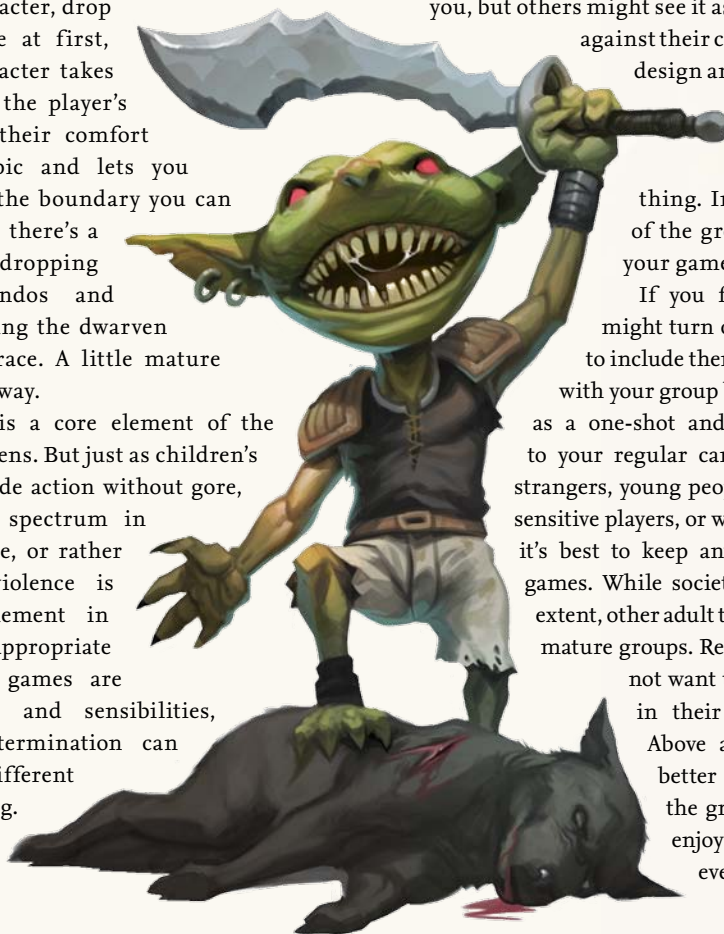
The GM as Host

The GM's primary job is to run the game, but there's more to that task than just rolling dice and orchestrating in-game challenges. As the group member most responsible for the game's success, the GM is also the de facto host for each session, in charge of handling or delegating the logistics behind the fun.

The social side of a session is at least as important as the quality of the game itself. Adult gamers might rarely get time to socialize, given the pressures of jobs, families, and homes, so game night becomes a welcome chance to spend time with friends, no different than a night of board games, movies, or poker. And like any party, there's work to be done both before and after.

Some of the following issues can be delegated to a willing player, but ultimately, all of them are the GM's responsibility.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

Before a game ever begins it's up to the GM to decide how many players to invite to play. While there is no firm minimum or maximum limit to how many players a game can accommodate, this choice is largely a matter of how many players the GM expects he can comfortably manage and what limitations a game's expected play space present. Although most published adventures present challenges for parties with four characters, any encounter can easily be customized to suit the needs of any size group.

Small Groups

Groups of two or three can allow for more intense roleplaying, but they require you to carefully craft your challenges to be appropriate for fewer players. You'll also need to compensate for any major abilities that may be missing from the party.

A simple way to accomplish the latter is to eliminate the need for those abilities. For example, if the party lacks a rogue, you may wish to remove traps and locks from the party's path. Another method is to introduce an NPC who has the needed abilities—just so long as that NPC doesn't steal the spotlight. Alternatively, you can give the characters magic items that perform the necessary function, such as healing potions and wands for the party without a healer. Last but not least, if the players are experienced enough to handle it, you might enjoy letting each player play two characters to round out the group.

Large Groups

Groups of more than six players offer more character options, but they also tend to be louder and harder to manage. The more characters there are, the more complex combat becomes and the longer each person has to wait for his turn, making it easier for distractions and side conversations to get out of hand or for naturally shy players to be overlooked. It's generally best not to take on more than six players at a time unless you're experienced enough to make combat move along smartly without looking up a lot of rules. Game aids like the *GameMastery Combat Pad* also make it easier to keep track of things like initiative with a large group.

FINDING PLAYERS

Once you know how many players you'd like to have, it's time to organize a group. Start by talking to friends and family members you'd like to include. Mixing ages is fine so long as there are enough common interests.

If there's still room at your game table, you can consider people you don't yet know or know only tangentially. Coworkers and friends of friends are usually the first to be included in this set, especially if your players have sung the praises of your game to other people.

Outside of such personal contacts, there are a number of other ways to find players. Try contacting a local game store about putting up a flier with your contact information, or see if there's a gaming club at your school or the local college. The Internet offers instant access to thousands of gamers via free classified ads or message boards, and there are several websites specifically devoted to helping local gamers connect, such as the Gamer Connection forum on **paizo.com**. (Of course, safety always comes first—you should meet strangers in public places with plenty of people around and should never give out more personal information than an email address until you trust someone.)

Last but not least, when in doubt, go where the gamers are. Attend a local game convention, science fiction movie opening, or other event that might be of interest to gamers. Talk to people there, and if you find a gamer who lives nearby, mention that you're looking for players and provide contact information.

If you don't want to do the recruiting yourself, you can allow one or more players to handle it, but it's a good idea to ask that they run any potential new players past you—or even the whole group—for approval before inviting them to a session.

A word of warning: As with any party, it's important to make sure that everyone you invite to your game gets along with the rest. While you can't predict every conflict, you can do your best to avoid obvious problems—this might be a player whose style doesn't match the rest of the group (see Problem Players in Chapter Three), or a player with a more obvious conflict, such as a current player's ex-spouse. A lot of gaming groups fall apart because of interplayer

conflict. As a result, when taking a chance on a new player, it's generally best to issue a limited invitation, such as for a single adventure, and then decide from there. Don't let a party member who's friends with a potential player—or worse, the potential player himself—pressure you into inviting him back if he isn't right for your game.

WHERE TO PLAY

The optimum gaming space has the following features.

- A low-traffic room, where the game won't be disturbed by nonplayers or noise from other areas.
- A comfortable place for everyone to sit, with a good view of the gaming surface, plus space for rolling dice and writing notes.
- A large, flat playing surface with room for a battlemat and miniatures.
- Extra space for rulebooks, maps, notes, and other essentials.
- Bookshelves to hold reference materials.
- Easy access to snacks, beverages, and a bathroom.

The Building

It's often most convenient for you as GM to play in your own house, since all your gaming stuff is already there. Players usually have fewer books and tend to depend on GM copies for reference during games. If you and your players use a great many books and supplements, it's hard to lug them all to someone else's house—and if you take only a few, you'll almost certainly forget one that someone wants. Yet setting up shop at whichever member's house is best suited for it works as well, especially if there's room to store gaming materials between games.

Some groups successfully rotate houses, and there's a lot of merit in such an arrangement—no one is always stuck with cleaning up the inevitable post-game mess, and the disruption to any single household's routine is minimal. Furthermore, you can delegate some of the hosting duties to the player who lives there—particularly the snacks, beverages, and physical comforts. The key to making such an arrangement work is to either ensure that all the households have ready access to the needed materials, or else delegate players to bring them each time.

Some groups play in the local game shop, either out in the open or in a back room. If the shop caters to roleplayers, the owners might consider it good business to have a regular campaign running where customers can see it. This arrangement requires some patience on the part of everyone at the table, since the party will likely be expected to greet watchers pleasantly and answer their questions during the game. It also requires keeping the game family-friendly, as parents with children may be watching. If you've been looking for more players, a public game can be a great recruiting tool. If your game is closed, the back room of the game store may be a better bet.

In nice weather, playing outside in a barn or gazebo, or even at a picnic table or on the grass can be fun too—just be sure to weight down character sheets and notes so you don't have to chase them when the wind picks up.

The Room

The traditional gaming space is a table big enough to seat all the players and the GM, but that's not strictly necessary. The dinner table is often the surface of choice because it provides enough space for a battlemat and minis, plus plenty of seating. However, the dining room tends to be a central, high-traffic space in a house, and it usually isn't where a game library is kept. A small room where everyone can easily see and hear everyone else, with a bit of floor space for a map and minis, can work just as well. If you share your abode with other people, make sure that your presence won't disturb the rest of the household and that its regular activities won't disturb you.

WHEN TO PLAY

Sometimes games aren't hard to schedule. If you and your players all live near each other in college dorms, you might have no trouble getting a game together every night. But if you or your players have other responsibilities, scheduling can become a major headache.

One of the easiest ways is to have a regular schedule. Some campaigns are played weekly, others biweekly, and still others monthly. More frequent games are rare and usually unsustainable, as are games with more than a month between them, since players tend to forget what's going on after a while. A weekly game is optimal for many people since it's easy to remember. Weekends tend to be better for working people, but constant weekend availability is probably impossible for any one person. Weekdays after school may work for parents and students, but choosing a day can be tricky, since sports and club meetings may interfere for long periods.

If you do decide to go for biweekly or monthly games, you may want to make the sessions longer. Try scheduling an entire day for a monthly game—or even a weekend, if your household is up to overnight guests. For a game with low meeting frequency, be sure to remind everyone when the next session is coming up. You'll also need to prepare a good recap of what happened in the previous adventure so the players know where the characters were when you left off.

If you opt for an irregular schedule, you'll need to schedule every session, which can be more difficult, as players don't have the option of always leaving certain days open. Scheduling an irregular game can happen at the end of each session or via group emails and phone calls.

Rules of the House

Once you have a place to play and a date for your first session, it's time to decide what "house rules" are needed for your campaign. While the term normally refers to modifications to the mechanics of the game, house rules can also be the literal rules of the house, covering the basic courtesies and dynamics of the game table. Some typical house rules are discussed below, but this list is by no means exhaustive. Discuss the issues and the options for handling them with your players before play begins, and make sure everyone agrees to abide by the final decision. If you see a need for a new house rule as play proceeds, talk to your players outside of the game, then implement the new rule at the next session, reminding the group about it before play begins.

PLAYER ABSENCE

What happens to a character when its player is absent from a session? Below are some of the most common solutions.

Another player plays the character. This is a simple solution, but be warned that the other player may be unskilled with the class or simply unable to think of appropriate actions. If the character dies, the absent player is inevitably distressed—and legitimately so. Even if the character survives, the other player will almost certainly play it differently, which may result in unfortunate consequences for the character or the party. This arrangement has the best chance of working when each player designates a specific person to play her character, with no holds barred.

The GM plays the character as an NPC. This solution presents some of the same problems as giving the character to another player. As GM, you have enough to handle—you don't need the additional hassle of trying to run a PC in the game. Though you may be more cautious with the character than another player and are less likely to get the PC killed (since you know what challenges she will face), you won't be able to give as much attention as the regular player would, and any negative consequences are likely to bring resentment from the player.

The character leaves the group to do something behind the scenes. This solution is usually workable, though the party may keenly feel the lack of that character's skills during the session. Sometimes you might have to play the character for a bit to finish a combat, but a short-term withdrawal usually works. The main problem with this technique is that you must provide a logical in-game exit and re-entrance opportunity, and tie those in with the storyline.

The character disappears from the group, reappears when the player does, and no notice is taken of the event. This solution is quite simple, but it requires a degree of maturity to pull off. The character was there, then simply is not. After a time, she's there again. The GM does not need to find something else for her to do or stage an exit and re-entrance. When she reappears, the character may know what happened in her absence, or may not, depending on the group's preference.

CALLING OFF A SESSION

After how many bail-outs do you call off the game for the night? The answer to this question may depend on the size of your group. Obviously, if you have only one or two players, then a single absence makes play infeasible. With a larger group, you have more flexibility. Some GMs make it a rule to run for no fewer than two or three players. Others require a larger percentage of the party.

One way to deal with a session that only half the players can attend is to split the party and allow those present to pursue a side adventure for an evening. In this case, it pays to keep a small-group adventure available.

If absences become a chronic problem, some GMs may choose to invite slightly more players into a campaign than they need, with the assumption that one or two will always have scheduling conflicts. While it can be fun to have a rotating cast, this method can also require both the players and the GM to play fast and loose with continuity and bookkeeping... and requires the GM to be comfortable running a big group if everyone shows up.

FOOD AT THE GAME TABLE

While it's possible to insist that players not eat or drink at the game table, it's hard to enforce such a rule. Roleplaying sessions take a long time, and people get hungry and thirsty. You can set up snacks on a separate table or in a different room, but they're likely to find their way to the game table anyway.

If you decide to allow food at the table, you'll have to prepare for the inevitable messes. Keep towels at the table to quickly clean up spilled beverages, and encourage the use of plastic page protectors for character sheets. It's a good idea to keep reference books off the table for the same reason.

Also note that food and beverages aren't free. If you rotate locations, you can agree that snacks are the responsibility of the house where the game occurs, ask that everyone bring a snack or beverage to share, or simply pass the hat at each session for contributions to the snack fund.

CHILDREN AND PETS

If the house where you play has very young children, it's best to keep them out of the game room altogether. If this isn't possible, then everyone must be sure to keep dice and minis off the floor, as such objects may constitute choking hazards.

Pets can likewise cause problems at the game table. If anyone is allergic to animal fur, courtesy demands that

the animals be kept out of the room. This solution also prevents a random doggy tail swipe from clearing the battlemat, or a kitty from turning the minis into cat toys. Still, if everyone enjoys the company of the animals, it may be fine to allow their presence.

OTHER ACTIVITIES AT THE GAME TABLE

Despite your best efforts, you won't always be able to keep all your players engaged with the action. Large combats may drag, and if you have a lot of people at the table, it may take quite a while for a player's next turn to come up. Furthermore, the party may split, requiring you to divide your attention between groups.

In such situations, players may want to fill the time between turns with other activities. Someone might bring a book, a knitting project, or some figures to paint. Others might spend the time creating new characters. Finally, some players might sit and chat about out-of-game topics. As long as the alternate activities aren't distracting either the player involved or the other players from the game, it's probably fine to allow them. If they start distracting the player involved to the point where he can't follow what's happening in-game, however, the group may want to ban those activities, or simply ask him to find another.

If the alternate activities are disturbing the other players, you can ask that those involved move to another area, away from the table. Just moving over to the living room couch may suffice—those involved can still hear the action, but the other players won't see what they're doing. Alternatively, those not involved with the action could make the popcorn, refill people's beverages, and pick up the snack debris. Doing so can provide them with an opportunity to chat in another room for a while.

Out-of-Character Talking

Roleplaying requires lots of in-character conversation, but plenty of out-of-character chatter happens at the game table as well. It's not usually difficult to separate them when the table talk is about the science homework or the plumber's impending visit. But when the players are talking about what to do with the orc prisoner, it can be tough for the GM to determine whether they're actually making threats or just theorizing, which can lead to problems if the NPCs show their hands by reacting to something a player didn't intend to say in character.

One option is to simply require a player to stand up or make a specific hand gesture when talking out of character. Alternatively, you could have everyone use an accent when speaking in character. As long as everyone understands the convention, it should take the group only a few sessions to become used to it.

INTERPLAYER CONFLICT

Though the members of adventuring parties usually have common goals, they don't always get along. Some party disputes arise from in-character conflicts, such as alignment or history. Others happen because the players behind the characters are angry at one another.

Most party bickering isn't harmful, and some may even be entertaining. However, if party members draw steel against one another, it's probably time to intervene. A house rule that mandates an out-of-game discussion when such a situation occurs is highly recommended, as are rules discouraging intraparty duels and theft and encouraging players to work as a team rather than splitting off into groups, which results in less game time for everyone.

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Preparing to Run a Game

Great Game Masters make running a game look easy, weaving memorable characters, breathless action, and vivid descriptions into unforgettable tapestries of fantasy. Players in a well-run game have a sense of danger (and a sense of accomplishment in overcoming it), plus a general feeling of spontaneity as events unfold and the characters rise to meet new challenges.

Such magical experiences require plenty of preparation, even a sense of spontaneity—it's tough to seem spontaneous when you're shuffling though notes.

THINGS TO HAVE AT THE TABLE

Supplies and materials on the list that follows keep the game from derailing as you fumble for what you need.

Rulebooks and Other Game Materials: You need copies of whatever rules are in use, plus a copy of any supplement or expansion that deals with player character abilities. If it's a book that's referenced frequently by players, it's often appropriate to ask players to provide their own copies.

Dice: An inadequate supply of dice can slow a game to a crawl. At minimum, make sure each player has a full set of the dice most commonly used in the game: d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, and d20.

Writing Materials: Everyone needs a pencil and some notepaper. In addition, it's a good idea to keep a supply of blank character sheets handy.

Miniatures: Many GMs use miniatures to keep track of the action. These work best on a scale map of the adventure scene, typically a gridded battlemat suitable for use with erasable markers (such as GameMastery Flip-Mats), though the right computer equipment can project or print maps to scale.

Props and Associated Supplies: Props and player handouts, such as sketches of important items, maps for player reference, and written notes, can speed play and help hold the players' interest.

SEVEN ESSENTIALS FOR GOOD PREPARATION

Exactly what kind of preparation is needed varies from game to game. If you follow this checklist, however, you'll be ready for just about anything.

Know the Characters and Players

Sit down with all the character sheets and look them over carefully. Consider what each character can do in the game—major powers, secondary powers, special abilities, and inherent traits. This helps you anticipate what your players might do in any given situation.

Pay special attention to powers that work automatically or passively—for example, an ability to detect impending danger or notice concealed doors. It falls to you to make sure such abilities work when and how they should.

Knowing your players can prove as important as knowing their characters. Many players develop favorite tricks and stunts with their characters' powers, or well-ingrained misconceptions about what their characters can or cannot do. Knowing these quirks can help you keep the players engaged and challenged and can deflect problems before the dice hit the table.

Know the Scene

Get familiar with the scene where the action will occur. If you're running a published adventure, read through it carefully. Not only should you know the answers to basic questions ("How high is the ceiling here?"), but you should also be able to convey sensory details.

Next, take a moment to get familiar with each adventure site's layout. Note the major features and where they lie in relation to each other. Pay special attention to entrances, exits, stairwells, and other features that the characters will use to move around.

Know the Story

Some games don't have much story—the characters simply endure whatever you decide to throw at them. But even such straightforward adventures will run a little better if you take time to consider how the adversaries came to be in the party's way, what they're doing when the party appears, and how they might react to intrusion.

Other games place the characters within an unfolding story. Before running such a game, stop to consider the story's beginning, middle, and end. Note the key events and turning points in the tale, and pay special attention to events and developments that turn on character decisions or actions. Consider how you will present those turning points so that you can create a seamless narrative that flows naturally from the party's actions.

Know the Adversaries

Think about the foes your characters must face and any other obstacles they must overcome. Consider how those adversaries will act toward the characters.

Creatures and NPCs can often react to characters when they're still some distance away, thanks to their hearing, sight, or other senses. How these foes respond depends on their nature, temperament, and intelligence, as well as why they're on the scene and what they're doing when the party arrives.

Animals and creatures with a similar level of intelligence are usually present simply because they live in the area or because someone else has brought them there; they often don't pay much heed to the characters unless they perceive them to be some kind of threat. Many animals would

rather flee than fight, but even a timid animal can become ferocious when cornered, and some are highly territorial and aggressive.

Any creature smarter than a common animal generally tries to assess the situation before acting. Very few simply sit in rooms or lairs waiting for the party to come and attack. What they do depends on the weaponry and powers they have available, and what they have at stake.

Creatures that have something to defend (property, livelihood, family, reputation, and so on) likely won't hesitate to confront the party in some fashion. That doesn't always mean an immediate attack. Consider how the creature thinks of intruders or visitors. Is it curious or prone to negotiation? Does it think of the group as a threat or an opportunity? Has it made plans for dealing with intruders? Also think about how well the creature knows its ground, what risks it's willing to take, and how quickly and accurately it can assess its situation.

Not all responses need to be tactical. The creature might just want to chat with the newcomers or might send someone else to do so. Alternatively, it might try to scare away intruders or perhaps misdirect them. A creature with nothing to gain probably won't fight at all if it can avoid doing so.

You should also think about what might make the creature surrender or flee. Few creatures fight to the death if there's an alternative available.

Know the Rules

You don't need encyclopedic knowledge of the Pathfinder RPG rules set to run a quality game. You do, however, need to be comfortable with those parts of the rules that come up frequently in play. This means the rules for determining initiative, how creatures attack and defend, and how to resolve noncombat challenges like skill checks (such as picking a lock or noticing bad guys sneaking up on the party's camp). It doesn't hurt to mark your rulebooks to help you find your way around—a few self-adhesive tabs can prove indispensable.

Also be on the lookout for any character ability that uses a complex, difficult, or unfamiliar game mechanic and take a moment to study it. Do likewise for any creatures, traps, or hazards the party might encounter.

If you can't quite figure out some aspect of the rules, and time permits, consult another Game Master, or the messageboards at **paizo.com**, which contain a wealth of helpful information and rules discussions. If all else fails, decide how you want the rule in question to work and use it that way—such decisions have a way of working out if you think them through ahead of time.

Don't Overdo It

Remember that you're preparing so that things proceed smoothly at the game table. Over-preparation can ruin

Published or Homegrown?

Published adventures can be a great investment. Reading through such a scenario can give you an idea of how an adventure is put together, what challenges are suitable for your group's power level, and what sorts of rewards are appropriate. The *Pathfinder RPG Core Rulebook* deals with these subjects, but there's nothing like seeing all the elements put together. More importantly, a close look at adventures someone else has thought through can give you new ideas for constructing your own. It's easy to fall into a rut, especially when you're running games regularly, and adventures like Paizo's Pathfinder Adventure Paths and Pathfinder Modules can help dig you out.

Similarly, there's a wealth of prepackaged campaign settings available, including Paizo's own Pathfinder Campaign Setting. Consider mining concepts from them for your own world, or adopting locations from them that inspire adventure concepts.

No matter how many published adventures or settings you own, it's up to you to decide whether you'll use them. If you merely lift an idea from them now and then, you're still getting your money's worth, but using them to a greater extent allows GMs to run sweeping, intricate campaigns with minimal preparation.

that. Instead, prepare just enough so that you can quickly deal with situations that you expect to arise, and so that you can handle the unexpected. Don't script your game so tightly that the players lose their sense of freedom or that your game's whole structure falls apart if your players fail (or refuse) to accomplish what you expect them to.

Likewise, don't create so many notes that you can't keep them organized. One page for each major encounter, event, or personality is generally plenty, and often less will do.

Lay a Few Alternate Plans

There's an adage in military circles: no plan survives contact with the enemy. Sometimes players head off in directions you didn't anticipate, defeat your primary villain with a few rolls, miss an obvious clue, or lose a key battle. You can take such developments in stride by considering a few contingencies that can set your plot back on track. Start by thinking about how things might go astray. Does some key individual drive your plot? Do the characters need to learn something before they can succeed? Is there a danger that, if overlooked, can defeat your party? Once you've identified the key stumbling blocks, think of plausible ways to repair the damage if the worst happens.

Of course, sometimes you still won't be able to prepare for player actions. When things go astray, it's generally

PATHFINDER
ROLEPLAYING GAME

Sharing the Load

Even though you're the GM, you don't have to do everything yourself. You can pass along any number of tasks to your players.

Bookkeeping: This covers all the little tasks necessary to keep your group organized. You might ask one player to be the recorder, keeping notes on what the group accomplishes in each game. The recorder can keep tallies of party loot and foes defeated, saving you effort when it's time to divide the spoils. You can also ask this player to note key pieces of information the PCs discover, names of important people they meet, and places they go. These notes can help your group get back up to speed when they return after a break.

Rules Knowledge: If you have a fair-minded player with a talent for explaining the rules, use her as a resource. When you expect to tackle an unfamiliar rule, discuss how it works with this player. When disputes about the rules arise during a game, get her opinion. It's also frequently helpful to team her up with rookie players as an advisor, keeping the game moving.

Round-Robin Campaigns: No one says you have to GM every session. Sometimes a team of GMs can rotate the responsibility of running the game, each GM taking up the game where the previous one left off each week, while the other GMs play. This requires significant coordination, and expert roleplaying (as some players already know the plotlines), but the chance to play in your own campaign and regularly experience different GM styles can be extremely entertaining and rewarding.

the most fun for everyone to play along, exploring the new story and using it to gently nudge the game back onto the original track. Sticking without exception to a prepared plot makes players feel powerless, and part of the fun of being a GM is being surprised by your players. Go with it.

ONE-SHOT GAMES

A one-shot game is a scenario intended to last for a single play session. These scenarios might be "standalone," with little or no connection to other campaigns you run, or merely a diversion for your regular characters to give you extra time to put together the next major challenge. Paizo's Pathfinder Society Scenarios are designed for just such situations, and can be downloaded from **paizo.com**. Keep in mind that the characters in these sessions can be the usual PCs, affiliates such as hirelings, or totally new characters intended only for a single game—one-shots are often perfect for unusual character ideas that might fail or grow stale in a longer game.

Characters

Unless you've got a very short scenario to run or a very long game session planned, create new characters ahead of time. In a time crunch, you might create them yourself and allow your players to pick from the bunch. In this case, you should make a few more than you'll need so that nobody feels stuck with the leftovers. If you decide to have players create their own characters, be clear about the power level, gear, and other game details you'll allow and reserve the right to review and edit characters to better fit the group. You might even want to meet up with players one-on-one or have them submit characters early for review.

Getting Started

Introduce the scenario in a way that engages the players. Don't give away any secrets, but let the players know why each of their characters is getting involved—having several "adventure hooks" allows you to pick which one would be most compelling for a given character. You can also always start the action with the party already committed to the adventure or facing a situation that leads in to the rest of the scenario, so as not to waste any playing time.

The concept of the macguffin often proves useful here. A macguffin is some element that drives your plot forward, but that you can ignore once it's served its purpose. Your macguffin might be a rumor, a mission or request from a friend, a cryptic message, a treasure map, or anything else that piques the group's interest without giving away too much.

Wrapping Up

Consider how the party's activities, successful or not, might end, and be ready to sum up when the last die stops rolling. Because your players might never play these characters again, you can plan unusual rewards or endings that would be awkward in a regular campaign. Of course, more than one adventure that began as a one-shot has stretched into a campaign when both players and GMs found the plots and characters too much fun to retire...

CAMPAIGNS

A campaign offers something more than a series of adventures. A campaign gives context and depth to a group's activities, making them part of a larger world. A properly constructed campaign also provides you with story elements, locations, personalities, and conflicts that serve as springboards for your creativity as you create adventures. Campaigns can be completely plotted out ahead of time, such as the 6-part *Pathfinder Adventure Path* series, which give GMs all the adventures and supplemental material they

need to run a complete campaign, or they can be crafted on the fly, with GMs stringing adventures together just a session or two in advance. A Campaign Sheet is included in the back of this book, which you can use to plan and record all of the relevant details of your campaigns.

ESSENTIALS OF GOOD CAMPAIGNS

Most advice in the section on preparing for a one-shot game applies to campaigns as well—only the scale is different. Below are a few elements to consider.

Setting and Scope

Your campaign world provides the backdrop for all your adventures. Take some time to consider the lay of the land and what it might be like to visit the place—Chapter 6 provides some specific ideas on creating a setting.

The sheer scope of your campaign world can also affect play. You can confine all your adventures to a single country or similar geographic area, or even to a single town or city. The kinds of adventures you can run in such a confined setting, however, will be different than what you can do with a whole continent. An epic, world-spanning campaign offers an endless variety of adventure sites, while a localized campaign offers a more intimate feel and a strong sense that the characters are part of the world.

Story

Your campaign need not have an overarching storyline, but having one (or more) continuing plots can help tie your adventures together into a continuous narrative, and inspire new ones.

Don't overdo this element. Your goal isn't to script your campaign, but rather to explain how and why things happen. Keep the story general, with an eye toward details your characters can notice and perhaps change through their actions. Choose something that can unfold slowly so that the story can move along even when your player characters aren't actively involved in it. Consider how the player characters might shape or redirect the story, but also establish what happens if they don't get involved.

Movers and Shakers

Decide who's who in your world. This includes not only the beings that hold the reins of power, but also everyone who's involved in driving the campaign forward. If you've laid out a story for your campaign, identify the entities behind the major threads. Ask yourself who's pulling the strings and who stands to gain and lose with each twist and turn.

Not every important character in your world need be terribly influential. Every locale with people has a few memorable characters, so sprinkle the neighborhood where your PCs live with a few of those. Some of these might become valuable assets to the characters, providing them with information, introductions to more influential people, or protection in times of need. Others might simply offer the occasional bit of comic relief.

Campaign Endings

Many campaigns run on indefinitely until the group breaks up due to changing lives and priorities. There's nothing wrong with that, so long as running the campaign—and playing in it—don't become chores. Still, it's pleasant when a campaign comes to a natural end that allows you and your players to leave with a sense of completion.

You might plan a campaign with an ending in mind—a fairly easy task if you've laid out a story. Or you might decide to end the campaign when player interest (or your own) starts to flag. In either case, consider what elements in the campaign have struck a chord with the group. Perhaps they've grown fond of a particular town or character. Perhaps they really despise some villain or have a burning desire to obtain a certain item. Craft your ending so things end on a high note, with main conflicts resolved and the loose ends tied up. It's often fun to create an epilogue that lays out each character's later career and retirement and looks ahead to the general state of your game world during the surviving characters' sunset years.

WINGING IT

Preparation is great, but sometimes you just want to play. Published adventures are perfect for this, but even those require a bit of reading ahead of time. If you want to truly wing it, with nothing more than a few notes and some dice, try flipping through some completed adventures for stat blocks you can use—at the very least, you're going to need to know things like hit points, AC, and saves—or tag some creatures in a monster book. Sketch out as much of the plot as you feel you need; it could be a whole adventure, or just the first scene. Consider throwing in a big decision requiring party deliberation whenever you need a minute to figure out the next encounter, and remember that a fun roleplaying encounter with an oddball NPC can provide extensive entertainment without any math involved. For more tips on emergency game prep, see pages 48–49. And when in doubt—roll initiative!
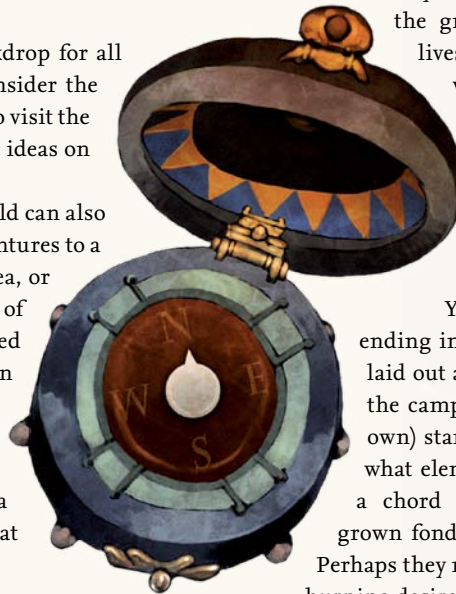
CREATING A CAMPAIGN GUIDE

In television series and similar ongoing media, there is the concept of the "story bible," a document setting forth the essential information about the characters, story, and setting of the series so that later writers can produce scripts with some amount of consistency. In a similar vein, Game Masters can create a campaign guide to help keep track of their creation and to supply players with an overview of an ongoing campaign. This way, the players have some idea what to expect and can create and play their characters to best fit into the overall setting. The most important function of a campaign guide is to make your players excited to delve into the setting and play the game! Consider the following when preparing a campaign guide.

SYSTEM

The default assumption is that your game will use the rules as presented in the *Pathfinder RPG Core Rulebook*. Many GMs customize the Core Rules to fit their preferences, play style, and players, and the campaign guide is the perfect place to set out these custom house rules so the players know what to expect and so customizations or exceptions remain consistent throughout the campaign. You'll also want to lay out character creation guidelines for the game and clarify what is expected or prohibited, so players know their choices going into the process of designing their characters.

For example, you might ban a particular sorcerer bloodline or other character option simply because it doesn't fit into the setting and does not exist there (at least so far as anybody knows). On the other hand, you can set up a rule that PCs cannot be assassins or choose evil as their alignment because you'd rather not deal with the complications those possibilities entail. That doesn't necessarily mean assassins and evil alignments don't exist in the setting; they're just not an option for the players.

SETTING

The meat of a campaign guide is the description of the setting: where and when the campaign takes place, and in particular, the "base state" or status quo with which the characters should be familiar. Doing this effectively can be more difficult than it sounds, so follow these guidelines to keep this interesting and on point.

Broad Strokes: You don't need to hand your players a 200-page document detailing every corner of the campaign world and every major event in its history. Even if you do have such a document, it's probably best to hit new players with just the highlights. Focus on where the campaign starts and, if you describe other parts of the world at all, do so in generalities. You can always fill in more information as the campaign progresses.

Focus on the Present: Historical context is good, particularly historical events that have an impact on the present day, but focus on giving the players the status quo as it will be when the game starts. Don't focus too much on irrelevant historical detail; if an account of a particular battle hundreds of years ago doesn't impact the present day, summarize or cut it altogether.

Enliven with Detail: Try to give the players some essential details about daily life in the setting. What do people eat? What kind of clothes do they wear? What do they do for fun? What is a typical day, week, or year like? What are some expressions people use? These details form valuable hooks players can use to get into character during the game.

STORY

You may or may not want to include story content in your campaign guide, depending on the type of game you want to run. You may find it helpful to fill the players in on the type of story you want to tell, so they can assist with their character concepts. Is this an epic fantasy wherein local heroes discover a terrible threat to the world at large, or a focused struggle for domination over the guilds and noble houses of a single city?

Some GMs prefer a freeform campaign, starting the players off with just a setting and their characters' backstories, letting the rest unfold as play progresses. The story is written as the players choose what their characters do and the dice determine the outcome of those actions. Other GMs have a particular kind of story in mind and try to deftly steer the players, allowing them a wide range of choice within the bounds of the story, but keeping it focused on a particular field of play; for example, a player who wanted his character to go off exploring some lost ruin in a campaign about warring guilds might discover something hidden in the ruins that has some bearing on the main conflict, bringing things back around to that story.

VOICE

Voice is how the guide conveys the content to the reader. It includes choices like viewpoint, tone, and style, which can not only affect how the content is conveyed, but can also provide additional information and insight for players in and of itself. The two main approaches to voice are an "inside" or subjective voice, or an "outside" or objective voice.

Subjective Voice: This method presents some or all of the content of the campaign guide in the form of fictional documents or dialogues, such as travelogues, journals, letters, or scholarly works written by people in the setting. Subjective voice documents are heavy with setting-specific flavor and present a strong point of view, a fictional window into the world for the reader. On the other hand, they can be biased or incomplete, and they tend to provide less information in the same amount of

space than documents written in objective voice. These qualities can be good things, especially if you want players to initially receive somewhat biased or inaccurate information about things, but crafting such documents typically involves more work. Subjective voice presentation can serve double duty by introducing players to the fictional authors of the documents in addition to the subjects they discuss. For example, if the party is likely to interact with a certain sage or noble in the setting, perhaps part of the campaign guide can be written in that character's voice. This way, when the game starts, the players already have a feeling of "knowing" that character.

Objective Voice: This style of guide is written from the perspective of the Game Master and exists outside of the setting. This approach allows for a broader perspective in campaign guide materials, in which you can provide comparisons to modern examples and discuss things a subjective author might not know. Objective voice tends to be more concise because you can say exactly what you mean without having to phrase it in terms an in-setting character would use. This lets you provide more information in less space, saving time and effort if they are at a premium.

Combining Voices: Of course, you can also mix subjective and objective voice in your guide. You might use a primarily objective voice to provide the bulk of the information and then put the information into context with snippets or examples of subjective voice, such as quotations from in-setting characters or even more involved things like sketched-out maps.

PUBLICATION

Once the campaign guide document is prepared, you need to consider how to get it in front of the players. Modern media and desktop publishing create a wide range of options for sharing a campaign guide.

Print

The first and simplest option is to print the campaign guide and give each player a copy. It could be printed out at home or produced professionally at a copy shop. Larger campaign guides might be held in binders or report covers, and print shops offer a variety of binding options, from square tape-bound to plastic spiral binding (with or without cardstock or plastic covers). These options add durability and quality to your guide, making it easy for players to use and reference over time, but might make you less inclined to make changes as you go.

Electronic

You can also publish a campaign guide as an electronic document, easily shared via e-mail or hosted online. With laptops or handheld devices, players can still reference these documents during play.

The other main electronic option is to publish your campaign guide as a web page or website. Web page design programs make this a fairly simple matter even for non-programmers, and there are many inexpensive web-hosting services. Players can access a web-based campaign guide from anywhere with an Internet connection, can save or print the pages for their own reference, and can even actively edit the guide (if the GM allows it). Unless the site is secured, web publication also makes your campaign guide publicly available to anyone who wants to view it, allowing other Game Masters to benefit from your ideas.

Even if you publish your campaign guide in print for your players, you may want to have an electronic version as well for backup, further additions, and ease of reference, especially if you want to make the guide publicly available.

Copyrights

Most published RPG products are copyrighted, so you should take care not to violate the law by republishing parts of them without permission. Paizo has a Community Use Policy (**paizo.com/communityuse**) that explains how you can safely use some of our copyrighted materials in your campaign guide.

Other Media

Game Masters have taken advantage of desktop and online multimedia in recent years to create other ways of providing information to players. If you have musical talent, opening each session with custom theme music can be a powerful way of getting players into the right mindset. You can also create audio podcasts for your campaign, or even take things a step further and use video editing to create a "campaign trailer," like a trailer for a film, which you can then distribute among your players or share online. This doesn't have to involve a lot of original video; you can use still images and artwork and give them motion through effects like pans or zooms, with different dissolves and transitions between images.