

Breaking Them In

Incorporating novice players into your campaign

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Novice role-playing game players can be a trial to the most knowledgeable and experienced gaming groups. There is so much for them to learn, and the older players often do not want to wait for them to learn it. How do you, as the DM, bridge the gap?

The key lies in making the training of the new RPG player the job of the *entire group*, not just the DM. This spreads out the responsibility and speeds up the awkward period of adjustment the group goes through when taking on a new member. Here are a few tips to help you, the DM, help your new players get adjusted.

1. Set aside some time to work with the new player alone. Start the new player off by having her roll up her character's statistics, then let her choose a class. This will be one of the biggest decisions early on, so be prepared to give good advice. Try to remain impartial, however, or else she may wind up choosing the class she thinks you want her to use, rather than relying on her own preferences.

Once that is out of the way, you can get her familiar with armor class, hit points, saving throws, and the other mechanics of role-playing, so she will at least know what you mean when you say, "Make a saving throw versus poison." Ironically, I

find that most new players have more of a problem in identifying the type of dice they need to roll than in why they need to roll them (where else do you ever use 12-sided dice?). Keep this in mind as you and your veteran players are throwing around terms like "d20" or "d12."

When the player begins to choose the specifics of her character (spells for wizards, weapon proficiencies for fighters, etc.), try to maintain a "hands-off" approach. Answer her questions, but don't create the character for her. When complicated rules arise, such as the fighting styles in PHBR1 *The Complete Fighter's Handbook*, don't try to explain everything at once. Unless your new player is a whiz, this will confuse and aggravate her. Go slowly and give her time to understand the more complex rules. In extreme cases where a difficult choice must be made, recommend specifics that you know she will be happy with, and be willing to let her change these retroactively as she gains experience. The other players may howl when you let her change one proficiency to another, but they should be willing to compromise to accommodate the new player (and if not, then a few good DM growls should suffice to convince them). Finally, be prepared to stop game-play when the new player runs into a

problem; this slows down play at first but should happen less often as time goes by and the novice gains confidence.

Beware of the novice who nods too much, because it probably means that she doesn't understand what's going on but is afraid to slow down the game to ask for an explanation. Take the time to explain anything she doesn't understand, and make certain she knows that you are willing to answer *any* questions.

Most importantly, be sure that the novice turns first to you, the DM, for advice on specific rules. The other players may be well-intentioned in their efforts to advise her, but as we all know, many players have their own versions of the rules ("Oh, sure, you can bring a war elephant into a dungeon!"). This requires the DM have a working knowledge of the rules herself, a necessary prerequisite for any good referee.

2. Emphasize preparedness. The new player must be willing to spend the time and effort to learn the rules, or else your best efforts will be wasted. Of course, he cannot be expected to become a rules expert after just a few sessions, but he should have a willingness to read the rule-books on his own. Again, if you let him lean on you too much at first, you'll wind

up playing his character for him. To help him out, write or type out a summary of the most important rules needed during play, such as calculating THACO, initiative, etc., that he can keep within easy reach and refer to as needed. This will save countless minutes of frantic flipping through the *Player's Handbook* for a table or chart. One idea that works particularly well is drawing up an attack matrix (see the AD&D® 1st Edition game's *Dungeon Master's Guide*, pages 74-75), according to his character's chance to hit. THACO can be a difficult concept to master, and this will ease him into calculating his chance of success for himself. Another useful addition to the summary is on page 93 of the AD&D 2nd Edition game's *PH*, entitled "What You Can Do in One Round." I find that one of the most frequently asked questions of new players is "Well, what can I do?" so this information should give them a head-start on the answer.

If the player is using a spell-caster (something that is not recommended for most novice players), photocopy or type out the spell listings on pages 126-128 of the *PH* and highlight those his character has access to. This comes in especially handy for priest characters, whose major and minor access to various spheres is certain to confuse a new player. Allow the

player to use these aids freely, while stressing that they exist to supplement the rules, not substitute for them. Getting familiar with the rules themselves requires a little time away from the gaming table, but as all experienced players know, it's worth the effort. If the player is lagging on his "homework," a word to the wise should be sufficient to motivate him. The best advice a DM can give a new player is "Know your character." Learn what he can do, and what he can't.

3. Assign another player to be a guide for the novice. Ask for volunteers or assign someone you trust to lend responsible guidance. Your players may not be inclined to do this, so simply remind them that breaking in the new player is everyone's job, not just the DM's. If that doesn't work, try a small bribe to sweeten the pot (extra experience points, for example, depending on the guide's performance). If all else fails, the threat of a vampire or two can be a marvelous incentive to perform such a service.

Once the "guide" has been chosen, tell the novice that she would do well to follow the example of her new guide during play. Emphasize, however, the importance of innovation; in other words, see that the novice isn't blindly parroting the experi-

enced player. Warn the other players that while outside suggestions to the novice are welcome, you will not allow her to be verbally bombarded ("Cast a spell!" "No, throw a flask of oil!" "Don't do that! Help my character!"), a tactic virtually guaranteed to discourage new players from ever returning to the gaming table. Ideally, the novice should rely more heavily on her guide at first, then less so as she gains knowledge and confidence. This expedites play, keeps your players happy, and makes your job as DM a little easier.

These suggestions may not fit all gaming groups; some DMs may prefer a "hands-on" approach to training, while others may leave it entirely to the novice to sink or swim. However it is done, the addition of a new player should not be a trial for the DM, but an experience shared by the whole group. If it's done properly, it can result in a sharp new player, a tougher party of PCs, and a more enjoyable game for all involved. Ω

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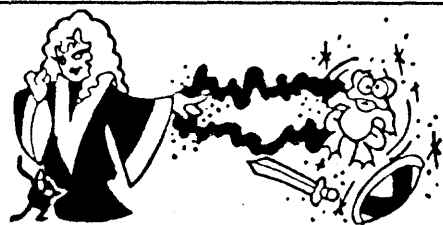
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