

Dungeon Mastering

written by A J | November 14, 2014

Great job becoming the boss of your Cresthaven RPG games! You're called the DM, which stands for Dungeon Master. You get to make up the rules, decide what happens in the story, and control all the monsters. Your job is to make sure everyone is playing fair and having fun. You get to create clues for the players to follow and help them get to the end of the game. You also get to decide how strong the players get and how fast they can move through the game. Your main job is to make sure everyone is having a good time playing the game. You get to react to what the players do and decide what happens next. You are the most important part of creating an awesome game experience!



Don't forget to check out the **How To Play Adventure: Goblin Raiders**. In it players and DM will find a simple, step-by-step dungeon, designed specifically to teach how to use rules and how to DM a game. If you're already ready to play, you can start your adventures in the default setting: **Village of Cresthaven**.

Setting Up The Game Space



As the DM, you know all the secrets of the game. You don't have to tell the players what you're doing or what the maps look like. It's important to keep your game area private from the players by using a divider or screen.

Sometimes new DMs think they need to show the players the maps and give them papers, but that's not necessary. The maps are just for the DM's eyes only.

If you want to be more organized, you can use miniatures and a dry erase map with a grid. But this is optional and can be confusing for some players.

During the game, the DM sits behind a screen and the players sit together with their character sheets and dice. The players talk about their plans, and the DM secretly rolls dice to decide what happens next.

Five Pillars of Dungeon Mastery

Playing an RPG is different than other board games or rpgs. It's a game where the rules are more like suggestions and the DM (Dungeon Master) makes the final decisions. You don't need to memorize all the rules, you just have to make up new rules as you go along and describe them in fun ways. You also need to answer lots of questions from the players, even if they are silly questions. You get to decide what happens in the game and your decision is the final say. You are like the boss of the game!

Pillar One: Rulings

As the DM, you are the master of the rules and the architect of the story. It's up to you to weave player actions into a compelling narrative, and that means interpreting the rules with creativity and flexibility.

Don't feel chained to the character sheets. When a player announces their intentions, it's your call to determine if the action is even possible within the realm of the game world. Once you've given the green light, let the player describe their approach, painting a vivid picture of their character's actions.

Then, it's time to introduce a touch of uncertainty. Assign a Difficulty Check that reflects the challenge at hand, letting the dice decide the outcome. This element of chance is what keeps everyone on the edge of their seats, including you! Even the most seasoned DM can be caught off guard by a natural 20, turning the tide of battle or unlocking an unexpected twist in the tale. Embrace the unpredictable nature of the dice and watch as they breathe life into your game.

Pillar Two: Actions over Skills

Ditch the long skill list – here, players call the shots. Want to climb a cliff face or charm a goblin king? Just describe it, roll the dice, and see if your guts (or charisma) pay off. No need for specific “Acrobatics” or “Persuasion” bonuses – anyone can try anything, though success might be as unpredictable as a drunken barbarian. As the DM, your job is to make these actions shine. Help players use their strengths to overcome challenges, even if it means the barbarian's charm attempt involves more wrestling than words. Remember, creativity, not skill checks, is king!

The DM's main job is to help players use their ability bonuses to make their actions more effective.

Pillar Three: Everyday Heroes

Adventurers begin their journeys as fledgling heroes, their potential raw but their pockets light and their skillsets threadbare. This is no hero's welcome – Cresthaven's path to glory is perilous, paved with pitfalls, and teeming with threats. A single misstep could spell the end, transforming epic sagas into cautionary tales whispered around flickering tavern hearths. Every encounter bristles with tension, every choice a potential turning point. Will your players ascend to legendary heights, or find their names etched upon forgotten tombstones?

Pillar Four: Mathematical Balance

Let's talk balance, or rather, the lack thereof. While I know some folks love crunching numbers and ensuring every encounter is a perfect mathematical equation, here's the thing: Cresthaven isn't about that. It's about throwing your players into a world that's wild, unpredictable, and sometimes downright brutal.

Think of it like a real-life adventure. You wouldn't meticulously map out every potential threat before setting foot out the door, right? You'd embrace the unknown, navigate by the seat of your pants, and figure things out as you go. That's the spirit of Cresthaven.

Sure, the game provides guidelines to keep things from going TPK-tastic, but the focus is on **storytelling, problem-solving, and sheer player creativity**. Let the dice fall where they may, and trust your players to rise to the challenge. A perfectly balanced encounter might feel like a scripted theme park ride, but a well-crafted challenge that throws them off-balance? Now that's where the real magic happens.

So, ditch the spreadsheets and embrace the chaos. Design encounters that spark imagination, not min-maxing. Let the players use their wits, their teamwork, and that trusty rusty dagger to overcome whatever you throw their way. Remember, the beauty of Cresthaven lies in its unpredictable nature. It's not about perfect balance, it's about creating unforgettable stories together.

Pillar Five: Player Agency

Player agency is when the players get to make choices that can change the story. This can happen in big ways, like deciding which quest to go on or how to defeat the big bad enemy, or in small ways, like picking which spell to use in a fight or which enemy to attack first.

The DM's job is to create challenges for the players, like putting them up in a tree with hungry wolves below and letting them figure out how to solve the problem. The DM shouldn't force the players into one specific solution, but instead help them with their plan to solve the problem.

If the DM takes away player agency too often or too harshly, it can make the game feel unfair or like the players are being forced to play a certain way. The DM should give the players freedom to make choices and let them be in control of the story.

DMing New Players

Beginning players often need help in learning to play and tips for new players.

For new players just starting out with Cresthaven RPG, it can be tough to know what to do. That's why the DM should try to help by suggesting things like searching for secret doors. But this is only for beginners – once players know the game well, they should be able to figure things out on their own.

It's also important for the DM to give clues when the players are in danger. Nobody wants to die without any warning! For example, the DM might mention a bad smell or bones on the ground to let the players know that something dangerous is ahead.

In the beginning, new players should win more often to keep them interested in the game. If they never succeed, they'll get bored quickly. But as they get better, they'll need to start relying on their abilities and strategies to succeed.

Sometimes the DM might "fudge" the dice to help the players succeed or find an important clue. This is okay as long as it's not done too often. But most of the time, the DM's rolls should be done in secret to keep things exciting and unpredictable.

Caller, Cartographer, and marching order

The player characters are often a chaotic bunch. They argue, get lost, and generally space out in the game and it can make the game feel more like babysitting than fun. I've found giving the players roles helps to keep your sanity as the DM.

The Caller – one player that speaks for the party. When the DM asks, "What will the party do next?" the player characters should talk among themselves and come to an agreement on the next move. It is the caller's job to relay that message to the DM. This player is NOT the leader of the party.

The Cartographer (mapper) – one player that keeps track of the player characters in the location. This player can use graph paper or just bubble maps to track movement and important information for reference later. It's easy to get lost if you don't have a map. If the players don't keep track of their location, it's on them. I recommend you print out the Dungeon Journal pages.

Marching Order – is important to track as the DM, as many events happen around the party. Knowing who is marching in front and who is in back can determine who gets hurt or cut off or affected by a trap. I recommend you print out the Party Tracker to help you.

Giving Characters an Out

Fighting isn't always the best answer. There are a couple of different ways that any encounter can play out. Fighting is one. Negotiating is another. Sneaking around, running through danger, etc, etc. It's up to you Dungeon Master, to give these options to new players. You should also reward characters with experience, treasure, and advancement for thinking outside of the hack-and-slash box.

Even the best plans can go wrong, and encounters that are supposed to be easy can become deadly if the dice turn against the players. If the characters get in over their heads, and you want to avoid killing them all, consider one of these ways to give them an out.

Enemy of My Enemy: Another group of natives or monsters arrives on the scene, providing a distraction to let the party change tactics or escape.

Kill the Leader: In some cases, monsters will withdraw or, in the case of intelligent monsters, propose a truce if their leader is killed or captured.

Jailbreak: Enemies might capture one or more of the characters instead of killing them (choosing to render them merely unconscious), and then barter them to another tribe. That other tribe might negotiate with the captives, or the adventurers might find a way to escape during the transfer. Alternatively, their captors hold the prisoners for ransom. The characters might be able to buy their freedom or make a daring prison break.

Negotiation: Humans and other intelligent opponents might be willing to bargain, even if the party is on the defensive. Perhaps their foes promise to cease the attack in exchange for something the party can offer, such as valuables or a promise to assist them against tribal enemies.

Run Away: Players don't always agree on when to run from a fight, especially with actions dictated by the initiative order. A character might want to make just one more attack or stay behind to make sure someone else can get away. If the players are talking about running, give them that option, dropping out of initiative order and segwaying to a chase scene. The characters' success in escaping should be dictated by their choices instead of by rules minutia, such as whether one character is slightly slower than another. Do they slam doors shut as they run through the temple, topple large objects behind their passage, or use another tactic to slow pursuers? Do they escape one danger only to run into more trouble? If they do get out of sight, can they find a place to hole up?

DMing Experienced Players

Experienced players bring a wealth of knowledge and cunning to the table, but their expectations evolve alongside their skills. Here's how to keep your game fresh and challenging for veteran adventurers:

Subtlety Reigns Supreme:

- **Gone are the days of obvious footprints and flashing arrows.** Seasoned players crave cryptic clues, requiring keen observation and deduction. Describe unusual formations, faint etchings, or ambiguous whispers carried on the wind.
- **Challenge their assumptions.** A treasure map might point to a seemingly mundane location, only to reveal a hidden entrance triggered by a specific action.
- **Layer your clues.** A cryptic inscription on a wall might only make sense when combined with a peculiar symbol found earlier in the dungeon.

Embrace the Gray Area:

- **Vague hints become the norm.** Instead of spoon-feeding directions, offer glimpses of the path ahead. Describe a distant light flickering in the darkness, or the faint echo of chanting emanating from an unknown chamber.
- **Let the environment speak.** Crumbling walls, strange flora, or the

lingering scent of sulfur can all hint at hidden dangers or potential shortcuts.

- **Make them work for it.** Hidden levers, pressure plates, or intricate puzzles can gate valuable information or powerful loot.

Remember, the goal is to empower, not frustrate. While subtlety adds depth, avoid overly obscure clues that lead to player stagnation. Offer enough hints to keep them moving forward, but leave room for their own creative problem-solving.

Tailoring the Challenge:

- **High-level characters can handle deadlier encounters.** Don't shy away from throwing them into the deep end with traps, powerful monsters, and intricate combat scenarios.
- **But remember, the challenge isn't just about combat.** Introduce social puzzles, ethical dilemmas, and time-sensitive choices to keep them on their toes.
- **Let them reap the rewards.** Experienced players deserve epic loot and powerful artifacts commensurate with their achievements.

By embracing subtlety, encouraging deduction, and tailoring the challenges, you can keep your experienced players engaged and thrilled. Remember, the best adventures are those where players feel like their choices and skills have a real impact on the world around them. So, crank up the mystery, unleash the danger, and let their cunning shine!

Bonus Tip: Consider incorporating player backstories and motivations into the clues and challenges. This personalizes the experience and makes them feel even more invested in the world.

Cresthaven RPG Resources

- Prebuild Episode Adventures
- Building A Dungeon
- Designing Adventures
- **Predesigned Setting: Village of Cresthaven**
- Magic Items
 - Identifying Magic Items
 - Magic Armor
 - Magic Weapons
 - Miscellaneous Items
 - Potions
 - Rings
 - Rods, Staves And Wands
 - Scrolls

- Treasure and Money

Online Reference

Here are a collection of blogs and tips that will help you better setup and run your games. They will help you to better understand when to roll and why. Essentially making you the most Bad Ass DM possible.

The Lazy DM ebook (\$7.99)

How to build Awesome Encounters

Adjudicate Actions Like a Motherf\$&%ing Boss!

5 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenaged Skill System

Dragonsfoot community forums

A Quick Primer for Old School Gaming