**A beginner’s guide to playing Dungeons and Dragons**

In person or online, D&D has never been more welcoming

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The story of Dungeons & Dragons, the iconic tabletop role-playing game, began in 1974. Since then, it’s served as the inspiration for countless daring adventures — and, arguably, entire genres in the video game industry. It’s the game that gave birth to actual play, a format that inspired the likes of Dimension 20, The Adventure Zone, and Critical Role and its The Legend of Vox Machina animated series. It provided the language and the lore for Netflix’s Stranger Things, inspired the mystery at the heart of the novel Ready Player One, and was adapted into the major motion picture Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves.

But while stories of flawed heroes coming together in the face of terrible odds makes for great media, the best way to truly experience D&D is to play it yourself. The game’s long history and books full of rules might seem intimidating, but its popularity makes it easier than ever to get an adventure going. Polygon’s guide is designed to help get you started.

**GATHER YOUR PARTY**

The first thing you need to play D&D is people to play with. Most will take on the roles of player characters with their own abilities and motivations that will drive their decisions and determine what actions they can take during the course of the game. Four to five is usually the ideal number of players, though you can have more or less with some modifications to ensure that the challenges don’t become too hard or easy.

One person will take on the role of the Dungeon Master (DM). They’re responsible for adjudicating rules, narrating the story, and controlling the actions of anyone the players encounter — from friendly innkeepers who might send them on a quest to the monsters that they may need to fight. You’re welcome to jump right into leading a game, but it’s often easiest to get a handle on D&D — or any role-playing game system — by playing it yourself first.

**THE BEST WAY TO TRULY EXPERIENCE D&D IS TO PLAY IT YOURSELF**

While D&D is often best played around a table, gathering your best friends at home together isn’t always practical. Luckily, there are plenty of resources to make it easier to find like-minded would-be heroes. D&D’s publisher, Wizards of the Coast, has an event locator that you can use to find a friendly local game store where you can drop in and try the game regardless of your experience level. You can also find games using platforms like StartPlaying, which connect would-be players with professional game masters.

But the fact is, you don’t need to meet in person with the other players at all. Spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a whole ecosystem of virtual tabletops (VTTs) that can allow you to play remotely — with or without video or voice chat. You can use something as simple as Google Meet or Zoom to get started of course, but VTTs like Roll20, Foundry, Fantasy Grounds, One More Multiverse, and others can replace the need for physical maps, dice, and character sheets entirely — even when playing in person.

**SESSION ZERO**

The most important rule of Dungeons & Dragons is to make sure everyone at the table (virtual or physical) is having a good time. When organizing a game, it’s a good idea to start with a “session zero” just to make sure everyone knows what to expect. One good way is to start by using simple safety tools, like John Stavropoulos’ X-Card, to make sure none of the players feel uncomfortable during the course of the game. Since role-playing games involve people acting like their characters and expressing their emotions, these types of tools can also help make it clear whether someone is actually angry or scared or if they’re just acting and having a great time.

You can also use the lines-and-veils system (first developed by Ron Edwards for his book Sex and Sorcery), which suggests setting “lines” that will never be crossed and “veils” for subjects that can be briefly glimpsed or referenced but not dwelled upon. That will help ensure people aren’t upset by potential plot elements or descriptions of what can be at times visceral action.

The character each person plays can also have a big impact on how much they enjoy the experience. A shy person might not want to take on the role of a bard or a rogue who would normally spend a lot of time talking. Someone who doesn’t have much experience with mechanically complex games might prefer a fighter over a wizard, since spellcasters have to keep track of more rules.

Know also that character generation can be both time consuming and complex. While it’s important to do things the long way to really understand D&D’s larger systems and how characters can maximize their abilities, you might just want to hand out pre-generated characters the first few times out. Later, you can use the free official online toolset at D&D Beyond to check your work.

One key thing to remember as a Dungeon Master is that even though you’re controlling all the enemies the players face, your goal isn’t really to defeat them. The DM is a facilitator, not an adversary. You always want to present your players with challenges that are appropriate for both the level of their characters and their familiarity with the game and its rules. Particularly lucky or unlucky dice rolls can mean a scenario doesn’t go according to plan, so be prepared to improvise if your players fail or succeed in a way you didn’t predict. Consider the cardinal rule of improv — say “Yes, and…” to accept what your players want to do and come up with a way to make it work within the narrative and mechanics of the game.

**ADVENTURING TOOLS**

Whether you go to a D&D event in person or play online, chances are you won’t need to bring anything at all. D&D players often invest huge amounts of time and money on props for their games, but you can still have a great time with nothing more than a pencil, some scrap paper, and a set of polyhedral dice. If you want to read the basic rules beforehand, you can even find them online for free.

If you’d like to run a game yourself, you may want to pick up the newest boxed starter set, titled Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set: Dragons of Stormwreck Isle, which is only about $19. It contains everything you need for a starting adventure, including five premade characters and a rulebook for your players, a set of dice, and an adventure book for you. However, the slightly older Dungeons & Dragons Essentials Kit, which includes extra rules for a kind of player character called a “sidekick,” is a great addition to your toolkit if you have fewer than five players at your table.

If you don’t mind making more of an investment and digging through more rules, you can get the full experience by picking up the Player’s Handbook, the Dungeon Master’s Guide, and the Monster Manual. In fact, all three books are sold in a handsome slipcase set. Together, they will give you everything you need to build your own campaigns.

Once you have your feet under you, you might consider looking for additional inspiration for adding more encounters and adventures to your ongoing campaign. In these situations, a great place to go browsing is inside officially published anthologies like Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel, Candlekeep Mysteries, and Keys From the Golden Vault. All three are filled with adventures that can be completed in a few hours rather than requiring players to come back week after week.

You may also want to check out the Dungeon Masters Guild, an enormous repository of D&D resources created using the Open Gaming License (OGL). You’ll find full hardcover books from industry veterans such as Eberron setting creator Keith Baker alongside free or pay-what-you-can tools such as maps, stat blocks for monsters, or new character options. There are also plenty of digital tools meant to enhance VTT play.

However, don’t get too far ahead of yourself. While a single encounter can last a few hours at the table, a published campaign book might last a few months to a year — or more — with regular play. Pace yourself, and always be paying attention to the appetite of the other players at the table.

In fact, you may want to hold off on investing in too many books mainly because D&D is in the midst of a large-scale rules refresh leading up to the launch of One D&D in 2024. The project will also include a new digital experience meant to make online play easier and more immersive.

**OTHER GAMES TO EXPLORE**

D&D might be the most popular tabletop role-playing game in the world, but there are many, many others.

D&D was inspired by tactical miniatures games — crunchy little wargames fueled by scholarship and military history. As such, it places a lot of focus on simulating fantasy combat. If you’d prefer to spend more of your time socializing and flirting — including in the midst of fights — you might want to try Thirsty Sword Lesbians. It uses the popular Powered by the Apocalypse rule set that is much simpler than D&D and provides a gateway to numerous other games based on that system inspired by everything from Buffy: The Vampire Slayer to Untitled Goose Game.

Blades in the Dark is another great option because it requires very little preparation from the person running the game, encouraging improvisation with an “act now, plan later” version of heists set in a dark fantasy world. If you really want to get started quickly, you can pick up For the Queen, a card-based storytelling game where two to six players work together to develop the world, their characters, and their relationship to their monarch.

No two games are quite the same, even if they use the same system, since the outcome will be determined by who’s involved and the decisions they make along the way. That makes role-playing a hobby rich in stories and characters you’ll probably be thinking about long after you’ve stopped playing.

THE BEST 5TH EDITION D&D CAMPAIGN BOOKS

Curse of Strahd — A horror-themed adventure starring an iconic villain.

Waterdeep: Dragon Heist — An elaborate heist set in a major city.

Baldur’s Gate: Descent Into Avernus — Go to hell, and enjoy the ride.

The Wild Beyond the Witchlight — D&D for theater kids.

Out of the Abyss — An underground adventure with high stakes.