



# 2 RUNNING A GAME





**V**aleros reached up to the ring in the dragon's nose and yanked hard to his left.

The beast screamed, and a jet of hissing flame roared past him, setting his cloak ablaze.

"That's right!" he crowed.

"Not so fun now, is it?"

In reply, the dragon simply swung its great neck sideways, knocking Valeros almost off the tower's edge. The swordsman looked down. Far below, Seoni was struggling to cast a spell while floating in midair. The dragon stretched its pierced and pinioned wings and roared.

"Fine," Valeros grunted.

"We'll do it your way." Then he leapt up and out, grabbing for the dragon's ring as he fell.



## HOW TO RUN A GAME

A roleplaying game is only as good as its GM. The GM sets the tone for the game, keeps the action moving, adjudicates situations, and tailors the storyline to the player's tastes. In this chapter, you'll find all the information you need on how to run the best game you possibly can, from tips and tricks to the tools of the trade, plus primers on avoiding common problems, the math behind the game, and how to design different types of adventures.

### GMING STYLE CHOICES

Before you run your first session, there are a number of decisions you need to make regarding the nature of your game. Is your table a serious roleplaying experience, with players staying in character at all times? Is it an immersive experience with painted miniatures, three-dimensional terrain, soundtracks, and mood lighting? Is it a zany get-together with friends, where half the fun is the in-game banter? Or is it some combination of those, or perhaps something else altogether? There's no best answer, but such decisions have a vast impact on the experience you and your players have. Noted here are a few of the more common decisions a GM needs to make when running a game.

**Miniatures vs. Freeform:** The Pathfinder Roleplaying Game presumes you're playing with miniatures and using a gridded mat to keep track of character locations during combat. This isn't the only method, though—you can also try charting things out on graph paper or drawing it on a white board, or utilize paper minis and combat tokens that can be printed out and discarded as needed. Yet you may decide that focusing on where everybody is and how far they can move in a round ruins the cinematic drama that you wish to create. In this case, you might prefer a more freeform style of play, where the GM keeps track of the action in his head, players describe the actions they wish to take, and the GM adjudicates the results. In this type of game, many rules take a backseat to flavorful flourishes and cinematic descriptions from both players and GM.

**In Character vs. Out of Character:** Do your players need to remain in character during the game, or can they speak as themselves, strategizing and giving advice to other players? Some GMs allow the latter only if there's a mechanism for determining when someone's in character (see page 15), while others allow a casual blurring of the lines.

**GM Tracking vs. Players Tracking:** There's a large amount of information to keep track of during a game. The Pathfinder RPG rules imply that this work should be split, with the players keeping track of their characters, hit

points, abilities, ongoing effects, and so forth, and GMs tracking the same information for the NPCs. Yet some GMs prefer to keep everything a secret from their players, tracking even their experience points, hit points, spell durations, and other information, only giving the players vague, lifelike information—such as telling them that they feel weak from blood loss rather than how many hit points they have left. While this can help enhance both the game's mystery and its sense of danger, the sheer amount of bookkeeping required on the part of the GM makes it easy for such games to bog down and overwhelm the GM.

**Taking Back Mistakes:** Almost every game session, a player does something they didn't mean to do, whether it's stepping on the wrong square or forgetting to add a bonus that means the difference between success and failure. Some GMs have a rule that once it's left your mouth or you've moved your miniature on the mat, you're committed, even if the end result isn't what you would have normally done. Other GMs allow players to retroactively add bonuses to rolls, or take back poorly planned spells and other mistakes, letting them make the best moves possible for their character. This is a difficult balance—too much leeway and there's no risk, but being too strict can ruin the fun for your players. Remember, though, that the standard used for your players should apply to you as well, and such “rewind” moments can be anything from a misplaced miniature to letting a clue slip out too early.

### Pregame Preparation

While this topic is covered in depth in Chapter 1, below are a few key points to remember.

**Read the Adventure:** If you're playing a published adventure, read through it at least once. It also helps to reread the parts of the adventure you expect the players to tackle in the upcoming session, to keep it fresh in your mind.

**Predict Player Actions:** Try to guess what your players might do in a given situation. If you think they might go to a tavern to get info, think about what NPCs will be encountered there, and what information they may have to impart. Likewise, if you think they might use subterfuge to get into a fortress, consider how the inhabitants might react to various plots. A little foresight goes a long way.

**Adapt to Players:** Consider tailoring your adventure to take into account the backstories of certain PCs, or incorporate a subplot that players initiated in a previous adventure. If one of your players is a paladin who hates devils, think about changing the generic cleric villain to a priest of Asmodeus to get your PC more invested. By tying your characters into the plot, your story naturally has more impact.

**Review Relevant Rules:** As you're reading through the upcoming portion of the adventure, take time to





familiarize yourself with relevant monsters, feats, spells, magic items, and rules subsets. Part of your job as the GM is to play NPCs and monsters to the best of their ability, which means being as familiar with the NPCs' options as your players are with their own characters'.

**Prepare Stats and Strategies:** Make sure the adventure's challenges are appropriately balanced for your party's level and composition. Think about the locations where the encounters take place, and how NPCs can turn the location and their particular abilities to their advantage. It can also be good to copy the stats for each NPC and monster for ease of reference, allowing you to make notations on spells used, hit points lost, and other information without marking up a book.

**Prepare Additional Tools:** If you use props in your game, preparing in advance helps the game flow smoothly. Pick the miniatures and any three-dimensional terrain you want to use in a given session and put them in an easily accessible place. Put any pictures you want to show in a folder on your computer or print them onto sheets. If the players have the map to a dungeon level, think about drawing the level on the battlemat ahead of time.

## Running the Game

Even once the adventure is prepped and the players are gathered, the GM's work is just beginning. There are a few things to pay special attention to during a game session.

**Initiative:** Keeping track of whose turn it is during combat can be complicated. While a simple written list helps, such can get cluttered and complicated as characters hold actions and delay. The *GameMastery Combat Pad* allows you to keep track of initiative order by arranging the characters and their adversaries on erasable magnets and moving them as needed. You might also manage initiative by using a stack of index cards with the name of a characters or opponents written on each one—maybe even with notes for easy reference.

**Dice Rolling:** Some dice rolls need to be made in secret, such as when a rogue looks for a trap or a monster attempts a Perception check. At other times, you may want to roll in front of the players, such as when a pivotal save is being made during combat which could potentially kill a player character. Making rolls in the open adds a sense of drama and fairness to the moment, and your players can see the result as they root for the outcome they desire. Yet



doing so can also tie your hands unnecessarily, interrupt the flow of the narrative, and generally detract from the sense of mystery. For this reason, physical barriers like the *Pathfinder* RPG GM Screen come in handy.

**GM Subterfuge:** You don't want your players to know when something important is happening by watching for you to roll your dice. As such, many GMs roll dice unnecessarily every so often, pretending to look something up in their notes. This makes it harder for players to guess when something significant has happened, such as a failed Perception check. It's equally important for things like finding secret doors—if you don't call for a Perception check simply because there's nothing to see, the PCs quickly learn that rolling dice means something is up, whether they made their roll or not.

**Tracking Hit Points:** During battles, you'll sometimes have more than one of the same type of monster on the table, so keeping track of which one has all its hit points and which one is barely holding on is important. Whether you track hit points on a sheet of paper, a dry erase board, or via some other method, make notes about which creature is which and any damage or conditions it may have acquired.

**Corpses:** If you use miniatures in the game, what do you do with the miniature when the monster dies? Some GMs immediately remove dead or unconscious creatures to avoid clutter. Others leave the bodies where they fall, providing terrain obstacles. With the ability to use channel energy to heal friends and foes in an area of effect, leaving monsters on the board could require you to track hit points of monsters well into the negatives on the off chance that the PC cleric unintentionally catches them in a healing wave. This is just one of many situations in which a GM must choose between the game's realism and the ease of actually running the game.

**Dead Characters:** Sometimes player characters die in combat. This is often a traumatic event for players, and how you handle it as GM has enormous bearing on whether those players continue to have fun or not. First off, determine whether there's a chance for those characters to be revived via *raise dead* or some similar spell. If they're likely to be revived at a later date, you can keep them engaged by having them play the role of NPC allies, cohorts, or even familiars or animal companions. Then when the combat is over and the characters get returned from the dead, they can resume their usual roles. If they're not likely to come back, having them start rolling up new characters is a good way to keep them busy for the rest of the session. For more information on this issue, see *Death of a Hero* in Chapter 3.

**Time Management:** Keep an eye on the clock to help you wind up your game on time. If you know your game needs to end at midnight, don't start the triumphant battle with

the main villain at 11:30pm. Know when to gloss over less-important encounters in order to reach a good stopping point, but also don't be afraid to pad things out and leave some goodies for next time. Finding a cliffhanger to stop on—the revelation of a piece of information, or a villain's dramatic entrance—makes for both a dramatic conclusion and a hook to keep the players excited for the next session.

**Keeping the Game Moving:** One of the biggest dangers in a game session is the risk of getting bogged down. Sometimes it's the result of the GM not being prepared and needing to read over something during the game. Other times, it is because of a player not being prepared or taking too much time to make a decision. These slowdowns can ruin the mood, tension, and drama of a game. Preparation as the GM helps minimize these risks on your end. For players, sometimes a decision merely takes a moment, and having a bit of patience is fine. Should long turns and side conversations regularly detract from the action, however, give players a time limit to declare their actions, after which they're considered to be delaying, and you move on to the next character in the initiative order. Of course, new players naturally require more time to make decisions than experienced ones, which is why it can be useful to assign one of your more adept players as a mentor.

## Post Game

Once the game session is done, there are still several tasks that need to be taken care of. First, award the players any experience earned during play, and allow them to divide up any loot earned. Having your players come up with an equitable wealth distribution system they can all agree on is vital to the long-term health of the campaign, so help them come up with a system that works for all involved. Last but not least, have the players help you clean up the gaming area.

Once the players have gone home, it may be a good idea to do some basic record-keeping, such as writing down what happened that session in case you need to refresh your memory later, or plot ideas to revisit in future sessions.

## EXAMPLE OF PLAY

Lisa the GM is running her group through "The Hook Mountain Massacre," the third installment of the *Rise of the Runelords* Adventure Path. Her players are approaching the homestead of the Grauls, a family of depraved ogrekin.

**Elsid** (human ranger): I check to see what kind of creatures have moved through this area and how recently.

*Elsid rolls a Survival check and gets a 22.*

**GM:** There seems to be a decent amount of traffic in this clearing. Mostly humanoid, with large feet, but a



few canine tracks, too. The path was used as recently as a couple of hours ago.

**Elsid:** It looks like that creature we killed back there wasn't the only one of its kind. Be careful.

**Karnak** (human barbarian): I move out into the clearing with my ranseur at the ready.

*The GM knows that there's a sneaky ogrekin hiding in the nearby vegetation, and asks Karnak to make a Perception check. Karnak's roll of 14 is worse than the ogrekin's Hide roll of 16, meaning he doesn't notice the lurking monster.*

**GM:** Nothing happens.

**Karnak:** OK, then I'll head toward the house.

**GM:** As you move forward, an 8-foot-tall creature suddenly charges out of the rows of corn to your right, his head a mass of tumors. He charges at you and swings a massive metal hook!

*Since Karnak is surprised, the GM rolls an attack of 23 versus Karnak's flat-footed AC of 16 and scores a hit.*

**GM:** The brute's hook took a piece out of your side, Karnak! Take 15 damage. Everyone roll for initiative.

*The party rolls initiative. The GM rolls for the ogrekin, who scores poorly with a 6.*

**GM:** Elena—you're up!

**Elena** (human rogue): I move to the side of the monster opposite Karnak so I can flank and get my sneak attack damage!

*Elena rolls an 18 and beats the ogrekin's AC of 16, rolling her weapon's damage dice and dealing 19 points of damage, which the GM subtracts from the ogrekin's 61 hp.*

**GM:** That seemed to hurt him. Sevashti—what do you do?

**Sevashti** (human sorceress): I cast *glitterdust* on him.

*The GM checks glitterdust's area of effect to make sure it doesn't catch any other players—it doesn't—then makes a Will save for the ogrekin, who fails.*

**GM:** Your spell catches the deformed thing right in the face, and he blinks rapidly to try to regain his sight. Your turn, Elsid!

**Elsid:** I rain arrows down on him!

*Elsid fires three arrows—all hits—and the ogrekin goes down. Because the party cast a number of spells with short durations before entering the clearing, and in order to keep the drama up since she knows there are more ogrekin around, the GM decides to keep initiative order. She rolls a Perception check to see if the ogrekin inside the barn hear the sound of combat, but her roll of 12 minus modifiers for the barn walls and the monsters' roughhousing means they fail.*

**GM:** The poor guy didn't know what hit him! Marbury, it is your turn.

**Marbury** (human cleric): As usual, it looks like only Karnak is hurt. You can handle it, big fella. I'm heading toward the house.

**Karnak:** Gee, thanks pal!

**GM:** Alright Jamek, you and Furball are finally up.

**Jamek** (half-orc druid): I send Furball ahead to scout.

*Furball, the druid's lion animal companion, approaches the house.*

**GM:** Have Furball make a Perception check.

*Jamek's player rolls a 16 for Furball. Instead of calculating the exact DC, the GM decides to save time and estimates that 16 is enough to hear ogrekin moving around in the barn.*

**GM:** Furball stiffens suddenly and looks toward the barn opposite the house.

**Jamek:** OK, I move up and see if I can make out what he hears or sees.

*Jamek rolls a Perception of 14—not great, but thanks to Furball's previous success, the GM deems it enough to pick out noise coming from the barn.*

**GM:** Jamek, you hear noise coming from the barn, but you can't make out anything distinct. Elena, we're back to you.

**Elena:** I move up to the house and check for traps on the main door.

*The GM rolls the Perception check for Elena, since she doesn't want the player to know if she succeeds or fails. A result of 15 reveals nothing, as there is no trap present.*

**GM:** Nothing.

**Elena:** It looks like the door is clear!

**GM:** Sevashti, your turn.

**Sevashti:** I'm going to delay until we know whether we're going to the barn or the house. Besides, I don't want to get too close to the action.

*The GM marks that Sevashti is delaying, and points to Karnak.*

**Karnak:** Don't worry, little lady, I'll get us some action. I head over to the barn door and throw it open!

**Elsid:** No! Karnak—wait!

**GM:** OK, Karnak, you head over to the barn and burst through the doors. Inside, you see a two-story barn with a catwalk around the top and stairways leading up from either side of the door you just kicked in. Three smaller versions of the monster you just killed are wrestling each other here, the smell of stale beer permeating the air. As the door clatters open, all three freeze, staring at you, then roar and move to attack...





## THE ART OF GMING

As a Game Master, you already know what's expected. You have some players, you've designed an adventure full of cunning threats, wild terrain, and a big clever twist, and you're ready to entertain. That should do it, right? Yet the best-laid plans of every storyteller sometimes go awry. There's a range of reasons, but while the Pathfinder RPG is a form of group entertainment, it still depends on you as the GM in order to succeed. You are the scriptwriter and director for this production, but you're also the chief performer. How you choose to approach the role makes a huge difference.

It's not that players aren't important; on the contrary, they're both your audience and your fellow performers, and in many ways everything you do is for them. But they also have less control over the world, and play more limited parts. You lead the band. If you bring gusto to the adventure, your players will respond in kind. If you show up unprepared and harried, they may not invest much effort either. Delivering the best possible performance as a GM depends on how you see yourself when you game, how well you prepare, and what tricks and techniques you use to keep your campaign moving smoothly.

### MAKING IT HAPPEN

With great power sometimes comes a sense that maybe your players don't appreciate your efforts enough.

You spend time drawing world maps, imagining plots and places, setting up ambushes, and devising schemes for villains. As GM, you have a certain responsibility for everyone's good time. You strive to challenge the party, but never to break it. You offer a sandbox of a million choices, but guide the party to the juiciest elements.

And yet things don't always go smoothly. Sometimes, all you want is for the players to embark on the quest you've spent all week on, but instead the party accidentally goes off in another direction—or worse, sees the hook for your quest and deliberately decides not to bite because it doesn't interest them enough, or doesn't offer enough of a reward. When such things happen, you have several options.

### Forcing Things

In many cases, it's entirely reasonable to say, "Hey folks, this is the adventure I've prepared—work with me." Many groups of players respond positively if asked for help—after all, they want the game to go smoothly, too. Perhaps they just need a stronger hook for their characters, the promise of a bigger reward, or a change of pace from something too similar to what they did last time.

Canny GMs, though, won't force it more than absolutely necessary. It's often worth it to ask your players after the

game (or one-on-one later, if that's easier) to tell you why they didn't buy into your original adventure premise, and what sort of adventure they'd prefer. If they want more gold and glory, or to find out what's beyond the western mountains, find a way to make that an option. Player feedback allows you to craft a game that's more satisfying for everyone.

### Follow the PCs' Lead

If you enjoy improvisational play, the best move may be to temporarily drop the planned plotline (or at least the planned plot hook) and follow your players' lead. Are they more interested in the dark, brooding mage with a zombie-filled *bag of holding* than the murder the prince of the city has asked them to investigate? Very well, then: the necromancer is the new patron of the adventuring party, and boy does he know about some dark doings—the prince of the city has sent his best troops out on a suicide mission, and the mage would like the PCs to bring back some heads for a quick *speak with dead*.

This approach requires you to think on your feet and make up NPCs and encounters on the spot, but it also means that the players are fully engaged; they're guaranteed to be doing the things they want, rather than following a plot dictated by you. And you get the additional fun of improvising and reacting to the players' ideas, plus the chance to be pleasantly surprised by yourself as ideas flow fast and furiously.

If you're especially fortunate, you can probably turn some of your existing encounters, NPCs, or plot elements into elements of the adventure that the party wants to pursue—or use their new direction to steer them subtly onto the adventure you had planned—but it's not always possible. When forced to think on your feet, one helpful trick is to listen to player speculation and then elaborate on their fears or suspicions to make the plots feel even more complex. If the players say "I'll bet the duke's involved!", a simple option is to take the cue and have the duke actually be behind the nefarious plot they've uncovered, thus making players feel satisfied for having figured it out. On the other hand, if it turns out that the duke is actually an unfortunate innocent, with his daughter held as a pawn of the true villains—then the players get both the satisfaction of being partially correct and the thrill of uncovering something new, and your adventure feels meatier and more intricate with almost no additional effort.

### The Illusion of Free Choice

This is the finest of techniques when it works, though it can be overplayed. The illusion of free choice is really a matter of the GM convincing the PCs to do exactly what he wants while making them think it's their idea. The simplest method in theory is often the hardest in practice: giving the players several choices, all of which lead to the



same adventure. This might be as easy as simply changing a hook—the PCs didn't know that the old man they ignored in the bar was about to tell them the same thing as the ancient treasure map they discover in the town graveyard. The ancient dungeon can be uncovered by order of the king, as the party is marching off into the wilds, or as the only hope for a town surrounded by enemies—once they go there, the adventure is the same, regardless of how they got there.

Sometimes, of course, the party has a reasonable idea what the adventure is and still decides to avoid it. In these cases, it's sometimes best to subtly make the adventure more and more compelling until *of course* the players decide to go after the big treasure hoard guarded by their arch-nemesis—they've finally learned his weakness, and they only have a few days to exploit it!

That's a bit of a hard sell, but notice three things about the example. First, it involves a pre-established nemesis; by tying the adventure into the PCs' goals as characters, you've made the same basic adventure seem far more appealing. Second, it provides a lure in the form of cash—because in this case, you've watched your players enough to know that this particular party loves loot more than glory or doing the right thing. Third, the hook relies on a change in circumstances that is time-dependent. If the party doesn't act now, ready or not, this opportunity will not come again. Limited-time offers have a way of selling things, whether it's adventures or refrigerators.

Above all, put yourself in the player's shoes. Don't think about how cool the villain is, how clever the traps are, or how smart the backstory is—think about what's in it for your players, and why an adventure would appeal to them personally, and you'll never go wrong.

## GM AS ACTOR

As both performer and director, a good GM needs some of the skills of the stage, from use of accents to scene management.

## Volume and Style

Stage presence is as important to GMing as dice. Though many GMs hide behind their screens and only venture out to move minis, others are animated, gesturing and using strange accents to demand attention.

While it's certainly possible to overdo it, the latter style is far more exciting and memorable. The GM doing those things is performing; he's fully engaged and driving the game with his desire to entertain. Yet not everyone is a natural performer, and many of the most bombastic GMs are shy and quiet in everyday life. Just like the rules and adventure design, the performance aspect of GMing is a skill that can be learned. Below are a few tips.

**Stand up:** Standing tends to make you more forceful and keeps you looking at your players, not fiddling with your dice. It also has the added benefit of letting you glance at players' character sheets or move miniatures faster and more easily. Try standing up during the most action-oriented sequences, when you have combat or other sources of immediate tension in play.

**Gesture:** Point at a player to get his attention. Put him on the spot, and make it clear that the NPC you're roleplaying expects an immediate response. This tends to push players into responding in character as well.

**Make Eye Contact:** Look at your players. If you're roleplaying the major villain, don't blink—literally stare them down.





**Dialogue:** Maybe you prefer to say “He speaks with the voice of the grave” rather than attempting to do so yourself. But even if you aren’t comfortable showing off, that doesn’t mean you can’t put a little spin on things, modulating your pitch or whispering instead of speaking. Hiss a little. Ham it up. Push your limits, and see what works.

Even without accents, a character’s word choices say a lot about his personality. Is he a noble dandy who refers to himself in the third person and sometimes uses big words improperly? Or is he an arcane scholar who knows *exactly* what those big words mean, and uses them to the exclusion of all others? Is his language dirty and lowbrow, much like the character himself, or prissy and precise, refusing to debase itself with contractions? The words you choose are every bit as important as the manner in which you say them.

Of course, if you’re interested in working up accents to make your NPCs more memorable, there are numerous ways to improve your skills. First and foremost, take risks—even if your accent falls flat after the first few lines, it’ll still be more interesting to players than if you used your normal speaking voice. Next, try thinking of familiar actors, cartoon characters, or (if you’re feeling daring) friends and family with speech patterns different than your own. Speak your lines as if you were that person—the odds of you mimicking them perfectly are low, at least at first, which means what comes out will be attributed solely to your NPC in the players’ minds, and having a person whose voice you’re already familiar with in mind allows you to maintain consistency. For further creativity, try borrowing from real-world regional accents, slang terms uncommon to your area, or a wide array of speech impediments like lisps and stutters.

While all of these options can be combined at random, it can often be easiest and most effective to identify a single speech trait that characterizes each character. Spend some time thinking about what most represents each NPC. A voice that cracks frequently makes people think of someone young, inexperienced, and comical. Someone who speaks in a rapid-fire chatter often sounds anxious or like they’re trying to sell something, and characters who speak slower than normal often sound dull and unintelligent. Everyone has certain ingrained associations and prejudices tied to specific patterns of speech—identify yours and your players’, and use them to your advantage. Not only can you paint a clearer picture, but you can also create interesting roleplaying encounters by occasionally playing against type.

**If the Party Talks, Sit Down:** Last but not least, when the players talk among themselves, withdraw. Let them plan—while they do, you can check your notes, update the map, and think about the next encounter. It’s good to perform, but not all the time. The players deserve some stage time as well.

## Giving Direction

As GM, you want the most out of your players, and you know them as well as anyone. Some deal well with setbacks. Some love to hog attention. Some only shine when things are clear; others are leaders when things are thoroughly muddled.

One way to handle these differences is to acknowledge them. Sometimes simply saying, “Hey, you’re hogging the spotlight” is a better solution than trying to passively-aggressively give more attention to everyone else. As long as you confront the behavior rather than the person, it’s often possible for a given player to learn to play in sync with the group’s style.

## PRESENTATION

Presentation, as they say, is everything, and some GMs go that extra mile to make their game immersive with a cool handout, perfect soundtrack, or premade maps of every dungeon room. Below are a few quick and easy ideas for adding more goodies to your game.

## Handouts and Props

Handouts are extremely valuable for two reasons: they give players information about the adventure, and they are tangible, focusing attention on that information in a way that just saying it doesn’t. Whatever information you put on that handout is information that the party is more likely to pay attention to or act on, simply because it’s sitting in front of them. So write or sketch that diary entry, cargo manifest, treasure map, ambassador’s report, or shopping list for the golem artificer. If the players can’t figure out the story hook hidden in it, give them some Knowledge rolls to help them along, but know that every handout you spend time on will almost always pay dividends at the game table.

Fun, authentic-looking handouts are quite easy to make. For an old treasure map, for instance, try dipping white, unruled paper in coffee to make it resemble parchment, then drawing on it when it dries. You can also crumple it up a few times, tear and tatter the edges, and even smear a little dirt or ash on it. Other options include:

- Rolling up paper to make a scroll (and decorating a cardboard paper towel roll as a scroll case)
- Writing “TRAPPED WITH GLYPHS” on the scroll presented above, to punish incautious players
- Tearing a handout in half, so PCs have to find both pieces
- Writing in a foreign language or unusual font to represent the need for *read magic*
- Using an image or replica of a real medieval manuscript page (with your text in English on a separate page)
- Using real parchment or shell gold to make a fancy proclamation



Props are much the same sort of thing, but taken to broader ideas. Old pennies or just metal slugs can be put into a dice bag and thrown on the table for a solid thud when the party is offered 200 gp for the job. You can show a wand, crystal ball, staff, or dagger when you play the part of certain NPCs; likewise with hats. And best of all are the “real treasure” props. Throw down an old necklace to represent the Medallion of Rozxanatan the God-Smiter; if you have some costume jewelry with glass or paste gemstones, that usually does the trick.

In general, props are worth digging out for artifacts, for special NPC audiences that you know are coming up, and for particular impact with players who might be a bit jaded or easily distracted. One or two props per game sessions is plenty; you don't need to turn into an amateur magician just to make a point.

## Music

Watch a movie sometime with subtitles instead of sound, and you'll quickly realize just how much emotional weight the music carries. The acting, images, and words are important, but the music pulls at your heartstrings, and gives you cues about how the filmmaker wants you to feel during a certain sequence.

Sometimes you want that extra emotional impact for a game. And for those special occasions, it's worth digging around your music collection to build a playlist. It may seem a little trite, but most fantasy movie soundtracks work well as background music for a fantasy game, so long as you stay away from overly recognizable themes that will jar your players out of the moment. Most of the time, it's best to use fairly subtle soundtracks (though there's nothing wrong with some heavy metal beats to keep the momentum, if that's what you group loves, so long as there aren't a lot of words to distract people). But if you really want to knock a game out of the park (say, when doing a special “send-off” game for a player leaving town), then it might be worth it to ascribe themes to particular characters or, better yet, choose songs to go with specific encounters, such as heavy industrial noises for a fight in the dwarven smithy, soft mandolins and violins for the visit to the elven queen, a dirge for a dead NPC, or a bombastic, brassy symphonic charge for the final battle against the villain. The important thing to remember is that the music should support

the scene subtly, without taking center stage—for this reason it's often best to avoid popular music or things with comprehensible lyrics, and it's important to have the songs cued up and ready so you don't waste valuable game time and dramatic tension by searching for the proper track.

## Lighting

Lighting is like music; it's easy to overdo it. But a single candle or dimmer switch can get people to focus, or at least get their attention off their phone or laptop and onto the gaming table. The main thing lighting can do is help minimize distractions. A single spotlight on the center of the GM screen and battlemat usually does very well, if you can set up a table lamp to do so while still allowing enough light for people to see their character sheets.

## Attention and Distractions

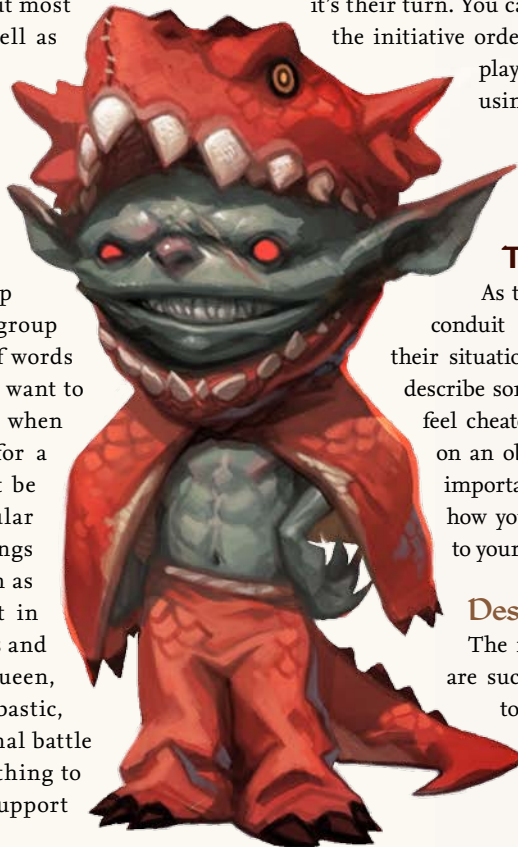
Just as effective (and less dramatic) is removing distractions directly. You're the GM—it's okay to tell players at the start of the game to put away the game system or music, cell phone or laptop. And it's also okay to tell them right at the start of the session that if they're not paying attention when it's their character's turn, you'll skip them that round. That usually does the trick, but if the carrot works better than the stick, you could also give additional XP to the players who are most engaged and prepared when it's their turn. You can also help them out by writing the initiative order down on the battlemat so the players know who's acting next, or using a *GameMastery Combat Pad* or initiative tracker that everyone can see.

## NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

As the GM, you are the one and only conduit for the players to learn about their situation in the game. If you forget to describe something, the players quite rightly feel cheated. If you focus your description on an object, they sense that it might be important. As a result, your choices on how you convey information are crucial to your game's success.

## Description

The first thing to know is that there are such things as being too loud and too quiet as the GM. If you spend the whole game talking, with players barely squeezing in hit and damage information,





you're likely overbearing and boring your players. But just as dangerous is the GM that's too quiet; if you're intimidated or underprepared, you won't have enough description to really give the players a sense of place, and one room of the castle or dungeon will feel pretty much like another.

There are ways to get across evocative information without writing out reams of text ahead of time. For instance, you might write down three or five words to describe each room, and then riff on those when the time comes to describe it. The words "purple tapestry, enormous fireplace, owlbear pelt on floor" set up a very different room than "bloodspattered walls, black candles, rusty manacles." In each case, you've got enough to fix an image in the players' minds, without going overboard on description.

Once you have that, you'll probably also want to add any pertinent notes on treasure, unusual terrain or interactive elements (such as a well or a dangerously weak support stanchion), or hidden terrain elements like traps or secret doors.

This same approach works well for NPCs, though in most cases you need more than just physical description. If you boil it down, most NPCs need a name, a speaking style, a general appearance, weapons and armor, and a motivation or goal. If you have all those, it's often possible to play a roleplaying scene without generating further stats for the NPC.

## Spotlight

There are many in-game tricks that a GM can use to convey information or rework elements of his game, including those mentioned above. The most powerful technique, though, is simply describing a monster, person, or item in detail. Anything that a GM devotes playtime to rises in the awareness of the players.

In most cases, that just means mentioning an item more than once. Players pick up on GM references very quickly. If you want a particular character to draw the party's attention, mention them as someone they see when they return to a particular location. Anyone they see more than once, or anyone they "notice" because the GM tells them they notice them, is bound to get extra scrutiny from experienced players. Of course, less experienced players might not pick up on it, and it's certainly okay to go from mentioning something to the more direct, "This guard seems to want something from you," or even "That painting seems bigger than the others, and the frame makes it look more important."

The point of using the GM spotlight is to get the action moving again. Be brutally obvious only if you must, but don't let the adventure derail just because someone failed a Perception roll.

## Backstory

In-world continuity and stories from a setting's history are usually a GM's darling—and sheer boredom for the

players. No one wants to hear the GM drone on about events from centuries ago, or the complex relationships of NPCs, or elements of the setting's culture that have nothing to do with the adventure at hand. This historical material is justified only in two particular cases:

- When the players ask about it or show interest
- When it's relevant to the adventure

In the second case, relevant doesn't mean "the GM thought it was interesting." The lore actually needs to matter in the present day, and help a player make a decision at some point in the adventure. If the backstory never matters to the adventure outcome, then it's best ignored.

## Cliffhangers

Leaving the outcome of any suspenseful moment in doubt is a time-honored technique from the early days of movies and literature, and the same trick works just as well for RPGs. When time's running out, and the party is ready to wrap up for the week's game, it's always nice to leave them wanting more. The idea is to present just enough of a hint to make the party curious how events turn out, without requiring them to immediately roll initiative. Some ideas include:

- An injured NPC claws his way out of a nearby passage
- A messenger arrives with bad news just as the party thinks all is well
- A monster bursts in on the party
- The party is falsely accused
- A villain arrives to gloat
- A defeated foe shows up prepared to settle old scores

The point is that a new plot thread starts as soon as the old ones drop, and if you're still in the middle of a story, freezing the frame on the cusp of a battle or huge revelation keeps player excitement high all the way until the next session.

## Cut Scenes

When you flash from the main party scene to a secondary view (a lone PC scouting, or events happening somewhere else entirely) you can create tension by flipping back and forth between the two. This works especially well if one scene is fraught with danger and mayhem, or if there's a race against the clock.

While this might seem like an ideal way to handle split parties and introduce historical events, it doesn't work for all groups. Impatient players might want to "get back to the adventure" rather than learn about events happening 1,000 miles away.

## Flashbacks

Like cut scenes, flashbacks pause the action to show the party pertinent information from another time. The best use of a flashback is usually one of the exact same location, but much earlier. The sight of blood on a throne room floor



might trigger a flashback to a murder scene, or a magical phrase spoken by the vizier might kick off the memory of a fight to bind a genie.

Better still, the flashback could feature the PCs as earlier heroes whose failure led to the present calamity: the tomb raiders who set loose the Lich Lord, or even guards who failed as the prince was assassinated. Above all, keep it short—flashbacks have very specific uses, and a single scene in this style is usually plenty to get the point across.

## Foreshadowing

The best payoff is sometimes the one that takes a long time to set up. The henchman hired at 4th level who betrays the party at 7th level is a long con, but it can have a huge impact if you've foreshadowed the betrayal in a way that seems obvious in hindsight (but which is tough to figure out ahead of time).

More practically, foreshadowing is often a clue that drops one or two sessions before the event you're foreshadowing occurs. Some possible techniques:

- Meeting a villain before anyone knows he's a villain
- Fortune-telling with a *Harrow Deck*
- Telling the paladin that a certain town seems dangerous, even heretical
- Having a madman complain about a certain locale or event in an over-the-top way
- Having a sharp-eared PC hear something suspicious
- Introducing omens and portents, such as dead birds or fiery comets

The idea is to make the foreshadowing creepy or unsettling, and vague enough that it doesn't allow the party to prevent the foreshadowed event. The sense of horror when a PC realizes that he could have stopped something if he'd only put the pieces together sooner is a highly effective emotion, and one that roots the PC firmly in the game world.

When done right, foreshadowing ties in heavily with the idea of continuity. Instead of inventing a new villain every game, why not bring back an old one—appropriately leveled during his time away, of course—who already has reason to hate the PCs? Or you could throw a twist into the storyline by making the sweet maiden they saved in the first adventure turn out to be the major villain of the campaign. Such recurring figures make it feel like all the events in your campaign and even your world are somehow tied together, the story leading to some grand and inevitable conclusion.

## Secrets

Sometimes a player may split off from the group, or you might want to give information secretly to a certain player because of a successful Perception check. Perhaps

an NPC only trusts one character enough to impart her dangerous secret, or the players suspect a traitor in their midst. Similarly, sometimes a player may seek to give you information privately, especially if she's working on her own secret agenda or a rogue attempting to steal from her companions. In instances where you need to box out most of your party, there are several options.

Simply taking the player aside and leaving the room, or passing a note, is perfectly adequate, but knowing another player is getting secret knowledge often eats at other players and can tempt even the most steadfast gamer into metagaming. Talking to the player in question between game sessions is a far safer option, but isn't always possible. Though there are any number of sneaky ways to let a player know something important without alerting the rest of the party—for instance, covertly sending them a text message if you allow cell phones at the table—in general the best way to handle secrets is to either flat-out ask your players to respect the fact that they don't know a given piece of information, or—better still—manipulate the game to avoid the need for intraparty secrets altogether. And remember that any time you spend with one player is time you aren't spending with the rest.

## CHEATING

Though it's considered more polite to call it “fudging,” cheating happens—sometimes a GM will be tempted to alter a die roll to make the story go a certain way, or to save a player character from a blow that would kill them and knock a fun personality out of the game. Should the GM give in to the temptation to cheat? And if the GM is truly in control of the world, and making his or her rolls in secret—is it really cheating at all?

There are several schools of thought on the matter. One side says that the dice are there to assist the story, not determine it—if a GM needs to occasionally alter or totally fabricate some die rolls for the sake of making an encounter a perfect challenge for the players without killing them, then he's just doing his job. Others say that it's the randomness which creates the realism and sense of danger, and that PCs who believe the GM won't let them die lose half the fun. And a third notes that GMs who clearly cheat or have too many coincidences—the party's powerful new items always getting stolen by sticky-fingered halflings, or villains being saved by miracle rolls when a player comes up with an unexpectedly effective strategy—undermine the players' enjoyment, and subtly encourage the players to cheat as well.

Where you fall on the spectrum is a personal call, but if you do decide to fudge rolls for the sake of the game, it's best done in secret, and as infrequently as possible. And only—*only*—if it results in more fun for everyone.



## THE SCIENCE OF GMING

Mastering the arts of narrative and group storytelling is crucial to running a good game. Yet game mastering has a practical side as well. The following pages address certain fundamental mechanics and tools that all GMs should familiarize themselves with.

### BASICS

While the heart of a roleplaying game is the story cooperatively created by the Game Master and the players, the physical tools used to play the game have an effect on the experience.

### Dice Mechanics

The Pathfinder Roleplaying Game uses dice to resolve events during the course of a game, such as whether the fighter hits the vampire or the vampire makes its save against the wizard's spell. However, the type and number of dice used determines the statistical probability for each numerical outcome, and fiddling with these probabilities can introduce interesting effects.

A single die has an equal chance to produce any of its results; if you roll a d20, there is a 1-in-20 chance for a 1, or a 2, or a 20, and so on. That means those dreaded fumbles and beloved crits come up just as often as an unremarkable 7, 11, or 16. This type of roll result is called a **discrete uniform distribution**.

Two dice added together do not create an equal distribution of results; if you roll 3d6, there is only a 1-in-216 chance for an 18 (by rolling three 6s), but a 27-in-216 chance to get an 11 (from multiple combinations of 3 3 4, 2 4 5, 2 3 6, and so on). That means the extreme values at the low and high end are much rarer than the middle values. This type of roll result is called a **normal distribution**, commonly known as a **bell curve** because graphing the results gives a line with a hump in the middle that tapers off toward the ends. The more dice you have in a roll, the more probable the middle results become (in the bell curve, the "bell" becomes taller and more narrow, and the rest of the curve is shorter and flatter).

Note that even though a d% is normally generated by two d10s, the result is still a discrete uniform distribution rather than a bell curve because the numbers on the two dice aren't added together. It's also worth noting that, when estimating average values such as damage, the average of a d6 is 3.5 rather than 3, as the lowest value possible on most dice is 1, not 0.

### Game Accessories

There are many game aids that help make sessions smoother and more memorable.

**Art:** In a fantasy world where terrible beasts crush villages and flying cloud castles eclipse the sun, an evocative photo or painting can help set the mood or provide a backdrop for an encounter, or even an entire campaign. With millions of vacationers posting their photos to the internet and professional photographers displaying samples of their work online and in magazines, it's possible to find free inspiration for almost any game scene, whether a castle, desert, island, or volcano. Most modern fantasy artists have online galleries featuring beautiful illustrations of fantastic creatures and locations, and many artists sell "coffee table books" of their artwork for easy browsing. Art books, history books, and travel books are rich sources for great photos, as are web pages of concept art from movies and television.

**Combat Grid:** Many aspects of combat in the Pathfinder RPG assume the use of a grid to determine the relative positions of different creatures. You can simply use graph paper for battles, erasing and redrawing each creature's location as it moves. However, most gamers prefer larger-scale squares that are big enough to contain a token or miniature for each creature. Many groups use wet-erase "battlemats" with 1-inch grids; these durable mats roll up for easy storage or travel. Office supply stores carry easel pads with 1-inch grid paper, which are especially handy when you want to reuse a particular map multiple times (such as a prominent street or the PCs' favorite tavern); laminating the pages or using a Plexiglass overlay (which is safe for dry-erase and wet-erase markers) extends the utility of these pages. Paizo's GameMastery Flip-Mats are laminated, full-color, eight-panel mats of terrain or locations (desert, dungeon, forest, jungle, tavern, and so on), usable with wet-erase and dry-erase markers. Paizo's Map Packs are collections of full-color 5" x 8" themed map cards (including generic structures for things like caravans, cities, farms, forests, towns) which you can use singly or to build larger areas or combine them with Flip-Mats. Many companies sell three-dimensional terrain, such as high-quality painted resin or fold-up paper models, and several companies sell inexpensive mapping software for creating your own gridded fantasy maps.

**Critical Hit/Fumble Decks:** If you prefer a little more randomness and excitement in your games, augmenting critical hits and fumbles is a fun way to introduce chaos and extra bloodshed into combat. Dozens of tables with random results for critical hits and fumbles exist, but an easy, durable, and versatile way of handling this sort of thing is with Paizo's *Critical Hit Deck* and *Critical Fumble Deck*. Each card in these decks has a different result depending on whether the relevant attack is bludgeoning, piercing, slashing, or magic, and the flavorful results vary from extra damage to ability score penalties to even more humiliating consequences.



**Face Cards:** A picture is worth a thousand words, and even the most descriptive GM may have to deal with players who have a hard time remembering a specific NPC, as it's a person they've never seen. To remedy this problem, you can use index cards with the name of the NPC and a photograph or an illustration, and show the card whenever the PCs encounter that character. For major or recurring NPCs, you might attach them to your GM screen so they're always on display, or paste them into a player handout about the campaign setting.

To find good illustrations or photographs, look at collectible card games, magazines, and roleplaying games for appropriate historical and fantasy characters. Internet image searches for concept art generate good results, and can be further fine-tuned by adding race names to the search criteria. Given a large enough library of character illustrations, you can create a card for every significant NPC in your game—and the cards provide handy places for the players to record notes about that NPC. Of course, if that sounds like more work than you're interested in, Paizo's GameMastery Face Cards are specifically designed for this purpose: a deck of full-color, illustrated characters with a large, blank, writable area on the back for recording the character's name and salient information.

**Miniatures:** The ancestors of the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game are tactical wargames that used tokens or miniature figures (once called "figs" by gamers, though "minis" is the most common term now). Many players still find miniatures an invaluable asset for gaming. Miniatures exist for almost every type of character, from gnome wizards to elven bards or orc barbarians, in any combination of weapons, armor, and body types. Monsters are just as prevalent, and come in all shapes, sizes, and poses. A trip to a craft or toy store presents dozens of toys, plastic figurines, and action figures suitable for gaming; even if the scale isn't quite right, the visual impact of a PC or monster miniature on the tabletop can help the players better visualize their allies and opponents—and placing an 8-inch-tall monster action figure in the middle of a party of 1-inch-tall PC minis can set the mood for a dangerous and exciting encounter. Weird monster action figures from movies, television, or other games can also spark the imagination for new creatures in a home campaign.

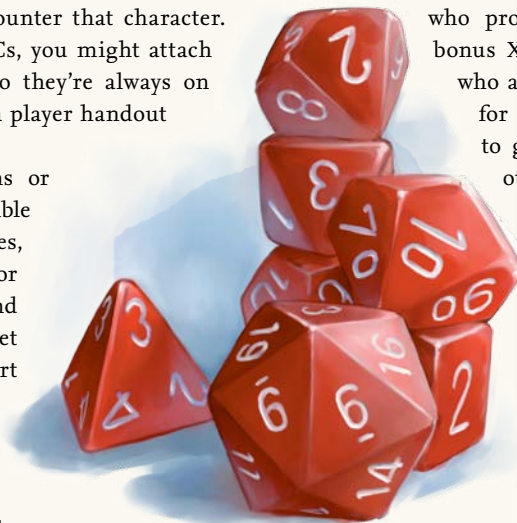
For decades, most miniatures were sold as unpainted metal or plastic, and painting and customizing

miniatures required time and effort to create a visually appealing tabletop setup. While this is still popular, nowadays there are also companies that produce pre-painted plastic miniatures or printable paper miniatures in PDF form. Even if you're not interested in collecting or painting miniatures, consider rewarding a player who provides miniatures for the game with bonus XP (just as you might reward a player who always hosts the game, or provides food for everyone). Painting minis is also a way to get a non-gamer spouse or significant other peripherally involved in the hobby; more than one "gamer widow" has earned kudos for painting miniatures without ever touching dice.

**Initiative Tracker:** Combat is the most complex part of the game, and the easiest place for a session to bog down. Anything that helps speed up combat means everyone gets more done and has more opportunities for fun. The simplest way of handling this is to record each PC and monster name on a card; when combat starts, write each creature's initiative score on its card and sort them into the initiative order. Thereafter, determining who's next to act is just a matter of cycling through the cards. Ambitious GMs can add info to the monsters' cards, such as hit points, special attack DCs, and other information relating to what the monster can do on its turn. (This can also be a useful place to record PC Perception checks and saves, so that you can make secret checks without asking players for their statistics.) Especially detailed initiative cards that resemble character sheets, with room for all of a creature's relevant data, can remove the need to refer to a book.

Another method is using a larger surface like a cork board, marker board, or dry-erase board to track PC and monster initiative and status. If positioned so the players can see it as well, this also lets them know when their turns are coming up so they can plan ahead. Paizo's *GameMastery Combat Pad* is a handy page-sized version of this—a magnetic dry/wet-erase board with dry/wet-erase magnets to indicate PCs and monsters. While it fulfills the same function as a pad of paper, the creature magnets make it easy to adjust initiative order for readied and delayed actions, and saves the GM the time and effort of rewriting all the PC names for every combat.

**Item Cards:** Kill the monsters, take their treasure, and sort it all out later—it's a standard tactic of most adventuring groups. So what happens when the players want to identify a stockpile of magic items from their last adventure? Just as face cards help players remember NPCs, a physical card describing an item (and perhaps





## LINEAR ADVENTURE



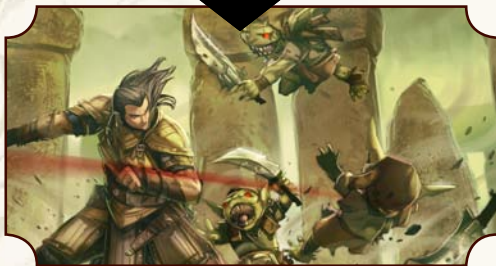
Monsters attack town



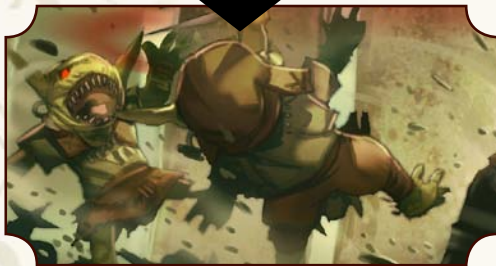
Witness gives directions to monster lair



Discover monster lair



Monster ambushes adventurers



Defeat the monster!

a note about who it was taken from) helps the players remember the unusual items their PCs carry—and helps a busy GM keep track of what that bubbling green potion, smoking longsword, and bleeding gauntlet actually do. Paizo's GameMastery Item Card line covers all the basics—weapons, armor, magic items, adventuring gear, and more, each with a full-color illustration and an erasable blank space on the back for keeping notes.

**Gaming without Accessories:** Of course, sometimes you don't want or need accessories at all—perhaps you're gaming in a car, at a campsite, or somewhere else with limited space or materials. Many campaigns don't use miniatures or a grid, even for combat. You can describe items verbally and not refer to cards or pictures. Crits are just extra damage and fumbles are misses. Character initiative is clockwise from the GM. Random results are determined by playing pick-a-number or rock-paper-scissors. The appeal of roleplaying games is the shared experience of storytelling (whether the story is an epic quest or a monster bash), and humans have been telling stories together for thousands of years just with their minds and voices. Each gaming group is different; some like all the bells and whistles, some prefer simplicity and abstraction, and many fall somewhere in between. Just as the sort of campaign each group prefers is different, how they choose to play that campaign can vary from group to group or game to game.

## CREATING ADVENTURES

It's the GM's job to plan and predict the course of an adventure. Depending on you and your players' play style, this may be an easy endeavor or require a lot of work. The basic types of adventures are linear, unrestricted, and nonlinear.

**Linear:** A linear adventure scenario is pretty straightforward; the PCs begin at point A, travel to point B, then C, and so on until they reach the end of the adventure. What exactly those points are, and which of them are combat encounters, roleplaying encounters, or merely places to rest and buy new equipment varies from adventure to adventure. For example, a scenario may start at a village where orcs just attacked, follow a survivor's directions toward the orc lair, deal with the orcs in the lair, and end with the PCs returning triumphantly to the village; there isn't much room for deviation from the expected plot. Most published adventures are linear adventures simply because a book only holds a limited amount of information—it's impossible to account for every possible character motivation, wild goose chase, or wrong turn that the PCs may take during the course of one or more nights of play.

With linear adventures, the GM has to be ready to steer the PCs back to the task at hand; one of the easiest ways is



to use a timed event to encourage the PCs to stay on track (such as a prisoner held captive in the next location who must be rescued before the monsters kill him), but some GMs fall into the trap of using brute force, such as an army of lizardfolk that coincidentally appears whenever the PCs try to go a different direction. Linear adventures are often called “railroads” because there’s only one place the PCs are supposed to go—but this isn’t always a bad thing. If you’re just running a one-shot game—say if an old friend is in town for a long weekend or the gaming group wants to play a single game with high-level characters—it’s perfectly acceptable to railroad the characters; the expectation is that everyone wants to finish the adventure, and wasting time looking for clues in the wrong place just makes it more likely the group won’t finish in the allotted time. In these situations, it’s okay for the GM to say, “you don’t think this has anything to do with the Dungeon of Bloody Death, and heading to Black Blood Mountain is clearly the way to deal with this threat.” In the same way that your group can use their imaginations to see ex-quarterback Bob as a female gnome rogue, they can accept a gentle push in the direction of the actual adventure when things get too far off track.

In an ongoing campaign, you have to be prepared for the PCs to go off the rails and stay off the rails for extended periods of time. Even if your plan is to run a linear adventure, it’s a good idea to have some mini-adventures, random encounters, or interesting locations for the PCs to visit should they detour from the plot of the adventure. With careful planning, these deviations can help steer the PCs back toward the main adventure—a random encounter with an orc raiding party that’s fresh from cooking and eating some peasants may inspire the PCs to deal with the lair; an old ranger needing help fighting a dire wolf may have a few +1 *orc bane arrows* he was saving for a special occasion, and so on. Of course, the best solution is to have several linear adventures planned, seeding the PCs with information about each, and letting them pursue whichever one they want—which actually works much like the next adventure type.

**Unrestricted:** In an unrestricted adventure, the PCs can go anywhere and do anything; they may not even be aware of your initial ideas for the first adventure. This sort of gaming is often called a “sandbox” because there are no limits to what the PCs can do, like children on a playground creating their own imaginative stories with toys. Running a sandbox game requires a GM with a lot of prepared game material or the ability to create multiple story elements on the fly. An easy way to “cheat” at running a sandbox game is to have several parallel adventures planned so if the PCs wander away from one 3rd-level dungeon, you can insert another one in the path of the PCs. Another trick is to “re-skin” one adventure with a

## UNRESTRICTED ADVENTURE



Monster attacks town



Exploration



Discover monster lair



Explore dungeon



Defeat the monster!



# NONLINEAR ADVENTURE



Monster attacks town



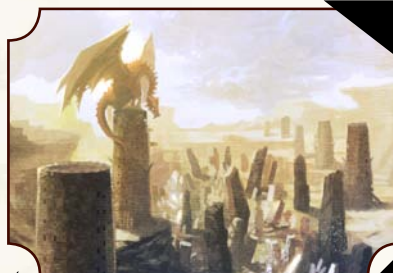
Seek out weapons to battle monster



Witness gives directions to  
monster lair



Rebuild town's defenses



Discover monster lair



Await monster's return



Monster ambushes adventurers



Adventurers ambush monster



Defeat the monster!



different flavor, such as taking a fire-themed temple and changing all encounters, spells, and monsters from fire to cold as the players go through it. If you're running a sandbox campaign and you get stuck, either because the PCs have lost track of adventure hooks or they're heading toward something you haven't thought much about, use the same tactics you'd use in a linear or nonlinear adventure (see below)—steer them in a new direction, tell them where they're headed isn't ready yet or is too powerful for them, or ask them what they expect to find there and use that to inspire what's actually there.

The one big potential trap of a sandbox game is that because there's so much to do, some players may split off from the main group for extended periods, leaving you to GM one group of players while the rest have to sit and wait until it's their turn. If this happens, steer the wandering PCs back to the main group, as dividing your attention for too long leads to bored players. Sometimes it's best to arrange a short session (or even a series of emails or messageboard posts) for just those PCs to let them deal with their plot elements and get back on track with the main plot. Sometimes the most drastic and mysterious action is best—if the wandering PCs turn up near the main group, disoriented and with no memory of the last few days except a sense of horror, you can move on with the main plot and plant seeds for what happened to that "missing time." For more information on dealing with split parties, see pages 65–66.

**Nonlinear:** If an unrestricted adventure is a blank page, a nonlinear adventure is a flow chart, as when the PCs have multiple options for engaging a storyline, they feel more in control, and the adventure starts to look more like a flow chart or series of crossroads than a straight railroad—this is the core of a nonlinear adventure. In many cases you're able to bend or add to the developments of a linear adventure based on the actions and desires of the PCs, turning it into a nonlinear adventure.

For example, in the aftermath of an orc raid on a village, the PCs may decide that tracking the orcs back to their lair is too difficult without a ranger and decide their abilities are better suited to building defenses for the town and waiting until the orcs come back. Instead of the PCs dealing with the monsters room by room, you can use those area-based monster encounters to attack the town in waves, or (if you think the PCs are up for it) to attack from two different directions. The PCs don't need to know that the encounter with the orc monster tamer and his worg pet was supposed to be area 4 of the orc lair, and perhaps the increased mobility of an open area brings an interesting twist to what may have been an otherwise routine encounter.

Nonlinear adventures require you to plan ahead for what the PCs may do, and think on your feet in case they come

up with something you weren't expecting. For example, if the PCs are intimidated by your description of the damage from the orc raid and ask about finding better weapons to help deal with the orcs, you may be momentarily caught off-guard because this sort of action wasn't in the original idea of the lair-based adventure. However, developing a stable of secondary characters and side treks lets you quickly insert an appropriate NPC for this purpose, such as the aforementioned old ranger with the *+1 orc bane arrows*—who no longer needs help with a dire wolf, and is now willing to trade the arrows for a favor to be named later (which you can use as a plot hook for the next adventure). If you're stuck for ideas when the PCs make an unexpected shift, don't be afraid to ask the players what their characters are looking for; if they ask about *orc bane arrows*, that may inspire you about a hermit ranger, but if they ask for potions or scrolls, it may inspire the idea of a lonely, half-mad cleric living at a ruined shrine, and the players don't need to know that their suggestion as to what they're looking for helped define the course of the adventure.

## RUNNING SMOOTH COMBATS

Combat is the slowest and most complex part of the game, with issues of timing, multiple creatures acting at once, and many, many dice rolls. Here are some tips for speeding up combat—things you can do and things your players can do to help.

**Be Prepared:** This sounds like a no-brainer, but the greatest source of combat slowdowns is not knowing what a creature can do or how its special ability functions. It's hard enough for the players to keep track of what their PCs can do, but as a GM you're usually running multiple creatures at once and have to keep in mind how the results of this combat affect other events in the session. Read over the stat blocks for all creatures you're using that session; if any of them have special abilities or use a universal monster rule, be sure you're familiar with those as well. If a creature has a complex spell or spell-like ability, note its page number or print out the ability to save time referencing it.

**Display the Combat Order:** See page 35 for descriptions of initiative trackers such as Paizo's *GameMastery Combat Pad* and initiative cards. If a PC knows what the current tick of the initiative clock is and knows when the participants get to act, he knows when his turn is coming up and can plan for what he wants to do. This means instead of hemming and hawing for a minute at the start of his turn, he can hem and haw during the previous player's turn and be ready when it's his turn. It also lets the PCs coordinate their actions together—while stingy GMs may see this as cheating or metagaming, remember that the turn-based initiative system is just a tool to simulate real-time combat in a way that doesn't take forever, and in



a real combat, people on the same side wouldn't be locked into only acting in a specific order without awareness of each others' intent.

**Five Second Rule:** If the players can see who's up next in the initiative order, they have no excuse for not knowing what's going on or what their characters want to do. If a PC's turn comes up and the player takes more than a few seconds to announce his character's action, skip him as if he had chosen to delay his action (*Pathfinder RPG Core Rulebook* page 203) and move on to the next creature's turn—after all, combat is hectic, and sometimes in the thick of battle you need a second or two to focus. This doesn't cost the PC any actions, so they're only penalized their position in the initiative, and it hopefully encourages them to pay more attention to what's happening. Note that speeding up combat in general means players get to act more often and are less likely to get distracted between their turns, so the rest of these tips should make this one less necessary. Note also that you should let players know in advance that you're going to do this, as springing it on them unexpectedly can seem vindictive.

**Plan and Combine Dice Rolls:** Rolling attacks and damage separately takes twice as long as rolling them all together. Save time by coordinating your attack roll dice with your damage roll dice so you can roll them at the same time, and encourage players to do the same. For example, if the PCs are fighting four orcs, each with a falchion, get four different-colored d20s and a pair of matching d4s for each orc, then roll all 12 dice at the same time; if the red d20 and green d20 are hits, you know to look at the red d4s and the green d4s and ignore the blue d4s and purple d4s. If the PCs are fighting a dire lion, you can color-coordinate the bite's d8 die with one d20 and two claw d6 dice with two other d20s, and roll all the dice at once.

Be aware, however, that while rolling attack and damage at the same time is always a good idea, rolling all your attacks at once can be problematic if you (or your players) want to split the attacks between multiple opponents—if you don't carefully assign each attack before you roll, it's tempting to say that two of those three attacks which would have missed the main villain were actually directed at his weaker henchmen, whether or not that was your original intention.

**Tokens:** There are dozens of conditions in the game that can affect a creature's behavior, possible actions, or combat stats, and it's easy to lose track of them during gameplay. One way to help with this is using tokens next to or underneath a creature on the battlefield or the displayed initiative tracker. The simplest tokens are torn pieces of paper with the condition written on them. Alternatively, you can use glass beads, colored plastic disks (possibly even magnetic ones for easy stacking), flat

wooden squares, or even fancier tools. Several companies make variants of these, allowing you to customize them to your needs, such as a yellow marker for panicked, green for nauseated, red for enraged, and so on. Tokens also let you single out unusual creatures when unique miniatures are unavailable ("the orc with the purple marker has tentacles instead of arms") and help the players identify targets in combat without having to ask which opponent is which ("I attack the panicked orc before he runs away and alerts anyone to our presence").

## BUILDING ENCOUNTERS

One of the ironies of being a GM is that it's not your job to create a fair fight between the PCs and monsters—if it were a fair fight, the PCs would lose half the time, and that makes for a very short adventuring career. Consider a "fair" fight between four 6th-level PCs and four 6th-level NPCs; the NPCs are a CR 9 encounter, which has a good chance of killing one of the PCs, but the PCs are likely to kill *all* the NPCs. This is how it should be—your job is to create encounters that are *challenging*, which means the PCs are expected to win, but should have to work for it. The following section gives advice on building encounters that are challenging, memorable, effective, and interesting.

## Play to the PCs' Strengths

As a GM, you should know your players and their PCs, and create encounters that suit their play style and show off what their characters can do. If the fighter's player likes to jump into the middle of groups of monsters and hack away, be sure to include such encounters every so often so that player gets to do what he likes best. If he has the Cleave feat, set up situations where he can cleave an adjacent foe; if he has Great Cleave, make sure every now and then he can go cleave-crazy on a horde of weak opponents. If the sorcerer's player is a tactician and likes to use ranged spells and enchantments, put her against charm-vulnerable opponents using ranged attacks so she has perfect targets for her style of play. If the monk's player is a fan of Wuxia films and likes the extreme-cinematic style of combat, put opponents on ledges so he can use high jump, or enemies at the bottoms of cliffs so he can get there quickly using slow fall, and make sure some enemies aren't immune to stunning fist.

This means you should keep an eye on what feats and spells your players select as their PCs level up, and on what magic items you award them or they create. If the fighter takes Great Cleave at level 5 and only gets to use it once by the time he's reached level 10, it's as if he wasted that feat choice, and that's not fun. You want the players to use the abilities that make them excited about the game. Reward them for playing well by letting their characters flex their muscles.



This is not to say that you shouldn't challenge the players to try different tactics. Put the fighter who likes being surrounded in a situation where he has to guard a narrow bridge and can't let anyone get past him, or have him fight monsters that get flanking bonuses or sneak attacks that make him rely on terrain or the other PCs to avoid getting killed. Let the tactician-sorcerer take control of a minion. The trick is to teach other styles of play (or at least present them as options) without them feeling forced.

### High- and Low-CR Encounters

The game expects that for about half of the encounters the PCs face, the CR of the encounter is equal to the average party level (APL). Obviously the rest of the encounters are higher or lower than the average party level, but what is too low or too high?

Table 12–1: Encounter Design (*Pathfinder RPG Core Rulebook* page 397) only covers encounters from APL –1 to APL +3, so that CR range is the usual limit for most encounters. After all, for a party of four 6th-level PCs, an “easy” encounter (APL –1) is a “rival” group of four 2nd-level NPCs (CR 1 each, +4 for 4 creatures = CR 5); if beating up NPCs one-third your level is easy, beating up even weaker creatures is more like bullying than adventuring. The risk of using very easy encounters is that the players may grow bored—they know their characters can deal with the monsters, but have to go through the motions of making attack and damage rolls without the excitement or risk from a “real” encounter. (Much like a “god mode” setting in a video game, the novelty of easily destroying all opponents gets old after a few encounters.) In some cases it's acceptable or even a good idea to lead off an adventure with a very easy encounter—for example, if the players need a morale boost or have power-boosting abilities that require some kills to start functioning—but in most cases you don't want to create encounters below APL –1.

The value of APL +3 should be a fairly hard limit for difficult encounters unless you want there to be a considerable risk of PC death. Once you're beyond APL +3, the PCs' ability to pose a threat to a monster dwindles, especially if the encounter is a single powerful creature rather than multiple ones on par with the APL. In most cases, this is because using a higher-CR monster may cross one of the invisible “break points” in monster design where the creature's defenses and abilities assume the PCs are a certain level and have access to certain spells or gear, such as magic weapons, spells to remove ability damage, items neutralizing poisons or disease, or even simple things like being able to hit the monster's AC or meet its saving throw DCs. If the PCs lack a critical spell or piece of gear, a difficult encounter may be nearly impossible.

For example, a succubus is a CR 7 encounter, and is an “epic” encounter for a group of four 4th-level PCs. Most

PCs at that level lack cold iron or good weapons, and thus have to deal with the demon's DR for every attack. The PCs may have difficulty overcoming her SR 18, energy resistances, and immunities, thus spellcasters will be frustrated. The PCs have even odds at best of resisting her at-will *charm monster* and *suggestion* (usually taking one PC out of the fight), and have to work very hard to make up for the temporary hit points from her at-will 6d6 *vampiric touch*.

It's entirely possible to have an exciting and challenging fight (CR equal to APL +1 or +2) without overwhelming the PCs. An “epic” fight may last two or three hours of real time—a memorable fight if the PCs win, but a depressing slog if they can't. It's generally better to keep combat encounters to about an hour—that way you can get two or three encounters into one night of gaming, and make more progress in the adventure or campaign than a single, longer fight. If the fight you've given the PCs ends up too tough for them, don't forget to remind them that they can run away, or you can cheat a little bit and suddenly treat the monster as if it had the young creature template (–2 on all rolls), which might be enough to turn the tide in the PCs' favor—after all, you want the PCs to win, because that means everyone gets to keep playing. Killing them with an accidentally-too-hard encounter is no fun for anyone.

### Solo Monsters vs. Groups of Monsters

Sometimes there's the temptation to use one powerful monster instead of multiple weaker monsters. The main drawback to this encounter-designing tactic is that the PCs outnumber the monster; even in the optimal situation where the monster attacks first, a group of four PCs gets to attack four times before the monster gets another turn, and with good planning it's entirely possible for the PCs to kill the monster in one round. Using multiple monsters forces the PCs to either focus their attention on one opponent (giving the remaining opponents more opportunities to attack) or engage all of the opponents (preventing an immediate slaughter). Using multiple monsters also lets you set up special abilities like sneak attack that are difficult to implement with a single monster, and means you can distribute the monsters' actions throughout the round (whether by rolling separate initiatives or using the delay or ready actions) and react more than once per round to what the PCs do.

Remember that, as a GM, you have tricks up your sleeve, and if the PCs are having an easy time dealing with a solitary monster, it's all right to send in reinforcements. An intelligent NPC may have bodyguards en route. A brutish monster may have a handler or trainer within earshot of its cries for help. Even an unintelligent creature like an ooze or big zombie may benefit from the arrival of wandering monsters.



## Winning Monster Combos

Some monsters are best used in groups or with other creatures that complement or augment their abilities. A single derro probably has a hard time using its sneak attack, but a group of them can easily set up flanking situations. Tieflings have fire resistance 5, making them handy allies for a fire priest with *burning hands* or a fire mephit; alternatively, a tiefling cleric controlling a gang of burning skeletons is all but immune to their area damage. Creatures with spell-like abilities can cast them on minions or on a leader. For example, a dark naga or spirit naga can cast *cat's grace*, *invisibility*, or *displacement* on its allies; a spirit naga can even turn itself invisible and cast cure spells on its allies. Given time, a succubus's profane gift ability can bolster every single guard, priest, and lieutenant in an evil fortress.

Monster abilities can also complement hazards or traps; a flying monster ignores difficult terrain, floor pits, or patches of green slime. Monsters with damage reduction are immune to arrow traps and most spear traps; those immune to poison can ignore the danger of poisonous traps or even rooms with inherently toxic air, such as a sulfurous volcanic vent. Using monsters intelligently like this helps create fun and memorable encounters, as well as challenges PCs to try new tactics.

## Don't Stymie the PCs

This is another way of saying "play to the PCs' strengths," but is worth reiterating. Part of the fun of playing is leveling a character and gaining new abilities. If you create encounters that circumvent the PCs' newest abilities, it takes away some of the fun of the game because it's like they didn't gain all the benefits of their level. For example, if the PC wizard just reached level 5 and learned the *fireball* spell, you may be tempted to throw some fire-resistant or fire-immune encounters at the PCs to compensate for this ability—which makes the 5th-level wizard feel like a 4th-level wizard. However, thousands of RPG campaigns have survived PCs who can cast *fireball*; it's better for a GM to embrace the new ability than fear it. Give the wizard a cluster of minions to blast so he feels powerful—or set up an encounter where he has to choose between blasting a bunch of minions or using the spell on just the boss.

Some monsters are designed to be more challenging to certain character classes. Golems are immune to almost all magic, some outsiders have very high damage reduction, oozes are immune to critical hits and sneak attacks, and so on. If the PCs end up facing

these kinds of creatures over and over again (especially in a short amount of time), the stymied players can easily get frustrated—after the third encounter with stone golems, the sorcerer and wizard are likely to give up and want to stop playing. If you're going to use a lot of these creatures (say, in a themed dungeon), you have two options to prevent player frustration.

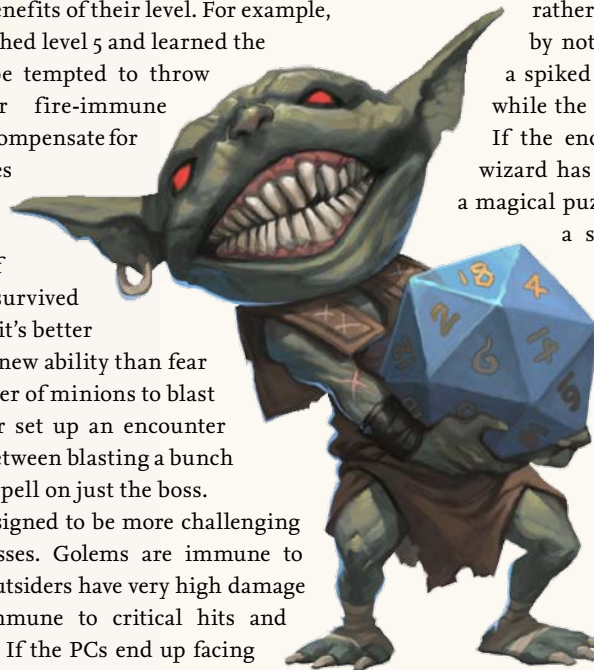
**Give the Character a Tool:** There are dozens of limited-use items in the game, plus consumables like potions and scrolls. If you know one PC is going to have a problem with an upcoming encounter, drop a helpful item into an earlier encounter or even an earlier adventure—an item that lets the character be useful in the battle despite the monster's resistances. If a PC druid has no magic weapons and you're planning an iron golem encounter, give her a *golembane scarab* so she can better attack it in wild shape. If a PC rogue has no bludgeoning weapons to use against a black pudding, let her find a low-level *wand of magic missile* and blast away using Use Magic Device. Many items and spells in the game are designed to deal with unusual encounters, but don't see play very much because PCs prefer general-utility magic; introducing a cheap or expendable item like this gives smart players something to fall back on if their primary strategy isn't effective or if they run into an encounter where the unusual tool is exactly what they need.

**Present Other Options:** Just because the encounter involves a monster doesn't mean that all the PCs have to focus on defeating that monster. Create another task that helps overcome the monster, prepares for the next encounter, or disables a parallel threat during the fight. For example, in a fight against a bunch of black puddings,

rather than having the rogue frustrated by not being able to use sneak attack, add a spiked wall trap that the rogue can disable while the other characters deal with the oozes.

If the encounter has an iron golem and the wizard has no electricity attacks to slow it, put a magical puzzle-crystal in the room that unlocks a secret room if the wizard makes a

Knowledge (arcana) check. If the party cleric channels negative energy and the other PCs are fighting undead (meaning the cleric would heal enemies if she tried to channel), include a door made of fused bone that only opens from a focused blast of negative energy. If the opponent is resistant to physical attacks, put a chained prisoner in the room that the barbarian, fighter, or paladin can rescue while the spellcasters deal with the threat.





## UNUSUAL CAMPAIGNS

Most GMs eventually toy with the idea of running a theme campaign, such as an all-dwarf or all-elf campaign. While most of these have no game effect, below are several variant campaigns that require special consideration when building encounters.

### No Healers

Whether you're running a low-magic campaign or just have a group of players uninterested in playing healers, a lack of curative magic in the party is a big deviation from the norm. Without a healer, monsters that deal high damage have a greater risk of killing a PC—there's no healer to step in and compensate for a critical hit—so you should rely on weaker monsters that don't deal damage in large increments. If there is magic in the campaign, the PCs can at least rely on potions (and scrolls and wands, given an adequate Use Magic Device bonus), but this forces them to decide between attacking and healing each round. Without reliable access to any healing magic (such as in a historical campaign), the PCs must resort to nonmagical methods like the Heal skill, or perhaps limited-use legendary items or quasi-magical items derived from unusual monster parts. They should also consider using more defensive tactics, such as taking the Dodge and Combat Expertise feats, in order to raise their Armor Classes and reduce the number of successful attacks against them. Keep in mind that without healing, PCs generally have no way to deal with curses, diseases, poisons, and other afflictions, so use creatures with those abilities sparingly or make mundane methods of overcoming such dangers a more significant and readily available part of your campaign.

### No Spellcasters

Though technically a broader example of the “no healers” variant, a campaign with no spellcasters at all has an entirely different set of problems. Most adventures assume that a typical party has one arcane caster and one divine caster; without any magic at their disposal, the PCs may have a hard time dealing with monsters that are resistant to physical damage but vulnerable to magic. Even something as simple as a swarm (immune to weapons but vulnerable to area attacks) becomes a significant challenge when the PCs don't have magic. Conversely, an otherwise challenge-appropriate monster that has a high spell resistance may actually end up weaker than a “normal” creature because its CR assumes the PC spellcasters are going to have trouble—a hindrance a no-spellcaster party completely ignores. Keep an eye out for monsters with high DR, high SR, or vulnerabilities to magical attacks (including cold and fire vulnerability); these are likely to be more or less difficult than expected.

### All Spellcasters

This section is more about a party with no melee classes, rather than a party where every PC is a spellcaster—a group of four clerics or paladins is technically an all-spellcaster party, but they don't have the sort of problems that four sorcerers, wizards, or even bards face. Such a party is the opposite of the no-spellcasters group; DR is less important, SR and resistances are more important, and creatures with nearly universal magic immunity are a serious problem. Golems, for example, can't be damaged by most direct-attack spells, and even though a stone golem is CR 11, it may be able to eliminate an entire party of 12th-level wizards, especially given a wizard's low AC and hit points compared to a melee class. The golem is an “easy” challenge on paper, but more dangerous in execution. Of course, smart players will use summoned monsters and charmed enemies to take the brunt of physical attacks, and a smart GM can stave off a lot of player frustration by providing such things to the PCs (even in the form of scrolls or wands) if the players don't think of it themselves; even a few summoned orcs at the start of an adventure can help an all-caster party survive.

### Small Party

Sometimes you have a player who can't make it to this week's session; sometimes you only know two other gamers in your area. Either way, having a small party presents you with some unique challenges. With fewer characters, a battle can shift against them very quickly—one unconscious, charmed, or held PC in a group of three is a loss of 33% of the party's resources compared to 25% in a standard party. Often, one or more PCs may have to take on multiple roles (melee character, skill character, arcane damage-dealer, or divine healer), and as the game rewards specialization, this means these hybrid characters are slightly less effective at either task than two focused characters would be. Fewer characters means it's more likely they're clustered together, and thus are more vulnerable to area attacks. When dealing with a small party, temperance is the key—start with smaller, weaker encounters, and give the players time to get the feel of their group's vulnerabilities. Once the players have an idea about their party dynamics, test them with encounters closer to their average party level, and eventually you'll find a good CR range that suits their abilities and is still challenging.

### Large Party

A party of eight PCs is a much different “problem” for a GM: they're able to handle more difficult encounters and more of them per day, often by expending disproportionately fewer resources than a four-person party. It would be



easy to make the assumption that because doubling the number of monsters in an encounter adds +2 to the CR, a party of double the normal number of PCs can routinely handle encounters where the CR is equal to the APL +2. This isn't always true, however, mainly because higher-CR monsters tend to have built-in assumptions about party gear (see High- and Low-CR Encounters on page 41). These differences are especially evident with a large number of weaker PCs.

A good low-level example of this is the barghest; it's only CR 4, and in theory, if four 2nd-level PCs can handle a CR 2 encounter, eight 2nd-level PCs should be able to kill a CR 4 monster. However, most 2nd-level characters aren't going to have a magic weapon, and therefore the barghest's DR 5/magic absorbs a lot of incoming damage. Also, a barghest's average damage per round is 20.5, assuming it hits with all three attacks (and with a +10 attack bonus for all three, that's a safe bet against 2nd-level PCs); while that's dangerous for 4th-level PCs (where a typical fighter has about 40 hit points), it's murder for 2nd-level PCs (where a typical fighter has about 22 hit points). In this case, the battle becomes a race to wear down the monster as soon as possible because it's killing a PC almost every round.

It's perfectly fine for a large group of PCs to have an easier time dealing with challenges where the CR is equal to the APL. In general, it's better to use multiple weak monsters than one powerful monster. This gives each PC multiple opponents to choose from, gives you more creatures to play with, and keeps PC mortality low.

## VARIANT PLAY EXPERIENCES

Not every game session involves half a dozen people sitting around a table, with dice and character sheets in hand. Other popular play experiences include solo campaigns, convention play, and online games.

### Solo Campaigns

A solo campaign—sometimes called a duet campaign—consists of one GM and one player. Such an arrangement is often perfect for spouses, roommates, siblings, and any other situation where players are scarce. In addition, a solo campaign is ideal for pursuing the kind of plotline that excludes other players—for example, an in-character romance, or a character who wants to build a business or carry out nefarious activities.

For better or worse, a solo campaign centers on the player's character. Thus, it's best to start with the character concept and build a storyline around that. For example, if your player wants a seafaring character, your campaign should focus on the ocean. You and the player should agree on the basics, then you can design adventures accordingly.

While this kind of campaign obligates you to cater to the tastes of your player, it also frees you from worrying about whether the other players are having fun—if your player's enjoying it, you're 100% successful. Still, this doesn't mean you need to focus exclusively on things you know your player likes, as that can rob you of the chance to find new things he or she might enjoy. Lay your campaign's foundation on known tastes, but feel free to explore.

Having only one PC poses some difficulties with standard adventures. A solo PC is incredibly vulnerable, not just to combat encounters, but to simple problems like falling into a pit—if the PC can't make the required Climb check or get out of the pit with magic, he's basically stuck. Likewise, a party of four PCs can deal with a monster that casts *charm person* on one party member, but a solo PC who fails that save is done for (unless you have a plan for dealing with the charmed PC shaking off the effect later and escaping). A good example to follow is a movie where there's just one protagonist; combat encounters are usually either multiple weak opponents that are only a threat to the hero in numbers (and the hero often controls the battlefield so he can deal with them one or two at a time) or a single, more difficult opponent such as a lieutenant or the main villain.

One way to compensate for the lack of other party members is to expand the character's range of abilities beyond what the game normally allows. As long as the character won't ever be played in a "normal" campaign, there's really nothing wrong with this tactic. Another option is to introduce one or more NPCs with the appropriate abilities, friends or sidekicks of the hero which can be played by either you or the player. You could also use magic items to help fill the gap. At some point, however, you may still need to adjust your adventure to eliminate challenges that the player simply cannot meet.

Stealth, skill, and roleplaying encounters are much more common in solo play. Just remember to have a backup plan should the PC fail to accomplish a goal, such as an alternate route around a trap, a quick combat resolution to a failed stealth situation, or a temporary way to neutralize or contain a dangerous opponent.

### Convention Play

Conventions are hotbeds of gaming opportunity. While many RPG events available at game conventions are single-session adventures, timed dungeon runs, or tournaments, others are run through organized play groups like the Pathfinder Society which allow players to keep the same character over the course of several games (or conventions!), accumulating experience, gear, and notoriety. Campaigns that operate via game conventions and other public events lose a great deal of the camaraderie of a standard campaign



due to the infrequency of sessions and the variable player mix, but such events can be perfect for players without a lot of free time or other players nearby. For more information on Pathfinder Society, the official organized play group for the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game, visit [paizo.com/pathfindersociety](http://paizo.com/pathfindersociety).

### Online Games

Since the birth of the Internet, GMs have been successfully taking their campaigns online. With an online campaign, you can play with people from anywhere in the world without leaving your own home. You can once again game with friends who have moved away, or make new friends from faraway places.

The two most common formats for online campaigns are messageboard games (which can also be conducted over email, if less conveniently) and live chat. In a messageboard game, the GM posts a description of events and asks for actions, and players post their replies. Though this method is slower, it carries no scheduling problems—players simply log on when they can and add their responses.

Live chat brings the play experience closer to that of a tabletop game. Everyone logs into the same chat channel at the same time. A live chat game moves slower than a tabletop one, but much faster than a messageboard game. Chat-based games require scheduling, however, and can be a significant headache when you have players from different time zones. Furthermore, absences may be more frequent until you get a solid group, as players are often less committed to an Internet game than an in-person engagement, but logs of missed game sessions allow absentees to quickly catch up on the action.

### FIXING A “BROKEN” GAME

Roleplaying games require flexibility and must be open to interpretation. Sometimes this means one element of a campaign can overshadow the rest of it, or a simple mistake can grow over time until it's too big to ignore. Fortunately, there are ways to fix these problems and get your game back on track. Remember that while this section is about things you can do to fix a broken game, you and the players are partners in the storytelling, and talking to the players about the problem can give you solutions you may not have thought of yourself.

**Too Much Treasure:** This trap is the easiest for a GM to fall into, but fortunately is also the easiest to correct. A few too many encounters with treasure-rich opponents such as NPCs with classes can mean that the PCs end up with significantly more wealth than the suggested value for their level. Too much wealth means they can afford to buy or craft multiple magic items to enhance their characters beyond the expected power level, allowing them to more

easily defeat other opponents and collect even more treasure. See Chapter 5: Rewards for more information on how to solve this problem.

**Gamebreaker Element:** Maybe the druid's spell-enhanced animal companion is more deadly than the party fighter, or the wizard's new staff allows the PCs to easily bypass or decimate encounters. Maybe the bard's new feat is letting him use his astronomical Diplomacy score to talk NPCs and enemies into almost anything. This sort of thing can either make the game boring because there's no challenge, or else make it too risky for other PCs because you have to make encounters engaging for the most powerful character. For tips on how to handle this, see Overpowered PCs on pages 50–51.

**No Motivation to Adventure:** If the PCs all have good alignments, it's easy to motivate them to go on an adventure; just dangle an evil overlord, undead army, or threatened village in front of them and let nature take its course. However, without altruistic motivations, sometimes PCs have to be prodded into action. Greed is always a powerful motivator; the lure of incredible wealth is a draw for many PCs, and throwing out a few plot hooks relating to a fabulous treasure should get them started. Other PCs want power; a frontier castle that's been taken over by monsters, a strange cult, or an enemy nation is a nice prize, especially if the local ruler is willing to grant land and title to those who reclaim it. Other PCs want fame; give them the opportunity to slay a fell beast that has been murdering folk for generations, or break the back of the thieves' guild. Look to history, fiction, television, and movies for other motivations—love, jealousy, vengeance, and fear are all common story elements that drive characters to their destinies. If you're not sure what would motivate the PCs, ask the players what their characters want and find a way to incorporate that into the campaign.

**When PCs Miss a Clue:** Any time you leave the course of an adventure to a die roll, you risk PCs—and thus players—missing something important, whether it's a secret door, a hidden panel in a treasure chest, or a failed Knowledge roll. Fortunately, you control the entire game world, and it's easy to point the PCs at the clue again. If the PCs missed a secret door, let them find a rough treasure map of the dungeon with the door clearly marked (on the back of a scroll they found earlier is a nice trick), or they can hear about it from another group of adventurers. Cohorts are good for spotting overlooked secret compartments in treasure chests, as is a sharp-eyed town merchant. A forgotten reference to an ancient king, priest, or wizard can turn up in an old prayer book or during spell research. While the PCs may be the focus of the campaign world, there are countless secondary characters and events that can put them back on the right track if they get lost.



## GM CONSIDERATIONS

One of the game's delights—and frustrations—is that it changes over time. Every session runs a little bit differently, and whether it's new abilities, new characters, or changes to the gaming group itself, a good GM needs to know how to roll with the punches.

### GAME CHANGERS

When you play a campaign long enough, the rules change. The characters that once limped into the village to beg for healing now use magic to cross continents, consult with extradimensional powers, and rescue their allies from death itself.

Alertness is your best tool as a Game Master. Keep one eye on what's ahead—what abilities you'll need to account for as you plan your future machinations. Whenever you're dealing with new mechanical elements, you should have three goals:

- Don't get surprised
- Don't let the new ability run amok
- Don't render the new ability useless

Players are inherent “surprise generators,” and being surprised by their ingenuity is one of the joys of being a Game Master. You don't need to consider every possible power combination. But when you see a game-changing power coming down the road, take a moment to think like a player. What will Bob want to do once he can turn invisible? Once you answer that, you won't be surprised (or at least as surprised) and can move on to the other two goals.

“Don't let the new ability run amok” and “don't render the new ability useless” are two sides of the same coin. Your fundamental job as Game Master is to provide entertainment, challenge, and above all, balance. Players have a natural desire to play with their new toys—you helped instill that desire in them when you put all those interesting challenges in their way in the first place. Now you have a responsibility to make sure that one player doesn't trivialize the game's challenges, for himself or for the whole table.

Below are some potentially difficult game elements, and some thoughts on how to manage them.

**Invisibility:** There's an inherent mischief to invisibility. Consider *The Invisible Man*, or the iconic example of Bilbo in *The Hobbit*. Let the players have their mischief—it frequently costs you nothing, and they're having a good time—and deploy the traditional countermeasures (divination magic, traps, creatures that don't use sight) only at points where you want to preserve the challenge. If invisibility isn't available to everyone in the party, that helps puts a brake on their invisible ambitions in two ways.

First, invisible means invisible—the other party members can't find the invisible PC for healing, communicate silently, or know where she actually went when she said she'd scout ahead. Second, for every sneaky gal in the party, there's usually a guy buried under layers of clanking plate armor as well. That guy is the Game Master's best friend, providing warning to enemies. The invisible player can probably choose her position and get a surprise attack in, but the presence of loud, visible companions ensures that the advantage of invisibility will be fleeting unless the group splits.

When the whole party can turn invisible, brace yourself for the entire table choosing to sneak past encounters you spent hours preparing. As long as they're truly quiet and don't run into monsters who can counter their invisibility, let them do so. You can recycle those encounters later, and it's probably better for everyone's fun to respect the party's choice to bypass. It's possible they're using invisibility to tell you they'd rather be doing something else. So move along, but save those encounters for later use.

**Flying:** Your immediate concerns are more tactical when flying shows up at your table—do melee-only monsters get slaughtered like bison on the Great Plains? You'll need to consider the monster mix in your encounters more carefully so that the players don't just fly above the dire wolves and drop rocks on them. But there's nothing wrong with letting the aerial advantage be an advantage every once in a while. Let the flying PC trivialize an encounter or a trap—there are always more of both coming down the line.

Unlike most other game-changing powers, flying comes with a hidden danger to players: altitude. When a ground-bound player gets stunned, knocked out, or dropped to negative hit points, he slumps to the ground. Depending on the exact nature of the flight power, the consequences for a flying character might be far more severe. If a character runs out of hit points and can't fly anymore, impact with the ground will almost certainly finish him off.

When a player learns to fly, it's worth a brief conversation with that player. Show him the math: “If you reach  $o$  hit points when you're  $x$  feet in the air, you'll take  $y$  damage on average, which leaves you at negative  $z$  hit points—dead, in other words.” Once he's got a grasp on the inherent danger, the player can take calculated risks, and it adds even more drama to a desperate battle in the sky.

**Teleportation:** Teleportation raises an issue similar to invisibility: once the whole group can do it, they can bypass content. And as with invisibility, if the players have done a proper job of playing by the rules, let them have their way. It's likely not that the players want to skip the encounters you've made, but rather that they're abundantly eager to get to the other encounters you've made. Tap into that eagerness! (And don't forget to recycle the work on those skipped encounters later.)



Teleportation can also challenge your preparation and ability to improvise. If your players can open a portal to the throne rooms in any of the Hundred Sacred Kingdoms, how do you cope with the mountains of preparation that come with unfettered, instant travel?

You improvise and cheat, of course. You don't have a hundred throne rooms (with a hundred high-level monarchs, royal guard complements, and sets of court intrigues) prepared. You have one prepared, notes for a second, and a good idea for a third. You rename your prepared stuff on the fly—the Peaceable Kingdom of Jarrach becomes the Shadow Duchy of Sindrauta. Prince Karelius becomes Countess Kar'than'draya. The royal guards become elves—and you just describe them as having pointy ears, because nobody really cares that their Perception scores are +2 higher. You've got better ways to spend your precious time, and your players will never know the difference.

For that second kingdom the PCs teleport to on a lark, go with your notes. Steal stat blocks as needed, from any source. A devil's stat block works just fine for the sinister seneschal who's rumored to consort with dark powers. Likewise for the third kingdom. And if you feel like the PCs are teleporting around too rapidly for you to keep up—well, you have a whole book full of monsters right in front of you, don't you?

**Lie/Evil Detection:** This magic can be exceedingly troublesome, especially in mystery adventures, yet instead of banning it outright, your best alternative is to stick with the three goals. First, don't be surprised. When your NPC schemers start scheming, consider how the players will put divination magic to use. Second, make sure that *discern lies* and *detect evil* don't run amok. You have magical countermeasures, of course, but save those for "this guy absolutely must be able to fool the PCs" moments. When you can, use low-key solutions such as:

- The NPC can use nonmagical but expert means (high Bluff score, natural defenses against divination) to thwart the PCs.
- The NPC can tell half-truths and leave the really incendiary stuff unsaid.
- The NPC gets caught lying, but that doesn't help the PCs uncover the truth.
- The NPC is serving evil under duress or is otherwise sympathetic.

- The PCs spot the lie, but jump to the wrong conclusion—they know that "troops are marching to Declanburg" is a lie, but it's a lie because the troops are already there, not because they're marching elsewhere.

NPCs—at least some of them, anyway—know how the world works. It's reasonable to assume that just as you thought about what your players would do with divination magic, so too will an NPC consider what meddling PCs might do and prepare accordingly.

Third, let the magic work—as a clue delivery system for you. PCs sometimes make astounding deductive leaps, but sometimes they ignore the blindingly obvious. Use *discern lies* and *detect evil* to get important information in the players' hands fast. Players might find a traditional interrogation of an NPC riveting, but they're unlikely to find the fifth such interrogation as interesting. Put a little divination magic to work, and watch your table quickly get the information it needs to get on with the fun.

More information on the use of spells in mystery adventures can be found in *Mysteries and Investigations* in Chapter 8, pages 246–247.

**Remote Viewing:** *Clairvoyance*/*clairaudience* and other scrying magic poses many of the same issues as teleportation. On the one hand, remote viewing is less work for you because the PCs aren't interacting with the NPCs and places they're observing. But on the other hand, remote viewing is generally easier and less risky than teleportation, so PCs are more likely to employ it.

By now, you're likely accustomed to the familiar refrain of "think like the players," and are largely concerned about remote viewing in two ways:

**Reconnaissance:** PCs use *clairvoyance* and similar spells to get a look at adventure sites beforehand. On balance, this usually works in your favor, because players will then plan a route (often when you're within earshot) that tells you exactly what they want to experience. That makes your job easier—now you just provide encounters that either support or confound their expectations. That's the beauty of





remote viewing—it's more of an information trade than the players realize.

**Espionage:** Players love to scry on the Big Bad Evil Guy when he's going about his sinister business in his chambers. This is a test of your ability to improvise—you've got to describe an interesting scene on the spot. Espionage-style spying can also be a clue delivery system for you. Decide what information you want to impart, surround it with enough dialogue and detail to make it believable, then get on with the fun.

But what if you don't have specific information to deliver, and in fact you're trying to keep the PCs and the antagonist separated for a while? If you don't want PCs tuning in at the dramatic moment, then you have two choices: describe a realistic but utterly mundane scene in the villain's life, or come up with a scene that refers at least obliquely to the ongoing narrative.

When the PCs are scrying, the players are pure spectators—a recipe for boredom for everyone but you. It might be realistic for most espionage-style scrying to reveal the mundane, day-to-day life of the villain (and a nice reminder if the players seem to be overusing it), but that doesn't do anyone any good. So accept the blow to realism and give the PCs tangible—if sometimes obscure—information with each scrying attempt. Even a mundane conversation about troop movements can have a little hook (it takes 2 hours to reach the northern watchtower) that makes the players say “Aha!” They might never go to the northern watchtower, but in that moment, they get a little “I know something I'm not supposed to know” feeling—and that can propel them into action.

**Portents and Omens:** Few things are as difficult as predicting the campaign's future. How can you tell a player her future when the campaign's conclusion might make her a demigod—or a string of bad rolls might make her a halfling-kebab on an ogre's spear?

First, do what real-life oracles and fortune-tellers do all the time: couch your predictions in symbolism and metaphor. Don't say “Your father won't give up the throne for you.” Say “Winter refuses to acknowledge spring.” It sounds more ominous—in the literal sense of the word—and gives the campaign's plot some much-needed elbow room.

Next, be specific, not general. At first, this advice seems counterintuitive. Isn't a general prophecy easier to keep than a specific one? That's true, but specific details are easier to insert into the narrative. Don't say “You shall become the king of the elves.” Say “When winter's moon is high, the fey will dance to the tune you call.” You have a likely fulfillment of that prophecy in mind (a formal dance at the coronation ceremony), but if the campaign goes off the rails, there are other ways to make that prediction come true. Specific details have another benefit: they make the players feel like they're getting their money's worth out of

the prophecy. If you try too hard to leave yourself room with a prophecy, you risk a prophecy so vague that the players find it useless or feel deliberately cheated. You're smart enough to engineer something interesting involving the fey near a full moon in winter—even if you aren't sure what it is yet. But based on that detail, the players will think that the oracle—and by extension you—has it all figured out.

If you have to hit the reset button, make it obvious that you're doing so. The campaign may have gone in a bold, player-driven direction that you weren't anticipating. And when it did, all that talk of destiny from the crazy lady back in the starting village was invalidated or became completely irrelevant. If you feel like you'd have to stretch the narrative too far to cover an out-of-date portent, then make it clear in the story of the world that the old destiny no longer applies. Perhaps the stars rearrange themselves in the sky (due to the PCs' actions, ideally), and now everyone's fate is uncertain, or can be perceived anew. Maybe the goddess of destiny appears and says that the trickster god has stolen threads from her loom of fate—including the threads that represent the PCs. You're operating in a realm where anything is possible, so avail yourself of that power.

## EMERGENCY GAME PREP

Sometimes day-to-day life conquers even the most committed Game Master. You meant to get that dungeon ready, but then the boss/spouse/kids/friends/lottery office called, and now everyone's gathering at the table. It's time for emergency game preparation.

Sometimes you'll need emergency game prep in the middle of a session, too. The party may get an urge to visit the Astral Plane. They may give the all-powerful scroll to the obviously disguised villain, just because he asked to look at it.

When this happens, don't try to find the right section of the book to reread. Every minute counts! In these situations, it's good to have an emergency game kit containing raw adventure fuel. That's stuff like:

**Stat Blocks:** Any opposition appropriate for the PCs works, even if it doesn't “belong” in that part of the campaign world. Coming up with reasons for monsters to hang out together and fight the PCs takes less time than flipping through the books to find the perfect monsters. That's particularly true in an emergency situation where you're likely going to “re-skin” the monsters anyway. That armored knight? You can just describe him as a hill giant and your players will never know. Then you can make him into a dire wolf, or a swarm of killer bees, and still your players may never know. Sure, you'll know that the damage dice should have been different, the skills were completely irrelevant, the Armor Class was wrong, and the special abilities were made up on the spot, but you're the only one who sees the stat block. Everyone else is just rolling dice and having fun.

**Ten Proper Names:** Write down 10 names out of thin air—names that have a “mouth feel” appropriate to the setting. You’ve now got your answer when the PCs ask what the name of the bartender is, or the name of the river they just crossed, or the magic words that open the portal. Nothing makes you look like you’ve prepared more than a confident answer to the “What’s his name?” question.

**A Basic Flow Chart:** Take a blank piece of paper and draw roughly 10 bubbles on it, scattered around the paper. Then draw some lines between them, trying to make interesting clusters but not connecting everything to everything else. Now you’ve got a rudimentary dungeon map and a basic event flowchart—whatever you need in the next few hours. If you use the flow chart as a map, of course it won’t have proper dimensions and everything laid out in proper architectural fashion. But your concerns are more basic. You want to keep track of the rooms so that when the PCs retreat from the map room, they come back to the observatory, not the barracks they visited two encounters ago.

Remember, thrust matters more than direction. As you improvise your way through a session, it’s tempting to worry about whether you’re making decisions—especially plot and setting decisions—that will come back to haunt you later. Ignore those concerns; you’ll have plenty of time to tie up loose ends, patch over plot holes, and bring the players back to the main plotline later. You care that the PCs are doing something interesting. The pause while you figure out the perfect encounter diminishes everyone’s fun more than the out-of-place detail or the tangential plotline ever could.

## TPKS

It’s a constant threat, but every so often it happens for real: every single PC is dead, petrified, or possessed by demon lords.

That’s a TPK—a total party kill.

The good news is that, as a Game Master, you’ll probably see the TPK coming before the players will, simply because you’ve got more information. You’re seeing all the dice and stat blocks. But the bad news is that the players will be demoralized, and possibly angry with you or each other—and they’ll be looking to you, the guy at the head of the table, for guidance. You have the power to “fix” the broken table while making sure that the TPK stings a little so that the PCs might be more cautious next time.

For starters, give everyone a break once the last PC falls. Either end the session or at least send everyone to the kitchen for snacks. Some “Monday morning quarterback” analysis is inevitable and probably cathartic, but the players don’t need to do that in front of you.

Besides, you’ve got work to do. You want consequences to matter at your table—that’s one of the great things about RPGs. But you also want your friends to have fun, and you

don’t want them to stop playing. So you’re looking for a way forward that makes the TPK matter, but keeps the momentum and desire to keep playing alive.

**Send in the Next Party:** The stereotypical solution to a TPK is to have everyone make up new characters on a mission to find out what happened to the original group. That gives the new group direction and a basic reason for cohesion. The players might be eager for a rematch—and it’s probably a good idea to soften the table’s stance on player knowledge/character knowledge in this instance so they don’t just repeat the fate of the first group.

When the second group succeeds and finds out what happened to the first group, the players can pick up the ongoing narrative where they left off. If resurrection is possible in your world, you can have the second group bring the first group back to life. It’s possible that some players at the table will like their new characters better than the old. Mix it up—let a composite group tackle the challenges of your campaign together.

**Meet Your New Boss:** If new characters don’t work with your story (or players balk at creating new PCs), it’s time to call in the cavalry. Have a powerful patron or mysterious presence somehow resurrect the PCs (or restore them from petrification, etc.) for some greater purpose. The resurrecting agent might be on the up and up, wanting the PCs to continue their campaign efforts (though you should make sure the players know they won’t always be bailed out). But the mysterious power might also have a divergent or sinister agenda, or demand tremendous compensation.

**I Want Them Alive:** Perhaps your villains were actually swinging for non-lethal damage on their last rolls, and instead of being dead the players wake up hours later in cells, stripped of their gear and forced to engineer a daring escape.

**Let Failure Be Failure:** If the PCs failed at a climactic moment, consider letting evil seize the day—let the players see the consequences of failure when they make up their





new characters. If mid-level characters suffer a TPK when investigating the actions of a demon cult, tell the players to show up at the next session with high-level characters. Then reveal that those characters have recently been taken out of suspended animation by a ragtag band of humans—scattered remnants in a world utterly ruled by demons and their army of tortured slaves. The demons conquered and enslaved the world due to the actions of the cult the PCs couldn't stop. Now your players get to see the consequences of their previous failure, and the new PCs have their work cut out for them.

**Rewind:** Sometimes accidents happen. Someone reads a rule wrong, you design an encounter that's unfairly lethal, or the game otherwise goes off the rails. If a fundamental misunderstanding or error led to the TPK, don't feel like you have to let it stand. Just hit the rewind button and play the encounter over again. You want decisions at your table to have consequences, but simple errors shouldn't steal everyone's fun.



## OVERPOWERED PCS

Characters naturally accumulate power over time. And in a game that relies on random resolutions of complex interactions, that power accumulation isn't always smooth. If one PC—or all the PCs—at your table makes a quantum leap in power, it's worth taking a good, hard look at whether that power is disruptive to the ongoing narrative and sense of fun.

**Consider the Cooperative Dynamic:** The Pathfinder RPG differs from most games in that it's fundamentally cooperative. Because you aren't playing "against" anyone in a meaningful sense, it might not matter that the PCs suddenly became much more powerful. You aren't likely to run out of powerful monsters. You might have to alter encounters to compensate, but once you've done so, your game continues unimpeded.

**When You Need to Rein It In:** By the same token, the cooperative nature of the game is why you sometimes need to "nerf" a character's power. Do so when one PC is too powerful relative to everyone else at the table. Before you take action, though, consider the following steps:

*Provide early warning.* Say a player comes up with a devastating combo—something that takes a monster out of a fight with a high success rate and no countermeasure. Let it happen the first few times, but tell the player, "I'll let you know when that combo gets tired." The player can still feel clever, but you've delivered notice and the whole table knows you take the balance of power seriously. Sometimes the problem power doesn't emerge at the table anymore—and you've got time to plan further. And the player might volunteer to be part of the solution, a "negotiated settlement" you can work out at the end of the session.

*Know what you're nerfing, and why.* After the session where something overpowered emerges, it's time to hit the books. Read everything relevant, even if you think you know the rules backward and forward. Think like a player and explore the problematic power, then put your Game Master hat back on and search for countermeasures. A complex game system has lots of moving pieces, and it takes effort to isolate which components and combinations are actually overpowered.

*Nerf it to the ground, but make it a surgical strike.* Once you've isolated the problematic element, bring it back into line with similar powers available at that level. Do your homework in terms of rules study and arithmetic; you want to make sure that the overall technique is no longer overpowered, not just the specific application you saw at the table. But make sure the PC still has viable options—and that the player still has interesting choices to make during an encounter.

*Explain it outside the game.* It's tempting to solve a balance issue on the spot, but consider the other players at the table. They might be bored by a rules discussion about somebody else's character. They might leap to the player's defense, or recommend a harsher nerf because they're tired of being second banana. Talk to that player away from the table before the next session begins, so that everyone's got time to pore over rulebooks and consider alternatives. It's also a good time to tell the player that you're acting for the good of the table, not to save your monsters. Most players respond better to a nerf when they realize they're diminishing others' fun and the change isn't driven by Game Master competitiveness.

*What you break, rebuild.* Overpowered situations rarely emerge overnight. They're often an intentional or serendipitous collection of smaller elements acquired over time. Spell x, magic item y, and feat z are fine by themselves, but you've got a problem once a player has all three. When you change the rules to make something less powerful, it's only fair—and certainly doesn't hurt anyone at the table—to let the player retroactively make different character advancement choices to compensate, so they haven't wasted half the game achieving a build that's no longer viable.

**Overpowered Monsters:** Sometimes the proverbial shoe will be on the other foot, and a monster will be unexpectedly powerful. At first, let it play out a bit. Once the power disparity is clear to everyone at the table, take action—either nerf the monster on the spot and tell the players (in general terms) what you've done and why, or forego use of that monster, telling the players that “the dragon turtle has some problems, which I'm going to fix before our next session.”

## PERSONALIZING PUBLISHED ADVENTURES

It's not easy to be a Game Master; of all the roles in the game, the GM has to put in the most work, and sometimes you'll want to relax and use a published adventure instead of creating your own. While many such adventures are ready to go straight out of the box, so to speak, the key to integrating one seamlessly into an existing campaign or setting is adapting the adventure to suit your campaign and your PCs, and this means you have to recognize whether or not the adventure is a good fit for you and your party.

Presuming the theme or feel is suitable for your campaign, you need to look at the game mechanics in the adventure, particularly the monsters and how they compare to your PCs' abilities. It's possible that the party composition may make an adventure too easy—a party with a paladin, good cleric, and good necromancer is going to blow through an undead-heavy adventure with

little trouble (though that isn't a bad thing, as letting the PCs feel powerful is nice now and then). You should always feel free to adjust the power level of an adventure's monsters (using the simple templates in the back of the *Pathfinder RPG Bestiary* is the easiest way) or swap them out for other monsters with similar CRs.

What it comes down to is that you have to make the adventure your own—whether a Pathfinder Module, a one-session Pathfinder Society Scenario, or a third-party adventure. If you're lucky and choose well, you can save yourself a lot of work. Make changes to the story if you have to, embrace tangents the PCs introduce, and always feel free to point the story in the general direction of your campaign's primary plot if the PCs decide to abandon the story in the published adventure.

## CONVERTING CONTENT FROM 3.5 OR OTHER SYSTEMS

Roleplaying games have been around for over 30 years, and there's a huge library of materials out there for other games which you can use in your campaign. One particularly easy conversion is from the 3.0 or 3.5 edition of the world's oldest roleplaying game to the Pathfinder RPG.

The Pathfinder RPG was designed to be backward-compatible with the 3.5 rules set. It's possible to integrate the two seamlessly with almost no work; the only big difference in most games is that Pathfinder PCs are a little stronger overall than 3.5 PCs, so your PCs may have an easier time battling things from the old rules. You can run with that, or apply one of three simple fixes below to balance things out:

**Reduce the CR by 1:** Treat anything from 3.0 or 3.5 as 1 CR value lower.

**Add the Advanced Creature Simple Template:** Use the easy “+2 to everything” version rather than rebuilding all the old stat blocks.

**Add Improved Initiative and Toughness:** Pathfinder creatures get more feats than 3.0/3.5 creatures (every odd level rather than every 3 levels). Adding these two feats for mid-to-high-level creatures helps make up the slight power difference between the two systems.

Of course, you can also look to other game systems for ideas and adventure materials, it just requires more work on your part. In most cases, searching the internet for fan-made conversion suggestions is a timesaver; most of these suggest skill DCs, replacement spells and magic items, and rough stat blocks or simple replacements (such as swapping the tcho-tcho people of the Lovecraftian mythos for goblins). Use the Pathfinder RPG rules as a resource—the *Bestiary* includes a wide variety of monsters so you can create the sort of fantasy that you want, and by trading a few proper nouns, you can convert even a superhero, space opera, or hard SF scenario into a fantasy plot.



## TOOLS FOR GAME MASTERS

The following pages supply a host of inspirational charts, suggestions, and other quick references to help inspire GMs both before and during a game session.

### TABLE 2-1: PLOTS

d%	Plot
1–2	<b>Greed or Glory:</b> PCs hear about a dungeon nearby and how no one dares enter it.
3–4	<b>Raiding Monsters:</b> Monsters or evil humanoids attack farmsteads and must be stopped.
5–6	<b>Treasure Hunt:</b> An NPC has a treasure map.
7–8	<b>Guards:</b> PCs hired to protect merchant caravan through dangerous terrain.
9–10	<b>Seek:</b> Locate missing important NPC.
11–12	<b>Destroy:</b> Purge a dungeon of monsters.
13–14	<b>Underwater Exploration:</b> Map area of sea and explore inland for suitable settling areas.
15–16	<b>Mine:</b> Search underground for rich vein of ore or a legendary cache of gems.
17–18	<b>Protect:</b> Enhance village defenses and train locals to defend themselves from an impending threat.
19–20	<b>Ruins Stir:</b> Secret but good NPCs are searching for holy relic and accidentally stir up undead.
21–22	<b>Spies:</b> The PCs are hired to collect information on a nearby group or kingdom.
23–24	<b>Investigate:</b> PCs brought in to solve a crime.
25–26	<b>Bait and Switch:</b> Monster far beyond the PCs is allegedly behind the plot—can it be true?
27–28	<b>Sacrilege:</b> Confront zealots allegedly carrying out human sacrifices.
29–30	<b>Salvage:</b> The crew of a listing merchant ship row ashore claiming that somehow their cargo scuttled the vessel, and that they want nothing more to do with it.
31–32	<b>Steal:</b> Work for good-fronted merchant group to steal an object they stole in the first place.
33–34	<b>Capture:</b> A rival merchant or guild wishes monster intact to serve as guard.
35–36	<b>Escape:</b> During routine adventure PCs are trapped by a rockfall which unleashes horror.
37–38	<b>Roundup:</b> A rancher needs extra hands to protect his herd from rustlers as he heads to market.
39–40	<b>Execution:</b> The PCs or an ally face a harsh punishment for breaking an unjust or arbitrary law.
41–42	<b>Exploration:</b> The PCs quest to explore a new realm, whether it be a continent, underground expanse, plane, or other locale.
43–44	<b>Kinslayer:</b> A relative of the ruler plans to claim the throne for his or her own.
45–46	<b>Watch:</b> PCs hired by town watch to uncover spies.
47–48	<b>On the Run:</b> The PCs must help a goodly creature escape those who hunt it.

49–50	<b>Monstrous:</b> The locals decide the newly arrived PCs are behind the deaths.
51–52	<b>Alliance:</b> Prevent a marriage intended to unite two monster clans without them realizing the sabotage.
53–54	<b>Precious Cargo:</b> Someone must keep a monster's egg safe until it hatches.
55–56	<b>Dead Man Walking:</b> A long-dead ally or personality reappears, seemingly alive and unharmed.
57–58	<b>Chainbreaker:</b> Find the slaver's base by getting captured and then escape to get reinforcements.
59–60	<b>A Little Knowledge:</b> Someone keeps trying to kill the hapless storyteller; which of his tall tales is actually true?
61–62	<b>Unexpected Event:</b> Earthquake or volcano unleashes horrors onto countryside or settlement.
63–64	<b>Reagent:</b> A powerful magic user needs the PCs' help in tracking down a rare component or ingredient.
65–66	<b>Menagerie:</b> Creatures have escaped from a private collection and the PCs are hired to return them.
67–68	<b>Courteous Killer:</b> An assassin sends a letter suggesting that the target put his affairs in order.
69–70	<b>Plague Run:</b> Find the ingredients that cure the disease and get them back before too many more people die.
71–72	<b>Deadly Waters:</b> The river has turned black and toxic—what's going on upstream?
73–74	<b>Feathered Apocalypse:</b> All the birds are dying and the druids are looking for someone to blame.
75–76	<b>Prophecy:</b> A prophecy is due for fulfillment. The PCs must work to fulfill or prevent it.
77–78	<b>Animal Enemies:</b> All the usually peaceful animals become killers.
79–80	<b>Political:</b> PCs assist local leaders in rooting out evil in their own halls.
81–82	<b>Festival:</b> PCs infiltrate performers to uncover a killer.
83–84	<b>From Beyond:</b> PCs must prevent plot to summon a powerful outsider.
85–86	<b>Incursion:</b> Creatures from another plane infest town and take hostages to experiment upon.
87–88	<b>Revenant:</b> Do the PCs stand in the way of an evil avenging spirit intent on wiping out an entire family?
89–90	<b>The Strange Child:</b> Is the changeling really behind the nightmares like the locals say?
91–92	<b>Doppelganger:</b> The PCs or others are seen murdering and stealing and the locals want revenge.
93–94	<b>Righteous Indignation:</b> A local tribe of non-evil monsters threatens a community that has trespassed upon their land or otherwise offended them.
95–96	<b>Surrounded:</b> PCs find themselves hunted in wilderness. Can they escape and survive?
97–98	<b>Hunted:</b> For some reason everyone thinks the PCs are someone they aren't. As the city mobilizes to capture and execute them can the PCs get to the bottom of the plot?
99–100	<b>Dragon:</b> A dragon appears in a city and demands tribute. Can the PCs defeat it? Is it real?

TABLE 2-2: PLOT TWISTS

d20	Plot Twists
1	<b>Altered:</b> PCs undergo some sort of magical transformation during the course of the adventure, and must seek to return to normal (or defend themselves from newly jealous rivals).
2	<b>Burden:</b> Something fragile (whether an NPC or object) is vital to the completion of the adventure, such as a delicate crystal or a prophesied child.
3	<b>Controlled:</b> Someone is secretly under the influence of another, either as an agent of the enemy or keeping an eye on the group for their patron.
4	<b>Deception:</b> A critical piece of information about the adventure is deliberately false. Old friends become enemies, and enemies become friends. Or is it all just an elaborate act?
5	<b>Doubles:</b> One or more of those characters appearing in the adventure (including possibly the PCs) has an imposter or duplicate.
6	<b>Dual Nature:</b> Someone in the adventure has a second nature or form unknown at the start.
7	<b>Extraordinary Arena:</b> Some or all of the adventure takes place in an unusual environment.
8	<b>Impairment:</b> The PCs suffer some sort of disadvantage relative to their foes.
9	<b>Love Interest:</b> An NPC encountered in the adventure forms a romantic attachment to one of the PCs, not necessarily reciprocated.
10	<b>Mistaken Identity:</b> One or more of the PCs resembles, or gets treated as, another person.
11	<b>Natural Obstacle:</b> A formidable barrier stands between the PCs and completing the adventure.
12	<b>Negotiation:</b> The PCs must make a deal with someone in order to complete the adventure.
13	<b>Peaceful:</b> Some portion of the adventure requires that the PCs find a non-violent way to solve their problems.
14	<b>Rivals:</b> A group with similar abilities sets out to oppose the PCs.
15	<b>Role Reversal:</b> Some portion of the adventure turns out the exact opposite of the PCs' expectations.
16	<b>Secret Ally:</b> Someone in the adventure offers aid to the PCs.
17	<b>Time Limit:</b> The PCs must complete the adventure within a specified duration in order to succeed.
18	<b>Transported:</b> The PCs are taken somewhere against their will and must return on their own.
19	<b>Undercover:</b> The PCs must assume new identities and remain "in character" in order to gather information or complete their objective.
20	<b>Watched:</b> Someone observes the PCs during the course of the adventure, and may interfere with their progress, or attempt to guide them.

TABLE 2-3: MACGUFFINS AND QUEST ITEMS

d%	Macguffin or Quest Item
1–2	Kidnapped royalty
3–4	Religious idol
5–6	Lost spellbook
7–8	Fountain of youth
9–10	City of gold
11–12	Pirate treasure
13–14	Lost culture
15–16	Weapon of the gods
17–18	Dangerous technology
19–20	Claimant to the throne
21–22	Ancient tomb
23–24	Dragon hoard
25–26	Imprisoned loved one
27–28	Legendary warrior (possibly deceased)
29–30	Placation for angry spirits
31–32	Signet proving noble birth
33–34	Rare spell component
35–36	Forbidden magic
37–38	Ressurrection for a slain innocent
39–40	Godhood
41–42	Cure for a plague or curse
43–44	Land grab
45–46	Enlightenment
47–48	Stolen property
49–50	State secrets
51–52	Mythical beast
53–54	Unlimited power source
55–56	Embezzled funds
57–58	Designs for a new weapon
59–60	Ghost ship
61–62	Lich's phylactery
63–64	Jade statue of a bird
65–66	Long-lost twin
67–68	Lost soul
69–70	Flying machine
71–72	Treasure map
73–74	Sunken island
75–76	Shipwreck
77–78	Lost culture
79–80	Relic from religious figure
81–82	Death (for self or others)
83–84	Hidden master
85–86	New home for displaced people
87–88	Sleeping prince or princess
89–90	Unexplored territory
91–92	Destruction of evil item
93–94	Prophecy and revelation
95–96	Dangerous fugitive
97–98	Portal to another world
99	True love
100	Answers



TABLE 2-4: CULTURAL TITLES

Byzantine	Chinese	Dutch	English
Basileus, Porphyrogennētos	Huangdi	Keizer, Keizerin	King, Queen
Kaisar	Gong	Koning, Koningin	Prince, Princess
Kouropalatēs	Hou	Groothertog, Groothertogin	Duke, Duchess
Proedros	Bo	Hertog	Earl/Count, Countess
Magistros	Zi	Prins	Viscount, Viscountess
Vestarches	Nan	Markies, Markgraaf	Baron, Baroness
Anthypatos	Qing	Graaf	Baronet
Exarchos	Daifu	Burggraaf	Knight

Ethiopian	Finnish	French	German
Negus	Kuningas, Kuningatar	Empreur, Imperatrice	Kaiser, Kaiserin
Leul	Suuriruhtinas, Suuriruhtinatar	Duc, Duchesse	König, Königin
Ras	Herttua, Herttuatar	Marquis, Marquise	Großherzog
Dejazmach	Ruhtinas, Ruhtinatar	Comte, Comtesse	Herzog, Herzogin
Fitawrari	Markiisi	Vicomte, Vicomtesse	Fürst, Fürstin
Enderase	Kreivi, Kreivitär	Baron, Baronne	Markgraf, Markgräfin
Reise Mekwanint	Vapaaherra, Vapaaherratar	Baronnet	Graf, Gräfin
Basha	Ritari	Chevalier	Freiherr, Freifrau

Indian	Italian	Middle Eastern	Ottoman/Turkish
Maharaja	Re, Regina	Caliph	Khalifa
Raja	Principe, Principessa	Sultan	Sultan, Padishah
Thakur	Duca, Duchessa	Khedive	Kaymakam
Nawab	Marchese, Marchesa	Pasha	Khedive
Janab	Conte, Contessa	Emir	Wali
Sardar	Visconte, Viscontessa	Mirza	Pasha
Jagir	Barone, Baronessa	Bey	Bey
Zamindar	Baronetto	Sheik	Effendi

Persian	Polish	Roman	Russian
Shah	Cesarz, Cesarzowa	Caesar, Imperator	Tsar, Tsaritsa
Argbadh	Król, Królowa	Rex	Korol, Koroleva
Artabid	Wielki Ksiaze, Wielka Ksiezna	Magnus	Velikiy Knyaz
Khshathrapava, Satrap	Ksiaze, Ksiezna	Princeps Elector	Ertsgertsog
Istandar	Markiz, Markiza	Dux	Kurfurst, Kurfurstina
Databara	Hrabia, Hrabina	Marchio	Boyar, Borarina
Vuzurgar	Wicehrabia, Wicehrabina	Vicecomes	Graf, Grafinya
Aztan	Baron, Baronowa	Liber Baro	Rytsar

Scandinavian	Spanish	Spartan	Thai
Keiser, Keiserinne	Emperador, Emperatriz	Polemarch	Chao Fa
Kong, Drottning	Rey, Reina	Lochagos	Mom Rajawongse
Storhertug, Storhertuginne	Príncipe, Princesa	Pentekoster	Mom Luang
Hertug, Hertig	Duque, Duquesa	Enomotarch	Na Ayudhya
Fyrst, Furste	Marqués, Marquesa	Phylearch	Somdej Chao Phraya
Marki, Markis	Conde, Condesa	Perioikoi	Phraya
Jarl, Greve	Vizconde, Vizcondesa	Hypomeiones	Muen
Friherre	Barón, Baronesa	Helots	Pan

## WORDS EVERY GAME MASTER SHOULD KNOW

Abase, abash, abattoir, abhorrent, ablution, abscess, abstemious, abstersion, abstruse, accoutre, acephalous, acrid, aesculapian, affusion, ague, alembic, alluvium, amanuensis, ambergris, ambrosia, ambry, amorphous, amphora, anchorite, anfractuous, anodyne, anserine, antechamber, antediluvian, anthelmintic, antic, aquiline, ardent, argot, ascians, asperity, astomatous, atavistic, ataxia, augen, autarch, avuncular, bacchanal, badinage, bagatelle, baksheesh, balderdash, baleful, baleen, ballyhoo, banal, bannock, banns, bantam, barque, barmy, baroque, bashi-bazouk, bas-relief, bathos, bawdy, bayard, beadle, beatitude, bede, begum, beldame, beleaguer, belfry, beltane, belvedere, benefice, benison, benjamin, beshrew, besot, bete noire, bewray, bibliolatry, bibulous, bier, bijou, bilbo, billingsgate, biltong, biretta, bivouac, blague, blain, blandish, blarney, blaspheme, blowzy, bodkin, boeotian, bombast, boreal, bouffant, bourse, bower, braggadocio, bravo, bretwalda, brine, bruin, bucolic, bursar, cache, cachinnate, cad, cadaverous, cadge, cadre, caitiff, calumny, camarilla, canard, canny, canticle, caparison, caper, carillon, castigate, casuistry, cataphracts, cateran, caudle, caustic, cavil, celerity, cenobite, chancellery, chary, churl, chyme, cinerary, circumvallate, cistern, clamber, clamor, cockade, cognate, cognomen, coif, collet, colporteur, comely, commodious, compurgation, concatenate, condign, condottiere, connubial, conterminous, contretemps, conundrum, convalesce, convivial, coomb, coppice, coquette, corban, cornucopia, coronach, coruscate, cosset, coterie, coven, covenant, coxcomb, coxswain, cozen, crannog, crenellated, crepuscular, croft, crone, crony, crotchet, cruciform, cubit, cuckold, cuirass, cur, cuspidor, cyclopean, cynosure, dacoit, damask, dastard, dauphin, debauch, decuman, defenestrate, deglutition, demesne, desiccate, diadem, diarchy, dictum, dirge, distaff, dobbin, dodder, dolmen, dolor, dotterel, doughty, dowager, doyen, dragoman, dross, dudgeon, duffer, durbar, ebullient, eclat, eidolon, efface, effigy, elan, eldritch, eleemosynary, elegy, empyreal, ensanguined, epicure, epigraph, equerry, escutcheon, eviscerate, excoriate, factotum, faldral, fallal, fardel, farrago, fasces, fester, filament, firmament, fitz, flagellate, flagitious, foozle, fop, formic, fracas, fresco, friable, frippery, frolic, fulgent, fulgurate, fuliginous, fulminate, fumarole, fustigate, gaffer, galleass, gallipot, gallowglass, gammer, gardyloo, gentry, genuflect, geophagy, gewgaw, gibbet, gimcrack, glaucous, gloaming, glower, gossamer, gralloch, grippe, hagiography, halcyon, halidom, harangue, harbinger, harlequin, harridan, hauteur, hebdomadal, hecatomb, helot, heriot, hermetic, hircine, hirsute, hoary, hoyden, humbug, hussar, hydrargyrum, ichor, idolater, ilk, imbroglio, indurate, ineffable, inexorable, infrangible, iniquity, inosculate, insouciant, intaglio, inveigle, invidious, irascible, irk, itinerant, jabber, jackanapes, janissary, jaundice, jeer, jejune, jeremiad, jingo, jocund, jongleur, jorum, joss, joughs, jowl, jubilee, juggernaut, ken, kern, khamsin, kine, kirk, kirtle, kittle, knacker, knell, knout, kowtow, kulak, laager, lachrymal, lackadaisical, lacuna, lade, laggard, laird, lambent, lampoon, lanceolate, lancet, languor, lank, lanyard, lapidary, lares, lariat, larrikin, lascivious, lassitude, laud, laureate, lazar, lazaretto, leal, leaven, lector, lees, legate, legerdemain, leman, lesion, liege, liniment, lissome, lithe, littoral, liturgy, loam, logogram, loll, lour, lucre, lupine, macerate, machinate, madrigal, maelstrom, mafficking, malediction, mammon, mandarin, mange, martinet, mawkish, medicament, mendacious, mendicant, métier, miasma, missive, monomachy, mordant, mulct, nadir, naphtha, narcissism, narcosis, nascent, naught, navicular, neap, nebulous, necromancy, necrophagous, necropolis, necropsy, necrosis, nectar, ne'er, neuter, nexus, nightshade, nihilism, nirvana, nitrate, noctule, node, nostrum, noxious, noyade, nubile, nucleus, nugatory, nullify, obeisance, obese, oblate, oblique, oblivion, obloquy, obsequious, obstinate, obstreperous, obtrude, obdurate, obtuse, obverse, occult, ocular, offal, officiate, offspring, ogle, olfaction, omen, ominous, onerous, onslaught, opaline, opiate, ordinal, ordure, orgy, orpine, oscular, ossify, ostracize, ovoid, ozone, pact, palpable, palpitate, palsy, panacea, pandemonium, pang, pannage, parabolic, paradox, paragon, parallax, paranoia, paraphernalia, parasite, pare, pariah, particularism, partisan, pathetic, paunch, pawky, pediment, penchant, pendant, pendulum, penitent, penology, pensile, pentacle, pentagram, penumbra, penury, peptic, perdition, perfidy, perpendicular, perpetual, persecute, pervert, pestilence, petty, phalanx, phallus, phlegm, phosphorus, pillage, pinion, piteous, plague, placid, plead, plenitude, plight, pock, polemic, pollard, polyglot, pompous, pontiff, porcine, potash, potent, primal, profane, prolate, propagate, prostrate, pulverize, pumice, purgatory, purulent, pustule, pygmy, quagmire, quarantine, quarrel, quasi, quench, quoin, quotient, rabid, rake, rampage, rampant, ramshackle, rapacious, ravage, reap, reave, reckoning, recluse, redolent, refute, regicide, regorge, regret, relapse, relic, relish, remorse, resinous, resurgent, retribution, revenant, reverie, revive, rhapsody, rhetoric, rictus, rigmarole, rime, rind, riparian, rookery, ruinous, runt, sable, sabotage, sacrilege, salve, samite, sanctify, sargasso, scabious, scallywag, scalpel, scandalize, scapegoat, scathe, scion, sclerosis, scour, scrag, scrimshank, sebaceous, secession, secretion, secular, semblance, seminal, seminary, senile, sepulture, serpentine, serrate, servile, shade, sham, shamefaced, shanty, shoddy, shorn, shrill, shun, silage, silvanus, simulacrum, sinuous, sitar, skewbald, slander, sluice, smattering, smock, sneer, snide, sordid, spawn, speculum, splay, spume, stagnant, stagnate, stake, strangulate, strigil, stub, subjugate, suction, sulphur, supernaturalness, supremacy, surge, suture, swagger, swamp, swank, sweat, swill, syringe, taboo, taint, tallow, tangible, tardy, tariff, tatty, temerity, temperance, tenuity, terret, terrify, tether,thane, theurgy, thews, thorn, thou, threshold, throb, throng, thuggery, thy, titillate, topsy-turvy, torpid, tortuous, totem, toxin, tractable, transform, trauma, tremulous, trigon, trotter, truncate, truss, tumulus, turgid, tyrant, ugly, ulcer, ululate, umbral, undulate, unhallowed, unman, unravel, unspeakable, uproar, usury, utter, vainglory, valgus, vapid, vault, vegetal, venerable, vengeance, verdigris, vigilance, violate, viridescent, virus, viviparous, voiceless, volition, voluble, vulgar, vulnerable, waif, wan, wangle, warn, watchfulness, waxen, wean, wheedle, whorl, widow, widower, wince, wreath, writhe, xanthous, xenophobia, xiphoid, xylograph, xylophagous, yearn, yule, zeal, zealot, zenith, ziggurat, zounds.