NEVER UNPREPARED

The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep

By Phil Vecchione • With a Foreword by Sean Patrick Fannon

Credits

Author: Phil Vecchione

Publisher: Martin Ralya

Editor: Martin Ralya

Art Director: John Arcadian

Graphic Designer: Darren Hardy
Layout: Darren Hardy

Cover Artist: Matt Morrow
Cover Designer: Darren Hardy

Interior Artists: Matt Morrow, Christopher Reach
Diagrams: Phil Vecchione

Indexers: Martin Ralya, Phil Vecchione
Proofreaders: Robert M. Everson, Daniel Milne

Capitalist Tool: Kurt Schneider

In memory of Eric Wujcik

With special thanks to my Keurig and my "fatman" chair, who supported me throughout my writing. –P.V.

Dedication

To my wife Florence, for putting me onto this path, and supporting all my gaming and other endeavors over the years.

To my children, Dante and Rose:
Embrace your creativity in all you do.

To my gaming group, who were the lab rats for all my tinkering and experimentation as this process evolved. –P.V.

Contents

Introduction

I've never read an RPG or supplement that has told me how to prep for my sessions. Most of them talk about encounter building and campaign planning, but none of them lay out what information needs to be in my session notes, how long my notes should be, or even the best way to record them. I don't know if that's an unrealistic expectation to place on game designers, but since the dawn of the hobby we GMs have been left to wander in the desert trying to figure out how to prep our sessions.

The RPG blogging community has done some work to help advance this aspect of GMing, but the number of articles on how one should prepare their session notes is drowned out by a deluge of articles on how to speed up combat, the best class combinations to take, and the reasons to love/hate every version of *Dungeons & Dragons*™. If you're lucky, you may stumble on the occasional article with some nuggets of information which, through trial and error, can be cobbled together into some kind of system to prepare for your game.

The end result is that many GMs hate to prepare their session notes. I have yet to encounter a GM who is excited to prepare their notes—at best, they have made some kind of uneasy truce when it comes to getting their prep work done. Not me: I am a GM who likes to do my prep. Not because I like to give up time for other forms of leisure to write encounters, but rather because I have come to appreciate that the time I spend on my prep will make the games that I run so much better. I have also created a personal system whereby I am not a slave to my prep; instead, my prep is minor to-do accomplished in the course of my day.

My goals in writing this book are to share my own experiences with, and techniques for, session prep; and to make prep much less painful—and perhaps even pleasant—for GMs. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first gaming book ever written exclusively about game prep.

What I share in *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep* is not a specific method for how to prepare for a game. That kind of approach is novel but inflexible and will become stale as our hobby continues to evolve. Rather this book looks at prep in a more holistic way, identifying its role and your specific needs, but will require you to determine how to meet those needs. Don't worry, though: There are plenty of tips and suggestions on how to do exactly that in this book.

When you have completed the book, uncovered those needs, and worked to solve them, the end result will be *your* prep system—and you will know how to grow and adapt that system as you run different games and embark on different campaigns.

Phil Vecchione
Buffalo, NY
March 2012

How to Use this Book

Never Unprepared is designed to be read, internalized, and adapted for your own use as a GM. Whether you've run a few games, never run one, or have run hundreds or thousands of sessions, you'll find things in this book that you can put to use right away to improve, streamline, and better understand your prep process.

Why a Book about Game Prep?

I'm hardwired at the genetic level to prepare for things: Through my maternal bloodline I am half-Scottish, and come from the Johnston clan. Our clan motto is *Nunquam non paratus*, "Never Unprepared." And while this trait does not carry through to all of my relatives, it is strongly expressed in me. I am rarely without a pocketknife, and I always have just what I need in my work bag. I hate to be caught unprepared and am at my most comfortable when I have done my research before any significant event.

I have been a gamer since 1982 and have been a GM for nearly all of those years. I cut my teeth on the Moldvay D&D Basic Set and crafted my first dungeons on graph paper from the stationery store. Over the years I have run numerous campaigns under a variety of systems, and I've written out my session notes in many

Artist: Christopher Reach

different ways. I have written and run thousands of sessions, and have been underprepared, over-prepared, and sometimes just prepared enough. In the course of running those games, I've developed a good feel for what common elements appear in the prep for any game.

When I am not in my basement gaming (yes, I game in my basement), writing gaming books (I was one of the authors and designers, as well as the project manager, of Engine Publishing's two first books, EUREKA: *501 Adventure Plots to Inspire Game Masters* and MASKS: *1,000 Memorable NPCs for Any Roleplaying Game*), or writing articles for the GMing blog Gnome Stew (*gnomestew.com*), which I've done since 2008, I am a project manager by profession. As a project manager I have experience in time estimates, scheduling, and planning. I have an understanding of how to take something complicated, break it up in to manageable parts, and then tackle them over time in order to achieve a goal.

The culmination of all of this has been a journey, undertaken over the past 10 years, to understand session prep and how to hack it for best effect. It is through trial and error that I have assembled the concepts and elements presented in this book, with the hope that the things that I have learned can benefit other GMs.

The Breakdown

Here's what you'll find in each section of *Never Unprepared*. Each section builds upon the others.

Understanding Prep

To really dive into how to build your own system for prep, we have to understand the nature of prep. First we'll look at the role of prep and its phases, and then we'll break down those phases and look at each step and its importance. In this section you will come to understand your own prep cycle and to identify the phases where you're strongest, and those where you need to develop your skills.

Prep Toolbox

In the next section we'll look at some of the components that go into creating your notes. We'll look at various tools to create prep notes; we'll also talk about creative cycles and energies, and how to do the right things at the right time. Then we will address creating a personal prep template that complements your style.

Evolving Your Style

In the final section, we'll talk about how to evolve and adapt your style as you gain experience. We will also address how to re-evaluate your tools when you switch games and as technology changes.

Understanding Prep

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Chapter 2:
The Phases of Prep

A common misconception is that prep is the thing you do when you write your notes or draw the maps for your upcoming game. Prep begins before that, and it goes through a series of phases that can eventually yield a stack of notes and maps. Different people place emphasis on different phases, and people have varying skill levels in each phase. Mastery of each of the phases of prep will make you very good at this critical aspect of GMing.

When we talk about the prep process we are talking about starting with nothing and progressing to a set of notes, maps, and other useful tools that we need for an upcoming game. This is not only the written material we require for the game, but also the mental preparation that allows us to run the material in a session. How we get from nothing to notes is a process that can be broken down into a number of discrete phases. At each phase we move closer to being prepared to run the game.

How This Came About

I did not set out to define the phases of prep; I came across them naturally as I began to take an interest in productivity and life hacking (the latter being the practice of using tricks, shortcuts, and various other methods to increase efficiency in different

Artist: Christopher Reach

areas of one's life—see *lifehacker.com* for more). I began to read a lot of articles about the creative process and how people in various creative endeavors, from artists and designers to those in advertising, actually worked. At the time, I was a software developer; this too is a creative endeavor, even if the medium you work in is somewhat more structured.

I began to take things that I read and apply them to my gaming, specifically the creative process of coming up with an adventure (or story or plot, if you prefer). The more I did this the more I began to see that the overall process of prep was much more than just writing my notes. I began to notice the early phases, the intangible stage of the creative process where ideas are born. As this introspection continued I started to see the boundaries between one process and the next. I explored the meaning of each one, and looked for how each phase contributed to the whole process.

The outcome of this process of observation was a more full understanding of a particular creative process for prep. Based on talking to friends and fellow GMs, I believe that this is a natural process that many of us follow, in most cases without really understanding it.

The Phases

Prep has five phases. Collectively, these take the roughest of ideas and hone it into a scene or story. Your brain naturally goes through these phases, and it's possible that you might not always be aware that they are occurring. The phases of prep are:

1. **Brainstorming**
2. **Selection**
3. **Conceptualization**
4. **Documentation**
5. **Review**

Brainstorming

This phase is when ideas are spawned. At this stage they are rough, unrefined thoughts about the story or a given scene, or sometimes even just a line of dialog within a scene. Ideas are just that: small and incomplete. They lack the refinement of a fully formed thought. They don't always make sense; they can be silly, serious, or even inappropriate. Their power comes from their nearly limitless potential. Because of their imperfection and incomplete nature, they don't have to conform to any rules. They are what they are: possibility in its rawest form.

Brainstorming can happen nearly anywhere and under a wide variety of conditions. It can happen spontaneously while driving to work, talking to a friend, or even sitting in a meeting. Some people rely on ideas appearing randomly, calling them flashes of insight or strokes of genius. Others learn to refine this exercise and are able to enter a highly creative state in which they generate lots of ideas about a given topic (or many topics). The best example of this is in the field of advertising, which

combines a highly creative process with crushing deadlines and competition; if you don't churn out a lot of ideas, and quickly, you lose.

When we brainstorm we generate a host of unrefined ideas, each of which has a chance of being something that we may use in an upcoming game. Not every idea can be used as soon as it springs to mind, though, and that's where the process of selection comes in.

Selection

This is the phase where we select the ideas that we want to use in our upcoming game. Every idea generated during brainstorming has the potential to be a good idea. In this phase, we apply a dose of reality to that pool of ideas and narrow the field to one idea—or a handful of ideas—that we will then refine.

In this way you become like the gem cutter who examines several rough stones, analyzes them, looks for characteristics that make for a favorable stone, and selects the best candidates to cut. Some stones will be so obviously high-quality that you know they should be cut immediately, others you'll hold onto to cut another day, and some you'll discard because they will never yield a worthy gem.

How you sort your ideas and select the best ones will have a lot to do with understanding the kind of game you are running and the players who are participating in the game. You will need to understand what fits within the campaign world and what breaks the fourth wall. You need to be aware of what kinds of stories interest your players and what stories will disengage or even upset them. You will also need to understand your own abilities as a GM and determine if a given idea is something that you think you can pull off in a game.

At the end of the sorting, your idea isn't really any more fully formed than it was when it was conceived during brainstorming, but now it has passed through a few logical filters and been found worthy of additional thought and consideration. You then need to build out this idea into something more usable in a process called conceptualization, the next phase of prep.

Conceptualization

In the conceptualization phase we now take each idea and expand upon it; we apply logic, give it a description, and fit it into the overall game. Where the brainstorming phase was about limitless possibly, conceptualization is about making your idea work within the reality of your game.

For an idea to be useable within a game, you need to make sure that it fits into the logic of the story. What characters or groups are involved in this idea and what are they doing? Do those things make sense based on what you already know about your game? How will you mechanically express some of the actions or elements of the world? Do those fit within the rules of the game?

17

Prep Toolbox

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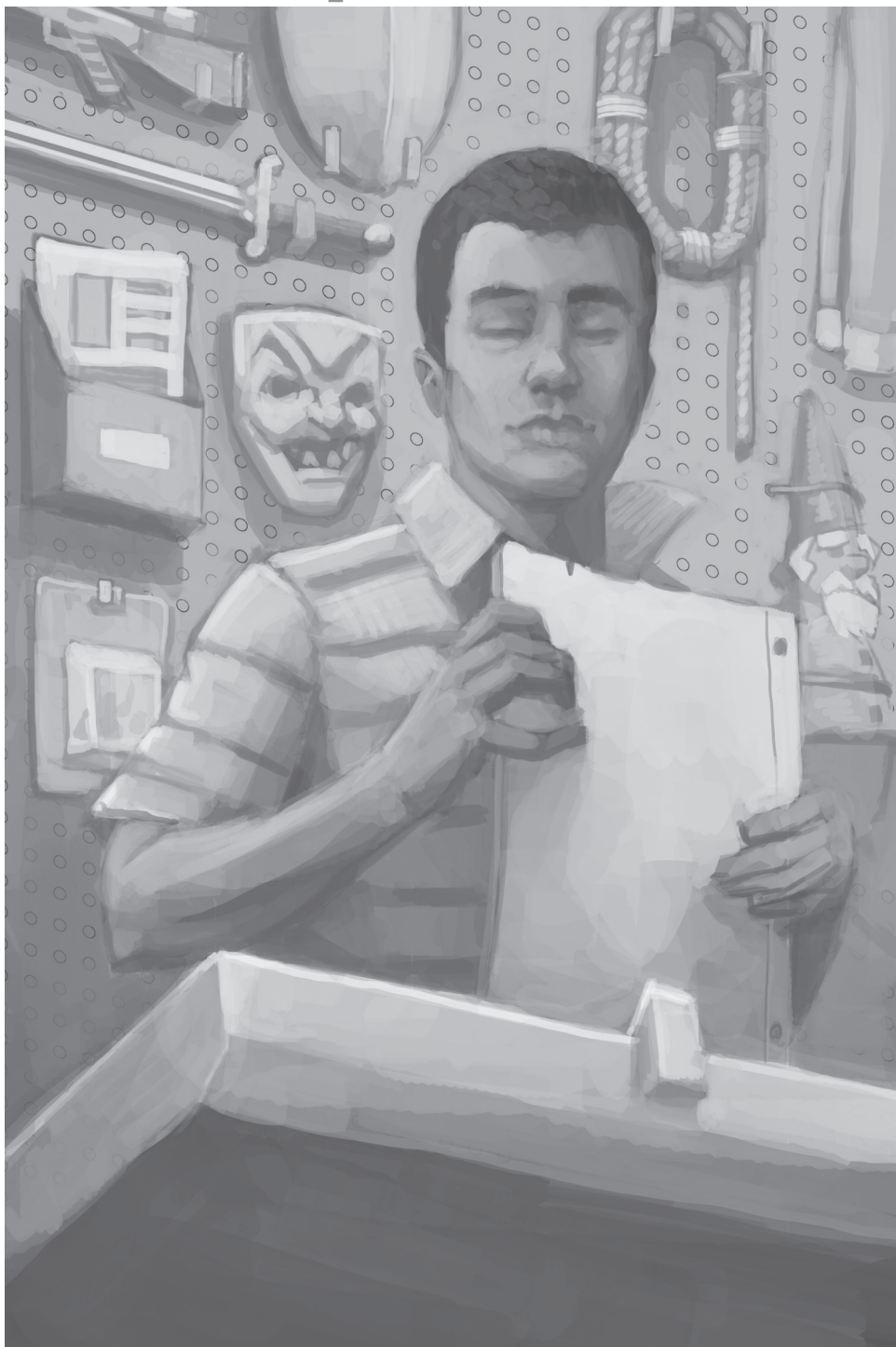
Chapter 9: Mastering Your Creative Cycle

There is never quite enough time to get done all the things you want to do, be it in a day, a week, or even a lifetime. We are creatures of obligations and responsibilities, and our lives are framed by a series of commitments that are made to ourselves and to other people. It's a condition that only increases in both volume and complexity as we get older and more responsibilities are given to us in our careers and the families we build.

In a sea of responsibilities, it's hard to find the time to work on a game. After all, many non-gamers will say, "It's just a game..." If we listen to those people too closely we might start to believe them. What we need to remember is that our games are our hobby; they're an outlet for the stresses in our lives, and a reward for the hard work we do. Hobbies, in general, are necessary for people to have full lives, and need to be treated not as a throwaway activity, but rather as a key element of what makes us who we are.

It's equally important to remember that gaming *is* a hobby, and that we do have all those other obligations and responsibilities. So while we must carve out a place in our lives for our hobby, we must also be realistic, give it a reasonable amount of time in our daily lives, and not overindulge in it at the expense of our other obligations.

Getting Prep Done

To adapt and paraphrase David Allen: Prep has to get done. From the moment you finish your session until your next session starts, the clock is ticking. All the phases of prep—brainstorming, selection, conceptualization, documentation, and review—have to happen before the next time you sit down behind the screen. It can be a lot of work.

You know what happens when prep doesn't get done: You arrive at the game unprepared. Some GMs will run what they have ready, and just play a short game—after all, some gaming is better than none. Others will run what they have and wing the rest; this can be hit and miss for everyone involved. And some will balk and cancel the game; do this too often, and you won't have a game to cancel.

As a GM, then, you want to be able to get your prep done in a timely manner without being stressed. Let's break those two elements down a bit.

"In a timely manner" means you want to have enough time to get your prep done between sessions, along with meeting all the other obligations and commitments you have as a partner, parent, professional, and/or friend. You want to have enough time so that if something unexpected comes up, and it always does, you can adapt and still complete your prep.

When you're doing prep, you generally feel stress for one of two reasons: not having enough time, which we've covered already, and doing your prep when you should be doing something else (mowing the lawn, playing with your child, working, doing homework, etc.). When you steal time from a competing task in order to do your prep, you feel stress and guilt. When you prep, you want to know that you're doing it not at the expense of other things, but rather in the time you've set aside for this activity.

Free Time (Hint: It's Not Free)

How much free time do you have in a day? In a week? Most people can't answer that off the top of their heads. I can. I'm not bragging—what I mean to say is that I know what all my responsibilities are in a given day, and throughout a week, and I know what times of day are truly free time. On weekdays, I have about four hours of free time, and only two of them are productive (more on that later).

In order to know how much time you have to work on your game, you really have to know all of the other things that you have to do every day of the week. You need to take an inventory of all your activities and obligations. Once you've done that, you'll see how much free time you really have.

The best way to create that inventory is to create a spreadsheet and make columns for every day of the week, and rows for hours of the day from 12:00 a.m. at the top

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Chapter 10: Your Personal Prep Templates

Up to now I've avoided talking about what actually goes into your session notes. I've discussed the creative process, the tools required for prep, and understanding and managing your creative process, all of which has built up to this moment. It's time to talk about what makes up your session notes.

Most GMs have developed some method of prep through trial and error using instinct as a guide. When GMs tell me that their prep is tedious and takes too long, it's often because they're putting too much material into it. The design of their approach to prep was not a conscious process. They don't have a feel for what needs to be in their prep and what could be removed, because they haven't designed their prep system. Their uncertainty forces them to include more and more material in their prep, until it becomes a chore to prepare.

This chapter takes a very deliberate and focused approach to determining what should be included in your prep. The end product will be written templates for sessions, scenes, and special cases that you can use to prep more effectively and efficiently, because they're built around your specific strengths and weaknesses as a GM.

The Purpose of Prep

A quick review: Your prep—that is, what's in your head and what you have written down—is everything you need to feel comfortable running your session. When your prep fails you, whether that failure is related to what's in your memory or on the page or screen, your ability to run your session smoothly is compromised.

In Its Simplest Form

Your documentation is the notes which detail the adventure that you're running for your players. Your notes are most likely going to be in chronological order, with the adventure starting at the beginning and concluding at the end.

Your adventure is likely to be broken up into smaller parts—scenes or encounters. Each of these elements encapsulates a part of the story: a dialog with the king, a battle with the rat men, or a chase through an asteroid field. Scenes also have a beginning and an end. Your documentation should also be broken down into scenes or encounters.

In addition to your scenes there will be supplemental material which supports your adventure. Most often this takes the form of NPC stats and maps, but depending on the game you run you might have some other material as well. This material is often tied to one or more of the scenes, and thus exists outside of their chronological structure; that often means it's at the end or on separate pages from your main notes.

There are three levels to your documentation, and at each level there are multiple elements you need to document and prep. The highest level is your session notes taken as a whole. What elements need to be included when you start your session notes? The next level down is the scene. What kinds of elements should you include in your scenes? At the lowest level are the needs of individual scenes: a combat scene will have different needs than a social scene. What elements are important to those scenes?

In order to account for all three levels and all of the necessary elements, you need to set yourself up to succeed.

Setting Up for Success

Your prep needs to be designed to set you up for success. Yes, *designed*. By thinking about what should be included in your notes, you'll be undertaking a design process; your personal prep template is the outcome of that process. The design of your prep template hinges on several factors:

- **What are your strengths as a GM?**
- **What are your weaknesses as a GM?**
- **What kind of game are you running?**
- **What type of campaign are you running?**

By understanding and then answering the questions above, you can then determine what elements should be included in your prep. Once you know that, you can build a template around those needs. The template will be a tool for your documentation, one that's designed to set you up for success by highlighting the elements you need to define at each level. By focusing on those elements you'll create better adventures and your documentation will be more helpful to you when you are running your game.

The rest of this chapter will highlight things that should be included in your prep, and show you how to assemble your personal prep template. Using that advice, you will be able to design a prep template that fits you.

Your Strengths as a GM

Every GM is stronger at some aspects of running a game and weaker in other areas. When you're strong in a specific area, you don't need to look at your notes that often during the session. That strength means that you're in command of that particular GMing skill.

What are your strengths as a GM? During which parts of a scene or a session do you feel most comfortable behind the screen? Do you deliver great dialog? Or maybe

awesome room descriptions? Do you excel at clever NPC tactics during combat, or know the duration of every spell in the game? Take a few moments to jot down the areas where you feel most comfortable.

Personally, I'm most comfortable describing locations. I can generally see the area in my mind and describe it to my players in an evocative way through words and gestures. I'm also comfortable with NPC dialog. When a PC engages an NPC in discussion, I'm good at playing off that character and going back and forth with the player. I'm not a master in either area, and I always strive to improve at those skills, but I am comfortable with both activities.

Your template should include the least documentation in the areas where you're strongest as a GM. If you include these elements in your template, they should be minimal; just a few bullet points or words as reminders. After all, these are your strengths—why waste time writing them down when you don't need to reference them when you run the session?

As an example, because I'm comfortable improvising descriptions, I don't include a section for descriptions in my template. Rather, I usually include just a small note with some tags to remind me of what I want to describe. For instance, if I were to document the description of a forest clearing it might look like this in my notes: "Forest clearing: mist, moss on trees, dense canopy, light breeze." That would be all I'd need to describe this location to my players during the game.

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