

SLY FLOURISH'S
RETURN OF THE
LAZY DUNGEON MASTER



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“Prep as little as you can.”

— Jeremy Crawford, lead rules designer for fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons

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CHAPTER 1:

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master is a book designed to help Gamemasters of any type of tabletop roleplaying game—both veterans and newcomers alike—get the most value out of the time we spend preparing for our games. The ideas in this book are based on reviews of hundreds of videos, articles, books, and interviews, as well as the shared experiences of thousands of DMs and GMs. *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* begins with an eight-step process for game preparation, then builds on those steps to expand into a full discussion of how we prepare our games, how we run our games, and how we think about our games.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

Gamemasters with some experience running roleplaying games will get the most value out of this book. *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* isn't designed to teach beginners how to run roleplaying games. (Thankfully, many RPG sourcebooks and Gamemaster guides can help shepherd new players through the steps of running games for the first time.) But you don't need to be a hardened veteran to make use of this book. If you have any amount of experience running RPGs, *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* can help you learn how to get more out of your RPGs by preparing less.

WHAT GAME SYSTEM IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book can work with just about any RPG—particularly d20-based fantasy RPGs. Still, while writing the book, I had the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* clearly in mind. *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* contains no game-specific mechanics, however. The concepts discussed

in these chapters can work with just about any fantasy RPG, and will work particularly well with *Dungeons & Dragons*.

WHY WRITE A NEW BOOK?

It's been five years since the first appearance of *Sly Flourish's The Lazy Dungeon Master*, and much has changed in those five years. Wizards of the Coast published the fifth edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying game in 2014. The streaming of tabletop RPGs online has exploded into a new form of daily entertainment. By any measure, the popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* continues to rise.

Lots of new people are coming into this amazing hobby. Lots of people who left the hobby are coming back again. The game has changed. We have changed.


Even with all this change, though, the ideas in the original *Lazy Dungeon Master* hold up. People still talk about how that book remains a valuable resource for learning how to prepare less—and to run better roleplaying games at the same time. For *Dungeon Masters* and other Gamemasters reading the original book today, the ideas found within it work just as well in our current games as they did in our games five years ago.

So why write this new book?

Because we've all learned a lot since then.

Though *The Lazy Dungeon Master* holds up, there are always new ideas to add. We can polish and refine the original concepts with the experience of tens of thousands of Gamemasters to make them even more useful.

Though this book builds off the concepts of the original book, *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* is fully self-contained. **You don't need to have read *The Lazy Dungeon Master* before reading this book.** If you have previously read the original



Lazy Dungeon Master, you'll find familiar ideas here, but this book's way of the Lazy Dungeon Master is a complete revision of the way of the Lazy Dungeon Master presented in that book. Nothing has been copied over directly. Every idea has been reexamined and rewritten in the context of what we know today.

This book is a complete encapsulation of the way of the Lazy Dungeon Master. If you want to follow this path, this is the only book you need.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master is designed to maximize the value of the time you spend reading it. Each chapter is deliberately brief, to get you to the meat of the book's topics as fast as possible. Though reading this book from cover to cover offers great benefit, that's not the only way to make use of it.

The chapter headings in the table of contents can act as a checklist of the tools, techniques, and principles of the Lazy Dungeon Master. You can skim the table of contents to get an idea of what you already know and what you might want to reexamine. Rereading the table of contents every few months can then help cement the core ideas of the Lazy Dungeon Master in your mind.

Chapter 2 explores the **Lazy Dungeon Master's checklist** that walks you through the main steps of Lazy Dungeon Master preparation. **If you read nothing else, read chapter 2** to gain an understanding of these main steps.

The end of each chapter includes a checklist covering the main points of the chapter. **Skim these individual chapter checklists** to understand what each chapter contains, and whenever you want to review the chapter without having to read the whole thing again. If any of those topics aren't clear, you can dig deeper into the chapter to see what it's talking about.

The end of the book contains a list of references and further reading, including books, RPG sourcebooks, articles, and videos for further research into running great games. If you want to dive deeper into becoming a great Gamemaster, these references are the best place to start.

Read this book in whatever way best suits your needs. If you prefer reading it cover to cover, that's great. But if you prefer to skim the contents and pick out the topics that interest you, you'll likewise learn from it. If you find that these ideas resonate with you, you can reread or skim the book regularly to wire its concepts into your own mental GM toolbox. Like all the ideas in *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master*, the book itself is meant to be used in whatever way gives you the greatest benefit.

OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER

The way of the Lazy Dungeon Master isn't doctrine. It's not a set of hard and inflexible rules. This style of running games isn't intended to be the *only way* to prepare and run our games.

Rather, all of us are on a journey together, following the paths of thousands of GMs who have walked before us for more than forty years. We all seek to find ways to make our roleplaying games better. This isn't about anyone grabbing you by the ear and dragging you down a single acceptable path. Instead, each of us has the opportunity to study what we see, discuss it, and determine individually whether a path is the right one or the wrong one for us and our games.

Becoming a better Gamemaster doesn't result from blindly following rules in a book. It comes from **constant and continual improvement of our personal craft**. It comes from our continual exploration of this limitless hobby, from finding out what works well for each of us, and from determining what we should discard.

Although this book presents a complete checklist for lightweight game preparation with a focus on improvisation at the table, **each idea in the book works on its own**. You need not follow every step explored here. Rather, adopt the concepts that fit well into your own GM toolbox or preparation process. **Take the parts of this book that work well for you and omit those that do not.**

Let's begin our journey together.

CHAPTER 2:

THE WAY OF THE LAZY DUNGEON MASTER

Prepare what benefits your game.

Those five words represent the core philosophy of the Lazy Dungeon Master. Our goal is to learn what parts of our RPG preparation and execution bring the most fun to our games. Our goal is to understand what benefits our games, and to separate that from what offers little value for the energy we spend in preparation.

The way of the Lazy Dungeon Master, first stated five years ago in *The Lazy Dungeon Master*, begins with a simple initial idea:

WE CAN SPEND LESS TIME PREPARING FOR OUR RPGS AND STILL RUN GREAT GAMES.

In that earlier book, I hypothesized that all of us as GMs spend a lot of time preparing things for our games that offer little actual value to the players. So by boiling our preparation down to only the things that matter the most, we can save considerable time.

While exploring this idea, however, I found another potentially deeper hypothesis:

THE LESS WE PREPARE, THE BETTER OUR GAMES WILL BE.

Now, this seems like something that can't possibly work. How is it even feasible that the less we put into our games before the fact, the more fun we'll have with our players at the table? But indeed, many Gamemasters—including many GMs we might think of as experts and professionals within the hobby—have found this to be true. The less we prepare, the better our games will be.

Clearly, though, this idea works *only up to a point*. We can't take this notion to its mathematical conclusion of "Prepare nothing, and your game will

be infinitely more fun." Some GMs do state that they prepare nothing at all for their games, but those GMs are a small minority. The 2016 *Dungeons & Dragons* Dungeon Master Survey at slyflourish.com received responses from 6,600 fifth edition Dungeon Masters—only 2 percent of whom said that they spent no time at all preparing for their games. This means that roughly 98 percent of us seem to agree that some game preparation is required to run a great game.


Certainly, there is a point at which too little preparation can harm the fun of a game. Though we can often prepare less than we think we need to before a game, **we must prepare something**. And because all GMs are different, what we need to prepare to run an RPG session varies. Yet many of us cluster around a few key preparation steps that can help us prepare less and still run great games.

Instinctively, each of us develops our own individual list of preparation activities by looking at every step we typically take and every technique we use while actually running a game. Then we ask ourselves, "Is this really useful? Is this really fun? And does it bring enough joy to the game to be worth the effort?" Each step and each component is worth drawing out under the cold, harsh light of reality, so that we can examine it dispassionately.

Let's look again at our Lazy Dungeon Master mantra:

PREPARE WHAT BENEFITS YOUR GAME.

It's easy to see that this simple statement has a negative space. In thinking about what best benefits our games, we can also think about what does not benefit our games—and we can ask whether those



things might *best be discarded*. If we extend our mantra into describing this negative space, we have the following:

PREPARE WHAT BENEFITS YOUR GAME, AND OMIT WHAT DOES NOT.

This second part of the process can be hard. As GMs, we're all so rooted to the ways we've always done things that it's often difficult to let those ways go. We don't have to make a big plunge into abandoning what we've always done, though. Instead, we can run small experiments.

We can **try things out**.

We don't have to throw away five thousand dollars worth of miniatures to try running combat in the "theater of the mind" once or twice. We don't have to get rid of five hundred pounds of 3D terrain to use a single blank poster map for a couple of sessions, so as to see whether we like the flexibility that comes from that. We don't have to toss out a three-ring binder holding hundreds of pages of world building to try out some spiral campaign building.

Trying out a new idea or removing a preparation step we typically take doesn't mean we have to do so forever. We just have to give it a try for a game or two and see how it feels.

For some Gamemasters, time is such a limited commodity that the question of what to throw away isn't the problem. Some GMs just don't have the time for a lot of game preparation—even to the point where a lack of time prevents some would-be GMs from running games at all. Hopefully this book can help—because preparing for a game requires less time than we think.

Using the game preparation checklist in this book takes about fifteen to thirty minutes for a four-hour game.

So whether you're just looking for ways to refine your own game preparation or seeking a system that saves you time, this book hopefully has a few ideas that might resonate. Let's dig in.

CHAPTER 3:

THE LAZY DUNGEON MASTER'S CHECKLIST

What does the way of the Lazy Dungeon Master look like? What are the steps we can take to prepare our games in as little time as possible and still run a great RPG? For a typical game session, the Lazy Dungeon Master's checklist looks like this:

- Review the characters
- Create a strong start
- Outline potential scenes
- Define secrets and clues
- Develop fantastic locations
- Identify important NPCs
- Choose relevant monsters
- Select magic item rewards

That's it. A number of variables will make some of these steps grow or shrink, including the length of our session, where a session falls within the campaign, and whether we're running a published adventure or not. We might even skip a few of these steps if we know we don't need them. If we're starting a brand-new campaign, we might have some extra steps (covered later on in the book). But even for brand-new games, this checklist keeps us focused on what matters at the table.

Here's a brief summary of each of the steps. The chapters that follow then break out each step in detail, and offer examples to show what using the checklist looks like.

REVIEW THE CHARACTERS

Before we do anything else, it helps to spend a few minutes reviewing the player characters. What are their names? What do they want? What plays into their backgrounds? What do the players of these characters enjoy at the table?

You might not even write anything down during this step, but reviewing the characters helps wire them into your mind—and ensures that the rest of your preparation fits around them.

CREATE A STRONG START


How a game starts is likely the most important piece of preparation we can do. Setting the stage for the session determines a great deal about how the rest of the game will go. When you define where a game session starts, you figure out what's going on, what the initial focus of the session is, and how you can get close to the action. When in doubt, start with a fight.

OUTLINE POTENTIAL SCENES

With a strong start in hand, we can then outline a short list of potential scenes that might unfold. This step exists mostly to make you feel as though you have a handle on the game before you start. However, as GMs, all of us must always be ready to throw our potential scenes away when the game goes in a different direction—as it often does. Usually, it's enough to come up with only a few words per scene, and to expect one to two scenes per hour of play. At other times, you might skip this step completely if you don't think you need it.

DEFINE SECRETS AND CLUES

The next step is second only in importance to the strong start, and might be the single most powerful tool available to the Lazy Dungeon Master. Secrets and clues are single short sentences that describe a clue, a piece of the story, or a piece of the world that the characters can discover during the game. You



don't know exactly *how* the characters will discover these clues. And as such, you'll want to **keep these secrets and clues abstract from their place of discovery** so that you can drop them into the game wherever it makes sense. This lets the game flow freely, while still allowing you to reveal important pieces of the story at any point where the characters might discover them. During this step, you might write down ten such secrets or clues.

DEVELOP FANTASTIC LOCATIONS

Building evocative locations isn't easily improvised. As such, it's worth spending time writing out a handful of fantastic locations that the characters might discover and explore during the game. Each location can be thought of as a set, a room, or a backdrop for a single scene in your adventure.

Describe each location with a short evocative title such as "The Sunspire." Then write down three fantastic aspects for it, along the lines of: "Blazing beam of light shining to the heavens," "Moat of molten rock," or "Huge elven glyphs carved into ancient stone." Ultimately, whole dungeons can be built from a series of connected fantastic locations, with each location representing a large area or chamber. A specific location might not come up during the game for which you prepare it, but it will be ready for a later session as the characters explore.

IDENTIFY IMPORTANT NPCs

During our preparation, we'll outline those NPCs (nonplayer characters) most critical to the adventure, focusing on a name and a connection to the adventure, then wrapping the NPC in a character archetype from popular fiction. Many other NPCs—maybe even most of them—can be improvised right at the table.

CHOOSE RELEVANT MONSTERS

What monsters are the characters most likely to face? What monsters make sense for a specific location and situation? We're using the term "monster" loosely here, so as to include enemy NPCs as well as truly monstrous foes. But whatever type of enemy you need, reading through books of monsters can give you the fuel to choose the right creatures for the right situation.

Additionally, understanding the loose relationship between monster challenge rating and character

level can help you understand how a battle might go. Most of the time, you can just list a number of monsters and improvise encounters based on what's happening in the adventure. For boss battles, you might have to do more work.

SELECT MAGIC ITEM REWARDS

Players love magic items, and it's worthwhile to spend time preparing items they'll find interesting. But even as this step brings joy to the players, it also helps to directly impact the characters—by dropping an interesting part of the story literally into their hands. You can use a mixture of techniques to reward magic items, from selecting items randomly to selecting specific items based on the themes of the characters and the desires of the players. Magic items are also a great mechanism to deliver secrets and clues.

A LOOSE OUTLINE TO GET COMFORTABLE

Your actual use of this checklist might change from game to game. But reviewing the checklist each time you begin to prepare for your game can help you feel comfortable that you're focusing your energy on the activities that provide the most value. The more comfortable you become improvising your games, the more you might start skipping certain steps on the list. All that's important is that you don't want your confidence to lead you away from important steps that your players enjoy.

THE LAZY DUNGEON MASTER'S CHECKLIST WITH PUBLISHED ADVENTURES

Our Lazy Dungeon Master's checklist works whether we're running a published adventure or our own home-brewed adventures. But published adventures offer tremendous value to the Lazy Dungeon Master, whether you play them mostly as written or use them to inspire your own ideas—giving you published and playtested material you can steal and drop into your own adventures.

To get the most out of a published adventure, it's important to first **read the adventure**, absorbing it and letting it inspire you. You then need to **make the adventure your own** by customizing it for your group. Adventure writers both expect and hope that

GMs will run their adventures in whatever way best suits our games.

When running a published adventure and going over the Lazy Dungeon Master's checklist, you might find that some of the steps are done for you. You might not need to put as much energy into steps like building fantastic locations, identifying NPCs, choosing monsters, or selecting magic items. Still, because you always want to customize the adventure, it's worth reviewing the checklist when running a published adventure, to help you sort through and focus all the material that the adventure is providing.

THE LAZY DUNGEON MASTER AND ONLINE PLAY

Running RPGs online has grown significantly in the past few years. In the 2016 Dungeon Master survey, roughly 20 percent of surveyed DMs said they primarily run their D&D games online.

Although *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master*

doesn't specifically address online play, the steps and processes discussed in the book work just as well whether you interact with your players online or around the table. Running online games might require additional steps or tactics—particularly in learning how to use the tools of your favorite virtual tabletop. In other ways, though, a virtual tabletop can make life as a GM even easier. But however you play, the Lazy Dungeon Master's checklist still works.

AN ONGOING EXAMPLE: THE SCOURGE OF VOLIXUS

Throughout this book, we're going to use a single example adventure called the "Scourge of Volixus." You'll see how to approach and make use of each step of the Lazy Dungeon Master's checklist as it's applied to the adventure—culminating by the end of the book in an adventure outline suitable for play.