



Home > Games > D&D > Articles

Save My Game

05/18/2007

Home





D&D Archive



Rules for Rules' Sake

"Everyone Here Must Follow the Rules ... Except Me"

By Jason Nelson-Brown

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This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

Problem: My Rules Apply to You, Not Me

Our DM is a huge stickler for the rules to the point of having to name page, paragraph, and sentence number of a rule one is using, yet he refuses to use the CR experience chart. "You'll level up when I'm ready" is the usual response. This is getting very, very old for some of us, and it's hard to find a campaign in my area. Any suggestion to right this ship?

-- Losing out on levels in Lancaster (Adam), from AskWizards.com

Aside from the -- oh, let's call them 'butt-head' issues -- that this raises, your DM is apparently not as big a stickler for the rules as he thinks he is. I've stated before that the DM is also a player in the game and that he needs to have fun. Your DM has the opposite problem: He needs to remember that he is not the *only* one who is supposed to have fun. Honestly, "You'll level up when I am ready"? What about when you, the players, are ready? Neither one of you should have the only voice in this. There needs to be give and take, and that seems to be a place your DM doesn't want to go.

Part of what's irritating you in this situation, I suspect, is the inherent hypocrisy. If your DM requires chapter and verse for every rule the players call on, he had better be ready to give it up as well. If he can't cite the basis for his rulings, then you can insist that he stop this nonsense and run the rules as written. He has established that strict adherence to the rules is a standard in his game, and you can and should hold him to it. If he's not required to meet his own standards, then neither are you.

Be forewarned, however, that this kind of power struggle can be fruitless. What you describe is a symptom, not a cause. You have a self-absorbed DM who can't see his own faults. If you challenge him and try to beat him at his own game, that may not help or change anything.

Here's one possible scenario --

You and the other players get together and make sure that you have a common understanding of the situation. Collectively, you write out a set of 'talking points' before sitting down with the DM down and talking to him. You explain to him how his actions are affecting your perception and enjoyment of the game. You aren't arguing with him about what he's doing or telling him what to do differently, just explaining the facts as the rest of you see them. Odds are high that he will try to argue or explain away your concerns. You need to stand together and stay firm on your contention that this is what he's been doing, whether he believes it or not, and that he is as wrong as two left feet.

Then the ball is in his court. He can tell you to get stuffed, that he's a good DM, and you are a bunch of unappreciative jerks. Or he could decide to change how he does things.

Finally, the players need to decide what to do, based on his reaction. Several times lately, we've talked about things coming to a head in player/DM disagreements over how the game is going, and here it comes again.

If worse comes to worst, he won't budge from his high-handed DM chair. In that case, politely but firmly tell him that he's out of a job. That means starting a new game with a new DM. Your old DM should be welcome to play in the campaign (unless the relationship is too strained for that), as long as he behaves like a player and contributes positively. If not, then cut him adrift.

Trust me, DMing is a challenging task. Sitting behind the DM's screen can be daunting. The trick (that this DM seems to have missed) is getting past the idea that you need to know everything about *D&D* to qualify for the job. You don't -- you can't -- know everything about the game. *And that's OK.* What is required to be a good DM is an attitude of lifelong learning. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Dungeon Master's Guide II* provide lots of good advice, not just on how to construct the basic nuts and bolts of a

campaign but also in how to handle all kinds of special situations. The same goes for websites like this one. Message boards and mailing lists on this site and elsewhere offer even more advice plus the opportunity to bounce ideas off of other players and DMs and to recount horror stories about things that went poorly or happy moments when things went great.

As you begin DMing, you will need to pull out the reference books a lot. As you get more comfortable, both with knowing the rules and with making your own judgment calls, you will need them less and less.

I state all this to demonstrate that your DM *does not* hold you hostage. You can do the job yourself if you have to, and you may even find that you like DMing as much as or more than playing.

Finally, here's a piece of advice that every DM should heed regardless of his experience at the helm. Every DM should step around the screen and *be a player* at least some of the time. This is a great way to see new ways of doing things and pick up fresh tricks of the trade. More importantly for the topic at hand, it breaks down the tendency to be high-handed and arbitrary when you see what that feels like from the players' perspective. If you are short on playing opportunities, think about switching off campaigns within the existing group -- you can either alternate back and forth between two campaigns (with different DMs), or play one campaign for the length of an adventure, then switch to another one, and so on. This system helps break down the DM/players barrier so that everyone in the group sees that they're all in the game together.

Have a question for the *Save My Game* column? Head over to the message boards: [What's a DM to Do](#) or [What's a Player to Do](#). Be sure to include "Save My Game" as part of your message's title. Or, send us a question directly, to [Ask Wizards](#).

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, and son Allen. He just finished his doctorate in education and is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing D&D in 1981.

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